

# POLICY

**Briefing**

## **Digital by choice: Bridging the digital divide**

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*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.

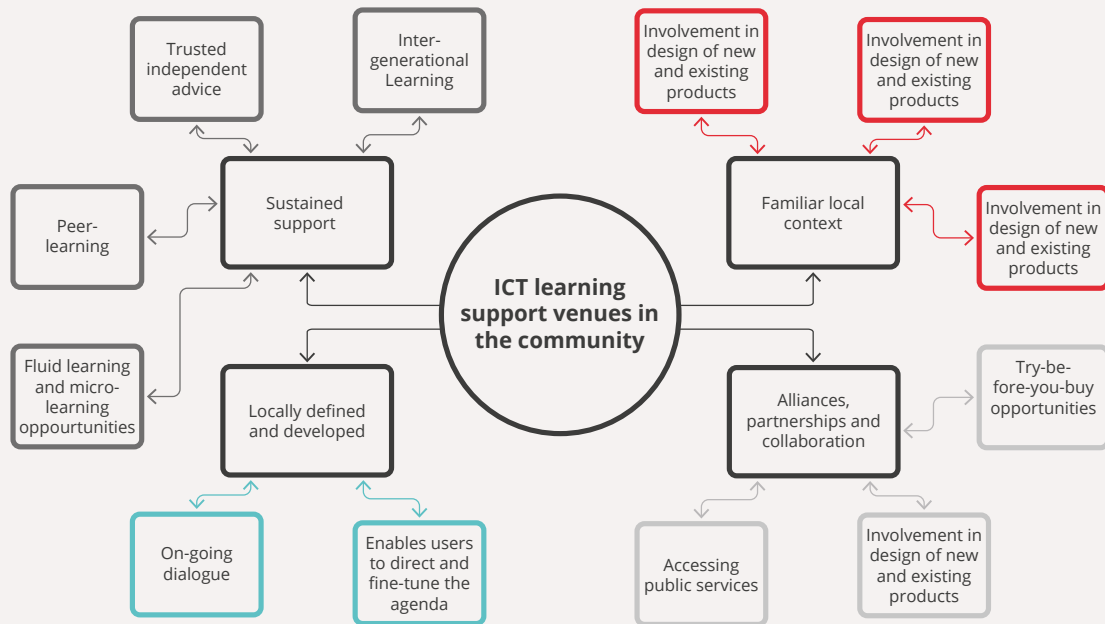
## Introduction

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.

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

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**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.

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

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**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.

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**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.

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

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*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>**



## **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.

Socitm Member group: [www.khub.net/socitm](http://www.khub.net/socitm)

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