

Swinburne University of Technology
Institute for Social Research

Industry Report 2

Reach for the Clouds: Initial findings and working hypotheses



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1 Introduction

The first report in this series provided an introduction to the Reach for the Clouds (RFTC) network, the research and evaluation project, and the social profile of the estate. In this second report, we explore in more detail the possible outcomes of the computer network for the residents.

The primary sources for this report are a survey of the residents, conducted in late 2002, and data from two collector districts for the 2001 Australian Census. These collector districts represent a significant sample of the Atherton Gardens estate.

Combining these sources with our other research on the estate and our identifications of its groupings and interests, we can make preliminary comments on what residents expect from having a computer, how they are now using them and would like to use them. We can also sketch out the current needs of the residents, in terms of education, employment, sources of information, communication and social participation. In each case, we can add to this outline some working hypotheses about the potential impact of the RFTC network.

These initial findings and working hypotheses are intended as points of comparison for the final stage of our research in early 2004.

2 Computer access in the home

RFTC has made computer ownership possible for many Atherton Gardens households. Twenty eight percent of RFTC respondents said that one of the reasons they requested a computer was that it was free. Of these respondents, nearly half nominate education as a key use for the computer, with eleven percent using the computer for work related activities. Over half of these households had children (55.2%).

Census data indicates that, within the collection district that covers almost half of the Atherton Gardens estate, there have been low rates of computer use in the home. In 2001 the rate was 21.6%, compared to 49.4% for the surrounding area and 46.6% for Melbourne. The least disadvantaged age group at Atherton Gardens was the 15-19 years group, but all other age groups had significantly lower rates of computer use at home.

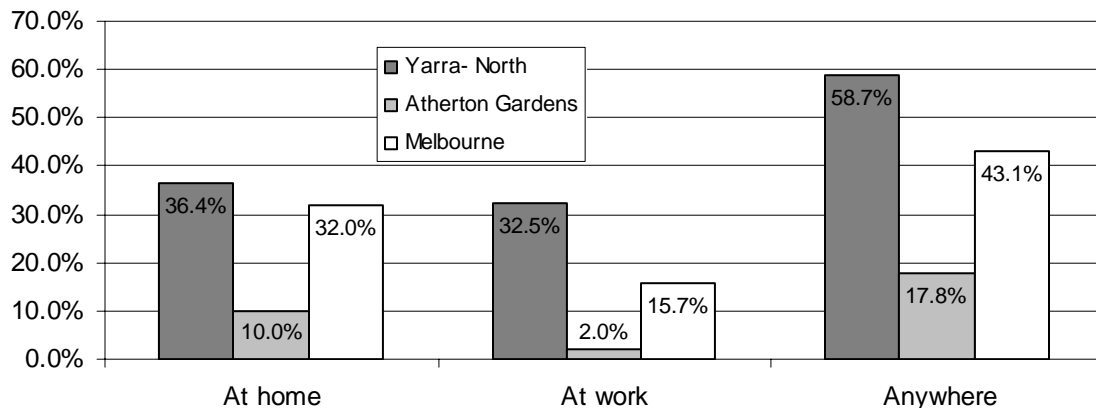
Table 1 Computer use at home, selected areas, 2001

Age group	Yarra- North	Atherton Gardens	Melbourne	No. of AG residents
0-9 years	31.1%	10.1%	37.6%	158
10-14 years	72.4%	48.5%	77.9%	68
15-19 years	70.3%	61.5%	77.1%	52
20-24 years	59.0%	34.5%	60.3%	55
25-34 years	56.2%	27.1%	51.1%	144
35-44 years	57.5%	13.9%	54.5%	122
45-54 years	52.1%	11.3%	46.2%	80
55-64 years	35.9%	12.5%	29.3%	48
65-74 years	11.7%	5.9%	14.2%	51
75 years and over	5.6%	0.0%	5.7%	26
Total	49.4%	21.6%	46.6%	804

Source: ABS, Census 2001

Examining internet use (Figure 1) shows that *Atherton Gardens' residents are three times less likely to access the internet at home than Melbourne residents as a whole.* A negligible proportion access the internet at work. Only 17.8% access the internet at all, compared to 43.1% of Melbourne residents and 58.7% of Yarra- North residents.

