Falling off the bandwagon?

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engagement by older people

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SUSTAINING DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT BY OLDER PEOPLE

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This consultation brought together experts concerned to promote effective, confident and sustained use of digital technologies by the UK's older population. A core objective was to consider how to meet the ICT learning and support requirements of older people. Based on extensive research and engagement with older people, a specific proposition for achieving this had been tabled for deliberation. The central concept in the proposition is that the needs could be met through local venues delivering consistent, accessible support for continued ICT use by older people for pursuit of their interests, for community engagement, and for confidence-building.

Over twenty-four hours, we discussed
- known findings and experience that show
  - practical necessity for maintaining digital engagement by older people in the UK (including delivery of Digital by Default and access to various state services)
  - personal and social benefits to individuals of remaining digitally engaged;
  - a strong need and desire expressed by older ICT users for local, community-based ICT learning and support venues or 'hubs' where they might drop in, learn informally, explore personally relevant ICTs at their own pace, and exchange skills in a relaxed and sociable atmosphere
- how to establish such 'locally-grown' hubs across UK communities:
  - identifying and supporting ownership, leadership, and coordination
  - obtaining and managing funds and resources
  - training, standards and quality assurance
- ways now to start carrying out such a plan:
  - building agreement that *sustained* digital inclusion is needed
  - connecting existing organisations, individuals and resources for digital inclusion
  - working locally with what we have (rather than 'what we ideally *should* have')

How things are
There have been great efforts to get the UK population online, with many successes by public and private digital inclusion programmes, from Digital Unite's Spring Online events to GO On UK. Both national and local government are moving towards more digital provision of services. Whitehall is keen to make sure that a significant majority of the UK population is digitally competent: concepts such as

'digital by default', 'assisted digital' and the delivery of Universal Credit depend on this.

Online interaction makes for considerable savings in public services. Socitm statistics from 2012 suggest the average cost of each face-to-face interaction is £8.62; by phone, £2.83; online, £0.15. However, it was recognised that the low costs indicated for online service delivery do not factor in the very considerable costs of building the capacity of most of the population to have the necessary skills to use on-line services, nor the costs of providing support and assistance when problems occur.

It has been shown that ICTs can help the fifty-plus population to live independently, access government and commercial services, and engage socially. However, very many older people remain offline and unconnected. Even more worryingly, some of the older people who may at some point have gone online may subsequently disengage, i.e. they do not *stay* online. They face particular, age-related barriers including physical and cognitive changes, transformation of social and family environment, as well as fast-altering technology. More general barriers include distrust lest they be exploited by commercial providers, and incomprehension of ICT terminology and jargon. Meanwhile, technologies continue to evolve at a bewildering rate. The challenge is not just to help (older) people to get online in the first place, but to provide a context which will help them to overcome challenges posed to their on-going digital engagement (whether by changes in capability, social support or technology) and to develop their own skills and competencies as far as they wish to do so.

There is a serious risk associated with a longer lived population that digital *dis*engagement will continue to occur at the very time when sustained engagement is most needed – both at an individual level to maintain independence and quality of life into later years, and nationally to economise while improving state delivered services. 'Getting (older) people online' is not enough to deliver the desired economies and social benefits associated with ICT use.

How we want things to be
Visions of an inclusive digital society are based on extensive research into the human aspects of ICT use including users' experiences and preferences, their purposes in using ICT, and how they best learn and retain information.

A program for sustained digital engagement must first respond to older people's diverse needs and varied starting points on the ICT learning journey, and then look to the relevant current technologies – tablets, smart phones, bring your own device (BYOD), social media, most appropriate apps etc – to carry out their desired task or activity.

