

TASMANIAN COMMUNITIES ONLINE PROJECT
- EMPOWERING AND TRAINING RURAL COMMUNITIES
IN INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Judith Timbs
Project Manager
Tasmanian Communities Online
91 Murray Street
Hobart, Tasmania 7000
email: Judith.Timbs@Central.tased.edu.au
www.tco.asn.au

ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the rationale and vision to establish 60 Online Access Centres throughout rural and regional Tasmania.

Forty-five Centres are currently operational and 15 are still being established. The mission of the Tasmanian Communities Online Project is to accelerate the uptake of technology by Tasmanians by providing free or affordable access to, and training in, the use of computers and the Internet.

Online Access Centres are driving economic growth through assistance to microbusinesses, enhancing access to government services and encouraging social and cultural development in rural and regional communities throughout the State. Online Access Centres are electronically connecting 60 communities to each other and the world.

The paper outlines how the Centres are being utilised, sustainability strategies undertaken to date and future challenges.

1. INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE FOR THE PROJECT

The Tasmanian Communities Online Project has the following goals:-

- To provide equitable access to modern technology and the Internet for the Tasmanian community, especially people in rural areas.
- To increase community participation in and acceptance of the new technologies.

- To reduce isolation, especially among the elderly and others who find it difficult to travel. To reinforce community values.
- To provide assistance to community organisations.
- To develop websites for communities to showcase their heritage, cultural life and services.
- To enhance life-long learning.
- To promote micro businesses using new Internet-based marketing and distribution channels.

A grant of \$6.1 million spread over 2½ years was received from the Networking the Nation funds (sourced from the part sale of Telstra). The purpose of the grant was to establish 60 Online Access Centres in rural and regional towns to provide Tasmanians with local access to information technology and to fulfil the goals already described.

Why did Tasmania need a strategy such as this? Rurality is a major factor:-

- Tasmania has a very decentralised population with a higher percentage per population of persons living in rural communities than any other state. This makes access to services difficult and expensive for many Tasmanians.
- In relation to access to, and use of, information technology, the most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics report released in May 1999, shows that Tasmanians have the lowest home ownership of computers and use of the Internet among the states.
- The role of information technology and the change it brings with it requires an educational strategy to address the needs of communities for their future economic and social well being. Information technology has changed a number of areas including business, law and order, health, government services and education, etc.

So if the communities of Tasmania are to embrace and benefit from these new technologies, then all of the communities must have access to training and services, not just those who live in the cities or those who can afford their own computers. Hence the idea of building a network of Online Access Centres set in rural and regional towns across Tasmania. It was envisaged that by increasing the pool of people who have embraced the new technologies that Online Access Centres would also stimulate demand for these services in homes and businesses.

The successful Networking the Nation submission emphasised the utilisation of the already existing network of ISDN lines provided to schools and public libraries and therefore the capacity for establishment of the Centres in a cost effective manner. Centres would be able to co-locate with these organisations and receive free telecommunication links and free access to the Internet.

The submission also stated that it was an equity program and as such there would be no charge to access a Centre, the Internet or for basic training. The submission also stated that

Centres would be financially assisted to set up and run during their first year of operation, but after that they would be expected to become self sustaining.

2. IMPLEMENTATION

The Project Team consists of the Project Manager, three Regional Facilitators, an Executive Officer and two Project Officers. The Administration Office is located in Hobart and the three Regional Facilitators are located in the North, Northwest and South of the State. The three Regional Facilitators work directly with the communities.

The two major governance committees consist of the Project Steering Group and the Community Advisory Group. The Project Manager reports regularly to the Project Steering Committee that is chaired by the Deputy Secretary of the Department of Education, the lead agency. A Community Advisory Group receives the communities' applications and recommendations from this committee for the establishment of Online Access Centres are forwarded to the Project Steering Committee.

Communities are required to submit a proposal for the establishment of a Centre. There have been three rounds advertised: May 1998, November 1998 and August 1999 respectively. The final 15 communities have recently been recommended, but not publicly announced, for the establishment of Online Access Centres.

Forty-five Centres are currently operational with some of these only recently established.