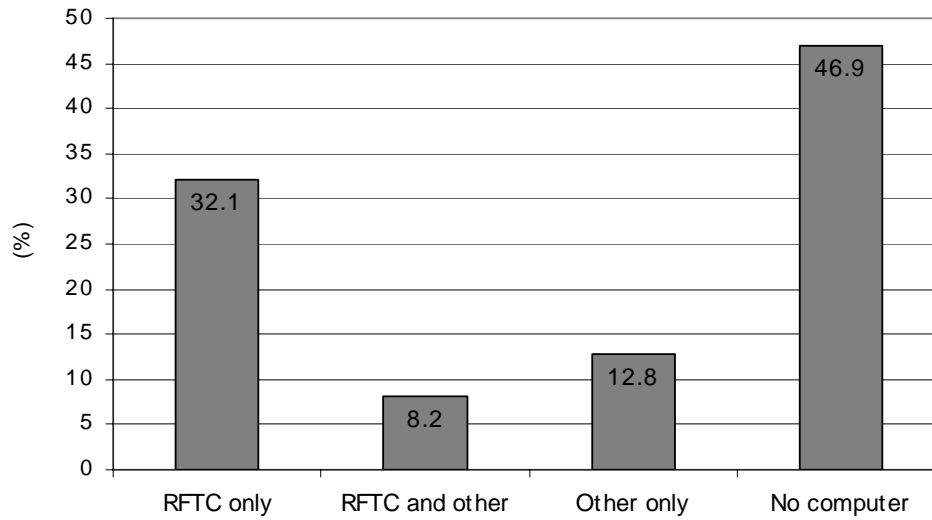
Figure 1 Internet use by location, selected areas, 2001



Source: ABS, Census 2001

Results from the survey are consistent with this. Only 21.0 per cent of our respondents had a computer prior to RFTC project. For eight per cent of households their RFTC computer is their second. Overall, 40.3% of our respondents had a RFTC computer. Just under a half of our sample did not have a computer (46.9%). Almost a third of these households accessed the internet elsewhere (31.5%), with the most popular location being school and library.

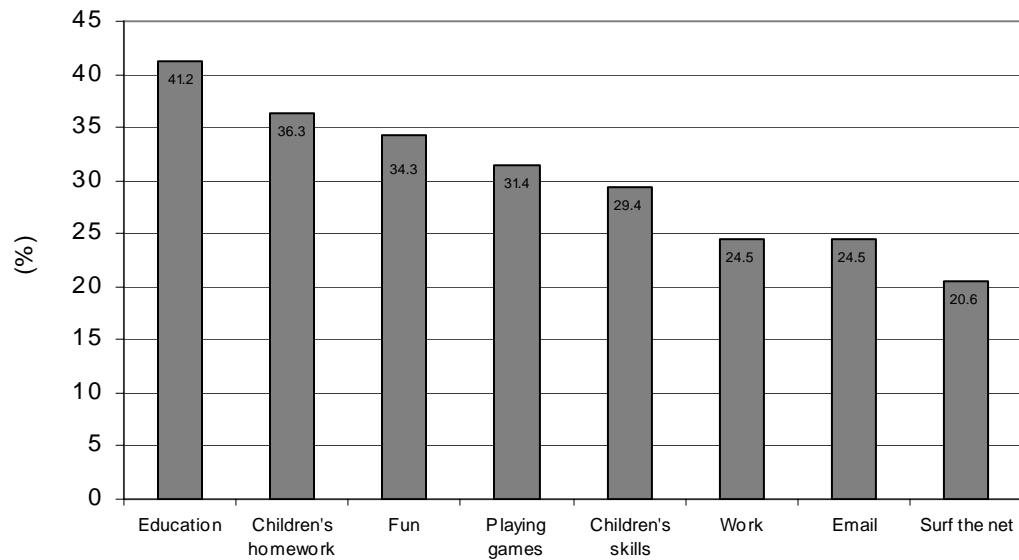
Figure 2 Computer in home by source, 2002



Source: ISR unpublished data

Those respondents who had computers appeared to be using them for educational purposes as well as for entertainment and general browsing, as set out in Figure 3.

