Lasa’s RightsNet

“A Resource for Advice”

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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Introduction

RightsNet, is a National Lottery Charities Board two year funded project that commenced in March 1998. The project sought to provide information, advice and support on matters relating to social security issues for advisers via the Internet. A central aim of the project was to evaluate the effectiveness of providing information and support services via the “new” medium of the Internet.

As part of the original project plan, forty-five agencies were selected to receive specific training on the use of the Internet and bursaries were available for these agencies to ensure they had the appropriate equipment. These agencies are referred to as the “project members”. A RightsNet key worker was identified by each project member and that person received training and support to enable them to make best use of the available information.

The RightsNet web site is an open access site. Participation and use of the site is not therefore restricted to these forty-five agencies or key workers. Other agencies that are using RightsNet but were not part of the original project are referred to as “non members”.

As part of the RightsNet project, Lasa employed one new worker who was primarily responsible for supporting the forty-five project members, managing the information available through the site and co-ordinating site design and usage.

Lasa maintains oversight of the relevance of material for all areas of the site. In practice for the discussion forum this means that all entries are looked at by Lasa’s RightsNet project worker to ensure they are accurate, where this is appropriate (i.e. factual information) and relevant (i.e. concerned with matters relating to social security).

The web site contains the following sections:

- News - brief items of interest about social security matters such as impending changes to the benefit system, new Statutory Instruments and the outcome of test cases.
- Reviews - in depth articles on social security issues as well as responses to Government consultations and detailed discussion of welfare rights issues.
- Discussion - a number of discussion forums for advisers to request and share information and concerns on benefit matters.
- FAQ’s - a developing database of “Frequently Asked Questions”. Users can search the database to look at previously asked questions and see the answers given.
- Links - a list of links to other websites of interest to advisers.
- Mailing List - Email updates as to what is happening on the site.

The RightsNet site incorporates contributions from individual advisers from a range of network member agencies, local authority service providers and other professionals working in the field of social welfare law. A number of specialist information providers also contribute to the site by making their information available.

Since commencement of the service fourteen months ago RightsNet has been visited 11,537 times by approximately 975 different groups or individuals, as at June 1999.

Lasa would like to thank all those who took the time and trouble to reply to the various questionnaires and to those who have contributed to RightsNet by taking part in the various forums.
1.2 Purpose of the evaluation

An initial evaluation exercise was undertaken in the first six months of the RightsNet project, which looked at the experience of the first 15 project members. The findings from this exercise were incorporated into site developments and users views were used to change and improve aspects of the RightsNet service.

This evaluation has concentrated on the effectiveness of the Internet as a means of delivering support and information to advice service providers. The evaluation sought to identify patterns of usage, and views concerning the relative value and usefulness of information available. Findings from the evaluation will be used to help Lasa assess the potential of Internet support services and to suggest the most appropriate format and content of such services in the future.

1.3 Methodology

The evaluation was undertaken using three different questionnaires. Four different populations within the advice sector were targeted. These were:

a) Project members “Key Worker” questionnaire sent to 45 people. [Total Response 39]

b) Project members “Manager’s” questionnaire sent to 45 people. [Total Response 38]

c) Non members but users of the RightsNet site sent to 240 agencies. [Total Response 20]

d) Non members not currently using the site sent to 240 agencies. [Total Response 80]

In practice, two questionnaires were sent to the same 240 non members and they selected which one applied to their circumstances. The 240 agencies were identified from the Lasa in-house database as groups that were in receipt of the Lasa welfare rights training team brochure and were assumed to have an interest in the subject matter held on the RightsNet site.

The questionnaires sent to both project members and non members who were using the RightsNet site were identical save for two additional questions on the project members questionnaire. This allowed the research to identify any differences in views of the RightsNet site between project members and Non members.

The questionnaire sent to “managers” of the 45 project members sought to identify any organisational issues that related to RightsNet usage. Finally, a short one page questionnaire for non members who had not made use of RightsNet to date asked about their expectations of a welfare rights Internet support service.

In addition, Lasa’s RightsNet project worker was interviewed concerning development issues and the RightsNet site itself was trawled for data verification following the questionnaire returns.

1.4 Findings

- 58 out of the 59 respondents said they felt they were confident in their ability to use the RightsNet site. (See 3.2.6)
The most pressing problem for many organisations was how to ensure access throughout the organisation. This concern can be divided into two separate issues: the need for additional IT training for staff other than the RightsNet worker and the need to improve physical access to computers. (See 2.3)

25% of all respondents accessed RightsNet either before their agency was open or after the agency had closed. (See 3.2.1)

17 respondents accessed RightsNet once each week, 15 accessed RightsNet twice per week, 13 accessed the site 3 times per week, and the remaining 14 agencies accessed more often than this. (See 3.2.2)

Speed of response to requests for information was uniformly considered to be important, but some users had unrealistically high expectations of how quickly a response should be made. (See 3.2.2)

The majority of agencies (35 of the 59) spent between 1 - 3 hours per week on-line. Nine agencies spent less than an hour on-line each week and the remaining fifteen agencies spent over three hours per week on-line. (See 3.2.3)

