

Policy briefing

Digital by choice

Bridging the digital divide

December 2018



POLICY

Briefing

Digital by choice: Bridging the digital divide

Part 1 of 3: Why digital participation matters

— December 2018

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Executive summary (parts 1 - 3)

Sustained digital participation, underpinned by ICT support in the community and in the home, is becoming an entitlement for engagement in 21st century society.

'Slower adoptors to technology' tend to be older people, those who are socially excluded and those dependent upon state support – and the barriers to digital participation are well-documented, but inadequately understood and addressed.

A 'user pull' approach, built on fulfillment of what users need and want – i.e. digital by choice – rather than the prevailing 'technology-push' inherent in digital by default strategy, is fundamental to achieving a step change in digital participation by older people and other slower adoptors.

Effective 'user-led' approaches to digital participation exist in small pockets of good practice and need to become mainstream.

Transformation, place-shaping, better economic, social, health and environmental outcomes, and re-design of public services are all dependent upon the uptake of digital technologies across all sections of society.

Local government has a crucial role to play in empowering and enabling 'grassroots-led' digital participation and is uniquely well-placed to do so in partnership with users and other relevant local stakeholders in the community.

A recommended strategic approach would encompass greater use of partnerships and collaborations, light-touch management, improved communication and co-ordination, harnessing the motivations of older people and slower adoptors, creating vibrant IT-enabled social networks, recognising diversity and co-designing provision.

This is the first part of a series of three Socitm Policy Briefings. Part 1 contains an explanation of the purpose of the series, and looks at 'why digital participation matters'. Part 2 covers 'user-pull – embracing users' needs' and government responses. Part 3 considers ICT learning support and the key role for local government, and draws out number of policy implications and recommendations.

Purpose

The purpose of these policy briefings is to:

- Set out why a focus on sustained digital participation, underpinned by ICT support in the community and in the home, is becoming an entitlement for engagement in 21st century digital society
- Dispel some of the prevailing myths about digital participation of older people and others that have underpinned many government responses over the last two decades
- Challenge the prevailing centrally-driven, 'technology-push' approach to increasing digital participation
- Identify the most significant barriers to the use of the internet and associated digital technologies by many older people and other 'slower adapters' to changes in technology
- Set out the case for a locally-led, 'user-pull' approach to achieving widespread digital participation and empowerment of older people and other 'slower adapters'
- Champion the unique role of local government in working in its locality and with its partners and communities to foster and sustain digital participation

Introduction

The series draws on a wide range of sources but especially the New Dynamics of Ageing Sus-IT Project and supports four key areas of policy work by Socitm and its Local CIO Council:

- Digital service design and transformation
- Digital health and wellbeing
- Leadership, diversity and skills
- Ethical and secure use of technology

We argue that widespread digital participation can only come about through the confident and successful take up by older people and others in the digital world and the way that services relevant to their needs are designed and presented.

Working with users, especially older people and other 'slower adapters to changes in technology', to re-design and digitally transform public services, particularly those more complex, relational services closest to their needs, is a crucial step towards increasing their digital participation and achieving better outcomes.

"We should not consider increasing online presence among older people on its own; it is easier to bring people together as a community and to make using the internet part of that"

Adam Hillmore, DWP [participant in 'Achieving and sustaining digital engagement' KT Equal workshop February 2011]

Slower adaptors are recognised as older people; those in social housing; those on lower incomes; the unemployed; those with disabilities; rural populations; traveller communities; homeless people; those with no recourse to public funds; and young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs).

Over the three briefings, we set out the case for local government to facilitate user-driven and place-based/community-led IT support to redesign services to meet user needs and to achieve better outcomes. Local government not only has a crucial role to play in empowering and enabling the widespread implementation of such an approach, but it is uniquely well-placed to do so.

Indeed, reaping the savings from the move to online service delivery can only happen if older people and others both go online in large numbers and sustain their ongoing digital activity.

Context

We live in an increasingly digital world where many people are already benefitting from the internet, digital TV and mobile communications. When individuals become digitally active, their lives are enriched, they are empowered, their access to services is improved; whilst those suffering physical, emotional and social isolation are supported and provided with opportunities for employment and other economic activity.

A long-standing aim of the UK government has been the digital inclusion of the vast majority of the population. Access to technology (connectivity); the acquisition of the appropriate skills (capability) and the motivation from the pull of compelling functionality and perceived relevance (content) to use it were identified in 2004 as crucial to creating a digital UK.

In 2010, the prevailing optimism of the government to promote digital inclusion was reflected in the 'Manifesto for a Networked Britain' with

its confident vision 'to get online by 2012 everyone in the UK who is not yet online'.

