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## **The New Social Policy and the Digital Age: A case study of a wired high rise public housing estate**

### **Introduction**

In an age of information overload, a widening gap is emerging between those who have almost instantaneous access to more electronic information than can ever possibly be absorbed and those who have no access at all. This gap is known as the 'digital divide'. Lack of access to electronic information is increasingly recognised as a new and serious dimension to existing patterns of social disadvantage, one which builds on patterns of social deprivation associated with class, culture, and disability (Lloyd, Given & Hellwig 2000; Brown, Barram & Irving 1995; Meredyth & Thomas 2000; Hoffman & Novak 1999). In Europe and North America in particular, but also in

Australia, policy makers are increasingly interested in this as a key problem in need of attention.

At the same time, a number of researchers and theorists have been developing a new approach to social policy. Their goal is to harness social networks and trust in order to encourage people to be more socially and economically active. Much of the rhetoric of this approach is concerned with the concept of 'mutual obligation' which emphasises 'active' participation in social and economic life as an alternative to the 'passive' receipt of welfare. Also central are notions such as 'social partnerships', 'empowerment' and, more recently, 'community building', in which citizens rather than bureaucrats play a crucial role (see, for example, Botsman & Latham 2001).

'Reach for the Clouds' is a social partnership initiated by Infexchange, a not-for-profit information technology (IT) enterprise with a long history of involvement in non-government service delivery. It is a

project which intends in a small but practical way to help close the information gap in one inner city suburb in Melbourne, by providing an Internet-ready personal computer (PC) to all tenants living on a high rise public housing estate in Fitzroy. These tenants are almost without exception on very low incomes and the most reliable estimates suggest that very few have a PC or access to the Internet in their homes. Their lack of access to digital technology is in contrast to that of many other residents in the affluent, gentrified and expensive neighbourhood within which the estate is situated. The available data suggest that over two-thirds of the households in the private housing nearby will have a personal computer, and more than half can be expected to have access to the Internet, if not at home, then certainly at work (ABS 2001).

The PCs to be donated to the public housing tenants are being loaded with standard operating software and will be connected to an

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intranet as well as having the potential for Internet access. The project is particularly significant as an illustration of the new social policy approaches at work. It derives from a public/private partnership in which a not for profit social enterprise has been the lead agency. Also significant is that the project is based on a community building philosophy (Howe & Cleary 2001), in which the technology and associated training is to be provided free in the expectation that this will lead to higher levels of social integration and economic participation.

This paper is a progress report that documents the initial findings of a large ARC funded research project on Reach for the Clouds (RFTC). We tell the story of how RFTC began, and the challenges it faced in moving from the conceptual to the implementation phase. Of particular interest is the problem of process and timing for a complex and large project without a clear policy 'home' despite the current emphasis on 'joined-up' government<sup>1</sup>.

RFTC is an IT initiative involving a social partnership, aimed squarely at the key social problem of the widening of inequalities in access to information and IT, located in a state with a newly elected Labor Government keen to be associated with 'Third Way' politics<sup>2</sup>. But the process of attracting support has been an extended one, with both successes and setbacks. For three years InfoXchange and its partners sought to get the project off the ground. Meetings were held with senior officers in relevant government departments, with ministers and their advisers, yet it was not until March 2001, some two years after conception, that the project finally got support, and even then only in a limited way. At the time of writing (February 2002), it has yet to receive

ongoing funding, and the key government agency involved continues to require further information before committing itself to offering recurrent financial support.

What have been the challenges to implementation, and what has made it possible for these to be largely overcome? These questions form the focus of this paper. We begin by plotting the broad context in which the project was conceived, considering the rise of the digital divide as a pressing policy concern, both locally and internationally. Next, we look at the emergence of the new social policy and the concept of public/private partnerships of the type envisaged by the RFTC project. Third, we explain the core ingredients and underlying philosophy of RFTC. Fourth, we show that, even though RFTC had all the ingredients of being a policy success, it has experienced a series of implementation difficulties. Finally, we try to explain why this happened.

