Report

Post-Covid recovery: digital equality

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Socitm INFORM

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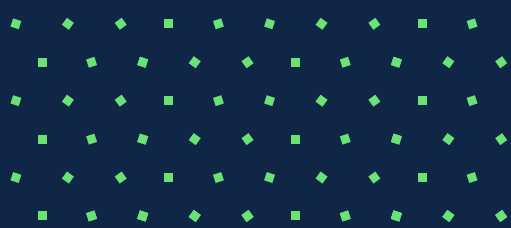
Introduction

Key points

› Overcoming inequalities with technologies and data

› Harnessing data for social progress

› Collaborating for inclusion

› Connecting citizens

› Leading privacy and security transparently

› Renewing local democracy

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought inequalities in societies around the world into sharper focus, including their access to digital technologies. Households with available computer hardware and good internet connections were more easily able to switch to distance learning and working from home. Individuals familiar with digital technologies were better-placed to set up home grocery deliveries, socialise by video call and generally navigate a world moved hurriedly online.

Despite public sector efforts, such as providing schoolchildren with hardware, in general those who most needed support during the pandemic were those least-equipped to do so digitally. This has not only applied to those with no access to technology but also to those with inadequate technology, such as smartphones with screens not large enough to use for home-schooling and homeworking, or internet connections that could not support video meetings.

As the UK's vaccination programme reduces the deadly impact of Covid-19, the UK's local public sector will be considering its longer-term impacts on people and communities, and how they can best support recovery. This report aims to provide guidance on how organisations can harness the power of digital technology in ways that are inclusive and that sustain the health and wellbeing of all people in their local communities, as well as their local environments.

Digital inclusion

The coronavirus pandemic has changed the way people live worldwide and the long-term implications are unclear. Whilst Covid-19 knows no boundaries, it has become apparent that it does discriminate, for example by age, existing healthcare conditions, profession[1] and ethnic background,[2] and it can impact people differently. The social restrictions put in place by government legislation aim to protect vulnerable citizens, but it is important to consider the different impacts they may have on groups who are already disadvantaged in other ways. One such impact is that those who do not engage in the digital world are at risk of being left behind.

The population is becoming increasingly digitally literate – at the start of 2020, 96% of households in Great Britain had internet access, compared with 73% in 2010 and just 25% in 2000[3] – but there is still a significant number of people who continue to be excluded from digital technology. According to the 2020 UK Consumer Digital Index from Lloyds Bank, 11.7 million people (22%) lack basic digital skills required for everyday life.[4] For those who were already digitally and socially excluded, the reliance on technology during the pandemic has increased their difficulties. Those who are not digitally literate may have found it more difficult to access up-to-date and accurate information, access health advice and shop from home.

As well as those who are unable to use digital technologies, some choose not to use them. Typically, adoption has been promoted through 'digital inclusion', focused on providing devices and increasing skills for employment, and 'digital by default', a utilitarian approach that pushes people to use digital channels and arguably exacerbates the 'digital divide'. These contrast with a 'digital by choice' model, as advocated by Socitm,[5] that provides better options for everyone in a purposeful and inclusive way and creates positive reasons to adopt digital technologies for personal and collective wellbeing.

Improving digital inclusion also has the potential to contribute towards tackling climate change, with many local authorities having committed to this through climate emergency motions. The pandemic-induced lockdown and subsequent reduction in travel and

movement initially led the biggest carbon crash ever recorded[6] and transformed the way citizens interacted with government and public services as these moved online. However, those who are digitally excluded do not necessarily reap the environmental benefits of these changes as their need for a service may now require a longer, more polluting journey.

Covid-19 has illuminated the structural and digital inequalities within society, but also offers the chance to improve inclusion in a post-pandemic rebuilding. To achieve this, local public services need to move from a technology-centric to a citizen-centric model.

Table 1: Households with internet access, 1998 to 2020

Year	%	Year	%
1998	9	2010	73
1999	13	2011	77
2000	25	2012	80
2001	36	2013	83
2002	42	2014	84
2003	46	2015	86
2004	49	2016	89
2005	55	2017	90
2006	57	2018	90
2007	61	2019	93
2008	65	2020	96
2009	70		

Source: Office for National Statistics. Figures to 2004 are for UK, from 2005 for Great Britain only.

Mitigating inequalities

Through a reliance on digital technology, smart place initiatives risk excluding those who do not or cannot use it. Digital exclusion disproportionately affects older people, with 77% of those over 70 reporting very low digital engagement in the Lloyds research and only 7% having the capability to shop and manage money online. Disability and lower incomes also reduce the likelihood that someone is able to take advantage of digital services.