Centres are mostly located in schools, public libraries, Business Enterprise Centres, Community Centres and one is in a Service Tasmania Shop. Substantial savings have been achieved by the co-location of Centres. This in kind support consists mainly of the free telecommunication costs, free accommodation, rental and power and represents approximately \$15,000 - \$20,000 per annum. The Centres are community owned and each has a local management committee elected to administer the grant and to manage the day to day affairs of the Centre. All Centres have a paid Co-ordinator, and volunteers play an important part in keeping the Centres opened for extended hours.

The Centres receive monies to pay for their staff, furniture, insurance, publicity, additional software, educational resources and to conduct public training courses.

The Project Team purchases and co-ordinates the installation of the computers, scanners, printers and software. An image is produced to enable all Centres to reinstall from 1 CD-ROM should a problem occur with any of the computers. The Project Team arranges all the telecommunications (ISDN or dial up lines) and also approves and manages the building modifications required. These costs are paid for centrally by the Project Funds. The Project Team also manages the initial training of the Centre Co-ordinator (2 days) and conducts follow up visits especially in the first three months.

Centres are assisted with their management and reporting tasks with the provision of Kits for Implementation, Operation Manual and a Co-ordinator Induction. These materials are used as

leadership training materials for community participants including such topics as “How to conduct meetings” and “How to set up an interview”.

Centre Management Committees are required to be Incorporated Bodies or be sponsored by an Incorporated Body. They receive their grants after signing a formal agreement document (including use of the site) between the sponsoring body and the Department of Education.

Centres are required to submit a three-month, six-month and annual report in their first year of operation. Upon receipt of these reports and confirmation of satisfactory operation against agreed criteria, Centre funds are granted. The Project Team has found that Centres require a minimum of six weeks to be established. This includes building modifications, installation of telecommunications and computers, advertising for and appointing the Co-ordinator, conducting community surveys, preparing training programs, recruiting volunteers and establishing community websites. In some communities eg. Rosebery, rationalisation of facilities, such as the public library, school library and Online Access Centre were achieved in one single building all sharing the space and telecommunication lines.

There is one site remaining to be selected, making a total of 60. As previously mentioned, 15 sites are currently at the approval stage and after public announcement establishment will commence shortly. The Project attracted a diverse range of participants in local communities, as the establishment of an Online Access Centre was not as interest specific as say a theatre.

There are four levels of Centres which are determined according to the population of their communities:-

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| Level 1 | Populations in excess of 15,000. |
| Level 2 | Populations between 2,000-15,000. |
| Level 3 | Populations below 2,000. |
| Level 4 | Small communities (below 2,000) with no access to Government infrastructure, eg. school or library. |

Provisioning of each Centre is according to these levels. Cash grants cover Co-ordinator salary, public training monies, publicity and software. Funds are provided for the first year of operation, however a recent variation to the contract with the Department of Communication, Information Technology and the Arts has given approval for Year II funding for the first round of Centres (20 in total). The Year II funding consists of a grant to these communities to provide partial salaries for their Centre Co-ordinator (62.5% of the original salary). This funding is designed to give these Centres a longer period of time to develop their strategies for self-sustainability. A business consultant has also been engaged to work with these communities to develop strategies. A List Serv created last year links all the Centre Co-ordinators and some members of Centre Management Committees (those who have Internet access). The List Serv has provided an invaluable tool for sharing information, problems and issues between the Centres.

To date over 12,000 Tasmanians have registered as members of the Centres. Registered members cover the full range of ages and socio-economic groups. When the final number of Centres has been established, an Online Access will serve approximately 3,400 persons per Centre and reach 214,000 Tasmanians. These statistics exclude Greater Hobart. Interestingly

the 10,000 Community Access Centres being established in New Brunswick, Canada are servicing approximately the same number! (3,400 per Centre)

WHAT DO ONLINE ACCESS CENTRES OFFER?

- Free or low cost use of computers and a range of software products;
- free or low cost Internet access;
- free basic 1:1 training in computer operations and Internet use;
- free group training;
- free support for micro-business development - research and communication, publicity development and production;
- free development of basic websites for micro-business and community groups;
- access to Government services delivered electronically;
- access to Online education courses and training;
- fee for service activities such as:-
 - advanced IT training courses;
 - design and development of websites;
 - development of electronic surveys;
- accredited training for 'Work for Dole' participants; and
- a place where participants can meet with others in the community and learn together.

3. ACHIEVEMENTS

Use of the Centres has been overwhelming and the following statistics demonstrate the demand for their services.