Figure 3 Main uses of computer, 2002



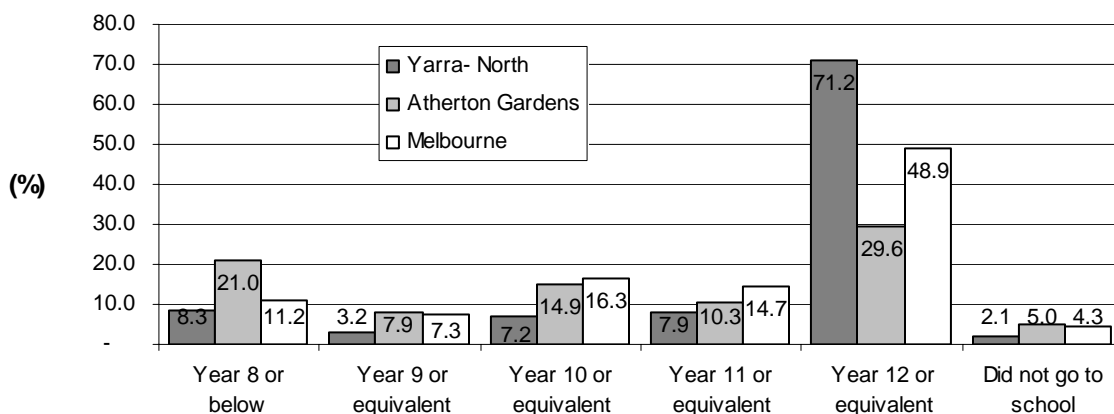
Source: ISR unpublished data

3 Education

The Reach for the Clouds initiative offers some important educational resources and opportunities to a population with high education and training needs. The residents have a strong interest in learning new skills, in helping their children with school work and in seeking training and qualifications for themselves. They see access to computers as an important element of this, and this is one of the main reasons why they are interested in having a computer in the home.

A high proportion of residents have low levels of education. Less than a third of residents had completed secondary school compared to over seventy percent for Yarra-North and just under a half for Melbourne. More than a fifth of residents had not completed schooling beyond a Year 8 level.

Figure 4 Highest level of schooling completed for those aged over 15 years and not currently studying, selected areas, 2001



Source: ABS, Census 2001

The respondents are eager for educational opportunities, formal and informal. The overwhelming majority agree that they enjoy learning new skills. More than a quarter of respondents are currently studying (15% full-time; 13% part-time). Of those who are not studying, a significant proportion report barriers that prevent them from pursuing further formal education. The most important of these is responsibility for children and caring for family members (28.7%). Only 22.6% said that they had no need for study. Others report that they have no time (23.5%), that they lack either literacy or English skills (12.2%) and that they have financial concerns (9.6%).

Asked why they wanted a computer, residents were overwhelmingly likely to nominate educational reasons, particularly those households with children. Forty per cent say that they are interested in using computers for education purposes, and nearly half of those in households with children envisaged using them to help children with homework. Forty

one per cent said that they were currently using the computer for educational purposes, while more than a third (36%) were using it to help children with homework.

Hypotheses

These initial results lead us to expect that educational use of computers will be an important element of the social impact of RFTC. First, we expect that use of the computers in the home will foster informal learning for adults and children, both alone and with family members or friends. One of the possibilities is high levels of self-education and experimentation, combining curiosity-led learning, recreation, entertainment and game playing. We will be interested in the extent to which people share their skills and help each other solve problems, given that the literature suggests this is the pattern with informal learning on computers, especially in the home. We will also be interested in whether acquiring these skills informally is seen by the residents to be effective in helping them find work.

Second, we expect the RFTC computers to have effects on the tenants' formal involvement in education and training in a variety of ways. There may be direct and immediate effects on children's schooling, if they are better able to complete schoolwork and if parents become more involved in homework and school-related projects and experimentation. It is possible that the children's educational performance will improve, though this is difficult to register in a relatively short-term project.

Computers at home may also raise the level of adults' educational participation. We hope to establish whether both self-reported levels of information technology skill and levels of participation in study have increased. We will be tracking the extent to which residents are studying from home, or are interested in doing so. We will also be interested in the extent of variation in patterns of educational participation according to gender, age, language group, English speaking ability, household type and disability.

Finally, we expect to be able to track the extent to which the use of the internet and other online resources affects educational participation and attitudes. This will include asking residents whether they or their children use the internet for formal and informal educational searches, whether email is used to communicate with teachers or other students, whether the internet is a useful resource for finding out about educational opportunities and whether other skills associated with effective use of online resources, such as problem-solving or creative skills, have been important to pursuing employment opportunities.

