

# Good practice guide



Developing  
a community  
intranet

RoFTRA

## About RoFTRA

RoFTRA is a member owned umbrella organisation supporting Tenants & Residents Associations throughout the Borough of Rochdale in working within their communities for the benefit of all who live in them through a range of engagement and regeneration-linked projects and activities.



**Chris Hand, HND graphic design, Hopwood Hall College, 2004**

It has been in existence since 1982 and now has a staff team of 22 and more than 100 volunteers working regularly within both the umbrella organisation and its membership. It is governed by a Board of Directors who are elected by the membership through the AGM. The Board meets monthly and the General Manager meets routinely once each week with the Officers elected by the Board.

RoFTRA accesses a range of funding streams to deliver activities ranging from sport through education and training to IT. RoFTRA has close links with both Hopwood Hall College and the borough's Adult & Community Learning service since it recognises the crucial significance of education and training opportunities for the economic and social well being of the communities its members work for. RoFTRA has been the lead partner, along with Hopwood Hall College and Rochdale Borough Wide Housing, in the successful equipping of 4 ICT Learning Centres in the Pennines area and in supporting the Tenants & Residents Associations running them.

## Project background

In 2001, RoFTRA was successful in a bid to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's Innovation into Action funding programme, managed by the Chartered Institute of Housing, to develop an Intranet that would link its member Associations to each other, to RoFTRA itself, and to a range of related information, data and websites. The funding also provided for the purchase and installation of PCs in a number of the better established Tenants & Residents Associations with Community Bases of their own.

This project was based on evidence that the digital divide was at its most acute in deprived neighbourhoods and that access to a user-friendly portal to immediately relevant information together with facilitated communication networks would be an effective counter measure. In addition, the need to train a number of volunteers in each centre, together with the cascade potential that would open up, was seen as itself an important contribution to inclusivity.

The project is now fully expended and has met all its objectives, demonstrating in its course the validity of the assumptions on which it was based. The Intranet (RoFTRA Tenants Net) is up and running – [www.roftratenants.net](http://www.roftratenants.net) Eighteen T&RA Community Bases in deprived neighbourhoods now have Internet PCs fully installed in them.

Further funding has been secured to extend the reach of the project to all 42 of our associations. We plan to have rolled out the project to all our members by early 2005.

### Comments from our leading members...

"At the moment we're just a collection of individual tenants associations.

Tenants Net will link us together to make us a viable force for the future of the community" – Derek Brown, Chair TRAK.

"It will make a significant improvement to our estate" – Peter Brierley, Smallbridge TARA

## Project outcomes

- Delivered information, knowledge and enabling technologies directly to the Borough's council tenants who, according to all the indicators, live in the most deprived communities of the 25th most deprived Borough in the country.
- Brought the opportunities of new technologies directly into the heart of our communities most in need of them. Most significantly, closing gaps in the digital divide and opening up learning paths in Information Technology via our partnership with Hopwood Hall College.
- Enabled better communication and joined up working of our community groups who can, via the technology, work more effectively as a collective tenants movement despite the large geographical distances in the Borough between community bases.
- Attracted a new and younger generation into tenant participation programs and activities.
- Made the Internet and PC significant tools in the day-to-day operations of our membership.
- Increased and enhanced the service provided by the RoFTRA team. Internet technology has enabled RoFTRA to disseminate informa-



Tenants Net Launch – April 04



tion, ideas, knowledge and resources more quickly and effectively without increasing the workload of an already stretched community engagement team.

- Shared the outcomes and experiences of the project with the nationwide tenant's movement through networking and the publication of this Good Practice Guide.

## PROJECT PROBLEMS

The Project Manager for Tenants Net, Anthony Lafferty, joined RoFTRA 14 months into the three-year project. His predecessor had released a pilot of the Tenants Net but left RoFTRA before measuring its success. As such, the Project Manager evaluated the pilot to determine the future direction of the project. His findings discovered that the pilot hadn't been successful. The project was inactive, awareness was low, the project was poorly understood, the pilot was not engaging and RoFTRAs' staff and members had little opportunity to contribute to the content delivered through the Intranet.