- Statistics
 - There are over 12,000 registered users (110 persons used the Devonport Centre in one day - Tuesday, 16th March, 1999).
 - Ringarooma has 59% of its population signed up as registered users with Maydena and Winnaleah at 49%.
 - Centres are utilised for 90% of their available opening hours. To enable greater access, some Centres have implemented swipe card systems allowing trusted users greater out of hours access.
 - Over 6,000 new e-mail accounts have been created.
 - 80% of user time is for Internet use.
 - 783 free training courses have introduced the public to basic computer and Internet training.
 - 994 web pages have been created for micro-businesses and community groups.
 - 1,247 micro-businesses have been assisted.
 - 433 volunteers have contributed over 21,000 hours of free service to users in Online Access Centres.
 - 45 Work for the Dole participants will complete modules in Certificate III in Information Technology.

- The Centres have generated high levels of enthusiasm and commitment in their local communities. Members of the public view the presence of access to IT and the Internet as a revitalising influence in their area. The public believes the Centres have reduced their isolation and economic disadvantage by providing opportunities for all, regardless of age. Families are able to remain together in their local towns while receiving education or looking for work 'Online' via the Internet. This has tremendous social impact particularly on small communities who have seen their sons and daughters move away from home.
- Centres are providing a powerful communication tool, bridging the gap between communities through e-mail and 'Online chat' facilities. This has provided Government with new communication and service delivery channels to meet the needs of Tasmanians, wherever their location. I believe the Centres are also seen as complementing the Government's requirement of strong communication between Government, its agencies and the wider Tasmanian community.
- Centres have demonstrated their value by providing economic opportunities for micro-business to electronic commerce via the Internet.
- Centres have provided valuable IT workplaces for high school work experience and senior secondary vocational work placements. Centres are also being used as workplaces for 'Work for the Dole' placements. In addition to the number of active users of each Centre, a large number of volunteers are receiving specialist IT training. Some have secured jobs as a result of this training.
- Online Access Centres are staffed by skilled IT Co-ordinators who have been employed from the local community. The Co-ordinators are employed by either the local management committee or a local organisation. They provide specialised IT training to members of the local community. They play a crucial role in the successful operation of the Centres. In addition, these Co-ordinators initiate business and education opportunities for the local community, some of which may be used to generate income streams. Centres are also supported by trained volunteers to extend the opening hours.
- In many cases, the Centres are providing IT skilled job opportunities (paid or volunteer) for the first time.
- The Project has attracted additional grants. 'Work for Dole' and 'Facilitating Best Practice' Grants enhance the work of the Centres. The 'Work for Dole' grants provide funding for a total of 45 placements. The Project Team have successfully brokered a partnership with Hobart College - a senior secondary college to deliver nationally accredited training to the participants. The 'Facilitating Best Practice' Grant from the Department of Family and Community Services is being used to provide 20 Centre Co-ordinators with the opportunity to work in IT industries to enhance their web publishing, multi media and e-commerce skills.
- Centres conducted the inaugural State-wide Conference in March 1999. Over 120 delegates from the Round I, 20 Centres, attended to discuss management and sustainability issues. As a result of the Conference a State-wide organisation representing the interests of Online Access Centres is being formed.

- The Project has forged new business partnerships with TAFE Tasmania. Revenue can be generated by enrolling students in Computer Managed Learning modules through Online Access Centres. The fee is approximately \$30-\$60/module and covers access to the Online education modules and provides 1:1 assistance for students in the Centres.
- A new partnership has been formed with the commercial company, Corporate Express. Online Access Centres have the opportunity to become local agents for Corporate Express in their community. Members of the public and local businesses can order any Corporate Express product including office supplies, furniture and IT products Online at the Centre through NetXpress for next-day delivery at no additional cost. The Online Access Centre receives a 10% commission on all sales, including items for internal use.
- Tasmanian Communities Online have engaged the services of a Consultant to produce policy guidelines for Centres entering into sponsorship deals. The guidelines will ensure consistency in approach by each Online Access Centre, guide Centres towards best practice and allow the Centres to avoid activities and linkages with business/industry which are not considered to be consistent with good business practice or generally accepted values.
- The Project Team participated in the Tasmanian State Government Industry Audit of the Information Technology Industry. The Project's thrust of providing training in rural Tasmanian towns was included in the final report with the recommendation that 'The Government is actively exploring strategies for developing community Online Access Centres such that they are able to become self-sustaining. It is anticipated that self-sustainability will be achieved through a variety of means including identifying better synergies with existing Government programs and access to new funding sources including the Telstra Social Bonus'.
- The Project attracts healthy and regular attention from the media with newspaper articles appearing each week in local papers. The Project also participates regularly in Expo's such as Primary Principals National Conference, Senior's Week, Adult Learner's Week, etc., and publishes a newsletter every two months with the purpose of sharing highlights from the Centres and progress on the Project's major activities.

