"Videotex has enabled us to dramatically improve communications between the council and the people it serves."

Trying to find out information about your local area or council services can often be a most difficult and frustrating task. If, however, you live in the London Borough of Hounslow, you can, using a ROCC videotex system, now access a massive database of local information at the touch of a button.

The Hounslow Viewdata Service, which opened to the public in February 1986, is a joint venture between Hounslow Council's Press and Information Division and the Department of Arts and Recreation. Over 2500 pages of information are available on the system, which is centred around a ROCC 2820 processor.

The Hounslow Viewdata Service contains a community information index under a total of ten headings such as Information and Advice Services, Education, Housing and Planning and Employment. At present there are ten terminals attached to the system. Three are in the council's district libraries in Chiswick, Feltham and Hounslow; four are in Hounslow's Civic Centre; one is in Hounslow's Citizens Advice Centre, one is in the Trading Standards Office, and one is in the area's largest comprehensive school, Feltham Community School.

"We plan to expand the system as quickly as possible . . ."

"We plan to expand the system as quickly as possible, funds permitting," says Colin Pink, the system's information officer. "The sort of sites we are looking at would include local council offices throughout the borough and the borough's eight branch libraries," he adds.

"Videotex has proved to be the ideal medium for distributing information in Hounslow." David Cook, librarian in charge of information services, explains, "From our point of view videotex is cheap, easily expandable and very easy to program, but as the service is aimed at the ordinary consumer, the

If you live in the London Borough of Hounslow and pop into the Civic Centre you can, by using a ROCC Teleputer videotex terminal, access a massive database of information at the touch of a button. Over 2500 pages of information are available on the Hounslow Viewdata Service which is centred around a ROCC 2800 processor.
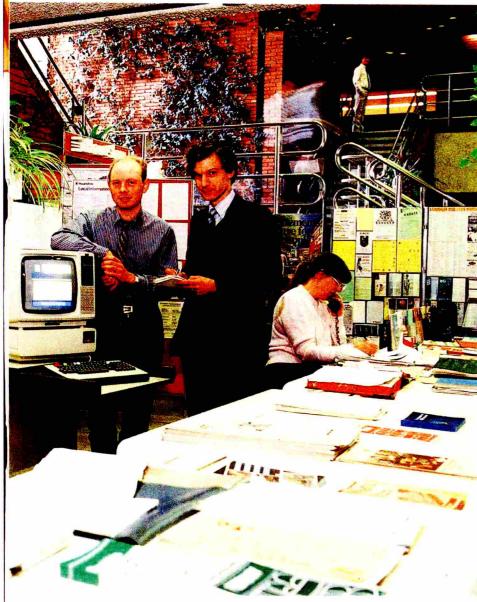
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man or woman in the street if you like, it is in this respect that videotex really scores – it needs no training to use."

Cook and Pink have found the initial reaction to the system to be highly favourable. "It has gone down very well," says Pink. At library sites and in the civic centre members of the clerical staff are always ready to lend a hand. "We found that it took only minutes to explain to our staff

how to use the system, exactly the same is true of the public who are using the system," adds Cook.

". . . it is so user-friendly, we have had no resistance from any of our staff or the general public."

"Videotex has enabled us to dramatically improve communications between the council and the people it serves ." says Colin Pink – information officer pictured left. With him is David Cook, librarian in charge of information services who adds: "Videotex is cheap easy to programme and where it really scores – it needs no training to use."

OUNSLOW

'Attractive' has been a word frequently used to describe the colourful presentation of the pages of information displayed on the system. "For our application videotex fits the bill exactly, it is so user-friendly, we have had no resistance from any of our staff or the general public," Cook goes on. "In addition, each of the pages available from the system has different format requirements, the sort of field restrictions present in conventional computer programming would have made life impossible," he adds.

A feature of the system is that the user can quickly access any part of the database by the use of 'key words'. For instance, if one of Hounslow's citizens wanted to find out who was the appropriate general practitioner for their area, they would merely have to enter the word 'Doctor'. The system would then instantly respond with the relevant page of information. The ROCC system makes this possible by allowing individual pages of information to be 'tagged' with key words. This obviates time-consuming page searching and the need for the user to remember page numbers. Each terminal is equipped with a printer, and any page can be made into a paper hard copy and taken home by the user.

The system is not used solely for issuing information to the citizens of Hounslow. Videotex has enabled the system to be truly interactive. For instance, after making an enquiry about the availability of insulation grants the user is invited to apply for a grant on the spot. The user can then type their details into the system and the request is actioned back at the Civic Centre.

"Not only does the system enable people to quickly find out what's happening in Hounslow and what is available from the council, it actually encourages people to use the services available," says Pink.

"Videotex has enabled us to dramatically improve communications . . ."

The system replaces a disparate database held on cards in the civic centre and in the libraries. Using cards meant information was seldom up-to-date and often contained large gaps. Videotex has enabled Cook and Pink to ensure a comprehensive database is available on all sites and to constantly keep up-to-date the information available through the system.

The system has proved especially useful for keeping track of the telephone numbers of rapidly moving personnel and easing the load on Hounslow Civic Centre's overloaded telephone exchange. In addition, videotex has enabled prices of goods and services to be entered into the database, a feat impossible using the card system.

"Videotex has enabled us to dramatically improve communications between the council and the people of the borough it serves, so benefiting both parties," says Pink. "Of course we are not totally parochial, if something of interest is happening in Richmond or Kensington, we'll put that on too!"