## Reasons for the problems

- No marketing or promotion of the system
- Confusion about what the project was
- Members thought they needed a RoFTRA computer to access Tenants Net
- No sense of ownership
- Stakeholders not involved in the process
- Stakeholders not informed of progress
- Updating the system was a complicated process
- No user training
- No user documentation
- Lots of misconceptions about the project

## SUCCESSFUL SOLUTIONS TO PROJECT PROBLEMS

Analysis and Market Research revealed that the project could be turned around. Associations used computers, Associations wanted a website, Associations and staff understood the potential of the Internet and most importantly, Associations and staff still believed in the Tenants Net project.

With this discovery a plan was put together to turn around the fortunes of the project. It was clear that the Intranet needed to be redeveloped to enhance the service provided by RoFTRA. The Project Manager decided to develop a CMS (Content Management System). This lets non-technical people contribute and manage the Intranet. To take the principle further the Intranet Manager created a system of Intranet channels. Each channel (similar idea to a TV channel) would represent the work of a project being undertaken at RoFTRA e.g. the Community Engagement Channel would be built up from content provided by the Community Engagement Team. It would thus become the responsibility of staff and members to update their respective channel. This was effective in keeping the Intranet fresh and up-to-date.

To make this work it was important for staff and members to have participation in the creation of the Intranet and to feel a sense of ownership. Adopting the principles behind the Information Systems theory of participation and ownership had been very successful in turning around the fortunes of the Tenants Net project. Before the Project Manager adopted this approach, the Tenants Net project had

been somewhat neglected. Staff and members believed the project was a good idea but they could no longer visualise what the project could be and/or understand what part they could play in its development. This all changed when the Intranet Manager started the process of encouraging participation and ownership of the project.

## The four stages of encouraging participation & ownership

1 Enlightenment	2 Encouragement
3 Participation	4 Ownership

### Stage 1

The first stage was to enlighten the staff and members, initially through informal chats and later through in-depth discussions on what an Intranet can do and how other organisations are using Intranets.

### Stage 2

The second stage was to motivate and encourage ideas from the staff and members. The Project Manager encouraged dialogue, feedback and the exchange of ideas. As a result the staff and members got very excited about the potential of the Intranet and were forthcoming with ideas.

### Stage 3

The third stage of the process was to develop participation. The Project Manager did this through a number of consultations in which he asked staff and members what they wanted from the Intranet. This was made much easier through the enlightenment stage as they all knew the possibilities of an Intranet.

### Stage 4

The final stage was to encourage ownership, to actually agree with the

staff and members, the design of the Intranet, what content they wanted to be presented on the Intranet and how often it needed to be updated. To take the principle of ownership one-step further the Project Manager had staff and members sign off a development mandate and an update frequency contract; which was basically a set of promises. The Project manager agreed to produce a system to their specification if they agreed to produce the content required and update the content as agreed in the documents.

