



Anglicare Online

Extending cooperation beyond the immediate purpose of a system

Anglicare Australia is the peak body for Anglican community service and aged care organisations and a member of the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS). Anglicare Online demonstrates how ICT can improve cooperation and information sharing.

Cooperating and sharing information through a members-only website

Anglicare Australia offers a wide range of community services around Australia such as aged care and disability services, children, youth and family services, and services to unemployed, homeless and Indigenous Australians. Anglicare Australia supports 51 autonomous agencies. Some are large agencies providing several services, and some are small, specialised agencies. Anglicare Australia has an annual turnover of over \$600 million. It employs 12 700 paid staff and has over 20 000 volunteers.

Anglicare clients are primarily from low socio-economic backgrounds, or experience particular disadvantage relating to mental illness, disability, age, location, or a range of social pressures facing individuals, families and even whole communities.

A strategic objective for Anglicare Australia was to improve communication among member agencies, but the network could not afford sufficient face-to-face interaction. This was a significant factor in the development of Anglicare

Australia's information technology strategy, of which Anglicare Online is a major element.

Anglicare Online is a members-only website which supports cooperation and information sharing between member agencies. Its experience shows how ICT can improve communication between agencies and improve case management, especially for people moving between states and regions. For example, before Anglicare Online was introduced, members of the network communicated by a combination of fax and email. Information sharing, joint project development or sharing of research activity took a lot of time and required significant 'hands on' coordination by staff in the small national office. By 2004 most member agencies have email and Internet access, and the capacity of members to interact through Anglicare Online has increased.

The Anglicare Australia website and the online networks are commercially hosted. The website is managed in a commercial content management package.

Anglicare Online was developed through a national information technology network project partially funded by the Australian Government through its Information Technology Online program.

ANGLICARE
AUSTRALIA



The idea for this project initiated from an Australian Government e-business display at an ACOSS conference.

People's attitudes to using ICT varied across the Anglicare network. For some smaller members the project was their first use of ICT, while others were already using the technology. The initial application of ICT was exploratory and the network learned together by working on the project. The project enhanced the communications of all agencies within the Anglicare network, particularly smaller organisations that were less experienced in applying ICT.

Benefits and success factors

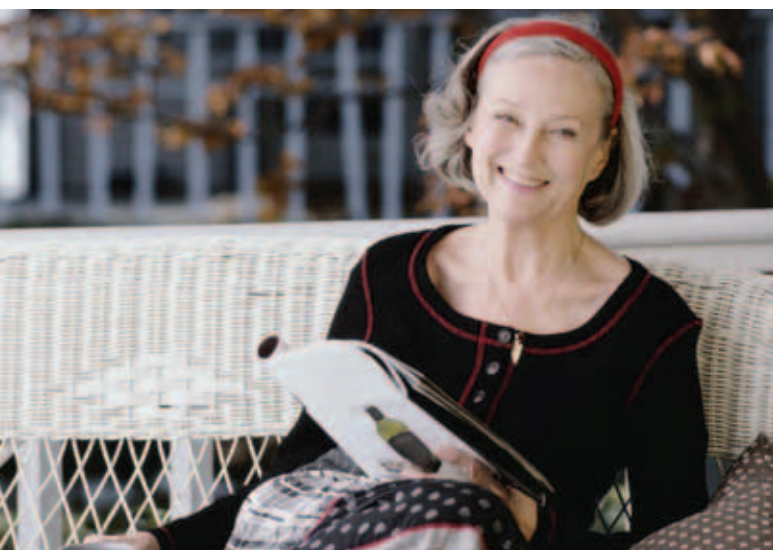
Anglicare Online has:

- improved and integrated communications to increase sharing of program information, cooperation and efficiency—for example, national cooperation on active research projects
- developed an Internet-based capacity to share new service delivery and quality monitoring approaches that aim to improve service quality and effectiveness
- increased awareness of the potential for ICT to improve communications, cooperation and service delivery
- encouraged agencies to work together and call on the expertise of other agencies
- improved public access to services and increased accountability to the community.

Cooperation has extended beyond the immediate purpose of the system to sharing best practice in administration and policy development. The network also facilitates information sharing that contributes to improving client services.

