



## CHAPTER 6

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### THE WREN TELECOTTAGE, WARWICKSHIRE, UK

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*The WREN telecottage.*

#### INTRODUCTION

In the UK, the development of community access or community learning centres is a small but important part of the current government's policy of promoting and expanding lifelong learning. There are several complementary funding schemes in operation to create or develop such centres. A £252 million programme funded by the National Lottery is providing support for the establishment of about 700 community ICT (information and communications technology) learning centres. The University for Industry (Ufi) programme ([www.ufild.co.uk](http://www.ufild.co.uk)), a public/private partnership to provide online learning and boost the competitiveness of business and the employability of individuals (Hillman 1996), is creating a series of Learning Hubs around the country. These are linked to more than 250 Learning Centres and smaller Access Centres in educational, industrial and community locations, marketed under the brand name "learnirect" ([www.learnirect.co.uk](http://www.learnirect.co.uk)). Funding is also being provided to equip all public libraries with full Internet access.

All of these schemes are designed to link in with the European Social Fund (ESF) which can be drawn upon for projects in designated priority areas, including adopting electronic networking to improve regional infrastructure, creating employment opportunities and combating forms of social exclusion. Some projects also draw European Union (EU) funding through involvement with colleges, universities, small to medium enterprises, and transnational partnership projects such as Socrates (education), Leonardo (lifelong learning) and the 4th and 5th Framework schemes (deployment of new technologies).

Over the past few years, a number of community learning and community access centres have been established in various regions of the UK, either on a voluntary basis or in partnership with local authorities, educational institutions and other bodies. However, relatively few have worked closely with the growing community networking movement, which takes its inspiration from U.S. community networks such as the Well and Charlotte's Web and the writings of pioneers such as Cisler (1993), Rheingold (1994) and Schuler (1996). Funding has been provided through organisations such as

British Telecom, the BBC and the Department for Trade and Industry, although the level of support has been much lower than in the U.S. (Beamish 1995). A number of inter-related umbrella organisations have been formed to promote community networking in the UK and several national conferences have been held (Miller 1999): UK Communities Online ([www.communities.org.uk](http://www.communities.org.uk)), established in 1995, led to Partnerships for Tomorrow ([www.partnerships.org.uk](http://www.partnerships.org.uk)) and then to Networks Online ([www.networksonline.org.uk](http://www.networksonline.org.uk)) and the Making the Net Work Web site ([www.makingthenetwork.org.uk](http://www.makingthenetwork.org.uk)).

During this period, the Warwickshire Rural Enterprise Network (WREN) ([www.nrec.org.uk/wren](http://www.nrec.org.uk/wren)) and the National Rural Enterprise Centre (NREC) ([www.nrec.org.uk](http://www.nrec.org.uk)) were actively involved in the establishment of RuralNet ([www.ruralnet.org.uk](http://www.ruralnet.org.uk)), which is described below. Much of the credit for bringing these developments together must go to David Wilcox (1999). Many of the online developments, however, were the brainchild of Simon Berry, the founder of WREN.

## LOCATION AND CONTEXT

The WREN telecottage is located on the National Agricultural Showground at Stoneleigh, which lies between Coventry and Kenilworth in Warwickshire in the UK midlands. This location is incidental but fortuitous. Stoneleigh is the site of a major UK agricultural show that is held every July to exhibit produce, livestock and farm machinery from around the world. Although WREN has no direct commercial or political role in agriculture, it has developed a leading role in the promotion of rural ICT issues and applications.

WREN seeks to stimulate and sustain the rural economy of Warwickshire through links with enterprises, educational institutions and community groups throughout the county. It has active links with the Coventry and Warwickshire Chamber (business and commerce), Warwickshire County Council, local district and borough councils, the Coventry and Warwickshire Co-operative Development Agency, the Women's Business Development Agency and other groups. It encourages the provision of similar resources in other parts of the country and provides a UK-wide advisory, support and consultancy service on rural teleworking and networking.

## HISTORY

WREN was established in 1991 by the National Rural Enterprise Centre (NREC), part of the Communications Department of the Royal Agricultural Society of England that manages the Stoneleigh Showground. Additional funding was provided by the Training and Enterprise Council (now part of the Coventry and Warwickshire Chamber) and private business. Two years earlier, NREC itself had been established to help rural communities improve and strengthen their local economies through research, consultancy, information transfer and project work. The current Director of NREC, Simon Berry, had a background in rural agricultural development in Africa and South America and a keen interest in ICT. He returned to the UK to manage the WREN project in 1991, and moved to NREC in 1993, initially as Telematics Manager and, since 1995, as Director. Both NREC and WREN are housed in adjacent buildings and work together closely. Jane Berry, whose background is in communications and small business development, took over as WREN Manager in 1993 and is currently Project Development Manager for a range of NREC projects, including WREN.

