

**SOCIAL TAPESTRIES**  
*Conversations and Connections*

**Evaluation Report**  
**for the Ministry of Justice**

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**Proboscis and Local Level**  
**April 2007**

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## Introduction

The *Conversations and Connections* project was established with ambitious but realistic objectives, based on a combination of creative technological innovation and sound community development experience. It was attempted in a clearly-defined local area with identifiable community activity, a recent history of community involvement, and in partnership with an established community organisation with access to premises. The project team had been working there for several months and had established recognition and trust. The project ideas, while innovative and challenging, were introduced in flexible and practically-sensitive ways.

And yet the project did not succeed. None of the innovations attempted under the project were adopted by the group with any lasting success. This evaluation report attempts to clarify what we believe to be important lessons from this project, which demonstrate the difficulties of establishing pioneering participative developments in less-than-optimum circumstances.



## Key Lessons

The project achieved or contributed to the following outcomes and effects:

- it helped draw attention to the work of the residents' organisation across the estate, mainly through organising and publicising open days in attempts to generate activity. This enhanced level of awareness and interest may have contributed to a boost in committee membership during the project period;
- it generated creative ideas in committee. In the event, although there was never sufficient commitment or energy to carry through these ideas, they may have kept the committee from becoming moribund;
- it helped some committee members to think 'outside the box' in terms of their impact and appropriate activities, by presenting the view that social development could stimulate democratic involvement and hence contribute to the tenant management movement, and hence to housing improvements.

The main reasons why the project did not succeed more fully are these:

- lack of consistent community development support on the estate
- weak connections between the residents' organisation committee and the residents
- failure to assert the connection between housing issues and social development issues: rather than seeing these as mutually-re-enforcing, some committee members tended to see the latter as of lesser importance

- failure to develop a lasting connection with one or two individuals on the estate with basic computer skills who would have been willing and able to invest time in exploring, helping to develop, and demonstrating systems
- the timing was unfortunate, in that committee members' energies were directed towards their tenant management objectives throughout the project period.

The project also raises questions about the extent to which residents who volunteer their time for major community projects are adequately supported – in this case, before they are able to get to the development stage of the Right to Manage process, when they would be entitled to additional resources for employing a worker. As government continues to promote models of community engagement in governance, this issue will need addressing. Low levels of participation in terms either of numbers of people or of hours committed, increases the pressure on those who are active, to the point where the most committed could become burnt-out and others, witnessing this effect, will back away.

A summary of policy messages is provided at the end of this report.

Kevin Harris and Giles Lane  
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## Background

### Project Rationale

The stated project objective was as follows:

*to explore how knowledge mapping and sharing ('public authoring') tools can be harnessed by a local community to stimulate connections between residents and thereby increase levels of participation at local level. Working closely with Havelock Independent Residents' Organisation (HIRO) on the Havelock Estate in West London, we will design and deploy a range of activities and tools (both online and offline) that encourage participation and connections within the community and outside.*

Having worked on the estate during the course of the previous year, and having good connections with a community development practitioner who was assisting in a Right to Manage process with the residents' organisation, the project team was well-placed to assess the need for and chances of wider participation. A background paper<sup>1</sup> published by Proboscis highlighted the problematic relationship between HIRO and the housing association (Ealing Homes) on issues of estate maintenance: the paper characterised this in terms of 'civic absence' and related it to an acute need for community development which would emphasise information-sharing and communication.

On this basis, the rationale for the *Conversations and Connections* project was as follows:

Residents experience 'civic absence' on the part of various authorities

▽

Although a core group of residents is involved in the Right to Manage process, there are low levels of engagement with the wider population on the estate

▽

It should be possible to stimulate activities around the community shop, based on resident-identified needs, using various techniques including new information and communication technologies. These would attract more residents over time

▽

Such activity will increase the amount of communication on the estate, about issues of concern to residents, and hence levels of peripheral participation

▽

Local people's skills and confidence in various aspects of community organising will develop as a consequence, with the work of the residents' organisation becoming more visible and roles becoming more accessible. This would amount to increased democratic engagement

▽

Local people will develop a range of materials which could be exploited for community development

▽

The project will thus be able to demonstrate an increase in democratic participation.

1. Harris, K (2006). *Common Knowledge: community development and communication on a housing estate*. London: Proboscis. (Cultural Snapshots)  
[http://proboscis.org.uk/publications/SNAPSHOTS\\_CommonKnowledge.pdf](http://proboscis.org.uk/publications/SNAPSHOTS_CommonKnowledge.pdf)

### **HIRO and the Right-to-Manage process**

Havelock Independent Residents' Organisation (HIRO) was established in 2000 and represents about 560 tenants, 120 leaseholders and 60 freeholders on the Havelock estate. Housing management on Havelock was transferred in 2004 to Ealing Homes, an arm's length management organisation (ALMO).

Ealing Homes provides premises for HIRO in a small row of shops on the estate. This 'community shop' includes meeting space and a small office.