However, despite extensive digital inclusion campaigns, interventions of varying kinds and the growing pervasiveness of digital technologies, the reality is that digital participation of many older people and other slower adaptors has remained stubbornly difficult to achieve.

Established, centrally-driven, 'technology-push' approaches to increasing digital inclusion focussed on standardised training in basic digital skills, have reportedly enabled many to join the workforce and make use of online services. However, the limitations of 'technology-push' approaches are becoming increasingly recognised and acknowledged in that they have reached most of those they can.

The enduring barriers to digital participation include fear of digital technologies; embarrassment regarding lack of digital competence; design which does not meet user needs; and the gross inadequacies of ICT learning support beyond the workplace.

A growing body of evidence suggests that these barriers can be addressed by a more holistic, 'user-pull' approach to achieving digital participation through the confident and successful engagement and empowerment of older people and other slower adaptors in the digital world, in ways that are relevant to their interests and needs.

Local government is uniquely placed to play a leading role, along with residents and communities. It can facilitate user-driven and place-based/community-led outreach. It can work with users, especially older people and other slower adaptors, to re-design and digitally transform public services, particularly those more complex, relational services closest to their needs and most critical to achieving better outcomes.

And all of this sits within the place-shaping role of local government and its concern for the economic, social, health and environmental well-being of its residents and businesses.

Why digital participation matters

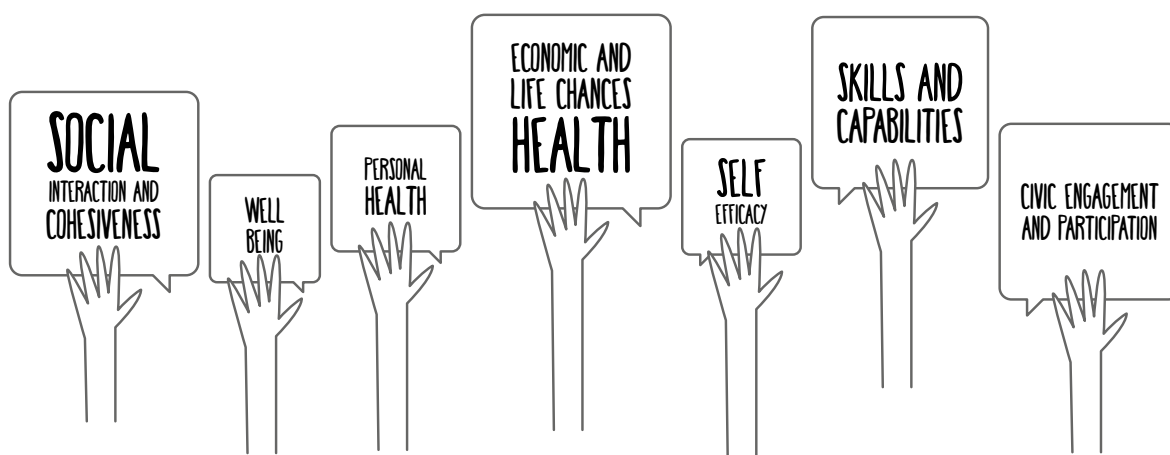
Firstly, digital participation matters because the numerous benefits and advantages to be gained from digital inclusion can only reach those who are digitally connected and engaged. Research shows that inequalities in access to and use of digital media have measurable negative impacts on the life chances, health and economic well-being of citizens.

Such findings have contributed to a growing awareness and understanding that being able to use the internet and associated digital technologies is rapidly becoming an entitlement for everyday life

in the 21st century. In other words, universal access, confidence, capability and support to use digital technologies are essential for engagement in our digital society, empowering people to sustain and enhance their well-being and active engagement in society.

As public services are increasingly squeezed by growing demand and by shrinking resources, achieving greater independence and enjoying the numerous benefits (see Figure 1) will depend on much more extensive digital adoption.

Figure 1: Benefits of Digital Participation



Conversely, lack of digital access may result in real economic and social disadvantage, isolation and social exclusion. Despite the pervasive nature of digital technologies and their integral role in our society, in 2017 over 13 million people were identified as either non-users or limited users of the internet.

The number of older people still not online remains high. Currently, 4.8 million British people over the age of 55 do not use the internet - this group makes up 91% of 5.3 million British residents who do not use the internet.

Secondly, as we have argued previously, many local public services, particularly complex, relational services in areas such as adult and children's care, are failing

"Access to the internet is now so important to every aspect of life it could become a human right."

