

RICHMOND BOROUGH COUNCIL FORMS NEW LINKS WITH THE COMMUNITY

Have you ever spent ages fruitlessly scanning brimming library notice boards to find the phone number of the local Citizens' Advice Bureau? Or similarly, leafed through endless pages of small ads to see what's on at the local cinema? It can be a time consuming and often frustrating way of obtaining information.

For the residents of the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames, such information, and much more, is literally at their fingertips and available within seconds, through the 'Linkline' computer data system now being provided by the borough.

Sharing information - not only about local facilities and community services, but also on council activities and personalities - is an all important link between a council and its public to ensure trust and confidence in the administration of the borough.

Similarly, effective communication of facilities and local services helps to promote the council as an approachable body in touch with the needs of the community and to foster an open relationship with the public.

Richmond Borough Council has always shown commitment to the effective transmission of information through for example, the publication of a comprehensive guide to the area and its facilities. While valuable, such booklets do have limitations as facts quickly become out-dated and the booklets themselves are easily misplaced.

The council's videotex computer system, better known as 'Linkline', was set up almost three years ago in response to the increasing demands from both the public and the council's own staff for an up-to-the minute information service on all aspects of



*Wright "has now reached a significant phase."
Sculpture by Kerin Alherton*

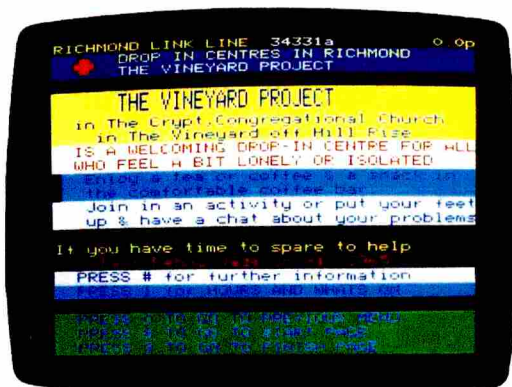
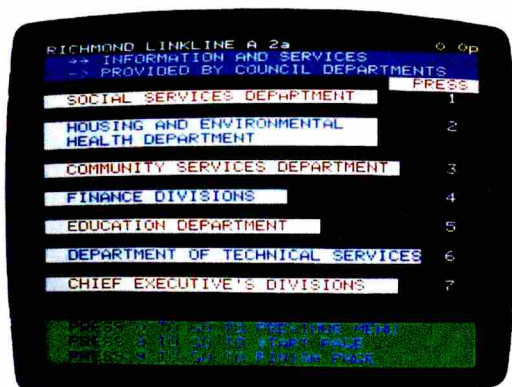
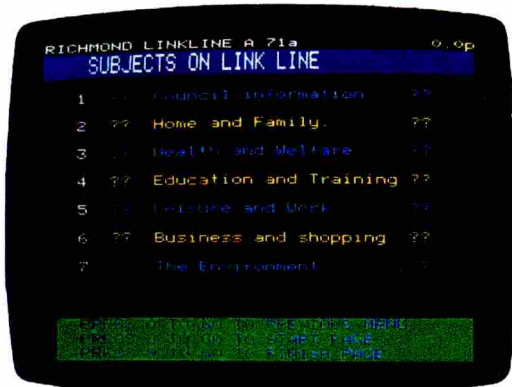
council and local activities. A ROCC 2820 computer system was already in use for data entry and to this, a ROCC videotex application was added.

Terminals for public access to the system were placed in two libraries, an adult education college, a community centre, an old people's day centre and a citizens' advice bureau. The system was set up for a trial period of six months and the public's response

was monitored.

The information on the computer database came from several council departments. Diana Howard, the borough's principal librarian for reference and information, had the task of editing the various contributions and compiling and coordinating an index, around which the system was based. She also had the task of entering all non council information such as details of local

Information at one's fingertips – that is the service that the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames is offering to its residents via 'Linkline' – a videotex computer system.



organisations, of which there are over 1000.

This type of database, covering many aspects of community facilities, was an innovation to the borough and proved to be a huge success. According to Howard, the service took off and the system "grew like topsy." Contributory information was offered from an increasing number of sources and the computer's capacity for information storage became in danger of being filled.

Since 1988 when the trial period ended, the number of council departments committing information to 'Linkline' has increased and now includes: Community Services, Education, Social Services, Housing and Environmental Health, Technical Services, and that of the council's chief executive and director of finance. Each of these departments is subdivided and each division within the departments is responsible for the creation, input and update of its own frames (pages of information).

The decision to make 'Linkline' the information database for all information officers and receptionists with the council resulted in a steering committee being set up to coordinate their approach. It is headed by the council's assistant head of libraries, John Wright. His task is to coordinate the development of the system. As he explains:

"The council has now reached a significant phase where it is in a position to extend the service even further. In conjunction with the imminent move of many council departments to new offices, we have opened a new, high quality public information centre in the Atrium of the new Civic Centre, adjacent to the existing York House and other Twickenham offices."