Information available within RightsNet is distributed throughout organisations in a number of ways. Roughly one third of groups have trained other workers to access to site directly, while a significant number of agencies use a variety of methods to distribute key information, such as print-outs or discussions of RightsNet items at staff meetings. (See 3.2.5)

37% of respondents had changed their patterns of usage over time, by visiting the site more often, spending more time at each visit and accessing more sections than before. (See 3.2.7)

When questioned concerning the visual layout, coverage of topics, ease of access and accuracy of information provided within the site, 80% of respondents said the various quality indicators specified were either Good or Very Good. The only exception to this concerned the frequency of updates of information that was felt to be average or poor by 31% of respondents. (See 3.3.1)

When asked to comment on changes made to RightsNet since inception, 37 out of the 53 who felt they could judge thought the site had improved and no one felt it had deteriorated. (See 3.3.2)

93% of respondents said they would use RightsNet when seeking additional information to add to their existing knowledge of a subject; 65% said they would look to RightsNet for information on a subject they previously knew nothing about; 53% of respondents said they would use the service to check the accuracy of existing knowledge. (See 3.4.1)

When asked to rank RightsNet against other comparative information resources for different types of information gathering activities, RightsNet came second in all but one category, with handbooks and guides as the first choice of users. (See 3.4.2)

Respondents felt that RightsNet was most effective at providing factual information, but many users of the site wanted to see the provision of tactical information expanded. (See 3.4.3)

The most frequently accessed part of the RightsNet site is the News service, followed by Reviews and then the Discussion section. The section felt to be most useful by users was the news section followed by the Discussion section and then Reviews. (See 3.4.3)

Of the 80 agencies responding to the "non-users" questionnaire, 67 expect to have Internet capability within 12 months, providing a substantial and growing user base. (See 4.1)
2 PROJECT MEMBER MANAGERS VIEWS OF INVOLVEMENT IN THE RIGHTSNET PROJECT

At the same time as sending questionnaires to the project member key workers, Managers of these agencies were also asked to complete a questionnaire. The purpose of this questionnaire was to gather views concerning the impact of RightsNet in a wider organisational setting. Of the forty-five project members, thirty-eight Manager responses were received.

Participation in the RightsNet project had required both the prospective key worker and (where one existed) the agency manager to participate in an interview. The purpose of this was to evaluate the agency’s appropriateness for membership of the project. The interview covered topics such as the minimum hardware needed to participate and whether a bursary was required, the level and amount of benefit work undertaken by the agency and the commitment required of the key worker and the agency’s willingness to support this involvement.

The Managers questionnaire covered three main issues, these were; the concerns felt by the organisation about their involvement in the RightsNet project; whether participation in the project had been an effective use of resources; and what organisational and operational issues had arisen as a result of participating.

2.1 Organisational concerns

Twenty managers responded that they had no concerns relating to their agency’s involvement in the project. The remaining 18 responses listed a number of issues, the most common (7 respondents) was a concern over the amount of time that accessing and using the RightsNet site would involve. For some agencies however the improvements in the RightsNet site combined with the increasing competence of workers to access information allayed these fears and they reported that the concerns were no longer valid. Only 2 agencies said their initial worries over the time required to access the information were realised.

The next most noted concern was that of ensuring other workers had sufficient access to RightsNet and/or the information available from RightsNet (5 respondents). Problems with access were either a result of restrictions of a physical nature, (i.e. only one machine with a connection, in the wrong place or being used for another reason), or were caused by workers not having sufficient knowledge to use the Internet and access the RightsNet site by themselves. These concerns have remained and form the bulk of comments received in the operational issues section below.

2.2 Was participation an effective use of your resources?

The overwhelming majority (35 respondents) said “Yes” to this question. Two agencies identified that it had been a mixed benefit and only one respondent thought the participation had not been effective. In this particular case the RightsNet key worker had left half way through the project leaving no-one trained in use of the Internet.

A range of additional comments were received to illustrate how participation had proved effective. Five manager’s responses mentioned a growth in confidence amongst both paid and unpaid staff as a result of having access to RightsNet. One organisation pointed to the absence of a generalist advice service in its area as having caused them a major problem. Deprived of the ability to refer clients on, the agency, which specialised within a client group felt under pressure to deal with all enquiries. The Manager noted that the ability to access RightsNet had made the workers at this agency “more confident in giving advice and information, especially as they knew that any really difficult problem could be placed on the Bulletin Board for assistance from colleagues”.
Other respondents mentioned that RightsNet enabled their agency to keep up to date with case law and the latest issues in particular areas of social security law. Several Managers felt that their agency’s involvement in RightsNet was a particularly beneficial use of their resources given the growing trend towards electronic advice and information service provision. They commented that involvement in the RightsNet project not only provided them with an early opportunity to join these developments, but that their participation could be mentioned when making subsequent funding applications.

2.3 Organisational and operational issues arising out of involvement in RightsNet project

The issues raised here reflected the concerns some Managers had identified at the outset of their involvement with the RightsNet project.