### **New social cleavages: the digital divide**

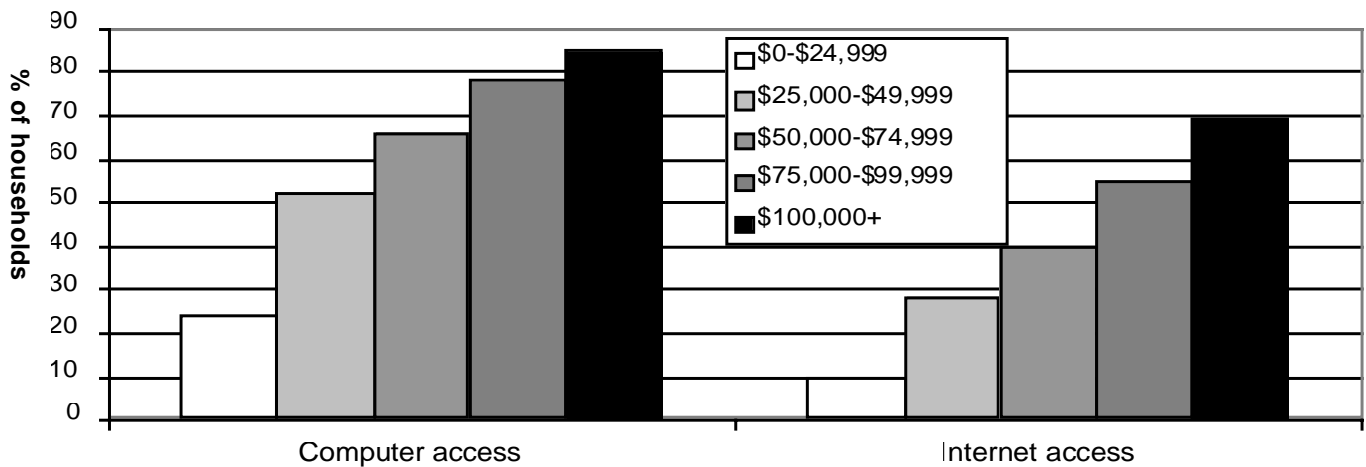
The notion of the digital divide is intended to draw our attention to the continuation of long-standing patterns of economic and social disadvantage in the new realm of IT (Haddon 2000). Early attempts to measure and understand this new form of old inequality were driven by the need to revise telecommunications regulation. In an influential 1995 study which led to a series of reports: 'Falling through the Net', the US Department of Commerce defined 'information haves' and 'have nots' in terms of household access to a computer and modem (Brown, Barram & Irving 1995; McConnaughey & Lader 1998; Irving & Levy 1999; Rohde & Shapiro 2000). Disadvantage was then gauged

across geography, age, gender and race. The authors of this study were motivated by the inadequacy of traditional measures of telephone penetration in assessing the policy goal of universal service: 'There are legitimate questions about linking universal service solely to telephone service in a society where individuals' economic and social well-being increasingly depends on their ability to access, accumulate, and assimilate information' (Brown, Barram & Irving 1995).

Although there were acknowledged problems with such a simplified approach, the presence or otherwise in the household of the necessary hardware to enter the on-line world became the critical short-hand indicator of the degree to which Americans were equipped, able and willing to take advantage of the new digital era. By the time the second 'Falling through the Net' study was published in 1998 (McConnaughey & Lader 1998), the 'digital divide' tag was in wide use. It is, nevertheless, a metaphor with different meanings. If in the United States the divide is most often seen as a racial phenomenon, in Australia the term is often used in the context of regional disadvantage (Given 2001), but it has also gained currency to capture socioeconomic differences as measured by income and wealth.

Figure 1 shows the direct relationship that exists between income and access to a home computer and the Internet in Australia. Only 24 per cent of households earning less than \$25,000 have a computer at home whilst only 10 per cent have home access to the Internet. As Figure 2 shows, this disparity is exacerbated for adults by the impact of work. Only 14 per cent of those earning less than

Figure 1: Proportion of Australian households with home computer access and home Internet access, 2000



Source: ABS Cat. No. 8146.0

\$40,000 were able to access the Internet at work, compared to 48 per cent earning \$40,000 to less than \$80,000 and 68 per cent of those earning \$80,000 or more. The results for Internet access are not as polarised when we consider whether adults have any access to the Internet.