HIRO has been working with independent consultants Partners in Change following a 'pre-feasibility' study for tenant management. This led onto a feasibility study in 2005, aimed at developing a stronger committee and improving communication, awareness and involvement from local residents in the committee's activities and in tenant management. This work preceded and has continued throughout the period of the *Conversations and Connections* project.

Through training, study visits and attendance at conferences and networking events, the committee has worked with Partners in Change to develop greater knowledge about the role of a tenant management organisation and to explore their tenant management aspirations for the estate. The impact and sensitivity of this work should not be underestimated: without it, it's highly unlikely that the committee would have developed the capacity to pursue tenant management, or any connections to external project development support such as that provided by Proboscis and Local Level. At the same time, one correspondent raised a question about the extent to which HIRO was being led rather than taking on its own development; and another wondered whether the work of Partners in Change was disguising an inadequate level of community development support from Ealing Homes. In our view, both points are slightly misleading but they highlight the remarkable sensitivity of this work, where participants constantly have to assess subtle implications of support, coercion, responsibility, detached encouragement and so on.

Throughout the period of this project, Ealing Homes had a community development worker appointed to the Havelock estate<sup>2</sup>. However, over an eighteen month period, including a succession of public open events run at the community shop, the project workers never had the chance to meet him. It has been acknowledged that the community development input has been less than adequate for the needs of the estate. At the same time, as one correspondent put it, within HIRO there has often been "an unstated objection to anything that is not about housing."

The intention in the feasibility study was for HIRO to move on to the development stage of the Right to Manage process. A test of opinion was held in December 2006 (as the *Conversations and Connections* project was coming to a close). The result, with 168 votes cast and 154 in favour, confirmed support for tenant management across the Havelock estate.

2. For the context, see the Resident empowerment strategy 2005-2006, [http://www.ealinghomes.net/export/sites/ealing-homes/main/ealing\\_homes/publications/publications\\_and\\_documents\\_documents/Res\\_Emp\\_Strat\\_2005-06.pdf](http://www.ealinghomes.net/export/sites/ealing-homes/main/ealing_homes/publications/publications_and_documents_documents/Res_Emp_Strat_2005-06.pdf), p14.

### Proboscis and Local Level: project preparation

The involvement of Proboscis and Local Level with HIRO was not an overnight invention for the *Conversation and Connections* project. The consultants had been invited to work with HIRO following an introduction in June 2005 from Bev Carter of Partners in Change, and both Kevin Harris and Giles Lane attended committee meetings from summer 2005 onwards. This involvement, which led to the publication of the Social Tapestries *Common Knowledge* paper, was associated with the committee's recognition of the need for improved communication with residents. It was felt that the fundamental democratic process of involvement in tenant management could be enhanced by improved communication and creative processes of engagement. The first open day, organised collaboratively by the consultants and HIRO in advance of the *Conversations and Connections* project, in November 2005, attracted approximately 60 residents. This was felt to be a sign of significant potential.

However, there were also indications that this potential could be deceptive, particularly since, aside from the Right to Manage process, there was little community development going on to stimulate activity and sustain involvement. HIRO's annual general meeting, held shortly before the 2005 open day, was very poorly attended, attracting only three non-committee residents and raising concerns about the group's representativeness. If nothing else, this highlighted an urgent need to stimulate involvement through any kind of activity: the point being that HIRO was committed to a process of democratic representation for significant social change, and its mandate appeared to be fragile. This was the setting for the *Conversations and Connections* project.



## Activities

### Introduction

Initial intentions were to proceed on two fronts. First, to stimulate communications activity ('sub-projects') wherever it seemed appropriate to do so and wherever an opportunity arose. Secondly, by organising and preparing for a community event on the estate on 10 June 2006, which would introduce techniques of observation and recording based on Proboscis' bodystorming, DIFFUSION eBooks and StoryCubes. The idea was to introduce the Urban Tapestries software and work with residents to demonstrate ways in which it could serve their cause by systematising their information.

A computer and an internet connection were in place, provided by Ealing Homes for the community shop, although the connection was not functioning until sorted by the project team in early March 2006. For our initial project event, an 'IT day' on 16 March 2006, Proboscis also provided an iMac computer, ethernet switch and a wireless router on loan, and wireless connectivity was established. The equipment remained on loan to HIRO throughout the project.

The IT day was organised to stimulate interest in the project with the intention of 'drawing out' some residents who might be ready to develop their skills and take ownership of some of the project ideas. In collaboration with Ealing Homes it was arranged for a computer training bus to be parked outside the shop, offering basic 'computer literacy' courses to residents. In the shop, we used the occasion to demonstrate the internet, digital cameras and the digital video camera.

Approximately 15 people came in – very low turnout for a Saturday when the event had been publicised in advance and the weather was mild and dry. A few people indicated their interest and their names were passed to committee members to follow up. When we enquired a few weeks later it was apparent that none had been followed up, but committee members said they knew the people concerned anyway. This pattern was to become familiar in the project: the lack of time available for project workers to be on site placed responsibility for such connections with the committee, who claimed connectedness but were seldom able to capitalise on it.