The most pressing problem for many organisations was how to ensure access throughout the organisation. This concern can be divided into two separate issues: the need for IT training, and physical access problems.

2.3.1 IT training

Ten respondents identified the need for all staff and volunteers to have IT training to ensure that they can make use of the Internet and the RightsNet site. One Manager identified the two pressures that are constantly present when planning IT training. These were the regular de-prioritising of IT training in favour of benefits training (i.e. direct service) and the pressure of attending to client needs, which restricts the time available for in-house learning. Providing IT training that enables increased access to staff is clearly of key strategic importance to many agencies.

Where direct access to the RightsNet site does not exist the project members key worker questionnaire identified that many agencies passed information to their colleagues via print-outs, or held regular discussions at staff meetings based on items or issues raised on the RightsNet site in the previous week. Some key workers also noted that they spent time accessing information on behalf of volunteers and other workers.

Other benefits identified by Managers included motivating volunteers who saw training in this technology as an attractive benefit to their volunteering experience. In addition, two agencies have already started to use the information on RightsNet and in particular the contents of the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ’s) section as a training tool for staff.

These various uses of the site make it clear that ensuring direct access for all paid or unpaid staff is very important to agencies. However, it would be wrong to assume that “mediated access” i.e. via selective paper print-outs is wholly inappropriate. Although disseminating information via print-outs seems to go against the spirit of Internet access to question and answer services and discussion forums, they are not necessarily a redundant means of sharing information.

The benefits of workers having direct access to RightsNet include: increased learning through participation; increased confidence in the use of technology; ability to engage in an inter-active learning process; access to a wide range of advice related topics and specialisms; and the opportunity to create new and relevant contacts.

However, a balance needs to be struck between encouraging wider access and avoiding potential duplication of costs, such as those related to telephone calls and individuals time, caused by several workers looking up the same information because it has not been shared across the organisation more appropriately. A key issue for agencies here is how RightsNet is being utilised as an information source. Is RightsNet an addition to other information sources or is it being used to replace them?

The answer to this question is complex and will vary depending upon the structure and resources available to individual agencies. What however seems clear is that the new medium of electronically
provided information and support services will require the development of new procedures and protocols.

2.3.2 Physical access problems

The benefits identified by managers and the pressure they felt to improve access for all workers may well lead to greater demands being made upon their IT hardware. In turn this pressure could lead to a change in agencies IT development strategy and result in the adoption of network solutions with the associated requirement for faster and newer machines and more technical support.

3 PROJECT MEMBERS AND NON MEMBERS - MAIN FINDINGS

This section of the report deals with the various findings taken from the questionnaires sent to both project members and non members making use of the RightsNet site. A genuine enthusiasm for and interest in the development of the site was apparent from many of the questionnaire replies. Overall the comments received and rankings or scores given reflected a high level of satisfaction with the development of the project to date.

Throughout the report the charts have used a common colour code where appropriate: project members are shown in Red; non members are shown in Yellow and joint totals for both groups are shown in Blue.

Where no significant difference or additional information was to be gained from identifying both sets of questionnaire respondents separately charts show combined totals.

Due to a number of agencies choosing not to answer all questions the total number of responses can vary across the report.

3.1 Project members not making a response

It should be noted that six of the forty-five project members did not return a completed questionnaire. Participation in the RightsNet project required agencies to go through an assessment interview that included their agreement to take part in on-going evaluations. The six agencies that did not make a response to the evaluation questionnaires had received initial training of their key worker on Internet usage and how to access RightsNet. Throughout the project all agencies had been written to, e-mailed and visited in person by Lasa’s RightsNet project worker. Despite this input the six agencies had experienced difficulties which they were unable to resolve.

The most common reason for agencies not returning questionnaires was that their use of RightsNet had ceased during the lifetime of the project. In four cases this was because the key worker had left and no one else was able to access the Internet. In one agency a second key worker had been trained but this person subsequently also left after a couple of months.

Despite the initial pre-membership visit, RightsNet was powerless to prevent internal matters impacting on usage of the site. This was particularly important in smaller less well resourced agencies, which because of their size have greater difficulty accommodating the loss of one person. RightsNet as a resource could be disproportionately more beneficial to smaller agencies in its impact on their service delivery and overall access to information resources. It was therefore appropriate that the smaller less well resourced agencies should be included in the project membership but that they should also be considered for additional support through-out their involvement. Where agency size allows, it would be useful to have both a designated key worker and a shadow worker in place, thus ensuring continuity.
3.2 Access and Usage patterns

Information was sought concerning patterns of usage on a range of issues such as time of day, frequency and duration of usage. In addition agencies were also asked about issues relating to access to computers and any problems arising from this.

3.2.1 Time of day

Although the majority of agencies responded that they accessed RightsNet at various times according to need, a significant proportion (25%) said they accessed either before opening or after their agency closed. That a quarter of all respondents did this demonstrates a high level of interest in the RightsNet subject matter. It also highlights the practical problems for many staff in gaining both physical access to a machine during office hours and of making time available during normal opening times because of client demand.