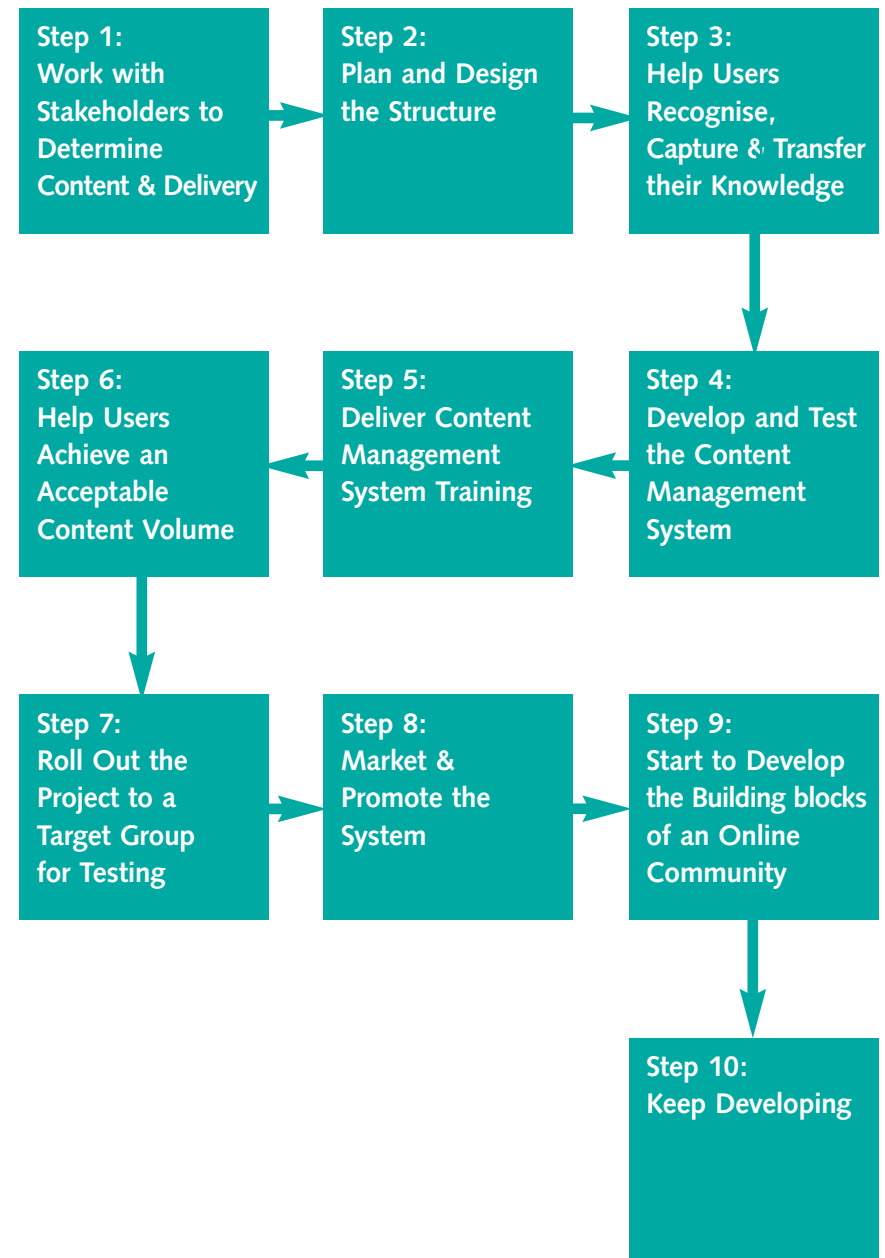
## What worked well for RoFTRA

- **Working with partners** – Realising the limits of your organisation/ in-house team and bringing in specialised help when necessary e.g. Working in partnership with Hopwood Hall College to deliver computer training.
- **Effective Project Management** – Setting realistic goals and objectives. Working towards those goals and being flexible enough to be able to reassess and move in different directions if the project dictated it
- **Participation and Ownership** – Time consuming and difficult to manage but a motivated team provides better outputs and solutions.
- **Rolling applications out in manageable stages** – Makes it easier to support new applications, deliver training and doesn't overwhelm the target audience. Too many releases too soon, make the project difficult to manage and confuses the target audience who struggle to keep up with the changes.
- **Developing the Intranet into Channels** – Very good system for breaking up content rich websites. Navigation on large sites can be difficult. Distinct channels help content production and presentation.
- **People Driven Solutions** – Technical advisor(s) should be available in an advisory capacity but the continual development of a system should be people and not technology driven. Key Stakeholders who

will benefit from the system will drive the project into directions that are far more relevant to the website target audience. Producing a far superior product that represents more accurately the wants and needs of the website visitors.

- **Autonomous decision-making on technical issues** – Seek participation on usability issues such as content, design etc but leave technical decisions e.g. the technical architecture to deliver content etc to the project developer/technical manager. This speeds up the development process and enables rapid response to technical problems that need quick resolution.
- **Information flow** – Keep stakeholders updated frequently on progress. To maintain stakeholder ownership and participation, a communication channel needs to be kept open and dialogue between the developers and the stakeholders needs to be ongoing throughout the project lifecycle.

## Tenants Net development process



### **Step 1. Work with Stakeholders to Determine Content & Delivery**

Work with stakeholders to determine the look and feel of the website, what content is to be published, is the content static or updateable, how frequently does the content need to change and how would they like that content to be presented and delivered.