From its inception, NREC was active in promoting and deploying ICTs for communication in rural areas. WREN was established in response to research drawing attention to lower levels of ICT skills in rural areas, particularly among women. Since 1991, WREN and NREC have been involved in more than 20 national and international projects, including studies and plans for the establishment of telecentres in Glamorgan, Lincolnshire, Surrey, Cornwall, Yorkshire and Norfolk, as well as in Belgium, Spain, Greece and Germany.

## **AFFILIATIONS AND STRATEGIC ALLIANCES**

Through its partnership with NREC, the WREN telecottage is at the centre of a network of real and virtual organisations concerned with access to ICT, teleworking and the development of rural economies. The most recent manifestation of this is Networks Online, a “network of networks” providing and linking intranets and extranets in the voluntary, public and private sectors to maximise access to information and resources, encourage knowledge sharing, promote online partnerships and help communities build a better future. The partners in Networks Online are as follows.

### ***RuralNet***

RuralNet, established in 1996, provides a group working system for grassroots rural development organisations. It provides information and publicizes events, news, experience and good practice. RuralNet content and services form much of the core shared areas of Networks Online. It is based on FirstClass, although currently most users may access it through the Web ([www.ruralnet.org.uk](http://www.ruralnet.org.uk)).

### ***Development Trusts Association***

Development Trusts are independent, not-for-profit organisations engaged in the economic, environmental and social regeneration of defined areas or communities. They build and manage workspaces, provide sports and recreational facilities, run childcare centres and promote community development in a variety of ways across the UK.

### ***Community Action Network***

The Community Action Network (CAN) is a mutual learning and support network for social entrepreneurs, people who use the techniques of business to tackle social problems by adding value to neglected community resources. Connected with the Partnerships Online movement, it was formed in 1998 on the inspiration of Leadbeater (1997), and its concept is close to the heart of several current government policies.

### ***Virtual Villages***

Virtual Villages is a Warwickshire and Worcestershire initiative partly funded by the UK government’s Single Regeneration Budget for the West Midlands, which aims to revitalise villages by assisting local shops, community centres and other institutions to provide additional retail services. Such services can include online shopping order and pick-up, ICT training, Internet access and e-mail, as well as the more traditional marketing of local produce and services. Other organisations with similar aims — for example, the National Association of Farmers’ Markets, ICT@Work project and ViRSA, the village retail services support network — also use NREC’s and WREN’s services.

## *Action with Communities in Rural England*

Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE) is the national association of Rural Community Councils whose shared purpose is to improve the quality of life of local (and, in particular, disadvantaged) communities in rural England.

## *People for Action*

People for Action (PFA) is a national network of housing associations, societies and trusts in England and Wales committed to empowering local people to take action to improve their circumstances.

## *Telework, Telecottage and Telecentre Association*

The Telework, Telecottage and Telecentre Association (TCA) is the leading UK organisation supporting and promoting the idea of teleworking ([www.tca.org.uk](http://www.tca.org.uk)). It was formed in 1993 by a group of teleworkers, and publishes the authoritative *Teleworking Handbook* and the monthly journal *Teleworker*. As one of the first telecottages in the UK, WREN was active in TCA's development and hosted its first seminar. The administrative support for the TCA is provided by NREC.

## *Educational connections*

All telecottages have an informal training role and many develop formal links with schools, colleges, universities and other training providers. This role has been greatly helped by the plethora of new entrants into the educational marketplace as a consequence of the growing interest in lifelong and online learning and the various measures that have encouraged education and training providers, community organisations and small businesses to collaborate more. The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, which turned further education colleges into independent corporations and encouraged them to expand provision through partnership schemes, led to a rapid expansion of educational opportunities. The 1990s also saw growing interest in, and support for, open and distance learning, stimulated in part by Article 126 of the Maastricht Treaty which dealt with education, vocational training and youth and encouraged the development of such systems (Robinson 1996). All of these developments have helped to broaden the appeal of education and training that are not time- or place-dependent and that are provided and supported by different groups.