Francis Maude (The Telegraph April 27th 2013)

to achieve modern expectations of delivery. Not only do these services eat up increasingly large elements of local public services budgets, they tend to be those most used by older people and slower adaptors to technology. The problem is compounded as these services tend to be entrenched in 'silos'; to have grown by 'process accretion' over many decades; to never be designed with the user in mind; and to suffer from poor or no application of digital technology. In short, they remain 'producer-led' rather than 'user-driven'.

Thirdly, the role of digital technologies in enhancing health and well-being and offering the potential for significant financial savings from the take-up of self-care on the one hand and the reduction in loneliness and isolation on the other, is significant for the future financial performance of local government.

"Working with older people to produce these resources was vital to ensure... that older people struggling with mental health, or families worried about loved ones, have access to support..."

Keith Chambers, Programme Manager for [MindEd](#)

For example, the growing incidence of loneliness and isolation in our communities and the growing trend toward self-care are particularly pertinent as areas for investment by local government, promising significant savings in supporting our aging population. The harmful (and costly) effects of loneliness in older people include an increased likelihood of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, dementia, mental illness and suicide. Researchers have estimated the potential cost of loneliness to health and local services will be in excess of £6,000 per person over ten years. With three quarters of older people being identified as lonely, the costs become unsustainable. For every £1 spent on preventing loneliness, there is a potential saving of £3. As loneliness is a problem that mainly affects older people, tackling this could over a period of five years result in a saving of £3.6 million.

The move to self-care requires older patients to access and use ICT devices such as diabetic testing monitors and cardiac and sleep apnoea equipment at home, without the direct supervision of health professionals. As responsibility shifts away from pressured health services to individuals to take charge of their own health and care, the success of health self-care will require education, support, and monitoring of ICT device usage by older people in their homes and in the local community.

Coupled with the need to combat loneliness, the use of digital technologies can help to keep older people in touch with friends and family, increase self-efficacy, pursue hobbies and interests, all of which contribute to health and well-being and increased longevity. To succeed in achieving these far-reaching benefits and the advantages of digital participation requires a major rethinking of how we deliver ICT support in the home and in the community, as advocated in this policy briefing.

Fourthly, keeping businesses, residents and citizens safe and secure is becoming increasingly vital as cybersecurity, unethical behaviour and abuse of personal data threaten the privacy of individuals and the very fabric of businesses, services, communities and society.

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Digital by choice: Bridging the digital divide

Part 2 of 3: User-pull - embracing users' needs

— December 2018

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A 'user pull' approach, built on fulfillment of what users need and want – i.e. digital by choice – rather than the prevailing 'technology-push' inherent in digital by default strategy, is fundamental to achieving a step change in digital participation by older people and other slower adoptors.

Effective 'user-led' approaches to digital participation exist in small pockets of good practice and need to become mainstream.

Transformation, place-shaping, better economic, social, health and environmental outcomes, and re-design of public services are all dependent upon the uptake of digital technologies across all sections of society.

Local government has a crucial role to play in empowering and enabling 'grassroots-led' digital participation and is uniquely well-placed to do so in partnership with users and other relevant local stakeholders in the community.

A recommended strategic approach would encompass greater use of partnerships and collaborations, light-touch management, improved communication and co-ordination, harnessing the motivations of older people and slower adoptors, creating vibrant IT-enabled social networks, recognising diversity and co-designing provision.

This is the second part of a series of three Socitm Policy briefings. Part 1 contains an explanation of the purpose of the series, and looks at 'why digital participation matters'. Part 3 considers ICT learning support and the key role for local government, and draws out number of policy implications and recommendations.

Introduction

Governments across the world have been striving for nearly two decades to achieve a connected world and to promote widespread uptake of digital technologies. Vast ranging, increasingly pervasive internet services offer numerous benefits for citizens and ever-increasing commercial innovations and advantages for business and society.

Government (business & third sector) responses

In order to exploit the potential of ICT, major investment has occurred in government and in business with innovation taking place at an unprecedented rate and scale in almost all areas of life, to the point where the digital world offers 'e-everything'.

In the UK, major programmes to transform service delivery have been underway in local government for well over a decade (since the early 2000s' Local e-Gov Programme) with the expectation of making significant cost savings by delivering government services online.

However, despite the extensive efforts, in 2017 over 13 million UK citizens (20%) were identified as limited or non-users of the internet, with the majority being from lower income households.

Statistics show that access to the internet is currently unevenly distributed amongst the global population, and older people in most countries are less likely to be internet users than younger people.

The population of older people continues to rise more rapidly than that of younger ages: there were 571,245 people aged 90 and over living in the UK in 2016 . Further, there are now 11.8 million people aged 65 or over in the UK, and this number is projected to rise by over 40% in the next 17 years to 16 million, and to reach the 20 million by 2030 .