### The new social policy

The 'new social policy' is being built out of the ashes of the 'wage earners' welfare state' (Castles 1985, 1994; O'Connor, Orloff & Shaver 1999), in which modest social security payments were targeted at the very small minority of Australians unable to gain secure fulltime employment in well paid jobs. The wage earners' welfare state was never intended for periods of high and persistent unemployment of the type and scale witnessed over the last twenty years. Trade protection, a restricted immigration program and high levels of government public capital formation were meant to prevent this from happening. When it did occur, government budgets were

inevitably put under pressure, from both sides of the ledger: tax receipts were less than they would otherwise be, while unemployment expenses rose dramatically. Deficits widened, and public indebtedness increased.

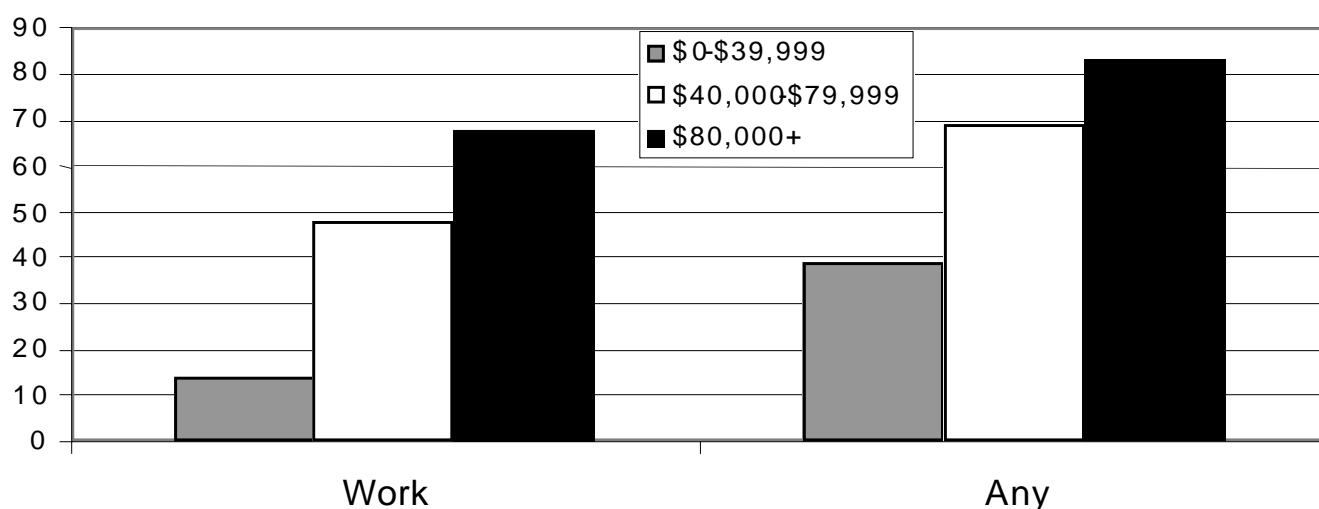
Concerned with rising taxes and deficits, a number of writers from both neo-liberal and social democratic perspectives began to question the effects that prolonged periods of idleness on passive social security payments were having on those receiving them. 'Welfare dependency' became an accepted term in social policy discourse.

The new social policy literature is highly critical of what are seen to be paternalistic, top-down systems of program delivery, and has become influential in Britain under the Blair Government's 'Third Way'. Preference is given to flatter, more inclusive service delivery structures. Three strategies have been identified to implement such structures. The first is what Botsman and Latham (2001) have called the 'enabling state'. This

model of state participation relies on the devolution of power from bureaucracies to small-scale programs at the local level that deal with specific needs. Whereas traditional bureaucracies squeeze both individuals and groups into pigeon-holes and treat each one identically, the 'enabling state' system is intended to deal with much smaller and more individual needs, and to tailor the allocation of funds very carefully to achieve much more directed outcomes. The second strategy, the encouragement of social partnerships is portrayed as the means by which programs are able to achieve these directed outcomes.

Social partnerships are collaborative ventures between governments (in the role of funding providers) and community groups or businesses whose role is to implement strategies for achieving improved conditions in fields as diverse as health, education, child care, employment, disability support, housing and culture. In the social partnerships model, government and community

Figure 2: Adult Internet access by site by personal income, Australia 2000



Source: ABS Cat. no. 8146.0

groups work together to deliver services in a way that links the funding and administrative know-how of bureaucracies with the local level knowledge, relationships and established trust which are the strengths of both larger- and smaller-scale community groups. Such groups may be large multinational charities or cooperative, local level community groups.