4. UTILISATION OF THE CENTRES

- Government Agencies

The Centres offer State and Federal Government Agencies with an extensive statewide network of service outlets including many remote parts of Tasmania. Government Agencies have opportunities for doing business and communicating electronically with their customers.

Government Agencies particularly those with outreach community workers can demonstrate to their clients' information on agency websites as well as information sources located globally. In addition, facilities such as List Servs and Chat Rooms offer Agency customers a whole new way of finding out about, or simply being able to discuss, a particular issue.

As an example, the Department of Health and Human Services through its Breast Cancer Awareness Day program has demonstrated how an agency can use Online Access Centres to deliver Agency information programs to a specific customer group. Health workers went to

the Ravenswood, Bothwell and Bruny Island Online Access Centres to run information seminars on Breast Cancer Awareness Day. The seminar included the more traditional presentation together with a demonstration of research sites available through the Internet. The seminar also familiarised participants with List Serv and Chat Room facilities to enable discussion of these issues with people in other parts of the world.

Government Agencies can also easily communicate with and solicit feedback from their clients.

For example, the Office of Youth Affairs conducted a Youth Survey both in paper and electronically. The majority of returns came through electronically and for the first time returns have come from a wider customer group than could be reached through the previous paper surveys. The electronic survey, advertised through Online Access Centres and libraries, has ensured that many of the State's youth, particularly in rural and remote areas, are now able to participate. In addition the public launches of this survey were done at the Devonport Online Access Centre and the Launceston Library and have attracted good media publicity for the survey.

Online Access Centres have provided training and/or training venues for regional government staff who do not have access to computers and the Internet.

For example, Forestry Tasmania staff at Geeveston are being trained in computer literacy skills by the Geeveston Online Access Centre Co-ordinator. This has proven to be a cost-effective solution to this training need, as the workers no longer have to travel to Hobart for the training.

- Non-Government Agencies

Some Agencies have developed online training packages for customers so those customers may undertake courses through their own personal computing facilities or through Online Access Centres.

For example, the University of Tasmania, the Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association and the Office of Vocational Education and Training are in partnership to develop a range of training packages for the farming community. Local access will be available through Online Access Centres.

- Community Development

All Centres have developed a community website to showcase local community activities and events. The sites are constantly updated and demonstrate immense civic pride and development. Community groups are making regular use of the Centres, for example, Devonport Genealogy Society, Girl Guide Association, Fly Fishers Clubs, etc.

Ethnic communities use the Centres to access information resources such as newspapers in their native languages. An example of this is the use of the Devonport Centre by members of the expatriate El Salvadorian community. Other migrants living in the local area use the Centre to access information resources placed on the WWW by the Migrant Resource Centre.

Communities are developing online services such as online petitions and surveys to canvass public views on local matters. Volunteer programs in the Centres have been very active and are bringing together a wide cross-section of the community to manage their local Centre. For example at the Devonport Centre there are 30 regular volunteers, assisting people using the Centre's facilities. The Centre's Co-ordinator has been producing a regular newsletter for these volunteers.

Community use by groups such as youth, women, the unemployed and seniors have made demanding use of the Centres.

For example, Oatlands has a teenage website that is managed by youth and will keep youth informed of events and issues in their town. Centres like Bruny Island advertise activities of interest to young people such as Surf Competitions and other sporting events. Several Centres are setting up clubs for children to introduce them to computers and the Internet, eg. Devonport's PC Central Club. A number of women's groups are using the Centres around the State to meet and to promote their activities through a website, for example Probus Ladies Club at Deloraine, Highland Women's Spinners Group at Bothwell, and the Soroptimists Club at Smithton.

Centres have become popular with the unemployed. For example in small communities, such as George Town, Rosebery and Maydena, the Centres are used to gain access to job vacancies and government services.