However, recent surveys in the UK show that while around 90% of the total population regularly

use the internet, these figures decline to 78% for the 64-75 age group and to less than 40% for those over 75. Significantly, UK adults aged 75 years and over had the highest rate of lapsed internet users in 2016 at 4.8%, (compared with only 0.2% of adults aged 16 to 24 years).

The statistics reveal a significant gap which has been termed the 'digital divide' between those who do and those who do not enjoy the benefits of access to the internet.

Many studies have demonstrated that the digital divide is not a simple binary division between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' – rather, digital divides arise from three main sources of inequality which occur both between nations and within them. In simple terms, these differences can be categorised as those of connectivity, capability and content. Thus, digital divides are likely to exist where people do not have:

- Access to appropriate equipment (connectivity)
- Appropriate skills and capabilities
- Motivation from the 'pull' of compelling functionality and perceived relevance of content

This analysis has led many stakeholders to the conclusion that non-users (the 'digitally unengaged') can be transformed into users (the 'digitally engaged') by an additive model which addresses each of the three types of barriers. Consequently, governments and other bodies in many countries have been investing significant resources into providing technical infrastructure, awareness and training initiatives, and the development of digital content and digitally-delivered services, with the aim of increasing access to the internet and promoting digital engagement.

Many sectors/organisations (including major business online corporations) - such as banks and retailers, as well as government, third sector organisations and others - have collaborated in digital inclusion 'activities' of various kinds.

Stimulated by the launch of the 'Manifesto for a networked nation' in 2010, digital inclusion provision today is supported by national government and

delivered by 'Future Digital Inclusion'; the DWP Work and Health programme (featuring digital skills training to support jobseekers); the BLF-funded Online Today programme (delivered to people with sensory loss); and Reboot UK (for individuals encountering complex barriers).

These programmes have focused primarily on teaching standard basic digital skills to non-users/limited or 'narrow' users who are seeking (or are required to seek) employment – rather than on helping them to enrich their lives through enjoying the pursuit of individual goals, interests and passions in their personal lives. Content has been defined for the target population rather than by them and delivered 'top-down'. While the approach originated in efforts to promote entry into the job market, it has been applied widely to many groups and situations in attempts to promote digital inclusion.

"At my first session three and a half years ago, I found an extremely friendly and encouraging group of people"

User, Long Eaton 50+ group

In addition, to these structured and centralised efforts to deliver digital inclusion, there are an assortment of 'interventions' in the local community delivered typically by Age UK branches, University of the Third Age (U3A), housing associations, community learning

services and libraries offering access to internet-enabled devices, and informal community groups.

These interventions also include a variety of pilots and projects and IT 'taster sessions' such as 'ITea and biscuits' and 'Techy tea parties'. These sometimes involve staff from technology companies as volunteer IT tutors. Typically, such interventions are usually short-term, often 'one-off' events, available only intermittently at infrequent intervals, reliant on unstable funding regimes and volunteers, and are often held in premises not usually frequented by the target population and therefore unfamiliar to them.

A 2013 survey of available ICT learning provision in seven UK cities found that just over three quarters of it could be accessed by older people, but often failed to meet the specifications for their digital learning identified by older people participating in the KT-Equal programme. The availability of long-term support and technical troubleshooting, and the flexibility for participants to choose what they learned, and the chance to consolidate existing skills was generally found to be lacking.

Despite these extensive efforts to achieve digital inclusion, significant numbers of older people and others are still not online at all, or struggle to keep pace with rapidly changing technologies and interfaces and, therefore, make very limited use of digital technologies. This threatens the full realisation of projected improvements and cost savings in online service delivery. The persistence of the digital divide in access and use constrains local government both in transforming service delivery for the benefit of service users and in achieving cost reductions.

Evidence suggests that the prevailing government-sponsored efforts - typically in the form of these top-down, 'technology-push' interventions offering pre-determined courses of learning, focused on basic digital skills - are not well-matched to the needs of a significant proportion of learners (or would-be learners). At best, many older people and other slower adaptors are nervous, even fearful, of digital technologies; few will voluntarily join courses of this type or benefit from them.