The third strategic approach involves social entrepreneurs. These are the key people who are able to liaise between governments and private, social or community groups, to identify problems on the ground and to access the appropriate resources with which to address them. Social entrepreneurs are the linchpin around which workable partnerships can be constructed (Mawson 2001).

Advocates of the new social policy argue that one of its strengths is its applicability to broad based community needs. Rather than the

fragmented approach necessitated by bureaucratic 'silos' which address themselves purely to issues of housing, health, or social support, there is a move towards joined-up government. The new social policy adopts a more holistic approach, using place based models of need which address interlinked issues of communities or groups experiencing multiple disadvantage in terms of low incomes, poor or substandard housing, high levels of crime, poor educational and health outcomes and entrenched structural deprivation. The place based approach recognises that 'the most reliable guide to someone's employment, health and educational status is their postcode' (Latham 2001, p. 128).

The new social policy has been increasingly popular in Australian policy circles, particularly in those states with Labor governments keen to model themselves on the Blair Government. In September 1999 a

Labor government was elected to office in Victoria, and it subsequently endorsed the agenda of the new social policy (see for example Victorian Government 2001; Wiseman 2001). It has embraced public/private partnerships and the concept of joined-up government, in addition to the key concept of community building. In 2001, the Government appointed the State's first Minister for Community Building (Bronwyn Pike who happened also to be the Minister for Housing) and established a community building unit within the Department of Human Services to assist in putting the new social policy agenda into effect.

### Reach for the Clouds: tackling the digital divide through the new social policy

Advocates of the new social policy have been entrepreneurial in the way they have presented their case. But, despite strong claims about the efficacy of

their approach, there are still a surprisingly small number of examples cited in the literature of the approach in operation. Families in Partnership in New South Wales and Bromley-by-Bow in London are two examples of the new social policy in practice. While each of these appears to be a promising case study, it is still not clear how widely they might be generalised to other policy contexts.

RFTC could well become another example used by advocates of the new social policy. It is largely the product of the InfoXchange, a small Internet service provider and web developer which began life in 1988 as an on-line coordination system for emergency accommodation. Since that time its activities have grown, in line with its mission to 'Use technology for social justice', to encompass a complete range of technology services for community agencies as well as establishing a fully searchable community support services database and running a weekly Infocast of material relevant to health and welfare workers across Australia.

InfoXchange developed its digital divide strategy during the latter half of the 1990s. In 1996 it successfully secured the support of the State Government to install Internet connected computers on eight high rise housing estates in Melbourne. In 1998 and 1999 InfoXchange decided to develop this concept more intensively in the form of the RFTC project (InfoXchange 1999). A year later it published a fuller strategy, *Bridging the Digital Divide*, which sets out its collaborative community building approach to the issue. At the centre of this strategy is its Green PC approach:

In the Australian context over two hundred thousand computers are retired every year.

These could be revitalised and provided to communities that otherwise will be left behind in the information age. This is not a pie in the sky solution that requires huge investment, complex negotiations, or new legislation. It simply requires cooperation. If we work in partnership the solution is inexpensive and simple. It is environmentally responsible, it has the potential to create hundreds of jobs, and it bridges the divide between the information rich and information poor. This is the idea of the Green PC (InfoXchange 2000).

The central idea behind RFTC was to renovate batches of retired computers donated by business and government departments, and donate these to tenants of a high rise public housing estate in Fitzroy, an inner city suburb of Melbourne. At the time the plan was conceived, the Office of Housing (the housing department of the Victorian Government) was considering trialing a concierge project, in which all tenants would be able to communicate electronically with a security officer at the entrance to the estate. The concierge project would require new wiring to be installed, and it was hoped to use this wiring to develop an intranet. It was also planned to provide tenants with the training necessary for them eventually to run their own help desk, as well as enable some tenants to start up their own Internet businesses, or develop job-related web design skills that would help them find employment (InfoXchange 1999).

Expected benefits for the resident community included: improved access to services from government and other agencies; increased computer skills and literacy; facilitation of access to employment, education and training; potential for development of online community enterprises; and greater access to information and communication, around which community building activities can take

place.