Elderly and recent retirees have been enthusiastically using Online Access Centres. The Centres provide a supportive learning environment for these people to learn about computers and the Internet. Many master the technology, with the express purpose of using e-mail communication with their children/grandchildren, who are overseas or interstate

For example, at Geeveston many seniors have enrolled in and access courses from the University of the Third Age, a special tertiary program developed by the University of Tasmania. The Devonport Seniors Club is working with 8 Clubs (eg. Bowls Club) developing web pages and activities. Several Centres are conducting promotional activities in this year's International Year of the Older Person (IYOP).

- Business Development

Across the Centres over 545 business people have enrolled in training courses. Some of the business courses have been conducted in partnership with the Tasmanian Electronic Commerce Centre (TECC). Online Access Centres have forged partnerships with local businesses by providing free web design and support services.

For example, websites have been developed for the following small businesses - Mecca Bowl Cafe, Panogana Pottery, St. Winstan Indexing, Kingsrun Bird and Wildlife Tours, Elizabeth Town Nursery, the Clair's Luxury Accommodation and ABT Railway.

- Education

Centres have been utilised by students wishing to study online or to enrol in distance education courses and keep in touch with their tutors via e-mail.

For example, TAFE students are able to enrol in Computer Assisted Learning Courses throughout the State. Higher School Certificate students at Winnaleah have been accessing Year 11 and 12 courses via the Centre and, as previously mentioned, University of the Third Age students are enrolled in University courses.

The recently funded OPENIT Project in Tasmania will provide further courses online for the K-12, TAFE and University sectors.

- Cultural and Social Development

Centres have been active in promoting cultural events in their small towns, for example the Meander River Festival website was developed at the Meander Online Access Centre. The Deloraine Craft Fair website publicity materials and program were developed by the Deloraine Online Access Centre. Oatlands has hosted a website called 'The Rich and Fertile Country' which informs 'visitors' about the history of the Southern Midlands.

5. SUSTAINABILITY AND THE FUTURE OF ONLINE ACCESS CENTRES

The major strategy for sustainability is that the Centres are co-located with host organisations. In the case of being co-located on a Department of Education site (schools and libraries) or a Service Tasmania Shop, Centres receive free access to ISDN lines, free Internet use, free accommodation, heating, lighting and cleaning. The savings from the co-location are estimated to be between \$15,000-\$20,000 per annum per site. Centres also take advantage of the benefits of the 'Networking Tasmania' contract signed by the Government of Tasmania and Telstra. These benefits include free e-mail accounts. Centres can also take advantage of the Department of Education's bulk purchase of software arrangements, which offers significant discounts off the retail price for a variety of educational software.

All Centres have implemented cost recovery charges for consumables and services such as colour printing, scanning, etc. Centres in their first year did not charge a fee to access the Centre as the aim of the Project is to stimulate the rapid uptake of technology in rural communities and it was felt that an access charge might deter some users. Centres also have a schedule of fees for web design, PC games nights, Kids Clubs, venue hire and advanced training etc.

Several Centres have included additional services to their Centres, eg. Photocopying, laminating, selling disks, sweets, etc. Centres have also implemented Gold Card programs. This is a paid membership to the incorporated body and entitles the holder to such things as discounts at local businesses and after hours access to the Centre.

The Project Team have been responsible for brokering on behalf of Centres a number of significant services to be delivered through the network. Centres were circulated with an ideas pack entitled 'Fifty Ideas for Sustainability'. Online Access Centres also receive a fee for service for enrolling members of the public in Computer Managed Learning (CML) accredited TAFE and VET courses. Centre Co-ordinators with teaching qualifications entitles them to additional fee earning opportunities.

Work for Dole participants currently attract approximately \$1,600 per participant for supervising and conducting the training. Some Centres have three participants each six months. Some Centres are also receiving an income from Commonwealth agencies for their work in contributing to the rehabilitation of a worker. The Project has a joint initiative with a peak disability group in Tasmania and is currently seeking funding to pilot assistance technologies for the disabled.

A pilot program to establish Online Access Centres as retail outlets using Internet based 'e'-commerce has commenced with the company 'Corporate Express'. Members of the public and local businesses can order office supplies through the Centres for next day delivery. The Centre receives a 10% commission on all sales including items for internal use.

Charges were implemented for tourist e-mail at \$5 per half an hour across all Centres in 1998 and early 1999. This had become a substantial source of income for some Centres. The charge had to be removed due to legal advice that indicated that it breached a section of the Australian Constitution. Consequently charges could only be levied for international visitors. Centres have since decided to implement a casual use fee for non-registered users in order to be able to charge for e-mail.