WREN has always pursued partnerships with local educational institutions, working closely with Coventry University and the Further Education (vocational education and training) colleges in the city of Coventry and throughout Warwickshire. It has also partnered with COTU Ltd (originally the Coventry Open Tech Unit) based at Coventry Technical College in an EU 4th Framework project, and is currently working with Stratford on Avon College on an ICT-at-work project and a scheme to provide ICT for disadvantaged groups in rural south Warwickshire. For a time, WREN also provided pre-Internet network services (WRENConnect) to the British Association of Open Learning and a range of other business users.

As well, WREN offers courses in its own right, providing training onsite or at clients' premises on a wide range of software packages, the uses of ICT and the competitive advantages of the Internet for small business. It uses a "train as you go" approach, tailoring its training to particular individual, business or project needs and offering

programmes ranging from “Build Your Own Network in a Day” to Web page writing. Its programmes can lead to ICT qualifications such as the RSA Computer Literacy award or National Vocational Qualifications in Information Technology (IT) and Business. Through RuralNet, WREN offers an online mentoring scheme using volunteers to provide support to rural groups new to ICT. WREN has also been involved in supporting and delivering national Internet educational schemes such as “IT for All” and the BBC’s “Computers Don’t Bite.”

Such work has resulted in some impressive individual success stories. For example, Kay, who had left school many years ago and had never worked outside her home, came into contact with WREN through a village meeting a few years ago, took a WREN course, and then took an Access course at the local college. This led to her taking a business studies degree at Warwick University and she is currently working towards a Ph.D. while teaching women’s studies part-time at the university.

## **FUNCTIONS**

As a telecottage, WREN aims to offer a fully integrated range of services:

- training;
- a computerised workplace;
- business services, business incubation and IT support;
- marketing and sub-contracting; and
- social events and networking opportunities.

Individuals or small businesses can buy as little or as much as they need from the centre, from occasional photocopying to full and ongoing support. Some businesses use WREN as a permanent base, working in the centre, at home or in a mix of locations. Through RuralNet and other projects, WREN also administers intranet systems for group working, as well as access to e-mail through the Internet. A WREN nursery established in 1992 provides childcare facilities on a regular or occasional basis for telecottage users.

## **COSTS AND FUNDING**

WREN’s annual turnover is currently around £200,000, most of which comes from projects and commercial services. For its first few years, WREN was heavily dependent on grants from local government and other charitable sources, but these fell from over £80,000 in 1993 to less than £30,000 by 1996. However, within this period, WREN’s earnings from other sources rose from £90,000 to over £150,000.

WREN undertakes a variety of one-off and regular business activities for clients, and then ploughs the profits back into community services and facilities. Any deficits are met by the Royal Agricultural Society. The WREN nursery is managed as a separate business and broke even within two years of its opening.

Like most voluntary, educational and community organisations in the UK, WREN pursues grants and project income from EU and UK government sources. Most EU funding schemes require matched funding, which can sometimes take the form of staff time and notional rent, but more usually must be cash from commercial sponsors or partners. Some EU research and development schemes provide 100% funding, but the

European Social Fund administered through member state governments rarely pays more than 50%. Only projects based in those parts of Coventry and Warwickshire within the designated EU Priority 2 zone qualify for such support.

Some UK government support is provided by the Departments of Trade, Transport and the Regions and Education and Employment, but much new project money is now channelled through the New Opportunities Fund of the National Lottery. The latter has supported the ICT learning centres scheme described in the introduction to this chapter, and RuralNet is partly supported by the National Lottery through its Charities Board.

## **ACCOMMODATION**

WREN is housed in a single-storey detached block strategically located next door to the NREC offices. The telecottage itself is designed as an open public workplace with areas that small businesses can rent for private “hot-desking,” an important source of income. The public area is well equipped with computers and other office facilities. The other accommodation comprises a training room capable of accommodating up to a dozen people, two administrative offices, a library, a kitchen and toilet facilities.

WREN has taken care to ensure accessibility for people with disabilities, recognising the particularly important and active role that such persons can play in a telework economy.

## **MANAGEMENT**

WREN is legally a part of the Royal Agricultural Society of England (RASE), a charity with a commercial arm, an arrangement that allows for trading activity through WREN Business Services. WREN’s approach is project-based and Jane Berry describes WREN’s project management strategy as “stacking,” a process that involves running several different projects at once, usually on different life cycles and with different levels of funding. The well-funded projects support the less well-funded ones and make a more than proportionate contribution to the general running costs of the organisation.