The longer-term aim of RFTC, as set out in the project initiation document, is for the network to be tenant managed and self-funded. Sustainability, the document noted, depended on many factors, including a sufficient take-up rate on the estate, developing community enterprises online, and continued funding and support from the various stakeholders in the project.

The InfoXchange was aware at the outset of the considerable logistic and social challenges the project would involve. The towers at the Atherton Gardens Estate are designated 'family' towers and consist of 800 two- and three-bedroom dwellings. They have a high proportion of households headed by a single woman (~ 40-50 per cent), a low proportion of older people (~ 20 per cent), and a high proportion of families with children (40 per cent). More than half (64 per cent) of the current residents were born in Asia, predominantly Vietnam. Other ethnic groups include Slavs and Turks, with only 14 per cent of residents having been born in Australia. Less than 40 per cent have nominated English as their preferred language of communication with the Office of Housing (McNelis & Reynolds 2001, p. 15). Residents are generally on very low incomes, with 80 per cent receiving some form of government income support and only 20 per cent having private or other income sources. Weekly incomes vary from \$150 to \$399. Social problems around the estate, although not necessarily caused by residents, include a flourishing and visible drug trade, graffiti, vandalism of public areas and fear of personal violence.

## Doing deals: social entrepreneurialism and the foundations of Reach for the Clouds

In December 1999 the InfoXchange submitted a \$20,000 proposal to Multimedia Victoria – a government agency that was primarily responsible for the State's nascent Internet and information policy – to develop a Social and Technical Business Plan to wire up the Atherton Gardens estate. The proposal described the venture as an 'Information Technology project with a community development focus that will see every resident of the Atherton Gardens high rise estate offered the opportunity to access Internet Technology' (InfoXchange 1999).

As the lead player in a novel social partnership at the formative stages of development, InfoXchange found it necessary to move on several fronts at once. Its position as a major provider of IT solutions in the community sector enabled it to forge a coalition of community service providers in support of the project, including the Bedford Street Outreach Service (now Outreach Victoria), RecruitNet, City of Yarra, Yarra Community Health Service and the regional manager of the Office of Housing itself. This network was in place by early 2000. InfoXchange's existing profile in the sector was crucial in developing the credibility of the project. InfoXchange, the relevant regional manager in the Office of Housing and a number of community organizations jointly wrote the original proposal.

By mid-2000 a steering group for the project had been formed, with the first meeting held on 27 July. The authors of this paper had now become involved in the project, by virtue of a

relationship that had been developing for some time between the InfoXchange and the research institute where they worked. In early 1999, shortly after the institute was formed, its director encouraged InfoXchange to set up an office nearby on university premises, with a view to helping establish a research program in the area of electronic social policy. InfoXchange agreed to this, and shortly afterwards passed on to researchers at the institute the original RFTC plan. The director of the institute promptly joined the steering group, and has remained on it since that time.

By this stage Multimedia Victoria (MMV), part of the Victorian state government, had provided a \$10,000 grant to prepare a project initiation document (PID) which was seen as a precursor to developing a fully fledged business plan. InfoXchange submitted an application to the Community Jobs Program, a state government program that supports community organisations, local government and

other government agencies to employ jobseekers on community projects. This application was for funds to employ long-term unemployed people to rebuild older PCs donated to InfoXchange by a range of public and private organisations, which were intended to be the PCs that would be distributed to the high rise tenants. An application was also submitted to BYTE, a program being administered by the Australian Youth Foundation on behalf of Lucent Technologies, a major global player in the commercial development of the Internet which has subsequently fallen on hard times.

The major task for the RFTC project team for the remainder of 2000 was developing a budget (through work undertaken on the PID), identifying potential funding sources and, where appropriate, making formal applications. Although much hope had been placed in MMV being the eventual funder of the project, it had become clear through the MMV representative on the steering committee that this was unlikely to be

the case, leaving the committee unsure why such a lot of time and effort had been allocated to the PID.

MMV's position led to a reconsideration of the best way to involve the various levels of government. One approach suggested was to sell the project as a form of service delivery to various government agencies, understanding that this depended on establishing a measurable community benefit. The project crosses a number of departments at all three levels of government, which presents a significant challenge in establishing financial support. One suggestion was to try and get a 'whole of government' approach at the state level by dealing directly with the Premier.