### Pursuing funding opportunities

During our preparatory work in 2005 HIRO committee members talked about the importance of having the community shop open as much as possible. If the venue was open consistently it would attract residents and become a hub of information and communication – it would stimulate conversations and connections. Without funding to employ a worker there was no commitment to open the shop regularly, so Local Level undertook to work with a committee member on a Big Lottery Fund proposal. The proposal was submitted in February 2006 but was not successful. In retrospect it's fair to say that if the proposal had been funded, it could have made a significant difference to the *Conversations and Connections* project because a HIRO information and advice worker would have been on site every weekday.

At a committee meeting in summer 2006 it emerged that there was an opportunity to apply to a local funding source: members were interested in organising day coach trips for older people from the estate. Hoping for an opportunity to spark ideas collaboratively, the project worker volunteered to come to the shop at an agreed time the following week (28 June 2006), to work with committee members on the proposal. Unfortunately no-one else turned up and it was a fruitless journey. This meant that not only was no bid made to the fund, but no directed conversation (eg about the needs of older residents) took place.

### **Opportunities to broaden experience**

Alongside the project, Local Level organised some initiatives to help HIRO's cause. The first was to arrange a visit, under the Home Office's Guide Neighbourhoods scheme, to the Pembroke Street Estate in Devonport. This took place on 26 January 2006 and gave four committee members the opportunity to learn about the success of tenant-based estate management on what was previously a very neglected and challenging estate.

The second initiative was a visit to Havelock by three officials from HM Treasury, on 4 April 2006. They met with residents at the Family Centre and at the community shop. They participated in a walkabout and visited one family in their home. In this case there were two purposes: the first was to give government officials an opportunity to explore informally with residents the complexity of neighbourhood life with no frills, no laudable award-winning projects, no spectacular crisis or heart-swelling response. The second was to give residents an opportunity to articulate their own experience and to be listened to, at some length.

It was made clear to residents in advance that they could not expect resources to flow as a consequence of this visit, but it was generally felt afterwards that they benefited from the sense that they had a cause which merited attention. Nonetheless, one negative effect on the day was that historic tensions between HIRO and the Family Centre were exposed. It's likely that these tensions are associated with some of the distancing from HIRO which we encountered from time to time, but given the limited contact time we had on the estate it was impossible to determine their depth or significance. It's important to remember that all neighbourhoods and estates where people experience exclusion are likely to be creaking from such fissures of conflict and tension: there was no reason for the project team necessarily to feel that these were insurmountable, given creativity and a readiness to share ideas.

A third attempt to ignite activity was the consequence of a connection between Local Level and Ealing Libraries. The project worker set up a meeting (on 10 May 2006) where representatives of the community libraries and adult education teams came to meet HIRO committee members, with the project worker in attendance. An invitation was extended to HIRO to visit an adult education project elsewhere in the borough, to be followed by some creative community education input to HIRO's proposed open day in June. Subsequent enquiries revealed that the project visit had not been taken up, and the connection was allowed to drop.

Another peripheral opportunity arose later in the year, when an invitation was extended for committee members, working with Local Level, to prepare and present a workshop at one of the Home Office's national Together We Can conferences. This was understandably

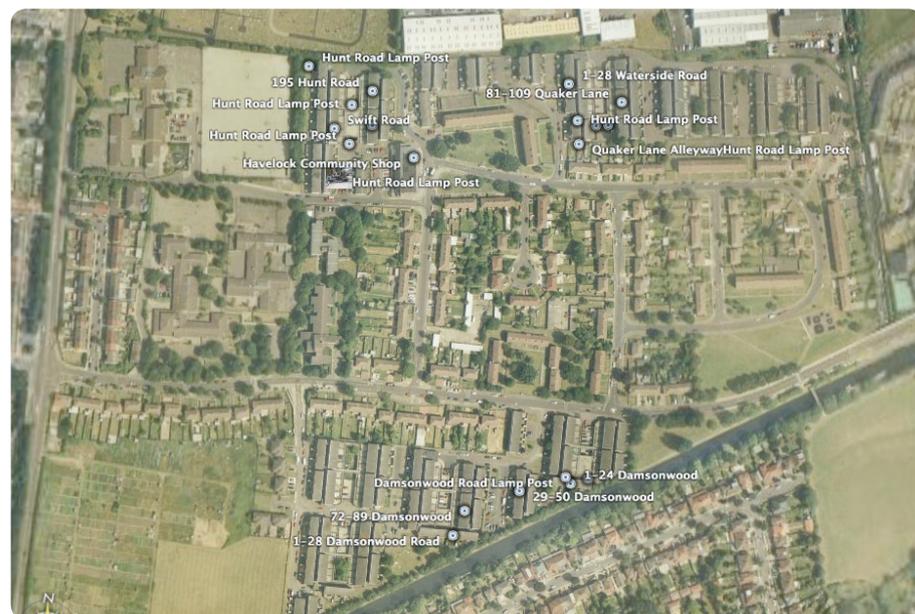
declined as those members who could make the date did not feel they had sufficient confidence to proceed.