Figure 2. Characteristics of ‘technology push’

Technology-push Characteristics:

- 01 Top-down

- 02 Structured training

- 03 Qualification-driven

- 04 Predetermined approach and target

- 05 Prescribed process of engagement

- 06 Requirement to pre-book for training

- 07 Emphasis on basic digital skills

- 08 Often crisis-driven

- 09 Standalone interventions

- 10 Variable support

- 11 Online learning materials for off-line learners

- 12 Assessment and monitoring of learning

- 13 Monitoring of performance/ outcome measures

- 14 Personal details are documented

- 15 Focus on reaching pre-set goals e.g. specific skills

- 16 Requires people without digital skills to use ICT to register for sessions

- 17 Classes often require individuals to register/sign up and commit to attending at fixed times

- 18 High turnover of volunteers (and consequent lack of continuity in the relationship)

There are multiple reasons for the limited success of many of the established initiatives/interventions. These include the characteristics listed in figure 2, many of which are seen by older people and others as barriers to their sustained engagement in the digital world. Furthermore, interventions are usually ‘done to’ users rather than being led by them, tending to have a narrow instrumental focus on access and the acquisition of basic digital skills, with little or no regard for the diverse personal goals users may wish to achieve, and how services and content can be co-designed to facilitate the achievement of their hopes and aspirations.

Critically, there has been a lack of understanding that it is the combination of such factors as fear and embarrassment, perceived lack of relevance of the internet/digital technologies, and a lack of help and support rather than disinterest that tend to constitute the major and substantive barriers to the adoption of the internet and associated digital technologies for older people and other slower adaptors.

When people are forced to learn in a crisis (as dramatically portrayed in the film ‘I, Daniel Blake’) anxiety and fear predominate. Such emotions are not conducive to effective learning. On the contrary, the evidence suggests that the top-down, technology-push approach focused on basic digital skills tends to exacerbate the problems and discomfort of people unfamiliar with information and communication technologies - rather than easing them.

The ‘Routes to Inclusion’ evaluation of learners who have been supported by the Online Centres Network provides valuable insights into the barriers to learning digital skills. It shows that the learning journeys of their clients are often complex, fraught with difficulty and stress, often occurring at times of deep crisis and trauma for the individual. Importantly it shows that one-to-one support is needed from centre staff.

The report refers to learners reaching personal goals and building relationships with staff; it says that ‘rather than offering digital skills as a transactional service, our centres help people learn by developing long-term relationships with them’. This finding underlines the need for an alternative support-rich approach matched to user needs.

User-pull: Embracing users' needs

To gain the bigger view on the impact and value of the use of digital technologies and the internet - and its crucial role in social inclusion and connectedness in wider society and quality of life in the 21st century - demands a good understanding of the real needs of older people and other groups of slower adaptors. Recognising and meeting these needs is fundamental to the achievement of much more extensive digital take up in society.

As part of a major participatory collaborative research process, user requirements were elicited and validated in facilitated workshop sessions conducted with older people. The ICT learning support they identified as necessary to enable them to achieve and sustain their digital participation was articulated by them (see figure 3).

Figure 3. User-specified ICT support needs

User-specified ICT support needs

- 01 Readily available

- 02 Trusted and sustained

- 03 Delivered in familiar, welcoming and local venues

- 04 Embedded in social activities and personal interests

- 05 Free of time pressure and assessments

- 06 Inclusive of problem-solving/trouble-shooting

- 07 Offering impartial advice and 'try before you buy'

Source: 'Taming the Dragon; making technology work for us' [workshop at Anglia Ruskin University 2012]

"I can now do my shopping on-line with ASDA and have my groceries delivered to my home now that you have taught me"

User, Long Eaton 50+ group

Whilst existing digital inclusion approaches have generally failed to meet these needs, there are in existence some small pockets of good practice in successful digital participation. In these 'grass-roots' examples, user needs are recognised and met through user involvement and co-creation with relevant parties in the local community.

Research into practice in older people's groups reveals that confidence and success in digital participation arises when older people themselves are the architects, owners, co-creators and central players in an ongoing and shared IT learning support process that has wider goals and objectives in mind beyond simple acquisition of the digital skills necessary for using government services. To create awareness of the relevance of the use of digital technologies for slower adaptors, giving them opportunities to influence the content of learning opportunities offered to them, means their needs can be better met and relevance increased.

Learning in an enjoyable and rewarding social context where people can fulfil their personal goals through the use of digital technologies offers a viable alternative route to digital inclusion. Such a process promotes positive attitudes and enthusiasm, with the outcome that people will gradually opt for 'digital by choice', because their experience is relevant and satisfying – and easier.

The few, small scale but qualitatively rich examples show that the above user-specified needs can be met very effectively in the community – demonstrating ‘user-pull’ in action and delivering long-term enduring benefits. Successful practice in promoting digital participation is built upon genuine user engagement at a grass-roots level, collaborative processes and knowledge sharing through peer support and continuity of provision. Such ‘user pull’ (see figure 4 below) has been developed and successfully sustained since 2005 by the user-led IT learning support provision at the Long Eaton 50+ group. Through successfully meeting the user-specified needs, the strong ‘user-pull’ developed and continues to be sustained.