4 Training and employment

Census data (see Table 2) shows *Atherton Gardens* has an extremely high rate of *unemployment*, at more than seven times the Melbourne average. The unemployment rate for people aged 15 to 24 years is, at 64.9%, nearly five times the Melbourne rate. The labour force participation rate for residents is 40.9%, compared to 64.6% for Melbourne and 71.8% for the Yarra-North. In addition, of those people employed, a higher proportion of Atherton Garden's residents are working part-time.

Table 2 Employment indicators, selected areas, 2001

	Yarra- North	Atherton Gardens	Melbourne
Unemployment rate	8.1%	46.2%	6.6%
Youth unemployment rate (15-24 years)	14.2%	64.9%	12.2%
Participation rate	71.8%	40.9%	64.6%
Proportion part-time	30.7%	40.5%	32.1%

Source: ABS, Census 2001

The respondents show high rates of unemployment and underemployment. Nearly a quarter of our respondents were looking for work (23.1%). The unemployment rate amongst our sample was 55.8%. Twenty eight percent of those not working are unable to look for work due to family commitments. A further twenty two percent are not looking because of ill health or disability. Nineteen percent are concerned that their government payment or pension may be affected.

The inability to speak English well is one barrier to employment: 49% of respondents said they spoke English 'not well' or 'not at all'. Unsurprisingly, only 11% of those unable to speak English at all were working, compared to 18.4% overall.

Some residents see having a computer in the home as an aid to seeking employment. Twenty per cent of those currently unemployed said that they acquired a computer for work related purposes.

Hypothesis

Our initial supposition is that RFTC may help Atherton Gardens' residents find employment opportunities. They may be able to build information technology skills or other associated skills. Online resources may provide better information about job vacancies.

In the longer term, some residents may be able to work from home, either by using the computer as a workstation or by using email and the Internet.

More speculatively, if RFTC achieves its aim of becoming resident-run and self-sustaining, those residents who are directly involved may improve their employment opportunities significantly. RFTC may become an enterprise that is able to generate employment. More indirectly and immediately, involvement in training, in refurbishing and maintaining computers and in managing the network may enable residents to build information technology skills, or become creators of content.

Within the scope of this research project, however, it will be important to register the extent to which patterns of employment on the estate have varied in the period concerned, and whether residents' perceptions of the barriers to employment have changed. We will be able to ask residents whether they are now using the computers for work and whether they are seeking work using the Internet. We will also be able to ask about the use of email, messaging and other means of communicating about employment prospects.

5 Communication

We know from participation in the training sessions that one of the main reasons why Atherton Gardens' residents were keen to have networked computers was to contact people overseas.

The survey results indicate that respondents use interstate and international phone calls to stay in touch with friends and relatives. Many have face-to-face contact with friends and family rarely (a quarter do so less than yearly). About half of them make phone contact with parents monthly or weekly and the same pattern occurs in contact with siblings. Few residents report making use of personal visits or letters to stay in touch with either family or friends.

Table 3 suggests the degree to which access to email will be of benefit to those residents with family and friends overseas. It appears that telephone charges inhibit contact between respondents and their parents. Over half of respondents with parents in Melbourne have daily contact with them (no resident with parents either interstate or overseas has this level of contact). Interestingly only five percent of residents with parents living overseas make less than one telephone contact every six months.

Table 3 Frequency of telephone contact with parents by location of parent

	Daily	Once a week	Once a month	Every six months	Less often	(n)
Melbourne	52.9%	23.5%	5.9%	5.9%	11.8%	17
Interstate	0.0%	42.9%	28.6%	14.3%	14.3%	14
Overseas	0.0%	18.5%	61.7%	14.8%	4.9%	81

Source: ISR unpublished data

These findings indicate a high degree of dependence on telephones, particularly on higher cost telephone services. However, not all residents have a phone in their dwelling (89.7% do have a phone). This may be for cost reasons; interviews may determine this.

Hypotheses

We expect the computer network to be used to supplement tenants' existing ways of staying in touch with friends and relatives locally, nationally and especially internationally. It is likely that residents will make extensive use of email for these purposes and we will be able to track the volume of email through the aggregated data available in monthly reports from the servers, supplementing this with interviews with residents. It is possible that some residents will also make use of messaging, chatgroups and other online forums.

Email and other forms of internet messaging offer substantially cheaper alternatives to the telephone, especially for long distance and international communication. However, while the pattern of phone use may change, it is unlikely to be replaced. And while savings may be at the margins, the volume and frequency of communication are likely to significantly increase. We will be able to track these changing patterns in communication.