### Using ICTs: attempts to spark activity

One initial sub-project was suggested in HIRO committee at an early stage and led to the purchase by HIRO of a digital video camera. Two members expressed an interest in learning to use it and an experimental outing was arranged on the estate. A mini-project was proposed with a view to gathering, editing, and presenting material about conditions on the estate to local councillors. However, before this project could begin, the equipment went missing – it had been necessary to store it off site while insurance was being organised. It was presumed lost, to be rediscovered (in a committee member's home) in January 2007.

Another opportunity arose following the visit to the estate in Plymouth in January 2006 referred to above. The project worker suggested that some of those who went on the visit might want to learn to prepare a Powerpoint presentation in order to report informatively to other residents. Two committee members expressed interest, but when invited to begin work on it during the IT day on 16 March they declined.

Then in the summer, we seized upon what appeared to be the perfect opportunity to demonstrate Social Tapestries' creative and supportive use of technologies. One committee member had spent time cataloguing faulty street lamps and block lights on walkways, stairways and communal areas, in a rigorous campaign to expose inadequate maintenance.



We began a process of entering the basic geo-spatial data into the Urban Tapestries system so that by 10 June we were ready to demonstrate it to committee and residents, and to train people in using and maintaining it. The objective was to encourage local people to enrich the data with images and text, thus generating a live resource which could be made available publicly on the internet as a maintenance monitoring tool, and

which could also be used to reflect environmental conditions on Havelock. In our own 'expeditions' round the estate we identified and photographed numerous examples of disorder which seemed to confirm residents' opinions about the quality of maintenance, and these examples could also contribute to an accumulating record. From an early stage we also argued for the need to include positive, celebratory material by exploring which parts of the estate people valued and why. There were various discussions about organising parties, barbecues or community festivals on the green in the centre of the estate, although it gradually became clear that the committee did not have the resources (in terms of energy, skills and connections) to bring these ideas to fruition.

### **Recording Havelock, June 2006**

At the annual general meeting of the residents' organisation (22 May 2006) nineteen residents put themselves forward for committee membership, out of 36 residents who attended. This compares with a total of just three non-committee residents who attended (but did not put themselves forward for committee) the previous AGM in 2005. It was notable that a representative of the Somali community put themselves forward and was accepted onto the committee<sup>3</sup>. Another new volunteer said, at his first committee meeting:

*"I'm here because I feel neglected by the council and I see someone trying to make a difference."*

It seemed reasonable to claim that the publicity and activity generated by the project contributed in at least a small way to this refreshing level of interest. We anticipated that our proposed activity day, 'Recording Havelock,' would build on this.

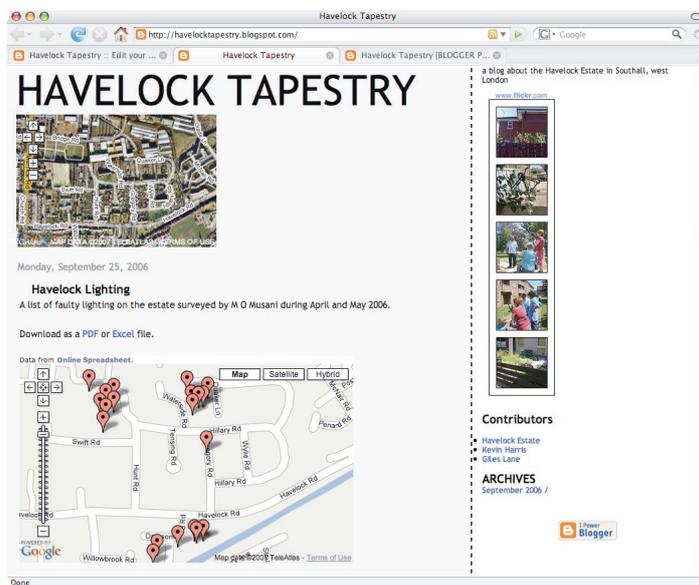
On Saturday 10 June 2006 project workers spent an afternoon video-recording interviews with local residents of Havelock to capture different 'voices' and experiences of life on the estate, while others made themselves available in the community shop with equipment to hand. The date proved to be the day of England's first World Cup match: this is likely to have affected turnout at the shop (which was very low) but not the content or quality of the interviews. Eleven residents were interviewed and an initial DVD was produced in the following week with a selection of edited interviews. A second, shorter version of the DVD has now been prepared.

At this time Proboscis also created two StoryCubes reflecting positive and negative issues about Havelock, based on the interactions and conversations with residents over the previous year. The intention was to run an event with local residents where they would create a whole series of StoryCubes based on their own experiences and use the cubes in groups to explore the connections between them. Thus the project team was on the lookout for any occasion when residents got together, with a view to exploiting such gatherings creatively. This is why we showed an interest in working with residents on funding bids. We were also keen to contribute to a proposed 'induction session' for new committee members after the successful AGM in May, but this session apparently was never organised.