### **Step 2. Plan and Design the Structure**

Create a schematic of the website, a blue print for consistent development. The essential HCI (Human Computer Interaction) elements will be reviewed in accordance with the schematic and a decision about the essential HCI elements below, should be made:

- Colour scheme
- Design and layout
- Navigational structure
- Graphical design

### **Step 3. Help Staff/Members Recognise, Capture & Transfer their Knowledge**

Help staff and members recognise, capture and transfer their knowledge into a suitable format for the website. Assist staff and members with the process of collecting and editing content for the website

### **Step 4. Develop and Test the Content Management System**

Working closely with stakeholders, develop and test the CMS in stages. From stakeholder feedback correct and/or redevelop system applications as necessary.

### **Step 5. Train Staff/Members to Use the Content Management System & Supporting Technology**

Train staff and members responsible for publishing content. This will include how to use the Content Management System and Content Capture Technology e.g. digital cameras and scanners. Establish good working practices with staff/members and negotiate an update frequency contract.

### **Step 6. Help Staff/Members to Achieve an Acceptable Content Volume**

Help staff and members add their first contributions to the website. Thereafter encourage staff and members to add sufficient content volumes. Provide good system documentation to support this task. Monitor progress in accordance to the update frequency contract and encourage and manage progress as appropriate.

### **Step 7. Roll Out the Project to a target audience for testing**

Roll out the website to your target audience. Collect feedback and fix problems.

### **Step 8. Market & Promote**

Once content targets have been reached and the live roll out complete, the website needs to be promoted to its target audience.

### **Step 9. Build an Intranet Community**

Once awareness and usage, has been increased to a significant level, dynamic elements should then be added to the Intranet to build an online community. Applications should be introduced to encourage the exchange of ideas and knowledge.

### **Step 10. Keep Developing**

Constantly keep the content of the website fresh and consistently introduce new applications that enable your target audience to interact with the website. This will create the stickiness of the website and keep visitors returning regularly.

## Tips for building a better website experience

### **Create a Natural Flow**

Place the navigational buttons and hyperlinks in an order that creates a natural flow throughout the Website. For example: News, Discussion and Opinion Polls, in that order, will represent the natural navigational flow of the Website and help to represent in the mind of the users, the intended hierarchy of these closely related areas.

### **Help Visitors Find What They Want Quickly!**

Create a Site map that helps the visitor find the information they want very quickly.

### **Keep External Links on One Page**

External links drive people away from a website. This may happen before your website communicates your message. Relocate external links to a single information point.

### **Listen to The People**

Create a Feedback section – it is essential to know what people think about the site in order to improve the service to your members. Constant feedback is an invaluable resource to help plan continual improvements.

### **Acquire the Knowledge**

Create an online knowledge base of categorised FAQ's that are easily searchable and provide real answers to many frequent issues faced by visitors. Continually updating this section, will in time create a valuable knowledge repository that visitors will keep coming back to use.

### **Show Your Face to the Community**

Add staff pictures – create a warm and friendly look and feel! Help create the community spirit of the Intranet by making staff members recognisable and approachable.

### **Content, Content, Content!**

Content is the key to driving regular repeat visits to a website. It is no longer good enough to just publish useful information. Good websites are more than just informative: they are interesting, the content is useful and most importantly, the content is dynamic. Much more than this, visitors contribute to the content of successful sites, thus giving them a sense of control and ownership of the creation and direction of the website.

### **Tailor your Content for Different Target Groups**

Know your audience and present your content in a way they will best interact with. Young people respond far better to information presented through multimedia while professional people prefer information to be presented in a clear and readable format with good search facilities to find the information they need quickly.

### **Plan for Accessibility and Inclusion at the Start of your Project**

Consider and plan at the start of your project accessibility and inclusion. It is good practice to include alternative language pages and make sure your design and use of technologies doesn't exclude members e.g. text readers cannot read scripts. Not only is this good practice it is also now a legal requirement. It is important to resolve these issues at the start of the project, failure to do this will result in an expensive and time consuming process of trying to re-engineer your web pages to comply to industry standards and law.

## Further information & advice

RoFTRA are always willing to share good practice and offer information and advice to interested parties. We also offer a consultancy service: we specialise in helping organisations set-up community IT projects.

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