Inequality is a strong determinant of poorer social cohesion, social mobility and life expectancy. The coronavirus pandemic has exposed such inequalities and the structural disadvantages and discrimination faced by people living in deprivation.[7] Poorer people can be more exposed to infection due to insecure labour conditions which make them unable to self-isolate and may also live in closer proximity to each other.[8] Furthermore, the government's lockdown and social distancing measures had a worse social and economic impact on those already experiencing inequality. These negative consequences may continue even when Covid-19 is under control, given its disproportionate economic impact on those in lower-paid sectors such as retailing.

Those people most likely to need to use government services, such as to apply for welfare or social housing, are usually the people who are least likely to be digitally literate or have access to a computer. In the rush to move health and government services online, smart solutions to the Covid-19 crisis risked disconnecting those who were in most need of these services, and non-digital channels such telephone became harder to use due to lack of staff.

A report by the Chief Digital Officer at Leeds City council recognises that reducing digital inclusion is a way in which cities can mitigate the long-term impacts of the pandemic. It details how community efforts to co-produce solutions can help local authorities, with 100% Digital Leeds' Tablet Lending Scheme and Digital Champions training cited as evidence of a smart place initiative that improves inclusion and quality of life.[9]

Access to the internet

The use of technology and the internet is widely regarded as voluntary, but it has arguably become close to a requirement during the pandemic. This presents a major challenge to those living in the 6.6% of homes in England and Wales that do not have a decent fixed internet connection.[10] Whilst the proportion of households without internet access is reducing, it remains imperative to close this gap completely in order to ensure that everyone has the same equality of opportunity and access to services, places and rights.

The Oxford Internet Surveys have found that nearly 70% of people in Britain use public Wi-Fi and nearly 20% access the internet in libraries.[11] Many local authorities have established the former, and all unitary, county and London boroughs are responsible for managing the latter. However, there is more to be done. The coronavirus pandemic and its lockdown regulations have exposed the digital divide and inequalities of access and affordability, leaving millions of people around the UK socially isolated, unable to stay connected with loved ones or access health information, services and education.

This gap in capabilities between internet users and non-users during lockdown has led some including Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the world-wide web, to argue that access to the internet should become a human right.[12] For people on low incomes and with limited digital literacy, public spaces had become vital for providing free internet access as well as offering opportunities for in-person knowledge exchange, but access to them has been reduced or in the case of libraries removed for some periods during the pandemic.

If access to the internet was to be treated as akin to a human right, local authorities would need to shift focus from limited internet access in public spaces to universal internet access everywhere. This could include providing Wi-Fi in social housing, either free or inclusive within rental and service charges, given the particular importance of internet access within people's homes.

Privacy and security

Increasing the availability and affordability of the internet will have a limited impact on those who are digitally disengaged as a matter of choice, including as a result of concerns over the collection and use of personal data. Indeed, according to Lloyds Bank's UK Consumer Digital Index 2020, one of the predominant reasons people choose to avoid the Internet is due to their concerns regarding privacy, security and identity theft.[13]

Technology has played a useful role in mitigating the Covid-19 crisis through the use of mobile tracking and contact tracing, underpinned by collection of citizens' personal information. However, this has caused problems. In March 2020, the government announced that the health services in England and Wales had begun work on a contact-tracing app as part of the Test and Trace programme, but this faced criticism over a centralised data collection model that arguably threatened users' privacy. This was eventually scrapped following opposition from Google and Apple in favour of an app released in September that kept data about contacts on user devices, after Scotland and Northern Ireland had adopted a similarly decentralised model.[14] The privacy implications of centralised model were demonstrated by Singapore's government, which moved from saying the data from its TraceTogether app would only be used to tackle Covid-19 to allowing it to be used in policing.[15]

It is clear that privacy and security concerns threaten universal digital inclusion, and the lack of transparency in some smart innovations inevitably trigger their own downfall. But according to Lloyd Bank's Digital Index Report, only 36% of respondents see online safety as the most important digital skill, compared with 54% of people mentioning video calls and social media, and online shopping at 47%. Arguably, many individuals are poorly-equipped to protect their own privacy and safety online, meaning this has to be built-in to systems.

In order to build trust and foster inclusion in digital systems, technical architects need to balance efficient technological solutions and privacy concerns. Privacy impact assessments are already required under data protection law and can be used to assess such problems fully rather than as a legal obligation. Independent third-party reviews, such as the MIT Technology Review's audit on contact-tracing apps, could also build confidence[16] and public authorities will also need to expand the scope of public discussion. The alternative is to risk embracing smart solutions that effectively construct new surveillance infrastructure and centralise state power at the expense of personal autonomy and privacy rights, replacing an overt health crisis with a more obscure privacy and civil liberties one.

Digital democracy

Socitm's 2016 Smart Guide on Democratic Renewal described how 'democracy is changing' as a result of technology and this continues to be the case today.[17] Many impacts may seem negative, such as the use of social media to disseminate fake news. However, the effective use of digital tools can provide a way to sustain democratic processes. Local authorities have increased virtual access to council and public meetings, arguably making these more accessible by removing the need to travel and building capacity issues. Some have adopted digital tools which provide a means by which citizens can express their political voice, again arguably increasing access to democratic processes.