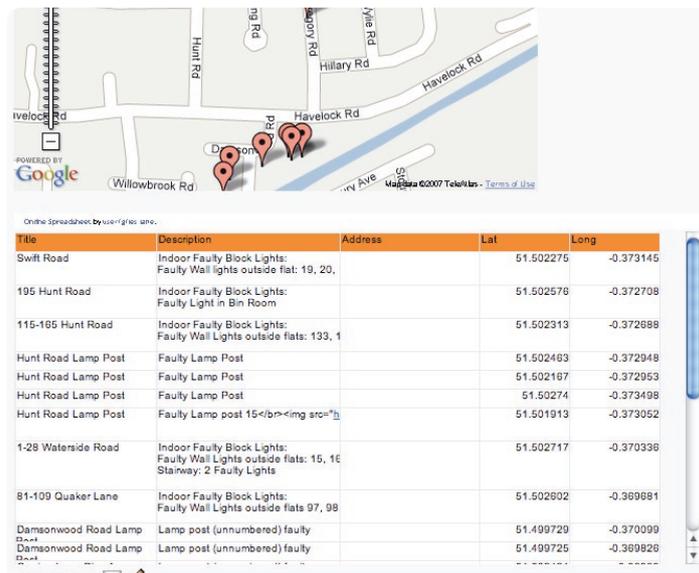
3. In February 2007 we were told that the Somali representative had 'dropped off the committee.'

### 'Scavenged' public authoring

In summer 2006 Proboscis developed a new prototype public authoring system based on 'scavenging' free online services. Various free services offer the elements of public authoring – mapping, collecting data, sharing knowledge, images, audio and video – and are designed to require little or no specialist knowledge to set up and maintain. By bringing them together and supporting residents and groups in combining their use, we sought to stimulate the recording of local issues, and hence participation in addressing those issues.



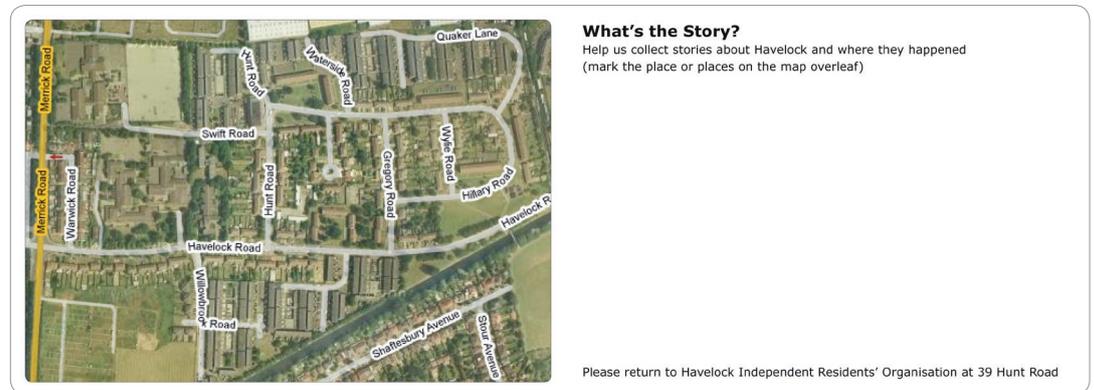
In this case Proboscis used an online spreadsheet (EditGrid.com) for gathering and editing local data. This data uses a free EditGrid service to create localised maps (using Google Maps) linking the data to actual locations; which is then inserted into a blog (Blogger.com). A Flickr photosharing account allows images to be posted online and linked to in the spreadsheet and maps, as well as in the blog. We have also defined the process for audioblogging/podcasting using these tools to map audio and video files to local places.



While the project was unable to prove the contribution of this system to democratic participation, it's worth acknowledging a glimmer of its potential: one member of the committee, a teacher who had been away for much of the year, took the time in the summer to learn the system and to make some entries, which can be seen at <http://havelocktapestry.blogspot.com>.

**The StoryCards: attempting to build up a picture of life on the estate**

Two StoryCards were designed, printed and distributed for the *Conversations and Connections* project. The first was used for the June 'Recording Havelock' activity day. It was a conventional A6-sized postcard with a coloured aerial map of the estate on one side, and the main streets named.



There was plenty of space for people to write comments, and they were invited to return the card to the shop at any time. We received only a handful and there was very little material for us to exploit in other ways.

The StoryCard was completely redesigned for its second iteration in October, when it was distributed throughout the estate together with a HIRO newsletter. A larger A5 format was used with better quality card. The writing side looked like this:

**Living on Havelock**  
What are the issues that affect **your** life on Havelock?  
Please **tick** the boxes below if you think there is a *problem* or *need* and **mark** the place or places on the **map** overleaf.

