



“Building a Networked Nation –opportunities for charities to go Digital by Default”

Peter Wanless, addressing delegates at Go ON ND11, 12th May 2011

I find it extraordinary how far behind a digital by default world many charities and funders find themselves, given the years in which experts have been developing national strategies and plans to address digital inclusion and companies have been trying to flog us ever more apparently impressive kit. So much of this effort and activity has passed us by. If the time and effort spent on writing papers, hosting conferences and advertising cheap broadband had been targeted onto connecting up the disconnected and giving more of us greater confidence in the products and available support, there would be far less urgency about the task facing us today

So I want to begin by thanking Martha Lane Fox and her colleagues at Race Online 2012 for injecting focus and an imminent deadline into all this.

The Big Lottery Fund has a mission to support communities and people most in need. As so many important services and opportunities are now online, it is crucial to our mission that individuals and communities already at greatest disadvantage, don't find their problems compounded through lack of access or understanding as to what is possible via the internet.

All of us must adjust to the availability and opportunity of an online world and the Big Lottery Fund is no exception. We cannot ignore the benefits and efficiencies of online operations to our cost base, or to our customers, so we will be going digital by default in order that more good cause cash gets to charities who can make better use of it. An obvious risk is that areas likely to need our funding the most - for example, urban areas with high levels of deprivation; or rural areas with limited services – may also be those with **least access to online services**. Race Online's passion and determination to ensure everyone is connected is incredibly timely for us. In the meantime, while there are some great technology-savvy projects, too many charities make poor use of what is available: unwilling, unaware or unable to exploit it to best effect.

- As a funder, we don't always help. Last year BIG made **14,000 funding commitments**. **We typically commit £500-600m a year, to groups across the UK**. At least twice as many organisations applied. Most did so on paper forms which we had to transcribe. This creates duplication, scope for error and toing and



froning between the funder and the applicant that can be eliminated via an online, self help system.

Moving more of our services online will help us to become more efficient. It can also improve the experience for many applicants and grant holders, freeing transactional resource to add greater value. Our move online is underway and in the coming period we will go digital by default. As far as possible applicants for our funding will need to complete their applications online.

This isn't simply to force people to use the internet for the sake of it!

We have trialled **online applications**, for four of our funding programmes.

With our first People's Millions pilot, approximately 90% of applicants opted to use an interactive form over a paper one. Most applicants completing a survey found the process clear and easy to use – 93% found the questions very or fairly easy to understand; and 90% found the form very or fairly easy to fill in.

- In 2010 there was a 59% increase in People's Millions application forms being downloaded compared to the previous year. This was due to usability and accessibility improvements carried out on the website, and on the interactive form. In 2011, we received 1,827 completed applications compared to 841 the previous year. But not only were there more applications, it cost us less to administer them – the smart form meant fewer needed to be sent back as 'incomplete', saving time and cost for both us and our applicants.

But that's not the only **benefit for our customers. Under our new system, currently being introduced:**

- Technology will help us link applications from customers under a single account. This makes it:
 - easier for us to find information about an application
 - Applicants will only need to submit some of their information once, where it is common to many applications. They will not need to submit their annual accounts for every application they make.
- Applicants will be able to share their application within their organisation much more easily, which is very useful where sections of the application may need agreement from a number of people.
- Applicants will be able to track the progress of their application online.
- They will be able to get their decisions much faster.
- Applicants should find that their interactions with us are far more transparent and intelligent. The system will help to release resource so that we can focus more on



activities that add value to an application, helping it to become more successful, rather than just administering it.

For us, it is crucial that **our applicants and grantholders remain at the heart of our processes**. The feedback they give us on this journey will be vitally important; and we will take steps to ensure that all our customers – regardless of size or location – are equally able to benefit from our systems.

We estimate that the number of organisations that will find online processes to be a severe obstacle to applying for our funding is small but the more successful Race Online 2012 are, the further that will reduce. In the meantime, we are reconsidering our **customer contact strategy** alongside our new funding management system, including:

- Redesigning our website to promote the new system, and answer more questions online
- Designing a clear, accessible and engaging portal for the new system
- Involving our customers and partners in thoroughly testing our new systems, to make the transition as smooth as possible.

If we are convinced that the move to online processes will help BIG become more efficient, and improve the experience of our customers then it follows that making better use of IT could be equally valuable to the charities we support, helping them to make efficiency savings, which prolong the life of their grant, promote their projects, involve local people and offer access to new sources of funds. Yet NCVO calls ICT the sector's biggest skills gap. A third of small and medium charities say they have no one to talk to about technology.

BIG is looking at ways that our funding can help charities support and learn from each other through the use of digital platforms.

- In 2009 we launched a dedicated People's Millions website, and in 2010, upgraded it to offer enhanced campaigning support for shortlisted projects. We provided technical support to help applicants showcase their projects via BIG's website, Facebook, Twitter, Bebo, and other social networking sites, giving them the confidence to advertise and campaign for their project and raise the profile of their organisation.
- This year, our **Village SOS** programme, to be featured in a prime time BBC show later this year, is accompanied by a Learning Campaign, and a community and learning website. The villages can promote and share experiences, and



encourage local involvement. The Learning Campaign will also provide resources and enable people to collaborate to develop ideas for community enterprise.

- And across thousands of individual projects, we see the profound change triggered when you give a computer to those helping someone with complex needs – creating a safe, supporting learning environment. Whether it's a drugs rehab drop in, or a shelter for the homeless, computers allow development workers to support vulnerable people through umpteen different problems.

But we know that to get the best value from technology, we need to do more, and take a more joined-up approach.

There are some common systems which we are funding that can help.

- The **KnowHow NonProfit** website uses online technology to connect civil society organisations so they can share knowledge, create learning and lead their own development.
- **The Knowledge Portal** is an online catalogue and library being set up by the Third Sector Research Sector in collaboration with the British Library. It will create a permanent collection of published material on and for the voluntary and community sector, making it far easier for researchers and others to locate and access the evidence they need.

And we have further plans to develop a **BIG Online Community** - a single platform to support communication and exchanges of knowledge, learning and ideas between our projects.

As well as providing opportunities for learning, there are also ways we can help to equip organisations with access to **low cost digital tools and expertise** that will help them get more out of their projects.

- The Young Foundation is being funded by us to develop a **menu of low cost digital tools** – from apps to websites – to enable communities and individuals throughout the country to build on their strengths and come together to accelerate change. Through **building digital activism (£820,000)**, they will support people to campaign and lobby for changes through popular social media platforms, and, where appropriate, the aforementioned newly developed digital tools.



- BIG is funding the development of a **digital platform** to support the piloting and roll out of Your Square Mile (£830,000). This is a locally controlled platform that will provide people with access to local information and resources, including information about local groups, action opportunities and local support services (such as pro-bono legal or accountancy advice).

But charities should also be asking how they can help themselves. There are abundant but extraordinarily underused resources out there:

Advice: **IT4Communities** has a bank of 3,000 IT-specialist volunteers.

Software: the **Charity Technology Trust** with its software packages has already helped thousands of charities but reckons it could offer support to tens of thousands more

Kit and connectivity: new schemes from **Race Online 2012, Remploy and Microsoft** are offering new and refurbished PCs for under £100.

A lot of that support has been available for some time – but has often felt disjointed, and is not always visible to the people that really need it. Today's event is beginning to draw all that together – and not a moment too soon.