Fig 1.

Comments made to Lasa’s RightsNet project worker by project members may also have a bearing here. Several key workers have commented that logging on to RightsNet during the working day can be viewed as “playing”, i.e. possibly too enjoyable and not as earnest as reading a magazine or guidebook. Some RightsNet key workers reported feeling under pressure from colleagues because of this and adjusted where and when they accessed accordingly.

As Internet information sources become more widespread, workplace attitudes to the technology and those who currently use it will undoubtedly also change and develop. Within a relatively short amount of time attitudes may have altered and the Internet will be seen as a primary source of information. However, in the interim it will be necessary to offer support and guidance to both workers and management in agencies where accessing the medium meets with approbation.
3.2.2 Number of times RightsNet is accessed per week

No significant difference existed between the patterns of usage by project members and non members for those only accessing RightsNet once or twice per week. However, at three times per week eleven project members compared to only two non members was significant. As part of the project membership criteria, agencies were asked to log on and participate at this frequency. A trawl of the log of web site “hits” corresponded with agencies estimation of their usage. Ten agencies appear to be accessing RightsNet at least daily and a few were accessing more frequently than this.

Fig. 2

![Bar chart showing the number of agencies accessing RightsNet per week.](image)

The data collected here was compared against other questions concerning frequency of updates of the information available within RightsNet, specifically where agencies had said that speed of response to questions was important to them.

This analysis showed that of the eleven project members accessing RightsNet three times per week, six felt that frequency of updates were either average or poor, whilst all eleven said that speed of response to question was either important or very important to them.

Fig. 3

![Bar chart showing the speed of response question](image)
This clearly demonstrates a serious issue around user expectations of the medium. Agencies accessing on a daily or near daily basis were less satisfied with response times than other users. One respondent commented that “it would be most useful if RightsNet was available to provide more immediate answers to specific enquiries, i.e. as Lasa’s helpline was”. (N.B. Lasa’s helpline is still available and is provided in addition to RightsNet services). In addition this respondent suggested that “discussion tends to be slow… a request for information can take hours or days to receive…”

User expectations of RightsNet and more generally of open access electronic information forums need to be addressed. What constitutes a reasonable response time depends on a number of factors, including how often a worker can gain access to the site, the urgency of the question and the alternative means available for getting an answer.

The expectations of near instantaneous answers or immediate coverage of breaking news events is unrealistic within the current RightsNet staff resource. Lasa will need to ensure that the operating criteria of the RightsNet site, including what constitutes a reasonable response time, is made more explicit and communicated to users more effectively, that the breadth of contributions is more important than the speed of response. At the same time agencies need to ensure they understand these operating criteria and have appropriate alternative sources of information available for when a response is required more quickly than RightsNet can provide. It is also important that agencies recognise that sharing experience and expertise are integral to the RightsNet ethos and that Internet services are reliant on all users for the speed and quality of replies and that they should not rely solely on RightsNet to provide answers to urgent questions.

3.2.3 Time spent on-line per week

The charts below show agencies’ estimates of total time spent on-line for the whole organisation, not just the key worker. This includes time spent accessing various Internet sites, not just RightsNet. Figure 4 shows the average time spent on line each week for all respondents. Figure 5 shows in more detail the average time on line for those accessing the site for three or less hours per week.

With thirteen agencies accessing between one and two hours per week and twelve agencies accessing between two and three hours per week, the charts suggest that Internet usage is quite moderate. This may have been one of the factors, which resulted in managers reporting in their responses that fears over increased costs had not been founded.
3.2.4 Computer Access

How RightsNet is used within an agency is obviously dependent to a large extent on the computer arrangements for staff access. A number of access problems were identified in the managers' responses and were also commented on by project member key workers and by non members.

As can be seen from the Figs.6 and 7 below, although the project members were similarly positioned with regard to having to share access to a machine, they were significantly more likely to experience problems arising out of this. It is difficult to say why project members would experience more problems sharing access (13 out of the 15) than their non project member counterparts.

Only twelve agencies had Internet access from all computers. The greater accessibility offered by this does not appear to have led to any significant increase in either frequency or duration of usage. The majority of these twelve agencies spent under two hours per week on-line and only four logged on more than twice per week.
Further analysis of the forty-seven agencies shown in Fig. 9 as having limited access (i.e. Internet access not available from all computers), showed nine of the respondents had sole use of the computer with Internet access. These nine workers, with high levels of accessibility within their own agencies made up five of the thirteen agencies accessing RightsNet three times per week.

It is difficult with the information available to identify any clear trend. Having access from all computers did not lead to a noticeable difference in the frequency of visits to the RightsNet site. On the other hand, groups with less advantageous levels of access to a computer dominate the higher usage scores, and are using RightsNet despite these restrictions.

Responses from the Manager's survey and comments made by RightsNet key workers would still lead one to the view that groups currently demanding greater training and accessibility for their workers would make more use of the site if they were able to access a computer without disturbing another worker. The lower reported usage of those currently enjoying network access may be an aberration.

