

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

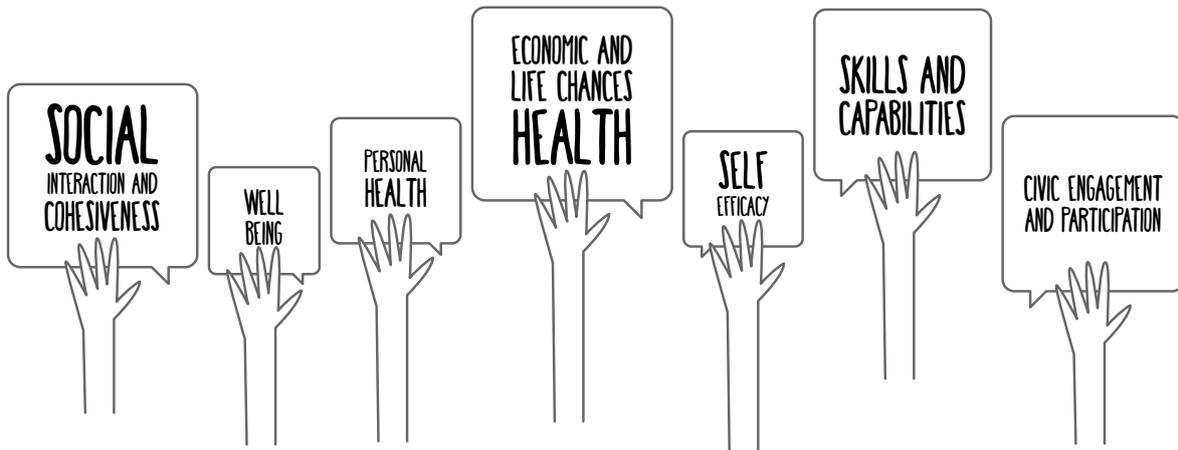
Firstly, digital participation matters because the numerous benefits and advantages to be gained from digital inclusion can only reach those who are digitally connected and engaged. Research shows that inequalities in access to and use of digital media have measurable negative impacts on the life chances,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

Resources

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About Socitm

Socitm is the professional body for digital leaders in local public services. We offer networking and peer support, professional development, and access to research and consultancy on a wide range of digital policy and technology issues to 1500 members and their employing organisations.

Socitm works with Central Government, the Local Government Association, COSLA, SOLACE, CIPFA, ADASS-IN, the Local CIO Council, the Local Government Delivery Board, iStand and a wide variety of other strategic partners in areas such as digital leadership, strategy, skills and inclusion, data quality, interoperability standards, transparency and open data. Socitm also has strong links with its partner associations in Europe and around the world.

Have your say

We welcome comments and discussion on the ideas presented in this Policy Briefing.

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