6 Information: news

Residents of the Atherton Gardens estate have a number of information needs. Some are seeking local information with over half of respondents reading the local paper. Local papers were a particularly important source of news for those respondents who did not speak English well.

Radio is another important source of news and information. A high proportion of respondents listen to SBS radio or NESB radio (more than a third).

Tenants report dissatisfaction with the news available to them, especially with international news. Not surprisingly, they are least satisfied with the amount of news available from their country of origin.

Table 4 Overseas born residents satisfaction with access to news and current affairs, selected topics, 2002

	Satisfied	Not satisfied	Don't know
Australian	72.3%	17.3%	10.4%
International news	48.3%	25.0%	26.7%
Home country	35.3%	36.5%	27.1%

Source: ISR unpublished data

Hypothesis

We expect the RFTC network to offer residents new ways of accessing news and information about current affairs, both locally and internationally. We will be tracking the

extent to which email and the internet are used as sources of news, and the extent to which residents report changing patterns of media consumption. Aggregated data from the RFTC servers will also assist in tracking this.

7 Information about estate activities

Only ten percent of respondents felt that there was not enough information about the estate. In addition, very few residents (13.7%) said that they were not confident in their ability to deal with government agencies and even fewer (7.1%) answered that they were not confident to speak their mind at estate meetings. Only a small proportion of residents (12.2%) did not agree that the estate was well run and fair. Taking these results at face value would suggest general satisfaction with the current information and consultation practices on the estate. Given this apparent satisfaction it will be interesting to monitor the interest of residents in using the network to access information on the estate and communicate with the Office of Housing.

Hypotheses

Our working supposition is that the network, as it develops, may offer residents new ways of accessing information on estate activities and on social services. Use of the training room computers for sending emails and accessing the world wide web has already begun extending access to information and new communication channels. As the intranet and RFTC website develop, new information resources will become available, in a number of languages, from the Office of Housing, from local, state and federal government agencies, from community groups and not for profit agencies and from local businesses. Which residents use this information, for what purposes and with what effects, remains to be seen.

One possibility is that the availability of information online engenders a stronger desire for information. This may have an effect on how residents perceive their own degree of competence and confidence in obtaining services. Some may become more satisfied with the information available, while others may become less so, as expectations rise.

We will be able to track some changes in patterns of information seeking through the aggregated data available in monthly reports from the servers. We will be particularly interested in the extent to which residents seek information on housing services and on local health services.

8 Social connectedness

Our initial findings indicate that *residents tend to be isolated from their immediate and extended families*. As noted above, many depend on international or interstate phone calls to stay in touch. Some residents have friends and relatives who live locally. They may, however, see them rarely.

Twenty nine percent of respondents did not know an immediate neighbour at all. On the other hand, 23.4% of respondents knew at least one neighbour very well. The remaining households knew at least one of their immediate neighbours ‘slightly’.

However, many residents appear to have strong local connections. Exactly half agreed that Atherton Gardens is an active community, just under a half thought that people were friendly and helped each other (49.0%) and that there were a wide range of community and support groups to assist or be involved in (48.2%). Few people disagreed with these statements, instead choosing the ‘neither agree nor disagree’ option. When asked directly if they felt part of the local community, 46.2 per cent agreed with nearly one in five disagreeing (19.8%).

Religion is an important associational link. Survey questions about membership of clubs and organisations established that half of the respondents attended a place of worship (47.2%). From census data we know that Buddhism is the most frequently nominated religion on the estate (36.2%), followed by Christianity (29%) and Islam (17.2%).

Around a third of respondents were involved with a sporting or leisure club. Just over twenty percent of those surveyed were not involved in any organisation or club.

As expected, survey findings indicated that the patterns of social interaction on the estate itself are complex, undermining any assumption that Atherton Gardens is a single community, consisting rather of a variety of groups and associations, with a number of isolated individuals and households.

Clear majorities agreed that the estate was a good place to live (66.2%) and that it was a pleasant living environment (64.1%). Residents recognised that Atherton Gardens is in a high amenity location, with 92% of respondents agreeing that there are good local services or facilities. The vast majority (86.4%) agreed that the estate had a good mix of people of different backgrounds.

More direct questions regarding the estate elicited less positive responses. *The issue that most polarised residents was safety and security*. While nearly half of the respondents agreed that people feel safe and secure (48.2%), a significant majority disagreed.

More than half said they trusted none of their co-residents in the same tower. They were even less likely to trust those in other towers.