Evidence that real needs are being met is reflected in comments from group participants and from volunteer ‘tutors’. The participants spoke of their enjoyment in the group, their surprise that they could learn to use computers and the variety of uses they employed such as Skype and maintaining friendships. Verbatim comments of participants are in Appendix 1.

The volunteers gained equally, speaking of their pleasure in being part of the group and the satisfaction gained by passing on skills, often gained over many years of relevant experience. The comments of volunteers are in Appendix 2.

"It is a joy to help the 50plus-ers gain confidence and enjoy the use of the internet"

Volunteer, Long Eaton 50+ group

User-led ICT support in the community is being sustained on an ongoing basis in a low-key, low cost manner in small-scale inspiring examples. Low costs are the result of the unpaid work of committed older

people working in partnership with local councils, and of an ethos of making economies through prudent use of local resources. Keeping costs low is further facilitated by the absence of the major infrastructure costs associated with established corporations seeking to achieve greater digital inclusion.

Figure 4. Characteristics of user-pull

User pull characteristics:

- 01 Enjoyable learning embedded in social activity

- 02 Community-based - 'trusted faces in familiar places'

- 03 Set up by older people to meet the evolving needs of older people

- 04 Drop in – no appointment needed

- 05 User-centred - users set their own agenda, 'do their own thing'

- 06 User sets the pace

- 07 Freedom from demands, assessments and monitoring (no form filling)

- 08 Low cost/free of charge

- 09 Informal and approachable

- 10 Learning as part of a social process

- 11 Peer-to-peer learning and sharing (IT buddy scheme, Skype mentoring)

- 12 Enables users to try out digital devices - free of sales pressure

- 13 Flexibility - no requirement for continued attendance

- 14 Eliminates/reduces the fear of digital technologies/the internet

- 15 Builds and strengthens confidence in using ICT

Appendices

Evidence that real needs are being met is reflected in the following responses from group participants and from volunteer 'tutors' to the question: 'Why do you come to the Long Eaton ICT support drop-In?'

Appendix 1 - User comments:

"I enjoy coming here, it has helped me make more friends"

"I didn't think I would learn how to use computers"

"Together we have learnt how to use SKYPE, so now we contact each other when we are at home"

"I can now do my shopping on-line with ASDA and have my groceries delivered to my home now that you have taught me"

"At my first computer session three and a half years ago, I found an extremely friendly & encouraging group so found it easier than expected to learn more about my new iPad"

"Initially I felt a bit of a techno-phobic especially as a gent about 20yrs my senior was studying the well-prepared manuals for his iPad and Smart phone. We became great IT buddies & I was happy to register with Skype so he could then practise to 'chat' with his daughter, this became a regular non session weekly session with us and sadly when his daughter died a vital friendship link"

"The reason that I come to the Library each week to use the computer is the fact that it is affordable which allows me as an O.A.P. to learn and to find out how to use the computers in a situation which is pleasant and informative"

Appendix 2 - Volunteer comments:

"Having been an IT professional for some 22 years (systems analyst/computer literacy trainer) - before going back to financial management (qualified accountant) - I find a lot of satisfaction in imparting my skills/knowledge to other people"

"Since retiring in 2010, I was recruited by Roy Smith at a U3A meeting to assist over 50s with their computing skills at the sessions on Monday mornings in Long Eaton Library. In my past employment with Derbyshire County Council as a copy typist and VDU inputter, I gained many IT skills and I enjoy passing on these skills, plus others I have gained with my use of smart phones, laptops, PCs and tablets"

"It is a pleasure to help the 50plus-ers gain in confidence and enjoy the use of the internet, email and many other delights of computing"

"They are a lovely, lively group and I have enjoyed my time with them"

"I decided to volunteer at the Long Eaton 50Plus Computer group whilst looking for a new job after being made redundant. I find the opportunity to help others improve their knowledge of computers satisfying but also challenging. My background is more in Windows computers but the questions cover all areas of tablets and smartphones, from basic to advanced, Android and iOS, which I have to investigate in order to help answer the questions. This is revealing where my knowledge is lacking and helping to fill in some of the gaps"

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Digital by choice: Bridging the digital divide

Part 3 of 3: Key role for local government

— December 2018

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Executive summary (parts 1 - 3)

Sustained digital participation, underpinned by ICT support in the community and in the home, is becoming an entitlement for engagement in 21st century society.

'Slower adoptors to technology' tend to be older people, those who are socially excluded and those dependent upon state support – and the barriers to digital participation are well-documented, but inadequately understood and addressed.