WREN works very closely with NREC and receives “small but significant” ongoing support from RASE (Shearman 1999). For its first three years, WREN was guided by a Steering Group representative of local businesses and the community. More informal support came from group meetings of interested individuals and partners. Once WREN’s partnership and client networks were established, this group was disbanded. However, WREN is still responsive to its needs and operates a “can-do” policy introducing new services and facilities as needed.

The internal management structure is flat, and there are weekly team meetings.

## **STAFFING**

WREN has grown from one post in 1991 to three full-time and four part-time staff today, with a further 12 posts in the nursery. It has been successful in creating local employment and makes extensive use, as necessary, of teleworkers, freelance project staff and student placements.

## **TRAINING MANAGERS, STAFF AND USERS**

WREN has no formal staff training policy, but actively supports staff participation in any training activity provided by the telecottage. An important part of WREN's philosophy is the integration of training and work, and work is often subcontracted to freelancers and small businesses that the telecottage has helped to establish, thus developing and continually expanding a local enterprise self-help training network. One example of this is Jan, a grandmother who has set up her own home-based business with support from WREN. She also does occasional freelance work at the centre, leaving her grandchildren in the care of the nursery.

## **PUBLICITY**

WREN publicises its services extensively. It publishes black-and-white leaflets for distribution throughout the county. Well-funded projects such as RuralNet can afford the luxury of printed colour leaflets. As the administrative arm of the TCA, WREN is also able to publicise its activities through TCA literature, especially the *Teleworking Handbook* and bi-monthly *Teleworker* magazine. Both of these publications receive funding through EU and UK Department of Trade and Industry grants and the *Teleworker* also receives support from British Telecom, Apple Computers and the Gulbenkian Foundation.

WREN was an early adopter of the Web, establishing a site in 1993. This site also provides links to the wider range of organisations represented on the Networks Online site. WREN contributed significantly to the Making the Net Work site, and is linked to the TCA site. It also contributes to NREC's rural development portal, Inforurale. There are various mailing lists and conferencing opportunities on all of these sites, notably the RuralNet FirstClass system and the TCA meeting place on WebBoard.

## **ACCESS**

WREN is open from 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. on weekdays, although there are sometimes evening and weekend meetings and courses. Access to the telecottage's computers, training rooms, Internet access, videoconferencing and general office services is by appointment.

## **TECHNOLOGY**

The telecottage's public workplace area has two networked Apple Macs, one of which has a 21-inch screen for DTP and graphics work, two PCs, a laser printer, colour DeskJet printers and a colour scanner. General office facilities include a fax, photocopier and franking machine, and ISDN (a high-speed communications link) videoconferencing services. The training room has eight networked PCs with Internet access, a printer, an overhead projector and a whiteboard. All computers in WREN and the adjacent NREC have Internet access through a leased 64 Kb line. While WREN was Apple-based in the early years, the current NT network means that staff and clients can use either PCs or Apples. A portable network of up to 10 PCs is also used for training.

WREN staff tend to favour Apple computers and software, although they recognise the necessity of conducting training on PCs. However, server software, graphics and Web design services are undertaken on Apples, and the FirstClass conferencing software used

for RuralNET is also Apple-based, although this is now available for a wide variety of client and server platforms. Training is available on most main Microsoft, Adobe and Lotus packages, together with specialist applications such as Sage (accounting) and Quark (desktop publishing).

WREN is a partner in the RAVAN (Rural Areas Videotelephone Access Network) project supported by the UK Department of Trade and Industry which has installed PC-based videoconferencing facilities in a group of UK telecottages. This association has provided an Intel ProShare system using basic rate ISDN. Through this project, WREN has developed a system of protocols to demonstrate the advantages of videoconferencing to small businesses. However, to date there has not been any widespread take-up of this technology for business purposes, and Jane Berry feels that this is one area where WREN has been less than wholly successful.

## RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

Most research into teleworking in the UK in the past decade has found this mode of work to be increasing, although estimates of the numbers of workers and companies involved vary (TCA 1998). Huws (1993) suggests that most teleworking is concentrated in the southeast of England and involves large service sector employers, British Telecom probably being the most prominent example. There are relatively few large employers in rural south Warwickshire and WREN has therefore focused more on the needs of rural businesses, organisations, individuals and disadvantaged groups such as the unemployed and women in rural communities. It also promotes ICT as part of flexible working and transferable skill development rather than promoting teleworking in isolation. After 10 years and many technological changes and advances, WREN still finds supported public access to ICTs to be a vital ingredient in fulfilling such people's needs.