3.2.5 Disseminating information throughout the organisation

As with all information management issues within the advice sector, how agencies distribute information throughout the staff group is of key importance. Electronic information sources provide opportunities for quicker, and wider distribution of information. However this is dependent on having the computer infrastructure (network access) in place and for many agencies this is still not the case. The majority of respondents (38 agencies) indicated that they distributed information throughout the organisation in printed format. A smaller number (18 agencies) trained all staff to access RightsNet directly, although this was identified by groups as having presented a training need they felt was difficult to manage. A significant number of respondents (21 agencies) used other methods of distributing information. These included discussions at staff meetings (10 agencies), one to one discussion (9 agencies) and emails between individual workers (2 agencies).

Fig. 10

In addition to the limitations placed on agencies by the lack of infrastructure it should be recognised that the information held within RightsNet is not uniform. Some parts of the site are more usefully accessed via direct participation by users (e.g. discussion forum) and sharing this information can be more problematic. On the other hand printing out news items is an effective way of distributing information across an organisation.
It is not necessary for all workers to have access to the RightsNet site to make use of the information available. Many smaller agencies manage very well by, as one respondent put it “We just talk to each other- old fashioned but effective”. Similarly a number of agencies discuss important information as part of their staff meeting. Only three respondents said they had developed in-house procedures/guidelines for accessing RightsNet (at least one of these related to time/frequency restrictions to address fears relating to extra telephone costs).

The important issue is that useful information from RightsNet is being distributed within agencies, using a variety of methods to achieve this. Lasa needs to ensure that RightsNet information is provided in a variety of formats that allow for effective distribution. RightsNet should investigate various methods of information dissemination (e.g. data dumping techniques, summarised extracts, full discussion thread printing, in-house electronic distribution etc.) and identify with site users which are the most effective.

3.2.6 Additional Training needs

Although agencies did identify some additional training needs, the level of confidence expressed by all respondents as to their ability to access information from the RightsNet site is very heartening. All but one (58 out of 59 agencies) said they were confident in their use of RightsNet.

Project members were asked what additional training needs they now had, having participated in the project for some months. Seventeen of the thirty-nine respondents identified additional needs. Six of these were for advanced Internet, e-mail and RightsNet training (i.e. in addition to the training provided during the RightsNet project). The remaining eleven groups included requests for basic (non-Internet related) computer training (3), and in-house/on-going Internet/RightsNet training (5). Two respondents raised lack of time/access to the system as training problems. Finally one respondent stated that “RightsNet is a useful training tool”.

3.2.7 Changes In Use over Time

Three questions concerning changes in use over time were asked. Responses were sought on changes to: frequency of visits; time spent accessing the site; and the number of sections accessed per visit. The responses showed that a large number of users (33) are spending the same amount of time at each visit and the same number, although not necessarily the same people are accessing the same number of sections. For all three questions roughly a third of respondents said they were making more visits, accessing more sections and spending more time at each visit.

A small number of agencies indicated a drop in their usage. Ten agencies said they were visiting RightsNet less often, five were spending less time and four were accessing fewer sections. It is possible that reduced usage may relate to greater familiarity with the site and improved technical ability. One user reported that their drop in usage was temporary and due to staff shortages.

Fig. 11
3.3 Quality measures and users views

When seeking views of the RightsNet project, the questionnaire asked two sets of questions aimed at identifying different aspects of quality. The first set sought views on the overall performance of the RightsNet site with particular emphasis on some key quality indicators. Agencies were asked to assess the design and accessibility of the site. They were then asked to consider the accuracy, timeliness and coverage of social security issues provided by RightsNet.

As can be seen from the charts below, the overwhelming majority of responses when evaluating the overall performance of RightsNet were very favourable. From the seven questions asked, six achieved an 80% response rate of either Good or Very Good. No significant differences existed between pilot agencies and other users. N.B. only project members were asked about the technical support they received.
The one exception to the extremely high approval ratings presented above was that of frequency of update, which received a 69% positive approval score (Good or Very Good) with 31% marking it as average. This 31% was comprised of seventeen respondents, thirteen of whom were project members and only four were non members. This was the only major difference between the two group’s evaluations for the question set. The issues raised by user expectations concerning frequency of update are discussed in section 7.
3.3.1 Quality issues within the various services available

A second set of questions relating to quality asked respondents to rate the various sections that comprise the RightsNet site. This enabled both a simple comparative test to ensure ratings were consistent and at the same time provided more detailed information concerning any variation in views between the quality of different sections within RightsNet. Users were asked, for the four main sections within RightsNet, how they rated: ease of finding information; the coverage of social security issues and how accurate and reliable they felt the information was.

No significant differences existed between the project and non project members in their ratings. Not all respondents felt they could comment on all sections as they were only accessing part of the site. Totals therefore vary across all sections.