A 'user pull' approach, built on fulfillment of what users need and want – i.e. digital by choice – rather than the prevailing 'technology-push' inherent in digital by default strategy, is fundamental to achieving a step change in digital participation by older people and other slower adoptors.

Effective 'user-led' approaches to digital participation exist in small pockets of good practice and need to become mainstream.

Transformation, place-shaping, better economic, social, health and environmental outcomes, and re-design of public services are all dependent upon the uptake of digital technologies across all sections of society.

Local government has a crucial role to play in empowering and enabling 'grassroots-led' digital participation and is uniquely well-placed to do so in partnership with users and other relevant local stakeholders in the community.

A recommended strategic approach would encompass greater use of partnerships and collaborations, light-touch management, improved communication and co-ordination, harnessing the motivations of older people and slower adoptors, creating vibrant IT-enabled social networks, recognising diversity and co-designing provision.

This is the third part of a series of three Socitm Policy briefings. Part 1 contains an explanation of the purpose of the series, and looks at 'why digital participation matters'. Part 2 covers 'user-pull – embracing users' needs' and government responses.

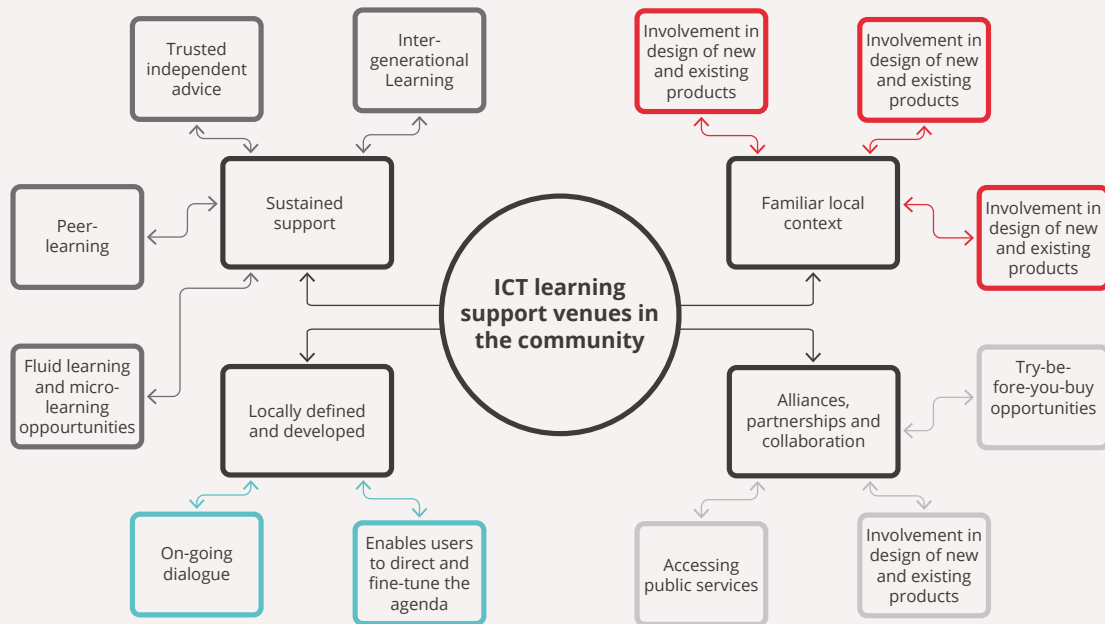
Introduction

The overarching strategic requirement for effective digital participation across the population that emerged from the work of the NDA Sus-IT project, Ofcom and latterly endorsed by other studies, is for everyone to have access to a support infrastructure for the use of digital technologies, whether this

is in the home (in the personal lives of people), at work, or in the community (see figure 5).

Without ICT support beyond the workplace, many face growing digital and social exclusion, as their ICT skills gained in the workplace become increasingly out-dated.

Figure 5. Proposition of ICT learning support in the community



ICT learning support

A community-based ICT learning support infrastructure is fundamental to successful access and use of most online services, especially to support the move to 'self-care' in the NHS (where increasing numbers of people are being expected to cope with differing digital devices to monitor complex long-term conditions – often multiple conditions which may require use of several devices).

The pressing need now is to introduce policy to spread the small-scale good practice to progressively enable the real needs of the 13 million limited users/non-users to be met successfully in their neighbourhoods and communities. As this approach becomes the norm, it will promote more extensive take up amongst those significantly excluded groups in the population.

Implementation of good practice at grass-roots level requires involvement of local people, especially the intended users of the community-based ICT learning support in the roles of local group leaders, coordinators, 'technology-stewards', developers, designers, tutors, IT buddies, and so on. Older people and groups representing them (such as the 50+forums) are particularly appropriate to work in collaboration with local businesses, local community groups and especially with local government bodies such as health and well-being groups.