The new system comprises a ROCC 2816 computer for viewdata and a ROCC 2825 for data entry in addition to the existing equipment. Sony terminals and Innovative Videotex standalones for public access are located in the Atrium. These standalones are free standing units with a keyboard and screen and are as easy to use as a bank cashpoint machine.

Standing in another council office window nearby will be an IV "through the glass" terminal.



Howard (foreground) ... "grew like topsy". Also seen are principal officer - customer care Will Pigg with systems analyst IT Services Helen Wylie in the Atrium of the new Civic Centre which houses 'Linkline'.

This will offer the public information on a 24 hour basis. Enquirers, by touching the window glass, behind which will be a heat sensitive control screen, will gain access to the same Linkline information as in the centre, on a television-size screen.

In addition to the increase in machines, the six communications lines into the system are being increased to 12. This means that with the new configuration, 12 people can access 'Linkline' at any one time. In addition the number of public terminals is being increased and shortly all 13 library buildings will be connected.

The success of the project depends on the speed of access to accurate and comprehensive information, and the ease of use. The general public is, on the whole, still wary of computers. Many of the system's users will be of generations that grew up before the escalation in the use of such technology and consequent-

ly will often not have used a computer before. For this reason access to the 'Linkline' database is simple and easy.

If, for example, someone was enquiring about information on libraries from the printed alphabetical index provided in Linkline locations, they would choose the option 'library services' or its reference page number from the colourful menu shown on the Linkline screen. Then from the screen of library services listed, the relevant location can be picked out, and the information received.

The system can also be accessed via a Prestel set through dialling the Linkline indexed code numbers which means that customers can obtain information in such cases in their own homes.

Sometimes the information required - advice on housing benefit, for example - will not be contained in full on the database as the facts will differ according



Principal officer – customer care Will Pigg is seen with members of his staff whose role it is to help the general public with any enquiry.

to every enquirer's circumstances. In these cases, the enquirer will be referred to one of the information officers who will also be working in the Atrium.

Linkline does not only benefit the general public; the council workforce is also enjoying advantages. Internal information relevant to many, such as the list of the borough's voluntary organisa-

tions, can quickly be referenced on the viewdata system. In addition, announcements to be distributed among council personnel can be made far more quickly and efficiently by typing them into the system for everyone to access, instead of going through the procedure of paper distribution.

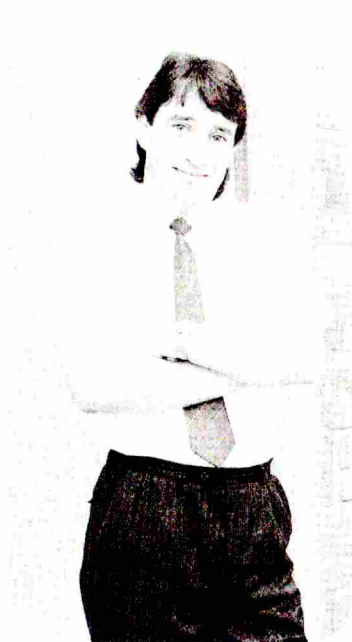
The index for the Linkline sys-

tem already covers about 300 subjects, each of which is further subdivided. To date, of the ROCC system's 15,000 frame capacity, less than half has been filled. Additions are constantly being made and entries updated and as Diana Howard points out, the scope for development is wide:

"We are working on expanding the service in several areas. Maybe in future, Linkline will have a section where there will be special frames set up for the public to report directly to the council via their Prestel sets, for example, that their street lights are out. Similarly, local businesses could contribute to the system to promote their services. In addition, links to other borough's videotext systems are going to be established, which will be of special value to those people living in boundary areas."

The way the service has grown since its conception indicates that it goes a long way to fulfilling the increasingly demanding need for a reliable and up-to-date source of local community information.

Once the new information centre is established, Richmond will have one of the most comprehensive public information services in the country - using state-of-the-art technology to offer a friendly face to the community. ■



Simmonds "ROCCAddress will facilitate a substantial increase in CCS' capacity for keying."

COST SAVINGS AT CCS



As Cleckheaton-based CCS' direct marketing business continued to grow, managing director John Waterhouse and data preparation manager Mick Simmonds had to decide how they were going to handle the increasing volume of associated data capture. Indeed CCS has already expanded its data preparation department since upgrading to a ROCC 2835 running Workstation Management System (WMS) last year, but decided that this time they needed something more flexible than just adding more workstations.

CCS decided on ROCCAddress. The system will facilitate a substantial increase in CCS' capacity for keying without any impact on staffing.

Waterhouse will readily admit that the cost savings were a very influential factor in the overall decision, but CCS believe that just as importantly, they have taken another step towards ensuring that their customers receive the best in terms of quality that is available. ■