**Fig. 19**

![Ease of finding information](image1)

**Fig. 20**

![Accuracy/reliability](image2)

**Fig. 21**

![Coverage of topics](image3)
The majority of users found it easy or very easy to find information within the various sections. However, four agencies utilised the comments section of the questionnaire to explain that since the design changes to the discussion forum they now found it more difficult to locate information. These changes were implemented following suggestions received from the previous evaluation and were necessary in part to enable individuals to more easily identify previously accessed information. The reaction from some users does however go to demonstrate how difficult it is implementing design changes that will meet with universal approval.

Across all sections, accuracy and reliability achieved a very high rating. This concurs with the view of Lasa’s RightsNet project worker who has not needed to exercise his function as a moderator, due to the high level of quality of the contributions received.

Agencies were slightly less effusive concerning breadth of coverage, but the majority still ranked it as good followed by very good. Project members gave the only poor scores, five rating the FAQ section as poor and one rating the discussion section as poor. Development proposals for the FAQ’s section are explored later.

3.3.2 Quality over time

A number of changes were made to the site following the first phase evaluation. We have therefore sought to identify whether users feel that changes over time have been beneficial.

The changes implemented after the first phase evaluation included:
• Changes in design to enable categorisation of topics within sections,
• Printing of all questions and replies that were linked,
• Additional search facilities within some sections,
• Changing to Portable Document Format (PDF) to enable inclusion of graphical information,
• Design changes to speed up time required to print information,
• E-mail notification service to users when new material is available on site,
• Colour changes to help identify material once it has been accessed.

The above changes were implemented within a few weeks of the first phase evaluation being completed. A strength of the technology through which RightsNet is delivered is the relative speed and cheapness of making changes in response to user feedback.

One respondent commented on the reply form that both the quality and quantity had improved. This response highlights one of the difficulties when judging quality, which is the confusion between more and better. It is assumed therefore that responses to the question were used by agencies to offer a general approval rating.

Six agencies said they had not been users for a long enough period to judge. Of the remaining 53 replies, 37 said they thought RightsNet had improved and no one thought it had deteriorated.
All those accessing RightsNet had been doing so for between three and twelve months. Just over half of all users said that the site had been just about what they had expected. This includes users new to the medium as well as more experienced Internet users. Project members were proportionately better represented amongst those who said the site was more comprehensive than they had expected.

The six respondents who said the site was less than expected provided explanatory comments. Two identified their own lack of confidence and technical ability as having resulted in disappointment with the site. The other four respondents complained of a lack of tactical and complex legal information sources, which they had hoped, would be included. This ties in with other comments concerning access to legal decisions and tactical tips in response to the section on future site developments (see section 7).

### 3.4 A new resource working in a new medium

When evaluating RightsNet, it is impossible to detach how users feel about the medium through which it is provided from the services it actually provides. RightsNet is therefore being compared simultaneously to both other sources of traditional information, (guidebooks, periodicals telephone consultancy etc.) and at the same time is being evaluated in relation to additional issues raised by electronic communication.

Respondents were asked to identify whether they would use RightsNet for certain kinds of information gathering activities. The three activities offered were: finding out about a topic for the first time; checking the accuracy of existing knowledge and seeking additional or supplementary information.

Traditional information materials support all three activities, with different sources being suitable for different activities. For example guidebooks/CAB Information system are designed to be a first port of call whereas journals provide updates and additional information on existing subjects. A series of questions asked respondents to rank in order of preference which sources of information, including RightsNet, they would use for these activities.

Finally, respondents were asked to rank in order of preference what kind of information RightsNet was most effective at providing from the choices of factual, tactical and general information.
3.4.1 Information gathering activities RightsNet is used for

Figure 24 shows the total number of agencies selecting each of the information gathering activities. Respondents could select as many as they felt appropriate. There was no difference between project members and non members as to the activities selected. Users most frequently identified RightsNet as a source of additional information, with slightly over half of all respondents saying they would use RightsNet both to find out information for the first time and to check accuracy of existing knowledge.

![Fig. 24](image)

3.4.2 RightsNet and other comparative sources of information

The following charts show how users ranked RightsNet against a set of alternative information sources. Noticeable for project member charts is the high ranking achieved for the three question groups, which show RightsNet coming in as the second most popular choice. Equally interesting for information providers and support services is the relatively low ranking given to telephone consultancy. Telephone consultancy was last or joint last on all charts, for project members and non members. This ranking may of course say more about the general lack of availability and difficulty accessing telephone consultancy services rather than their effectiveness once accessed.

Both project and non project members unsurprisingly ranked guides and handbooks as the most popular choice for all types of information gathering. The Citizen’s Advice Bureaux information system was included in this category by respondents. RightsNet was either the joint second or the third choice for non members which given the relative youthfulness of the service is encouraging.
Fig. 25

Seeking first time information

Fig. 26

Seeking first time information

Fig. 27

Accuracy of knowledge

Fig. 28

Accuracy of knowledge
3.4.3 Different types of information available through RightsNet

Agencies were asked to rank what type of information they thought the RightsNet site was most effective at providing. The chart shows a clear majority of users indicating that RightsNet is most effective for providing factual information. Users placed tactical information lowest.