Successful models for promoting sustained digital engagement already exist as small pockets of good practice, e.g. Saltburn Club, the success of which owes to:
- **commitment** (ongoing/repeat funding, dedicated leadership with local knowledge, ongoing use by target community)

- **credibility** ('locally-grown', not seen as a generic initiative driven by commerce or pushed by government but as an ongoing, sincere effort emerging from real local needs)
- **accessibility** (preferably in a familiar sociable venue, or by home visit; convenient, regular, predictable location and hours of availability)
- **delivery** of the general desired outcomes (increased ICT confidence and skills-sharing, externally assessable at various levels from council department to EU) by delivering users' own desired achievements – newfound abilities to text, explore Google Earth, order groceries online, show a friend how to edit a photo, etc

Of course, the challenge of how to scale-up local successes is not new to digital inclusion. But we are working with huge starting advantages; a solid knowledge of the economic and social rewards for getting it right, and significant knowledge of end-user requirements, preferences and aspirations. It is well worth the initial effort of connecting the dots.

Existing successful models point clearly to a solution in the form of local ICT hubs that build on community resources and social activities already in use in any given location.

Preferences to be met.
From existing research, an effective learning environment for older ICT users can be described in some detail:

- technology and information embedded in a familiar and sociable local context
- informal, comfortable atmosphere, without the pressures and performance-demands of a 'tested progress' learning environment or pursuit of formal qualifications
- no rigid course structure – fluid learning and hobby-based courses, to follow individual relevance and needs
- socially-embedded learning – motivation from and to others to get online and learn
- peer-to-peer learning – swapping skills with equals helps develop a network of friends who can offer help and support
- sustained, regular support, not one-off events – allowing people to drop in 'as and when'
- background expertise and reference available but not pushed; 'try before you buy' options and clinics for troubleshooting specific problems
- readily available, independent, trusted advice in plain English, not seen as manipulating users towards one outcome or product
- capacity to offer home visits and advice for housebound or stay-at-home participants

The risk of not understanding and working with older people's known preferences is reversion to default non-engagement or disengagement triggered in various ways: feeling daunted, overwhelmed or rushed; feeling irrelevant, uncertain, incapable, stupid, or out of place; feeling at odds with new or unfamiliar devices, information,

equipment, people, or even the perceived expense of resources (even if there is free provision). Many combinations of factors may be responsible for disengagement: ill-health, impairment, bereavement, loss of previous ICT support, and isolation are some common causes.

Enabling the pull
ICT learning and support venues/hubs should be purpose-driven. The goals and functions of remaining digitally engaged are similar across the UK as reflected in a number of surveys including the Oxford Internet Survey and others commissioned by Ofcom: communicating to family and friends using mobile phones, Skype, IM, etc; socialising through social media and online communities; accessing government services (tax returns, welfare, universal credit); making online purchases; handling photograph and image software; obtaining information and applications; using online tools such as navigation aids and Google Earth; enjoying online entertainment, streaming radio, using listen- or watch-again facilities, and so forth.

If the governmental and societal focus were to be on promoting skills, confidence and user satisfaction, rather than prescribing particular standardised provisions of training, then locally-workable models could fall into place more easily and ICT venues/hubs could be promoted as distinctive, different and attractive *for where they are*. Such an approach could be described as 'enabling the pull' for ICT adoption and digital participation, rather than imposing a push. Co-design and co-production with users is vital.

Co-design and co-production
Co-design and co-production will be needed – not least to select acceptable terms to refer to the ICT learning and support venue itself (the term 'hub' might imply a predominant focus on technology rather than the user) and also to the roles of delivery and support staff so that they reflect positive prior assumptions and aspirations. 'Advocates, facilitators, peers, advisors, mentors' suggest a friends-and-equals dynamic whereas, for example, traditional terms such as 'tutors, trainers, coaches, teachers, educators' reflect an unwanted power-hierarchy dynamic.

Again, if the emphasis of the venues/hubs remains on positive user experiences and known preferences, it becomes easier to define relevant outcomes, metrics, and standards for training, accreditation and acknowledgment of achievement. This means avoiding prescriptive models. The evidence suggests that what has worked so far takes the form of an organic, locally-driven initiative which responds effectively to local interests.