WREN and NREC have been involved in a number of research contracts in the UK and further afield during the past decade. These have included conducting feasibility studies for local authorities and other bodies and research into changing patterns of rural employment. Examples include market research on the establishment of a telebusiness centre in rural Bedfordshire and a preparatory study towards the development of a rural electronic network in North Kesteven, Lincolnshire.

European projects in which NREC has been a partner have included research components. Examples are the RegioNet project, the SARBA (Sustainable Rural Businesses) project (involving use of IT by small businesses in Spain, Greece and Germany), the OffNet project (the neighbourhood office model of teleworking) and work for the EU's former Research Directorate (DGXII) concerning urban-rural links in the UK, France and Portugal.

## CONCLUSIONS

The rapid growth and increasing technical sophistication of Internet access over the past few years has been both a help and a hindrance to rural telecottages such as WREN. It has helped by making access to a much broader range of information in all media more widely and easily available, making Internet access affordable for a larger proportion of the population, and allowing telecottages to maintain an acceptable level of technology at a reasonable cost. There are now a great many online resources available in the UK for community groups seeking to establish an online presence for charitable, promotional, educational or other purposes. "Making the Net Work" and "Communities

Online” are currently the most useful umbrella sites providing links to projects, planning advice and potential sources of funding.

These trends are likely to accelerate in the next couple of years as ADSL (Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line), cable modems and increased mobile Internet access reduce the cost of a permanent broadband Internet connection and allow for more mobile, flexible access at all times.

However, the growth of the Web has also had a down side. It has, as Jane Berry says, “blinded people to all the other aspects of online communities.” The exciting possibilities of audio, video, graphics and other manifestations of multimedia have led to a concentration on style rather than content. This has had a number of unhelpful side effects. It has encouraged small businesses and voluntary groups to rush into creating eye-catching Web sites without integrating this potentially powerful form of communication into their marketing, development or distribution systems. It has also tended to obscure the very real benefits that can be gained from text-based computer conferencing, intranets, extranets and mailing lists.

Any new telecottage needs a great deal of hard work and commitment from its key staff and a certain amount of luck in its first few years. Start-up support from government or charitable grants is important, but how much is available and the conditions attached to these are not always governed by logic or rationality. Sponsorship and support from the private sector are also important, but serious income-generating activities will become a priority within a very short time. Support for the telecottage and telecentre movement has been forthcoming from a wide variety of funding sources, in particular the UK Department of Trade and Industry and several departments of the EU. However, increasing competition for grants and the complexity of the application processes present problems for small organisations with few full-time staff.

WREN was fortunate in securing substantial grants through the ESF NOW (New Opportunities for Women) scheme at an early stage in its development. These funds cushioned it against cash flow problems and enabled it to maintain the staffing necessary to take on other projects. WREN and the TCA have both been leading forces in establishing and maintaining online communities of interest and membership in national and international networking activities through Partnerships Online, Networks Online and Communities Online. WREN has also benefited in many ways from its location and association with the Royal Agricultural Society.

Over the next few years, WREN plans to continue to “learn by doing,” passing on the benefits of wider public access to ICTs and raising awareness among local businesses, farmers and other sectors of the community. However, the role of telecottages is changing as computers and online access become more widespread in homes and small businesses. The more important task for the centres in the future will probably be in providing open and flexible training, support and guidance, possibly through “virtual organisations and communities” that complement rather than replace the physical spaces where people come to use hardware and locate information. Information and the means to access it will become universally available, a process accelerated by the growth of digital radio and television. But there will still be a need to acquire the skills to make full use of these resources, and people will still want to come together to talk, work and try things out.

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*Particular thanks are due to Jane Berry of the WREN telecottage for her assistance in the preparation of this chapter.*

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### *Web Resources*

- [www.communities.org.uk](http://www.communities.org.uk)
- [www.communitychannel.org.uk](http://www.communitychannel.org.uk)
- [www.dfes.gov.uk/ict-learning-centres](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/ict-learning-centres)
- [www.learnndirect.co.uk](http://www.learnndirect.co.uk)
- [www.makingthenetwork.org.uk](http://www.makingthenetwork.org.uk)
- [www.partnerships.org.uk](http://www.partnerships.org.uk)
- [www.networksonline.org.uk](http://www.networksonline.org.uk)
- [www.nrec.org.uk](http://www.nrec.org.uk)
- [www.nrec.org.uk/wren](http://www.nrec.org.uk/wren)
- [www.ruralnet.org.uk](http://www.ruralnet.org.uk)
- [www.tca.org.uk](http://www.tca.org.uk)
- [www.ufild.co.uk](http://www.ufild.co.uk)