It should be noted however that being forced to rank choices meant that they felt RightsNet was most effective at providing factual information but not necessarily that it was ineffective at providing tactical information. Many of the written comments received (full discussion below) touched on the need for and importance of tactical advice and indicated that they would like this area developed further.

Fig. 31
Two sets of questions were asked concerning the different sections of the RightsNet site. The first asked users to indicate the sections of RightsNet they used most frequently and found most useful. The results are shown in the Figures 32 and 33 below. The News section is accessed most frequently by the majority of users and considered to be the most useful part of the site. FAQs, links and e-mail accessed less frequently and are rated as useful by only a few users.

When considering the strengths and weaknesses of the Internet as a means of communication and information sharing between advice workers, it is important to identify the different types of information being communicated. When members of the public seek benefits information they are likely to want straightforward yes or no answers to their questions. The role of the advice worker however is that of problem solver. The process used to solve a problem is often more complex than simply applying a set of regulations or rules to a situation and requires analysis, interpretation and creativity to see how those rules can best be applied to the clients situation.

The current questionnaire returns suggest that much more work needs to be undertaken in promoting certain types of usage within the site. At present those using RightsNet have said that they believe it is best at providing factual information and the most frequently used sections within RightsNet are the News service (55 respondents) and Reviews (43 respondents). The Discussion forum, where tactical information exchanges are most likely to take place between advice workers achieved only twenty-five mentions as being frequently used and only twelve rated it as the most useful section within RightsNet.

An e-mail consultancy service on advice questions was offered as a special service to project members. This service was rarely used. Lasa’s RightsNet project worker reported that members had said they felt the complex issues they were raising could not be adequately answered by a pithy one off response. Project members said they wanted a dialogue around the issues raised by a particular problem. The call for a more discursive and interactive approach to problem solving was also echoed by those respondents who felt RightsNet should develop both the tactical debate within the site as well as information that would enable agencies to share ideas and knowledge of each others work.

Much more thought has to be given to how RightsNet can achieve a balance between factual and tactical information. Providing tactical information that is accessible and can be used by agencies is surprisingly difficult. The various sections below identify some of the obstructions that need to be overcome to enable these improvements.
3.4.4 Contributing to RightsNet

How confident and comfortable individual workers feel contributing to an open access discussion forum was an issue raised in the first phase evaluation. Contributions to the discussion forum have grown rapidly since then. However, despite the growth in the number of contributions, some workers still do not feel confident either asking what might seem “silly” questions in front of their peers or posting answers that might be wrong or incomplete. In addition, the standard of contributions to the RightsNet discussion forum is quite learned, regularly contributed to by Barristers and other specialists working in the area of social welfare law and could easily become an ‘experts’ forum.

This is of course a very valuable resource for advice workers who are able to access expert opinions which otherwise may not be available to less well resourced organisations. However it is very important that RightsNet should facilitate the exchange of information, ideas and tactics that cover the full range of worker expertise and address problem solving at all levels. This might require the setting up of a parallel forum within the RightsNet site for workers new to the discipline seeking “entry level” information.

3.4.5 Access Issues

Making RightsNet a resource for tactical information and ideas is also dependent on the ability of workers to gain access to the information on the site with relative ease. Where physical access or lack of training makes one worker dependent on another for access, or where time and frequency of access is very restricted then participation in discussions will be problematic. Where access is restricted RightsNet is likely to be used more as a news service offering factual and general benefits information.

4 RESPONSES FROM AGENCIES NOT CURRENTLY USING THE RIGHTSNET SITE

Two questionnaires were sent to 240 non member agencies. One mirrored the questions being asked of project members. The other was a one-page questionnaire specifically for agencies that were not currently using the site.

The inclusion of this additional questionnaire sought to identify agencies views of the potential benefits they felt an Internet welfare rights service might offer and in particular what sort of services they imagined would be most useful.

It was anticipated that very few agencies would take the time and trouble to respond to a questionnaire that asked them questions about a service they had not yet accessed. In total, eighty replies were received to this one page questionnaire giving a 33% response rate. This surprisingly high response rate may be attributable to the very great interest in the potential offered by Internet support services.

4.1 What non users said

Of the 80 respondents, seventy-four had never visited the RightsNet site. The reasons for this are shown in Figure 36. The position of the forty-five groups that did not have Internet access is considered later. The second most common reason given by agencies (17 respondents) was of not having heard of the site. When looked at in more detail these responses come from nine agencies outside of London and eight from within London. Seven of the nine agencies outside London were members of the CABx, who have not traditionally received Lasa information materials in their network mailings. Within London seven out of the eight agencies were independent advice centres and members of Networks who regularly receive Lasa mailings.

Six agencies had visited the RightsNet site but were not currently using it. The reasons for this were mainly problems over physical access to a computer.
Agencies were also asked to judge whether access to the RightsNet site would be beneficial to their agency. Quite reasonably a large number of respondents (33) said they didn’t know whether it would or would not be beneficial. But when comparing the subsequent rating of areas of potential benefit, those who indicated “Yes” or “Don’t know” to whether access would be beneficial gave a very similar pattern of responses.