But relying on digital channels to increase access to democracy risks disenfranchising those with accessibility needs, those with no internet connection and those who are digitally illiterate. The experience of the pandemic will be crucial to inform decisions about the advantages and limitations of digital methods. It is possible this could include consideration of online voting, which the Welsh Government proposed to pilot in local elections and by-elections in 2018, although there are longstanding concerns over its security risks.[18]
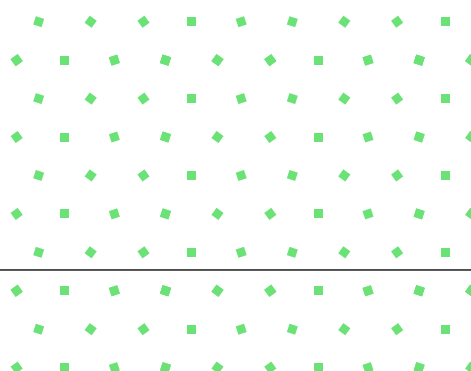
Practical implications

Overcoming inequalities with technologies and data – Covid-19 has redefined thinking about the role of technologies and data, both in supporting people and their diverse needs but also in playing a crucial part in people's lives. As the UK emerges from the pandemic, technologies and data are set to play a pivotal role in overcoming inequalities and building recovery.

Harnessing data for social progress – By harnessing data on the social and environmental health of our societies, local authorities can prioritise actions that accelerate social progress. This may include making better use of data to identify the digitally excluded and how public bodies can intervene. Barking and Dagenham's Social Progress Index is an example of an initiative that uses data to better understand the wellbeing of residents in specific neighbourhoods, allowing new services to be targeted in those locations. It fosters dialogue, improves accountability and helps to develop evidence-based policies that address the real needs of residents.

Collaborating for inclusion – As more services move online, it is imperative that local authorities and communities work towards ensuring everyone can use them so as to fully participate in society. 100% Digital Leeds an example of a partnership between local authorities and private, public, third and cultural sectors that aims to do this in an empathetic and coherent manner.

Connecting citizens – The pandemic has amplified deep existing inequalities in affordable and meaningful connectivity. Internet access may be regarded as a public good, but many are cut off from it. It has never been more important that everyone can connect, and the pandemic has provided the opportunity to shift the public policy mind-set. The public and private sector should commit to providing support to keep citizens connected, not only to ensure that this lifeline is universally accessible but to go further and provide incentives to encourage internet adoption among the excluded.

Leading privacy and security transparently – Transparency in political leadership is necessary to open up a public debate about the balance of privacy and security at national and local levels. NHS Surrey Clinical Commissioning Group's Integrated Care Record is an example of how transparent local leadership helps people understand the balance between privacy and security and how sharing information benefits them and their wellbeing. Building public trust and fostering universal digital inclusion requires transparency and openness in how data will be used and protected.

Renewing local democracy – Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, we have seen many examples of digital methods enhancing levels of citizen engagement, awareness and influence. Virtual solutions have allowed the democratic functioning of local authorities not just to continue during the pandemic but to thrive. Technology should be seen as an enabler rather than the solution to renewing local democracy, as the real benefits are realised when local authorities use it to address challenges, and to simplify, standardise, share and sustain effective methods, tools and techniques for engaging citizens.
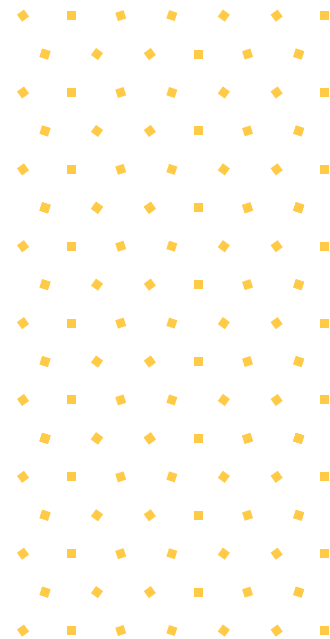
Conclusions

The pandemic has heightened inequalities in society, but local public sector organisations have both statutory duties and moral obligations to provide services that are accessible by everyone. On digital, this means moving beyond building services and pushing people into using them for efficiency's sake, to an inclusive model that encourages and helps people to use them whatever their circumstances, while providing alternatives for those who cannot. Doing so will require active leadership in building more equal, diverse and inclusive teams, organisations and communities.

Accelerated adoption of digital technologies has been achieved for many during the Covid-19 pandemic but, for others, they have served to exacerbate existing inequalities. As the immediate public health crisis recedes, technology leaders should be looking at how to bridge these gaps.

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