After several meetings between key players in the steering group, Office of Housing senior executives and the minister's adviser, a significant step forward took place with the agreement in November 2001 by the Office to fund the wiring of the estate independent of the trialing of the electronic security system. RFTC now had official support, but this did not extend to recurrent funding, nor did it mean that a lead agency had been found that would be a public sector champion necessary to deliver the sort of joined-up government solution that was required.

To address this problem, the steering committee agreed to solicit the support of a newly restructured government agency that had been given the task of developing a program of community building. The Community Support Fund (CSF), established with funds from state gambling taxes, was identified as the agency most likely to support the non-infrastructure elements of the project

such as training, and the director of the Office of Housing committed to make representations to the CSF on its behalf. The PID, written to satisfy the requirements of MMV, would have to be substantially added to, highlighting the project's social sustainability. In July 2001, reminiscent of the MMV experience, the CSF deferred on the request for recurrent funding, but agreed to provide \$10,000 to develop another application for funding.

By August 2001 the project team had stitched together a complex but incomplete patchwork of funding and support as set out in Table 1. This involved considerable effort and energy both in terms of identifying and pursuing funding opportunities and in planning the project as new sources of funding appeared and as identified sources such as MMV faded away.

### **Policy entrepreneurs and the lessons for joined-up government**

So far we have shown that an institutional context was established by virtue of broad structural transformations, which saw the emergence of two linked developments. First, was the emergence of a new social policy in which social partnerships and social entrepreneurship play a central role, as well as the election of a state Labor Government sympathetic to this agenda. Second, was the belief that new Internet technologies are the key to future prosperity, both individually and collectively. These provided the setting for a social entrepreneur like the director of InfoXchange to forge and promote what could prove to be a major social policy innovation. We

have also seen, however, that it has been a long and winding road from conception to the current situation in which the project has still to receive the ongoing financial support necessary to make it viable on a long-term basis.

After three years of hard work and negotiation, at the time of writing the estate is almost fully wired, the initial round of resident training has been completed and the first computers have been distributed. Whilst the project has aroused great interest and received considerable private and public sector support, it still has no clear bureaucratic home, nor does it have a relationship with a government agency able to broker interdepartmental agreements. It is without ongoing funding, but depends on an ad hoc mix of funding sources and donations. What explains this?

Part of the reason is the problematic nature of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) policy in a welfare area, where negotiation for responsibility is still taking place. Also important is the scale and complexity of a project such as this, which under a public/private partnership model necessitates a funding mosaic approach that involves a great deal of uncertainty. A third important factor is that a state government department or agency that takes full responsibility for pushing innovative joined-up or whole of government solutions in social policy has yet to emerge. The restructured CSF has yet to take up this challenge, and the only other alternative departmental forum, the Community Building Unit in the Department of Human Services, has only just been formed and is still feeling its way. The Community Building Unit exists within an existing bureaucratic

Table 1: Sources of major funding and support

Organisation	Sector	Support
Multimedia Victoria	State government	\$10,000 to develop PID
Community Jobs Program	State government	Funds to employ Green PCs staff
Australian Research Council	Federal government	Funds for a research project
Lucent Technologies (BYTE)	Private	Funds for multimedia training for under-25s
Office of Housing	State government support)	Strategic advice Partner in the ARC project (financial and other  Two units on the estate for training centres Preparation of tender document for wiring Funds for the wiring (probable)
Primary Health Branch (Department of Human Services)	State government	Partner in the ARC project (financial and other support)
Community Support Fund (CSF)	State government	\$10,000 to undertake a community benefit study to underpin an application to the CSF
Hewlett Packard	Private	70 high powered PCs, printers, digital camera and scanners for the training facilities
Microsoft	Private	Site licence for Windows and Office 97
Brotherhood of St Laurence	Community	Funding for training coordinator
Department of Human Services	Government	700 obsolete computers
City of Yarra	Local government	Strategic advice Funding for training coordinator

structure, and it remains unclear how it will undertake the job of securing interdepartmental agreements. As Kavanagh & Richards (2001, p. 17) observe: 'It is questionable to what extent joined-up government is possible to be established when departments remain crucial holders of resources and continue to dominate policy making and policy delivery'.