	Problem or Need	Please describe
Garages		
Estate repairs		
Internal maintenance (flats, houses)		
Rubbish and flytipping		
Illness and overcrowding		
Anti-social behaviour		
Community spirit / neighbourliness		
Access, transport and traffic		
Activities for young people		
Shops		
Lighting		
Security and safety		
Local service points (health, police, housing, libraries etc)		
Other (please describe)		

Please return to the **Havelock Community Shop** at: 39 Hunt Road

Again, residents were invited to return the card to the community shop. The card was prepared to fit in with HIRO's schedule for a 'test of opinion' (referred to as 'the ballot') before moving into the development stage of tenant management: this ballot was to close on 20 November and a schedule was prepared which required the cards to be designed, printed and delivered in time to be distributed by residents, folded-in with a newsletter as part of the committee's publicity, on 19 October.

The project team therefore committed to run two open days on successive Saturdays at the end of that month, and to be available throughout the week in between, for a 'survey week' to help residents capture and annotate information about their area. The intention was to build up a picture of life on Havelock and then to approach Ealing Homes to explore how this system could be used or adapted to help them improve the delivery of services to the estate.

Unfortunately HIRO members were not able to deliver the StoryCards or their newsletter before the first open day, and by the second open day only half had been delivered. In the end a total of just seven cards were returned to the shop. It also transpired that the days selected by HIRO for these events coincided with religious festivals for the two main faith groups on the estate, although this had not been mentioned during committee at the time the dates were chosen. Consequently the first open day attracted just six residents, and the second open day only one. It was decided to cancel the survey week as no-one on the estate had been informed about it. Compared with HIRO's November 2005 open day, initiated by Proboscis and Local Level, which attracted about 60 people, the turn out by local residents was deeply disappointing.

### **The Proboscis internship**

In our attempts to identify a resident who might take the lead on using technologies, we deliberately sought to involve the committee member who had helped with the video-recording. This young man – a rare example of someone from a challenging background, in their early twenties, who was concerned about community action – volunteered for an internship with Proboscis to gather and map local knowledge and work with young people on the estate. While he was keen to learn and develop his skills, it gradually became clear that he was insufficiently trusted by others on the committee for us to be able to take advantage of his enthusiasm.

In a HIRO committee meeting in July 2006 he volunteered to chair a sub-group to work on the information and communication issues (four sub-groups were formed at the time). It was agreed that in order to fulfill this role he should be given keys to the shop and office, which would enable him to spend time using the computer and other equipment.

Among the tasks proposed, which he was keen to work on, was a plan to establish a simple enquiries database on the office computer, so that issues raised by residents could be logged and monitored efficiently. The project team offered to help with this, and it was identified as a key early objective for the information and communication sub-group.

In spite of several requests for a set of keys, backed up by polite enquiries from the project team, he was never given any. In disillusion, he wrote a letter of resignation to the committee, which disappointingly made no effort to retain him, instead demeaning his

attempts to play a role by alluding vaguely to past involvement in drugs and to the fact that he no longer lived on the estate. The individual soon disappeared from the scene. This was a very negative moment for the project, partly because our potential connection to younger people on the estate was lost, but also we were concerned that by associating closely with him we might unwittingly have stoked the forces against him.



## Exploring the Lessons

### The importance of community development

All the key lessons from this project are about social relationships and the community development context for externally-funded projects. The technology options were not shown in any way to be inappropriate or flawed. While the first iteration of the Urban Tapestries system was probably too complex for novices to use, Proboscis's approach was flexible and creative. The 'scavenged' public authoring system using free online resources has obvious promise which merits further exploration.

In the researchers' view, based on experience of other low income estates where new technologies have been introduced, it was entirely reasonable to have expected at least a few core people to take it up and use it, and for this to spark further interest. We understand that the computer training courses are still being run from the mobile unit on the estate on a regular basis: this suggests that the interest in computer skills was there, but connections were not strong enough to bring them into the shop. There is still a strong case for exploring public authoring in an alternative setting.

The committee members are volunteer activists. What they know about the niceties of housing management comes from their direct experience of living in managed properties, in an area of poor housing and overcrowding. What they know about relating to authorities and professionals comes from struggling to find a collective way of addressing the sense of neglect, disorder and 'civic absence' on their estate. (Nor should we under-estimate the potential severity of conditions: the *Common Knowledge* essay argued that people are sensitive to the looming drugs culture and the fact that knife- and gun-related gang violence often swills across an estate in its wake). Much of what they know about decision-making and working together comes from that recent struggle and the support provided in a lengthy, patient learning process with Partners in Change.

Within the committee there was certainly a degree of awareness of the frustration felt by the project team over the *Conversations and Connections* initiative. One committee member said:

*"We feel very sorry about not having the energies, our main objective was to get into the development stage" [of the Right to Manage process].*

However inconsistent their approach to an externally-funded project, as volunteer activists HIRO committee members carry no responsibility for what happened. If there is any criticism to be aimed at them, it would have to come from other residents, who in theory might argue that advantage was not taken of the opportunity to exploit external resources. Beyond this argument, in our experience it was hard to find many residents who were not highly critical of the performance and attitude of the ALMO and the council. The levels of commitment and energy that people can bring to community action always has to be seen in the context of the generalised disadvantage that they experience.

