

Open Letter to Nicola Thompson, ICT Hub Project Manager

Dear Nicola,

I am writing to you to express my great concern at reports that funding for developing use of Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) in the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) is to be cut very substantially in the next round of Capacity Builder funding administered by the ICT National Hub.

The VCS already lags greatly behind both the business sector and the public sector in the introduction of FOSS. At the same time, calls for more use of FOSS are now increasing considerably at both EU and UK governmental levels. Recent instances of this are:

- 111 UK MPs signed an early day motion in December 2006 to support the use of FOSS in schools. The motion criticised the "outdated" methods used to purchase software for schools that locked them into buying proprietary software.
- In a speech on 8th March the Shadow Chancellor, George Osborne, estimated that the government could save more than £600 million a year if it used more FOSS. Contrasting the UK situation with that in many other countries, he criticised the slowness with which FOSS was being introduced within government departments. "The problem is that the cultural change has not taken place in government," he said. The government responded by confirming its own belief in the savings that could be made from FOSS and insisted that it was, in fact, working in the direction of increasing the use of FOSS.
- In January, the European Commission produced a major report concluding that the use of FOSS could offer considerable savings to organisations with little effect on their business. It rejected submissions from Microsoft and found that in almost all cases long-term costs could be reduced by switching from proprietary software. The BBC reported:

According to the study, the number of existing open source programs already available would have cost firms 12 billion Euros (£8 billion) to produce.

It estimates that the available programs represent the equivalent of 131,000 programmer years.

"This represents at least 800 million Euros (£525 million) in voluntary contributions from programmers alone each year," the report said.

At the moment, the report said, public organisations were the dominant beneficiaries of this work.

To continue this uptake, the report recommends "correcting current policies and practices that implicitly or explicitly favour proprietary software".

As well as providing incentives to the open source industry it also recommends that schools start to introduce more of the software.

This would instil "an attitude towards information technology that favours the ability to create and actively participate rather than just consume," the report said.

Surely the ICT Hub ought to be in the forefront of changing attitudes and culture within the VCS in line with these calls made across, and at all levels of, the political spectrum, particularly since, as the European Commission report says, FOSS itself represents a gigantic accomplishment by a voluntary sector, probably the biggest in history. Yet we hear of ICT hub members saying that they intend cutting the funding for FOSS because "there is little interest in it in the sector". In the light of the above calls should this not actually be a good reason for increasing, not cutting, funding for

FOSS deployment in the sector? Does the ICT Hub intend moving in the opposite direction to the business and public sectors on this issue? If so, why? Is it not concerned to see the big savings being talked about above becoming available within the VCS?

The research carried out by our East of England FOSS in the VCS project, funded from Regional ChangeUp money, pinpointed where the major problem was concerning FOSS take up in the sector. We deployed Ubuntu Linux on the desktop at 10 VCS organisations in our region and asked for reports back from the end users (see <http://foss.ciac.org.uk/article43.html>). These reports were almost entirely very favourable - most end users were very surprised to find out how easy it was for them to switch from Microsoft Windows to Ubuntu Linux and to a range of FOSS applications for carrying out their normal day to day work.

These tests concerned Linux on the desktop. On the face of it, this might be considered as potentially the most disruptive of changes over to FOSS. Much simpler is the deployment of Linux servers to replace expensive Microsoft Windows servers. Linux servers are more versatile, more secure and faster than Windows servers and integrate with Windows client computers in a way that is virtually invisible to the users of the client computers.

But why, if the changeover can be easy, is there such resistance to making the change? Our own research showed that this resistance came primarily not from end users, but from managerial and decision making levels. A major conclusion of our own research highlighted the central issue involved here:

- Concerns about longterm technical support have to be addressed. Much of this will need to be done nationally through development of a Linux user group dedicated to the VCS, training ICT circuit riders in Linux support, a national VCS help desk and knowledge base for Linux, etc. Pressure needs to be put on technical support suppliers to force them from entrenched positions of only supporting Microsoft operating systems.

In phase one of FOSS funding by the ICT Hub this central issue began to be tackled. If the ICT Hub is to continue making the "cultural changes" concerning FOSS that are being widely called for by political leaders at all levels then this beginning now needs to be built upon and taken forward, certainly not abandoned. At the same time, there are lessons to be learned from the first phase, contracted by the ICT Hub to the National Computing Centre (NCC):

- Although the two day trainings in Linux for circuit riders were a good introduction to Linux they were poorly attended. The marketing and advertising were woefully inadequate. This seemed to be due to a combination of both insufficient resourcing by the NCC and lack of active support from the ICT Hub regional ICT support structures and ICT champions.
- This lack of support within ICT Hub structures for developing FOSS use also seems to extend to the ICT Hub national help desk. VCS callers to the ICT Hub national help desk who ask about FOSS are still not being referred to those involved in implementing FOSS in the sector. Instead they are referred to the ICT Knowledgebase, which actually contains very inadequate FOSS information. The development of a national FOSS help desk for the VCS linking callers with ongoing support being developed through the regional FOSS trainings for circuit riders is essential for assisting FOSS take up in the sector. It is difficult to see why the ICT Hub's help desk has been hindering rather than encouraging this development.
- Certification for FOSS training for circuit riders would be an important aspect of winning the confidence of VCS organisations concerning the availability of quality FOSS support from techies who understand and know the requirements of the sector. It could also encourage participation by techies working with, or wanting to work with the sector. The initial two day Linux trainings did bring about enthusiasm for learning more from those

attending. The establishment of an intermediary standard Linux certification specifically aimed at circuit riders and other techies working with the VCS could build on this initial enthusiasm. Achieving a tested and recognised standard would enhance employment prospects for the circuit riders and other techies involved, encouraging their participation in the trainings. It would also assure VCS organisations about the standard of support they could supply. The East of England FOSS in the VCS project has been negotiating with the Linux Professional Institute (LPI), which produces internationally recognised Linux certification, on producing such a "Third Sector" Linux certification as a stepping stone towards higher level Linux certification.

There are many other aspects of building FOSS support in the VCS that require funding, particularly such things as putting together a basic Linux server package for the needs of the sector, adapting existing FOSS products for use of the sector, initiating new FOSS products specifically for the sector, etc. But without taking forward the main requirement of creating adequate national and regional FOSS technical support from techies familiar with the sector these are not likely to make much immediate impact on VCS FOSS use. It is therefore vital that the ICT Hub, as an absolute minimum, provide adequate funding to expand on the initial FOSS training programme, taking on board the lessons from the first phase outlined above. This should be made a priority. The original purpose of ChangeUp and the subsequent establishment of the ICT National Hub was to make changes in the use of ICT in the VCS that would ultimately produce long term benefits for it. It was always recognised that this would involve making some basic cultural changes to attitudes in the sector. Report after report from high level research bodies up to EU and UK government level have shown the long term substantial savings that can be made from the use of FOSS. Any retreat from overcoming the problems involved in deploying FOSS use in the VCS would amount to a negligence of the original ChangeUp aims and would ultimately cost the sector dearly through denying it the savings being proposed in other sectors through use of FOSS.

yours sincerely.

Chris Bailey
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