Centres have been encouraged to prepare applications for additional grants and the Project subscribes to the Easy Grants Information Service that provides regular and detailed information about what grants are available nationally.

The Project has also engaged two business consultants. One of the consultants will work intensively over the next few months with Centres to explore appropriate models of sustainability and levels of service delivery for each level of Centre. The consultant's report will be available at the end of the year. The other consultant will develop formal sponsorship guidelines to ensure a consistency in approach to sponsorship by each Online Access Centre. It is envisaged that there would be significant economic benefits for Centres for example for a statewide contract for a screensaver.

Centres have been unable to develop full transactional websites for micro-businesses on the Department of Education's server. The Department of Education's contract with Telstra allows for educational and non-commercial activity. Project funds have now been used to purchase web hosting space on a private provider's server. Centres will on-sell the space to micro-businesses in their communities. Centres will also charge for web design time.

As previously mentioned Centres in their second year are receiving partial funding towards their Centre Co-ordinator's salary. To access this funding Centres are required to sign a Year II Funding Agreement which outlines a set of agreed minimum performance targets over a range of services and income generating activities. This system has been adapted from the Western Australian Tele Centre Model in which Centres who fulfil their targets receive a \$20,000 grant from the Government sourced from the Lotteries Commission.

All Centres in their second year of operation are still experiencing a high demand for their services. All Centres are having difficulties though in generating the revenue required to maintain paid staff at original levels, particularly those Centres in the smaller and remote rural towns. So what does the future hold?

The Project to date has been highly successful, thousands of Tasmanians are using the Centres and gaining IT skills. The Project is delivering education, training, social and cultural benefits. The digital revolution is increasing the gap between the rich and the poor. The Tasmanian Communities Online Project is providing one strategy to reduce the 'digital divide' as some authors are calling it. Centres are also important in teaching members of the community the impact of technology on the world of work. They are demonstrating to their members the new ways that you can stay in rural communities and conduct your living and livelihood.

There still remains untapped potential for Government agencies (local, State and Federal) to utilise the Centres. This is a learning curve for both the Centres and the individuals within Government agencies. There is a powerful statewide network of 60 communities offering direct links to communities and individuals for government services, for trialling new services and for harnessing emerging ideas from the community.

The future of the Centres will also depend on their ability to develop stronger partnerships with partners who can offer both financial assistance and in kind help. The Centres' livelihood will be a mix of both income generation activities, grants received and in kind partnerships. Some Centres will be better positioned to attempt certain activities than others and the challenge will be for local Management Committees to recognise the most effective strategies for their Centre. The work of the business consultant currently engaged to work with the communities will hopefully provide this direction and support.

The Project provides a fundamental bridge into computer access within communities. The current access level in Tasmania is 16%. The Project Team believes that the education and training task will be complete when access is at the level of the top Australian States or at least say 55%. This may take up to five years. Currently only 10% of Tasmanians have access to the Internet.

The Project has fulfilled many expectations, but it has also raised others. Communities have expressed the vision that the Centres could provide a new way for Government to do business with rural communities.

Tasmania could be a national leader in working together with 60 networked communities in an innovative framework. The infrastructure already exists in a cost effective partnership utilising in the main the Department of Education's facilities and local community energy and support.

The Project has developed groups of enthusiastic, knowledgeable and informed people who are talking to others in their community about the benefits of computer technology and who are learning together about developing a vision at the local level.

Finally, I wish to quote from an address recently delivered by one of the Centre Co-ordinators (Geeveston Centre), Mandy Oliver, to highlight the impact of the Centres.

'Prior to the establishment of our Centre our local community was feeling isolated and forgotten. Services have been taken away, businesses have been closing one by one. The banks have declared Geeveston as depressed. Geeveston Online Access Centre is possibly the only activity accessible by all members of the community that has been set up in Geeveston in many years. There is no doubt that the Centre has made it possible for the local community to

access information technology and the Internet where in many cases this was previously not possible. Now children who have not travelled past Huonville are chatting with peers around the world, job seekers are searching the Net for positions, typing up their resumes and e-mailing them. It does not matter that Geeveston is an STD call to Hobart. For the first time in a long time we do not have to pay because we live in a rural area.'