Anglicare Online has positioned the network to take a national approach to contracting for services and has enabled national programming and joint project development. ICT provides the necessary tools, and the cooperation and commitment it has encouraged provide the will to work together effectively.

A shift from a more traditional welfare approach to a more dynamic community development approach requires the flow of ideas and inspiration. Sharing information and ideas that have worked in other places is a key element in empowering local communities. By establishing networks that could facilitate community building in this way, this project fostered greater cooperation between Anglicare Australia's member organisations. Currently five networks are active through Anglicare



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Online. They include the Aged Care network and the Break the Cycle (of child poverty) Campaign steering group.

Greater cooperation has encouraged members to share research results and interests, and this has revealed a latent research capacity within the Anglicare network. Having a national website, supported by regular email communication, helps staff within the network to initiate and manage national projects. A research project into alternative care undertaken with Flinders University reflects this commitment to cooperation.

Using ICT also helps Anglicare organisations to save money by taking advantage of the savings available through group purchasing power. For example, office stationery purchases are aggregated, and further efficiencies are planned.

Other possibilities for further exploration include an online ordering service and a national online donations service.

Anglicare Online has been successful because it had a champion, a coach and a willing team. Anglicare Australia's (then) executive director Russell Rollason initially took up the challenge to drive the process, and became the 'champion' who fostered and encouraged the project, and kept the flame alive.

Willingness to adopt ICT led to Anglicare Australia seeking out a 'critical friend', a trusted source of strategic advice. Anglicare Australia found someone who understood the welfare sector and had the right skills and sufficient time to see the project through. This critical friend provided appropriate, low key one-on-one coaching to member organisations.

A willing team of ICT users across the Anglicare network understood the project aims and its potential value. They were able to communicate the project vision to the rest of the organisation,



and this gave the project wider credibility among member organisations.

Barriers

Anglicare Australia responded to several challenges when it implemented its ICT project. Identifying needs common to consortium partners to encourage use of Anglicare Online was a major challenge. The steering committee worked hard to identify activities and information that would attract users to the site.

The project took considerably longer than originally planned. This was due primarily to the technical capacity available within Anglicare Australia at the start. The time and resources required for such an exercise should not be underestimated, especially for data collection. There were several data collection issues: for example, how to format the data, how much data to collect, and how to analyse or categorise data. One solution was to choose familiar, readily available software rather than custom build a database.

Anglicare Australia found that, to successfully implement a national project like Anglicare Online, all the participants needed to have a basic level of ICT capacity and knowledge. This meant ensuring that ICT experience was distributed to all the project's participants. In smaller, and particularly rural communities, participants needed help to access the Internet, as well as advice on hardware and software, and on how to train staff and volunteers.

Anglicare Australia had hoped to see greater consistency in communications, data collection



and service quality measures throughout the network but this is not evident yet, and they recognise it will take some time to achieve. The aged care and family support networks are examples of areas within Anglicare that acknowledge the need for improvement. Needing to respond to various government requirements, and a tendency to be distracted by day-to-day activities, makes this difficult to realise.

Key lessons

- Anglicare Australia entered this project with clear objectives. This investment in planning has delivered successful outcomes.
- Enabling the whole value chain from government purchaser to end client for service delivery accrues benefits to all participants.
- Knowledge and skills are required—the need for ICT training was highlighted.
- It is essential to have a trusted source of advice, someone who understands the non-profit sector and has the right skills and commitment.

References

Anglicare Australia website www.Anglicare.asn.au/

COMMUNITY CONNECTIVITY

More information

In these case studies, communities, nonprofit organisations and groups share their experiences and lessons they have learnt using ICT: enhancing capability and service delivery; supporting and building communities, networks and connections; and overcoming barriers and challenges.

Australia's Strategic Framework for the Information Economy 2004–2006 emphasises the need to ensure that all Australians can participate in the benefits of the information economy.

Key strategies in 2004–06 will be to strengthen collaboration and capabilities in nonprofit organisations, facilitate the creative use of ICT for building stronger communities and social cohesion, and develop networks, capabilities and tools to enable participation by people who are facing economic, geographic or social barriers.

For more information visit the DCITA website www.dcita.gov.au or email community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au.

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