

On top of the IT game.

"We've been able to go to a whole new level of operations." – Barrie Duke.



Say you were asked to find an organisation that uses IT to the full; that has embraced not only the information age, but the concept that networking and appropriate software can transform everything about an organisation's service delivery. You might head for the big city; you'd perhaps look for the new and funky names. You'd probably be forgiven for not starting with a small Age Concern charity in North West Devon.

Barrie Duke is Secretary and Chief Officer of the charity – Age Concern Okehampton and Torrridge. He laughs good-naturedly when I tactfully put this theory to him. "We're one of the smallest charities in the country – but we punch above our level due to IT," he says.

In fact it's the very nature of Barrie's organisation that has driven the application of technology. "We cover an area of 800 square miles in an extremely rural area – you can imagine what it's like trying to visit people. We can't afford to maintain an office, and the towns aren't large enough to sustain one."

Barrie rattles off some examples of where the charity is using IT creatively – many intriguing in their scope. "Dartmoor Prison falls within our region, and it contains a number of older inmates," he says. "They've lost their pensions, lost a number of benefits, and are normally isolated from society. What we do now is to pay a visit in order to link them up. We can then communicate with them via the web and email – all channelled through the prison officers – and work on their behalf remotely, no matter what their circumstances."

"Information and advice is the core of everything we do," he insists. "Now, with a proper server setup, we have our own Intranet – so everybody in the organisation can give out quality advice. This month, we'll be using MS Server to get VPN [Virtual Private Networking] finally set up – we'll be able to have all our volunteers logging on from anywhere. Even now, I can work on the train to London – it's hugely efficient."

"With our advocacy work it's vital to maintain a complete history of what's been said and done for each client, and we have an excellent management system to do this. On a completely different level we offer a foot care service – again, records on our server can be updated online. But with the network access, we don't need administrators – we can do it ourselves. So we've lost 25% of our costs by going to CTX – not counting the travel time that's saved."

The charity is full of plans to help its community meet the challenges ahead. "We're going to set up lunchtime sessions for businesspeople in the area, many of whom are over 50. We'll also offer IT training to our client base. It's important to realise that IT does help the rural communities to overcome social isolation in very good, practical ways," he explains, before making a perceptive point about the charity sector in general. "Small charities themselves will find that they won't be able to cope without good IT – and it may mean the demise of some, although they're doing good jobs," he warns. "They will find that they've become isolated themselves."

There seems little danger of this happening to ACOT, and with the likes of Microsoft and Cisco continuing to provide donations of leading-edge products through the CTX programme, the charity has a wealth of opportunities to continue expanding into the future.

Who are they?

AGE CONCERN OKEHAMPTON AND TORRIDGE.

Where are they?

NW Devon.

What do they do?

An accredited member of the national Age Concern federation.

How big are they?

A small regional charity covering a sparsely-populated rural area.

What did they receive?

Microsoft Small Business Server with licenses, Office Professional Plus 2007; Cisco 24-port Ethernet switch.

The outcome?

The transformation of back office systems and service delivery.

www.acot.org.uk