Community development has to cope with subtle and fluid relationships which are sometimes far beyond prediction. Often it is possible to accommodate what seem to be substantial tensions between individuals or between agencies; at other times, the less

visible tensions can prove the most intractable and problematic. On Havelock we worked in the slipstream of a tenant management programme which, given the wretched conditions of some of the housing, was imperative and possibly all-consuming for residents. Given the momentum of that programme, it is fair to say that in retrospect we did not appreciate the inadequacy of the connections between HIRO and the majority of residents. Committee members themselves continue to claim the strength of such connections in spite of the evidence of the difficulty in mobilising them.

It could be argued that the project workers might have been more cautious in establishing the project on this estate; that the relative isolation of the committee might have been identified earlier; or indeed that a redirection of attention to another agency (the Family Centre, the schools, the adjacent community centre) was called for along the way. We do know that in the past, committee members have spent at least five days of time door-knocking, speaking to residents, and have tried to open up the community shop as much as they can, to help deal with housing-related enquiries: hence our inclination to identify the contrast between effort on social development and housing issues. Whether or not there was, unknown to us, some key action which was needed and not taken, it might be said that the lessons are more about the realities of community action and the need for project workers and funders to take these realities into account.

### **Bonding and bridging social capital**

The *Conversations and Connections* project invites reflection on the balance of social capital in the context of community action. Ostensibly, conditions seemed highly promising: an established group with apparently high bonding capital and a 'mission,' had gained contact with external agencies (bridging capital) which brought resources to that cause. Research suggests that where both forms of capital are present the effect is greater than having either separately<sup>4</sup>. However, on Havelock, certain events over the course of the year, such as the low level of trust demonstrated in the younger committee member, indicate that bonding capital was strong only at the core of the committee. Attempts to extend that bonding capital through bridged resources were unsuccessful.

The key may be around the notion of 'adjustment' towards equilibrium or optimum conditions. More of one kind of social capital or the other is not necessarily desirable if the group struggles to make adjustments to take advantage of it. And in a nine-month period, with other activities going on, such adjustment may simply be unrealistic.

At the same time, this experience confirms that the distinction between bonding and bridging capital is not simple. At a micro level, HIRO clearly held stocks of bonding capital which helped the committee maintain its resolve towards tenant management. But across the estate – at the kind of level usually thought of as bonding, since it incorporates similarity of living conditions and day-to-day experience – the poverty of this form of capital was exposed. As one correspondent told us, "There's been an inability to *be* community representatives."

4. For a review, see Agnitsch, K, et al, Bonding and bridging social capital: the interactive effects on community action. *Community development*, 37(1), 2006, 36-51.

This suggests that the *Conversations and Connections* project may have been mis-timed in that the work being carried out by Partners in Change needed longer to run, together with some community development effort provided by Ealing Homes, to broaden the base of bonding capital. While the inadequacy of community development on the estate at the time is a key factor and has been recognised, there remains another question about the extent to which connections between HIRO and a 'periphery' of active non-committee residents might have atrophied or fractured completely as a consequence of this project activity. However, given the level of interest in some of our initiatives when we went beyond the community shop – such as the visit of Treasury officials and the 'Recording Havelock' day – this seems unlikely.

### **Circles of participation**

It's helpful to see effective community action in terms of concentric circles of connections. An 'active community' will have a core of participants giving up a lot of time around one or more issues. Each of these members will have a number of live connections to other residents who also give time and energy, but are less able to commit so much. The health of this second layer is almost as crucial as that of the first, because they too need to play a role in mobilising the next, outer layer, which comprises the least active and least participative residents. Given the size of the Havelock estate, arguably needing to be broken down into meaningful smaller neighbourhoods, we can see that it would be difficult for a small core of committee members to maintain extensive connections among residents without a loose intermediate group of associates. HIRO members often spoke of the power of word-of-mouth, but again there is insufficient evidence that this process worked when it was expected to.

We should note also that an 'active community' will usually have more than one prominent group representing its varied interests. With the possible exception of the Havelock Family Centre, HIRO is effectively a monopoly on Havelock: in terms of the ecology of community action, especially for such a large estate, this could be regarded as unhealthy and was apparently the cause of some disillusion and resentment.

Referring to the 'health' of a group includes the notion of churn and selection – that there needs to be a broad mix of people ready to play some kind of role, however small, because people's circumstances change (age of children, employment, personal health and so on), their skills need augmenting, and their commitment cannot be taken for granted. The layers need to be well-populated and easily permeable: people need to feel they can play a central role in a cause that concerns them, or make way for others and play a minor role if they lack the interest, skills, time or energy.

In order for gaps to be filled, opportunities to be taken, and residents to be mobilised when a need arises, connections have to be established and constantly refreshed: information has to be flowing and the channels kept open. Conventional single-committee systems with occasional hard-copy newsletters and not much else happening, clearly don't tend to work very well in supporting the concentric circles model, in a context of deprivation and disorder. This returns us to the basic rationale for the *Conversations and Connections* project.