Only one agency felt that access to RightsNet would not be beneficial to their organisation as they already had dedicated support from their own network organisation.
The final question concerned agencies’ plans to get Internet capability within the next twelve months. Of the fifty agencies that did not currently have Internet access, thirty-seven said they had plans to get connected. If all these plans are fulfilled then in twelve months time sixty-seven out of the eighty responding agencies (84%) will be in a position to make use of the RightsNet site. Only thirteen agencies said they had no plans to get Internet capability within the next 12 months.

The expected growth in agencies gaining Internet access capabilities signals the need for Lasa to make a continuing and concerted effort at marketing and advertising the existence and potential benefits of finding and using the RightsNet site.

5 DEVELOPMENTS AND THE FUTURE OF RIGHTSNET

The final set of questions asked was concerned with the future of the site. Users were asked five questions concerning the operation of the site and the results of these are shown below.

One of the most interesting results came from responses to the question that asked whether RightsNet should concentrate on welfare rights information only. A small majority of users (56%) either agreed or agreed strongly with the proposition. However twenty-six respondents (44%) either disagreed or neither agreed nor disagreed. The views of this significant minority should be examined further to identify exactly what other services areas they feel should be covered and what information sources they are currently using in these other areas. Lasa could then seek to identify alternative Internet information sources and make links with those sites.

Overwhelmingly respondents indicated that speed of response to items posted to the site is important (51 out of 59 respondents). The connection between users’ views on this matter and how the site develops is complex. Although Lasa operates the RightsNet site, it must not dominate the site. If Lasa were to respond to every question within a day then other agencies and potential contributors would have less reason to do so. The breadth of participation and the range of expertise contributing to the site are equally important, if not more so, than speed of response.

When asked whether RightsNet provides information users would otherwise not get to see elsewhere, thirty-seven users agreed or agreed strongly that it does. Sixteen users neither agreed nor disagreed with only six users saying they would have seen the information elsewhere. RightsNet is clearly providing a number of agencies with a valuable source of new and additional information, as well as providing an alternative form of delivery for others.
Similarly, when asked whether alternative sources of information made the RightsNet site unnecessary, fifty-three respondents disagreed with this statement. This further confirms agencies use of the site as both an alternative and additional source of information.

In response to the statement suggesting that there was no need for accuracy checks on the information posted to the site, forty-eight respondents disagreed, indicating they felt accuracy checks were necessary. The “moderation” function, as exercised by Lasa’s RightsNet project worker, is therefore crucial. The balance between quality assurance of information and the behind the scenes administrative controls, ensure both the continued accuracy and appropriateness of the contributions.

In addition to the above questions, users were asked to comment upon any development or improvement ideas they had. Almost half the respondents did make specific comments, and many of these were repeated by more than one respondent. These are discussed below.

5.1 Commissioner’s Decisions

A significant number of respondents requested that RightsNet should improve access to Commissioners’ decisions, making them available in a searchable database format. The debate over how Commissioners’ decisions should be made available has been on-going for several years and a number of governmental, private sector and voluntary sector agencies have and are still involved in negotiations and discussion.

RightsNet should seek to articulate the needs of its users wherever possible, with particular reference to the future cost and accessibility of the Commissioners’ decisions, ensuring that the public information they contain is widely available. RightsNet should seek to ensure that in the interim, whenever possible extracts or other collections of full decisions should be accessible free of charge through RightsNet acting as an intermediary.

5.2 Frequently Asked Questions

FAQ’s are still an under utilised resource within the RightsNet site despite developments over the last few months. The new site design, which allows categorisation of issues and better search facilities should be built upon.

Lasa’s RightsNet project worker should actively seek examples of questions from a range of service providers covering different service specialisms and client groups. In addition the range of questions should cover both complex and more straightforward enquiries, typically requested of advice workers.

Several respondents requested the expansion of this section and some stated that they would like to use FAQ’s as a training resource for new workers and volunteers.

5.3 New to welfare rights work new to the Internet

Lasa should seek ways to address the needs of both new and less experienced workers and those who are new to Internet services. Newer workers may want to ask more basic questions but feel too intimidated to do so at the moment given the current complexity of questions and replies posted to the site. Development of the FAQ’s, as suggested earlier, might go some way to encouraging participation from all workers.

Those new to the Internet may need to be supported and encouraged to add their “voice” to the discussion forums, thus ensuring the widest possible participation. All future site developments should be made with such workers in mind (i.e. both workers new to welfare rights and workers new to the Internet). This is particularly important given the expected growth in Internet use across the sector over the next few years.
5.4 Social policy on-line, agency profiles and campaign news

A number of comments were received which centred round the need for more information and/or specific sections within RightsNet providing agency profiles of RightsNet users. Groups felt that it would be beneficial if an agency undertaking a new initiative were to give a brief outline of it. This could then be followed up by other groups undertaking similar work, thus enabling them to share experiences or get ideas for their own agency.

Phil Woodall