The absence of a government unit able to champion initiatives like RFTC has been the most important constraining factor of all. While the rhetoric of new social policy initiatives is all about innovation and risk, the experience with RFTC to date is that, when faced with complex risk and reward trade-offs, some senior officers and departments are understandably still likely to protect their department's interest rather than facilitate a whole of government public sector outcome that is (potentially) beneficial to clients. Developing a partnership requires not just agreement from each partner organisation but often from numerous individuals within them, lack of cooperation from just one link in this chain can greatly hinder, or even stop, a project. One consequence of this is to push eager private sector partners down the never-ending and lonely path of project feasibility funding. This is the path of non-decision-making in which many projects get described but few get started and fewer get to finish.

The one big public sector funding success to date – agreement by the Office of Housing to wire up the estate – occurred under rather fortuitous circumstances. This decision did not take place until July 2001, some eighteen months after the project had started rolling. Crucial in securing this agreement was the steering

committee's ability to point to the success of the authors of this paper in securing late the previous year a large Australian Research Council grant to fund research into the RFTC project. The research grant application was written in early 2000, when RFTC was still searching for a funder and backer. In a sense, the application was a wholly speculative exercise in which the researchers were seeking funding to research an initiative that was still some way off being started. Significantly, it was made to an industry partnership scheme in which business co-funders were a condition of the research grant being considered. The industry partners in this instance were InfoXchange, the Office of Housing and the Primary Health Branch, the latter two being parts of the Department of Human Services. That the departments agreed to provide matching funding required the support of middle managers, who, in turn, were able to solicit the support of higher level executives. In a sense, these middle managers were bureaucratic entrepreneurs, keen to support a policy innovation and to be involved in a professional sense from day one.

While it is not clear that the Office of Housing would have turned down the request to wire the estate without the research grant application being successful, there can be little doubt that it played an important role in convincing the senior departmental officers that the risks of backing the project were significantly lower than otherwise would have been the case.

### Conclusion

RFTC has aroused a great deal of interest from a wide variety of interested private, public and not for

profit agencies. It has also enjoyed the support of politicians, not to mention some important policy officers in key government departments. RFTC is innovative not just because it involves a public/private partnership, nor only because it is being driven by a social enterprise, but because it is premised on a community empowerment model in which the objective is to provide the technical and skill infrastructure necessary for residents of a low income and disadvantaged public housing estate to control their own digital futures.

Despite its promise, and despite the favourable policy settings, we have shown that it has not enjoyed the smoothest of histories. It has required considerable perseverance and tenacity by a range of people for whom the project could only ever be a part-time interest. It has also enjoyed a couple of fortuitous breaks. Gradually, however, RFTC has picked up momentum. The renovated PCs are now being distributed, resident training has begun and the estate is now almost fully wired. RFTC is at a stage of its development where genuine impacts on the social and economic capabilities of the tenants are possible and where, if it is to achieve its long-term objective of resident control, greater resident participation in management needs to be achieved. Whether and to what extent RFTC succeeds in this stage of the project are questions being addressed by ongoing research.

### Postscript

Since this article was written in February 2002 the Community Support Fund has committed to provide significant recurrent funding for a three year period to enable the

project to proceed. By early February 2003, 382 RFTC computers have been distributed to Atherton Gardens' residents, and 361 residents have attended the training programs, including some who have been trained as trainers for other residents. Currently there are six residents employed by the project. The network is operational in one tower and connection of the towers (which was not part of the original wiring work) should be completed by the end of February.

Meetings to launch particular stages of the project (e.g. the handing over of the first computer to a resident) or provide updates on the project have been well attended and provide a useful indicator of the appeal of the project for residents. The eACE Reference Group that is to include at least four tenant representatives is in the process of being established to replace the previous steering committee and oversee the development of the project over the next three years.

## Notes

- 1 Joined-up government refers to attempts to make governments more efficient and effective through greater coordination between various departments and agencies and external organisations.
- 2 'Third Way' politics is most strongly associated with the Clinton government in the US and Tony Blair's Labour government in the UK. It is an attempt by the left to find an alternative to traditional statist policy prescriptions without reverting to radical free market ideas. Its most important theorist is Anthony Giddens, see for example *The Third Way and its Critics*, 2000 or the *Global Third Way Debate*, 2001.

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