There thus emerges an inescapable irony about this project. The fragility of the connections between the core and second layers was identified as a potential weakness in community action on Havelock, and the project was designed to try to address that weakness on the grounds that we could thereby demonstrate a way of addressing a crucial problem of democratic participation on the broader scale. In practice, the project was not able to overcome this flaw; the inadequacy of the connections constituted a barrier to our best efforts at creative involvement.



### Summary of Policy Messages

Stimulating participation at local level on low income estates, where a high proportion of people experience exclusion, and where the sense of community is fractured, remains an essential project for contemporary democracy. There is no reason to suppose that policy initiatives that seek to use new technologies to these ends are in principle misguided. But the *Conversations and Connections* project demonstrates how problematic this task can be where there is insufficient investment in community development to support people in their aspirations, and where there are weak links between activists and residents. The problems call for a holistic approach and our key policy messages are pertinent well beyond the themes of democratic participation or technological innovation.

<p>1. Residents should not be in this position in the first place. Volunteers whose energies are compensating for a shortfall in official provision are entitled to dependable support for their commitment. The need for this support can be relatively long-term and needs to be sustained. This is an urgent message in relation to the local governance and 'responsibilisation' agenda.</p>	<p>The <i>Common Knowledge</i> essay highlighted the fragility of life on the Havelock estate, mainly because of poor design and civic absence.</p>
<p>2. It can be crucial to gain a full assessment of the local community sector 'orgscape.' Subtleties and nuances in relationships can have insidious and treacherous effects.</p>	<p>The <i>Conversations and Connections</i> project struggled because, although it was thought this assessment was in place, it proved to be very partial.</p>
<p>3. Funders and partners need to be ready to emphasise the interdependency of social development and other development themes, such as regeneration and housing. Apart from anything else, by diversifying the activities that might appeal to people, there is a greater likelihood of attracting a wider range of residents and thus ensuring a broader base of interest to be mobilised when needed.</p>	<p>The HIRO committee lacked the time, energy, and perhaps the inclination to develop social initiatives. But community development experience shows that successful community events would have been likely to increase participation and thereby made the housing and regeneration efforts more likely to succeed.</p>
<p>4. Community development has to be taken seriously by local partners, and not delivered in a piecemeal and half-hearted way, especially where a group risks becoming isolated from its own constituency.</p>	<p>The project was unable to overcome the gap between its own community development objectives and the amount of support available to the activists. This gap proved to be crucial.</p>

## Social Tapestries Tools

### **Bodystorming Experiences**

Bodystorming manifests abstract ideas into objects and situations to reveal the kinds of relationships that occur through social and cultural interactions between people. Fun and tactile, this approach allows us to investigate different qualities that an idea may have when applied in a physical setting. It enables rapid iteration and development of ideas and relationships through a dynamic, continuous and creative process of trial and error. Like a game it reveals the tensions and pleasures of limits and rules. Using props and take-home materials generated by the participants, everyone shares ownership of their experience.

### **DIFFUSION eBooks**

Proboscis uses the unique DIFFUSION eBook format to create project and workshop specific notebooks for participants to gather and record evidence and observations. Each one is designed for the task in hand and can be distributed either as a PDF file (by email or web download), or as a made up A6 printed booklet. DIFFUSION eBooks are also used as a publishing format for workshop findings and evaluation materials, existing as finished outcomes in their own right.

### **Urban Tapestries**

Urban Tapestries is an online software platform developed by Proboscis to enable to mapping and sharing of knowledge and experiences. Using a web interface geographic places can be annotated with text, sound, pictures and video, and these places can be linked together via themes. Proboscis uses this system to build up Social Tapestries – searchable geographic databases of knowledge, stories, ideas, information and memories created by participants in our projects.

### **Scavenging for Guerilla Public Authoring**

During the *Conversations and Connections* project Proboscis developed a 'scavenging' approach for public authoring that would not depend on having access to top-down, custom systems or services (such as our own Urban Tapestries). Our concept of scavenging as a creative social practice is that it should require no central resources but enable people to stitch together knowledge, experiences and information using free online resources – a kind of Guerilla Public Authoring. Scavenging breaks down the core components (data, stories, photos, video, audio etc) of public authoring into a simpler process for linking them together and sharing them. Scavenging requires little or no expert knowledge to set up and which can be adapted to the local conditions depending on what resources are available to the community.

### **StoryCubes**

Proboscis uses our unique StoryCube format to enable workshop participants to devise collaborative narratives using visual and text elements in three dimensions. The StoryCube workshops invite participants to bring along images of their own (with themes set with the local partner or commissioning agency) which are then printed onto StoryCubes. Groups of participants then use the cubes to create a structure or landscape reflecting the issues and concerns of the event. The outcome of this process is an activity rooted in listening and negotiation. The StoryCube structure can also be exhibited to stimulate further conversation and discussion within the community.

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### **Havelock Family Centre**

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### **Residents of Havelock Estate**

### **Links**

<http://socialtapestries.net/havelock/>

<http://havelocktapestry.blogspot.com/>

<http://neighbourhoods.typepad.com/>

<http://proboscis.org.uk>

<http://www.local-level.org.uk>

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