A co-design model is also promising in terms of shared benefits between the users of the venue and the public sector (assisting users to access services); online retailers (demonstrating services, engaging with potential customers, building and maintaining capacity in the older population); designers and developers (researching users' needs, testing prototypes); and technology providers (pop-up shops, try-before-you-buy services, etc).

Questions remain as to what compromises are likely to have to be made. When compromise proves necessary, what guidelines will help to prioritise the positive experiences of the users? In evaluating 'success', how can we ensure that we give

appropriate prominence to qualitative metrics defined in terms of meeting end-user needs?

Organisational structure

These factors do not preclude and may even necessitate a well-defined national agreement to enable ICT hubs to deliver services well and aptly, using the right information, skills and best practice for the location. An 'invisible' national framework to support many locally-defined projects may be appropriate – but this calls for further identification and deliberation of the options.

At the same time, a well-defined structure for exchanging information and maintaining standards must not imply that one size can fit all. Each community has a different set of needs, demographics, resources, skills, geographies and potential champions or leaders, and each hub/venue should be locally produced from its 'local ingredients' in order for it to be recognised and welcomed as meeting community needs. Consistency needs a framework but 'consistency' should be sought in the quality of the outcome for the user, not the technical specifications of the input.

Practicalities

How can the UK deliver what is needed? Community ICT hubs/venues need stable locations and predictable availability (even if they are mobile), fast broadband, devices (many potential ICT users do not own portables or personal computers) refreshment and toilet facilities, skilled IT support available at known times and preferably whenever the hub is open, and training for people delivering services.

The three main factors that shape the opportunities and constraints of an area are available funding and resources, geography, and existing local organisations. Governing these is the level of commitment of individuals trying to make it happen – i.e., given sufficient commitment and determination, the other (material) factors will tend to yield, whereas even with funds, equipment, local support and easy access, a hub will fail if there is no commitment to make it work by the people directly involved, or a lack of trust amongst the intended user population.

Owners, leaders, coordinators

We discussed ownership, leadership and coordination as different, if overlapping activities, to be undertaken by different organisations or individuals and perhaps at various levels locally and nationally. Different combinations should be expected in different places, according to local particulars – with some core principles and (perhaps) functions extending nationally.

Some questions to address will be:

- Who owns the assets (building, hardware, etc)?
- Who decides to provide funding?
- Who makes everyday decisions for planning and delivery?
- Who holds or controls administrative assets, e.g. contact details for users, volunteers etc?
- Who is personally present to deliver the service to the end user?

- Who is the technical expert providing troubleshooting, updates, reference etc?
- Who provides training? – accreditation (if any)? – acknowledgments of achievement?
- Who offers support, resources, information, contacts etc to the hub decision-maker(s)?
- Who defines, maintains and implements guiding principles, mission statements, etc?

Finding an existing organisation to convene the various agencies who would contribute to the hub network is a challenge, given the clear need for independence in setting up and maintaining autonomous and uniquely local venues/hubs. Ideally, the convenor would be an organisation or group with an excellent partnership record that is very willing to remain 'invisible' so far as individual hub users are concerned and not seen to be motivated primarily by financial gain or the power of ownership. (Potential) stakeholders include:

- Users (loosely defined as the over-50 UK population)
- Service providers: among others, Post Office, RNIB, Dolphin, Digital Unite
- Existing groups for the older population: 50-plus forums, AgeUK, Saga?
- Local authorities
- Cabinet Office
- Government departments (among which DCLG, BIS, DWP, and DfE are particularly relevant) and governmental agencies
- Commerce: online retail, including supermarkets
- Technology providers: hardware manufacturers, broadband services etc
- Charitable and volunteering organisations
- Academia

Efficiency and frugality

For many reasons, including time, scarcity of funds and resources, and not least the preferences of the target users, it does not make sense to conceive of building a network of entirely new centres but instead to make use of existing assets and resources:

- Social locations already in use (post offices, public libraries, college and university departments, pubs and cafes, churches, shops, adult education/evening classes, social centres, mobile teams visiting elderly people in their own home), etc
- Refurbished/repurposed hardware (from the council, schools, private donors, etc)
- Donated/discounted software
- Emphasis on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) rather than charity: look for services, volunteers and discounts from corporations rather than only hard cash
- Seek sustained funding to cover core costs, and subscriptions/donations to cover movable costs (utilities, staff skills training, refreshments, printer-paper, etc)

Funding

Those who would benefit most from successful digital engagement of older people and therefore from the existence of the hubs could most logically be approached to support them, in a spirit of enlightened self-interest. Commercial enterprises, local government, national government, broadband providers, online retailers, Rotary Clubs, local Chambers of Commerce, even family and friends could see a return from providing a variety of support including funding. Commercial funding may be appropriate and genuinely helpful but must not be perceived as monopolising (and a Code of Conduct would need to be formulated and agreed to ensure that participating companies adhered to the spirit as well as the letter of agreements for user-led focus and other ethical considerations).

Subscriptions and ongoing sponsorship are sustainable (in principle); grants and other one-off funds may present a mixed blessing in that they do not allow for continued work. Nonetheless, we think seed starter money will be needed, even if pooled to begin with, which might come from one-off contributions by charitable donors such as Rowntree and Nominet. To obtain corporate sponsorship may well require an approach reflecting detailed knowledge of the company's current CSR programme but is worth pursuing for both funds and other support. International partnerships should not be ignored – for example, through EU digital programmes, such as the Riga Convention or Stockholm Challenge.

Funding for a central 'engine' or an enduring umbrella structure for enabling the hub/club network might be sought from a range of sources, e.g. the Cabinet Office, DCLG, BIS, Niace, Nominet or the Big Lottery fund – but such funds are scarce and project-focussed, and may be available only to innovation-driven projects. We should show government that if it invests over time, it will save increasing amounts each year as more older people move over to online services. Similarly, we should show retailers and service providers that, through their support in delivering ICT learning and support opportunities, they can increase their customer base by meeting the needs of older customers.

Funding vs. support

We believe, particularly in a time of austerity, that a truly sustainable and (importantly) *local* ICT hub will come together largely from existing resources and will attract and cultivate multiple sources of support. This idea is supported by evidence from successful examples such as the home delivery of ICT assistance by Leicestershire CareOnLine (LCOL). Fixed costs must of course be met, but building use, hardware, software, volunteers, materials etc can very often be obtained for an exchange in kind: goodwill, public relations, a keen future clientele spreading positive word-of-mouth news, and as part of CSR programmes. Partnerships with other interested organisations such as RNIB, AbilityNet or Dolphin could cut funding needs by, for example, supplying training (by webinar) and mutual support.

A local role of 'resource manager' is vital, and must be (a) locally well-informed, and (b) geared first and foremost towards attaining operability, rather than being diverted from the primary purpose of promoting digital inclusion by the need to meet fundraising targets. (The point was made that if the hub requires ten second-hand but working devices in an accessible space with three people who know how

to use them, getting those resources directly is a better start than to try to find £2000.)

Delivered by whom?

Again, a variety of successful models already exists for delivery of ICT support and, clearly, one model for staffing will not fit all. Leicestershire County Council's LCOL is delivered across the county by a small team including one person trained in visual and sensory difficulties, one in learning disabilities, a technical support person, an information and service provider and a decision-maker. An important part of LCOL's skill set is technical support. In other models, community volunteers or local library staff are entirely responsible for delivery. People might be sought from corporations more easily than gaining capital investment; large technology corporations could fulfil CSR commitments by offering staff-hours of work with elderly people on technology and software. From the research side, potential or actual older users can get involved to provide practical experience for students or interns in interacting with older people and seeing a design in use in return for trouble-shooting assistance and learning support.