Despite this, residents generally seemed positive about the running of the estate with 57.2% agreeing that the estate was well run and fair (12.2% disagreed) and the majority agreeing that people have the opportunity to participate in the running of the estate (57.4%). An even greater majority felt that there was enough information about the estate (67.7%).

Nearly seventeen percent of our sample said that they attended Atherton Gardens Residents Association (AGRA) meetings (16.8%), with 6.2% involved in the organisation of the group. Those who had lived on the estate for more than ten years were much more likely to say that they attended AGRA meetings or helped organise the association. Interestingly, residents of less than a year were likely to have attended an AGRA meeting. However, this falls away for those residents who had lived on the estate for more than a year but less than five.

Table 5 Residents' participation in AGRA by length of residence

	Attend (%)	Organise (%)	Number
Less than a year	20.0	0.0	30
A year to less than three years	8.7	1.4	46
Three years to less than five years	11.1	3.7	36
Five years to less than ten years	17.1	5.2	41
Ten years or more	27.3	8.2	44

Source: ISR unpublished data

Hypotheses

The rationales for RFTC emphasised its potential to build community on the Atherton Gardens estate. One possibility is that the network will build greater contact between residents, both offline and online. In turn, this could be expected to engender trust and co-operation. It could also build greater participation in activities on the estate, including decision making and involvement in tenants' groups.

Our own research has led us to avoid simple models of 'community building' based on a causal chain between contact, trust, participation and building stocks of social capital within the one community. We have assumed instead that social connection, online or offline, can affect groups, individuals and a resident population of this sort in a number of ways.

We expect that in some respects the network will *increase contact* between tenants. Use of the intranet and email groups is likely to promote online contact. Activities associated with setting up and sustaining the computer network may also promote greater contact between residents, both online and offline. These include the mixing of residents in the computer training rooms and interaction with volunteer trainers, who come both from the estate and from the wider community.

In turn, increased contact may have positive outcomes such as reducing isolation and building a greater sense of security on the estate. As people come to know their neighbours and co-residents better, they may trust at least some of them more. Trust may build cooperation, so that residents are more confident that they can seek help from neighbours as well as from family or members of the same language group. The activities associated with setting up and running the computer network may also build cooperation and self-help. In some cases, this may promote more willingness to attend residents' meetings, speak up in public meetings and be involved in estate decision making.

The results of the interactions associated with the network are difficult to predict, but there are several possibilities.

First, it is likely that when residents of the estate use the computer network they will replicate existing patterns of formal and informal association on the estate, building from language-based, faith-based or ethnic groups. In other words, the network may strengthen existing forms of bonding social capital (with both positive and negative associations), without necessarily promoting bridging forms of social capital.

Second, it is also possible that new formal and informal groups will form as a result of online interactions. These groups may build from looser connections, outside kinship and language group affiliations. They may stem from commonalities of interest, based, for example, on family type, or shared interests such as childcare, gardening, books and so on.

Third, it is possible that a number of residents may use the network without significant impact on their patterns of sociability or connectedness on the estate. Some residents may not want to get to know their immediate neighbours or co-tenants any better, although they may find the network useful for other purposes. Others may remain uninterested in using the facilities at all, however, these people are not necessarily disconnected from other forms of sociability on the estate.

9 Conclusion

We can highlight some key findings from the research so far.

There is a distinct pattern of economic and social disadvantage at Atherton Gardens, reflected in social isolation, high unemployment rates and low levels of education. Further, this pattern of disadvantage clearly extends into residents' use of communication technologies, and their access to information and computers. Residents are three times less likely to access the internet at home than Melbourne residents as a whole. Few have been able to acquire computers themselves. Although residents have strong local associations, safety and security are very significant concerns on the estate. Residents depend to a high degree on telephones, particularly on higher cost long distance telephone services. They do not find currently available news services satisfactory, especially for international news.

However, Reach for the Clouds has enabled many Atherton Gardens' residents to have a computer at home for the first time. And in the light of the information we now have, it is possible to see how RFTC has the potential to make a significant positive difference to residents on the estate. Our survey respondents are eager for educational opportunities, both formal and informal. Asked why they wanted a computer, residents were overwhelmingly likely to nominate educational reasons, particularly those households with children. Some residents see computers as likely to help them find work. While several scenarios are possible, the computer network appears likely to increase social contact on the estate, building on existing relationships and associations.