Local government's key role

Local government is uniquely well-placed to provide stewardship and to facilitate comprehensive

implementation of community-based ICT learning support. Its role in education, involvement with schools, ownership of library and other premises along with its experience in facilitating and coordinating initiatives such as the move to co-designed services – where communities are encouraged to contribute towards the development and running of services (e.g. community-managed libraries) - equips it for this crucial role in promoting digital participation. It has long experience of established delivery in the community, and rapidly-growing experience of co-creation/co-design and development of links with existing groups.

A leading role for local government will be critically important in this process as it seems doubtful that a successful strategy for digital inclusion/participation will be forthcoming from government in the foreseeable future. The UK Government Digital Strategy (launched 1 March 2017) states that it seeks to simultaneously implement strategies intended to address connectivity issues (with the aim of completing the roll-out of 4G and superfast broadband by 2020) and capability issues (e.g. creating the Digital Training and Support Framework).

The over-riding concern to ensure the UK does not fall behind and lose its leading position in Europe on technology appears to have resulted in a digital framework that gives very specific limited consideration to the needs of older people who are no longer in the workplace.

The lack of government focus on digital participation outside the workplace underlines the need to find appropriate 'owners/stakeholders/stewards' to take responsibility for this process in every community. The evidence indicates that basic digital skills training has reached most of those for whom it is appropriate and has not helped significant numbers of slower adaptors to participate in the digital world effectively, confidently, and with satisfaction.

Further, the government strategy does not take account of the growing evidence of a greater challenge to be addressed: that of sustaining digital engagement beyond getting online for the first time. While many rise to this challenge successfully and are able to use the devices and systems available to them, that is only the case until something unusual happens that they have not encountered before, or changes occur in the operating systems.

At this point, digital engagement comes to a halt – sometimes permanently – often for the sake of a few minutes of readily available and accessible support and help and, perhaps most importantly for those who are potentially at risk of exclusion, friendly assistance.

Policy implications

Extensive research findings have identified the multi-faceted nature of the issues of getting people online and keeping them there. They bring into sharp focus the need for local, place-based, joined-up policy and strategy of all stakeholders, including government, business, the third sector and, above all, older people and others themselves, to address effectively the real challenges of digital participation.

Implementation will need to embrace the ethos and core values of a 'user-pull' approach, enabling and empowering older people and other slower adaptors, in all their diversity, to fully participate in determining, influencing and guiding their own experiences as users. This should include, for example, encouragement to select and use language and terminology that resonates with their own experiences. In instances where this is the local practice, it is noticeable that users choose terms such as 'IT buddy', 'Skype mate', and 'technology helper' to describe those who share their IT expertise with them – rather than the 'digital champion' title with its elitist and sporting associations.

Effective 'user-led' approaches to digital participation exist in small pockets of good practice and need to become mainstream.

Transformation, place-shaping, better economic, social, health and environmental outcomes, and re-design of public services are all dependent upon the digital capability of residents.

Local government is uniquely well-positioned to provide the effective leadership that this process will require in its 'place', empowering and enabling 'grassroots-led' digital participation. It is uniquely well-placed to do so in partnership with users and other relevant local stakeholders in the communities that it serves.

Recommendations

Drawing on the arguments presented in this briefing, a recommended strategic approach towards achieving widespread digital participation, driven by user-needs, 'owned' by users and the local community, and empowered and enabled by local government would encompass:

01 Broker and facilitate partnerships and collaborations with relevant stakeholders (users, community groups etc.) to ensure maximum impact and sustained delivery.

02 Develop and introduce 'light-touch' management arrangements to support grassroots digital participation.

03 Require appropriate ICT co-design and provision of community-based ICT support to allow integration of off-line/on-line support in existing venues.

04 Respond to the diversity of older people and others, their needs, capabilities and social and economic opportunities.

05 Harness the motivations slower adapters creating a flexible ICT learning support policy, encompassing co-design and on-going use of digital tech at work and home.

06 Support the development of vibrant IT-enabled networks in the community to compensate for the impact of shrinking social networks of many slower adapters.

07 Improve communication and co-ordination of activities related to digital participation.

The policy implications and recommendations presented here are a small sample of the wide range of potential actions and guidance which arise from extensive evidence collected on the Sus-IT project and the evidence-review commissioned by the government.

Resources

**Department for Culture, Media and Sport. 2017.
Digital skills and inclusion-giving everyone access
to the digital skills they need. Available at:
<http://bit.ly/2y825RE>**

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