The purpose of training (volunteers, hub service providers, etc) is ultimately to benefit the end-user by providing a better experience. The question of how to guarantee effective delivery has to be answered with reference to the metrics of delivered successes as perceived by the users, as well as conformity with centrally-defined standards where these are appropriate.

Quality assurance (QA)

Formulating appropriate forms of QA will be challenging and will require the input of end-users: it must be able to differ from place to place while building on a few core principles relating to user success, commitment, accessibility and personal protection. More qualitative, tailored measurements will be appropriate in the venues/hubs, reflecting diverse local needs and programmes and individual users' experience and feedback. More standardised evaluation may be appropriate centrally for elements such as toolkits intended for use by any venue/hub, training specifications, or basic ground rules.

A vital element in maintaining quality is providing support in the form of coordination and communication to extend and share best practice in virtuous circles of improvement and innovation. Implementers of such procedures must be engaged and well-informed about existing projects and the underpinning principles so as not to impose a 'dead hand' upon the projects but instead to facilitate and encourage practices that succeed in responding to user needs.

Concluding session: next actions

The meeting concluded with a session in plenary, in which participants expressed strong support for the objectives and possibilities discussed, and warm interest in contributing further action towards realising ICT venues/hubs for sustained digital engagement by the older population.

We believe we can encourage the establishment and growth of ICT hubs/venues locally and autonomously in different parts of the country, offering them communication opportunities with others to exchange ideas and best practice,

partnership support for training, and general resources such as the Digital Unite library. Being able to show such prototypes in successful operation will be important in winning wider support and increasing the potential for gaining modest but steady funding.

It was recognised that this proposal will have to compete for attention with many others, requires some funding (albeit small), and concerns many different stakeholders, so it must be explained briefly and clearly in a number of ways so as to show most relevant benefits for its different audiences, and would appropriately be pursued along several or many routes rather than set on one 'right way' only.

Several specific directions were outlined for next steps:

The media has an important role to play in raising awareness of the benefits of digital engagement for older people and signposting people to sources of support. For example, under the sixth Public Purpose, the BBC is committed to working in partnership to help people develop the digital skills and confidence to engage with emerging technologies and should, therefore, be involved as key stakeholder.

The meeting helped crystallise an awareness of what areas will require funding. A steering group is needed to carry forward this issue by describing funding needs succinctly and very clearly including cost-benefit analyses according to stakeholder requirements. Good business cases can be made; this is an important step.

Digital policy interest and influence is vital for engaging MPs' interests and to bring people together around the topic, starting perhaps with a learned paper outlining the supporting research and information in an accessible form. Eleven universities have already been involved in the research; a PhD project could take findings further and provide the material to take into government.

The industry sector must be involved as a key stakeholder, perhaps first by engaging and building links with representative bodies such as Intellect (Technology Association). (It is also important to note that using the internet is a socio-technical system, so providers are not only technology providers.)

It was pointed out that existing efforts such as the Spring Online campaign which is run successfully by Digital Unite on an annual basis should be exploited by using one-off events both to introduce and to be transformed into sustained efforts for digital engagement. The interest shown by Socitm and the local government association in sustainable digital engagement provides a basis for developing and promoting good practice in the delivery of ICT learning and support provision for older people. Recommendations should be made for new ways of working and of empowering those who are already running successful projects (Leicestershire's LCOL was mentioned as an example of continuity, having been established twelve years ago).

To facilitate the next steps in the forward strategy discussed, it was agreed that the key points and conclusions from the extensive deliberations should be distilled into a succinct one/two page document to use as a basis for engaging a range of stakeholders in a position to "influence the influencers" and gain traction for the proposition of ICT learning and support venues in local communities.

The meeting was convened for the Sus-IT research project, led by Professor Leela Damodaran and Wendy Olphert at Loughborough University and for the KT-EQUAL project, directed by Professor Gail Mountain at Sheffield University. Further information is available through Professor Leela Damodaran (l.damodaran@lboro.ac.uk) and Wendy Olphert (c.w.olphert@lboro.ac.uk).

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