



Delivering Digital Inclusion (Oct 2008)

A consultation response by Fraser Henderson,
27-10-2008

“ **ParticiTech** welcomes the ‘delivering digital inclusion’ action plan which is a timely addition to the national strategy for enhancing the UK digital economy.

eInclusion is an essential precursor to eParticipation and is an increasingly important agenda as the benefits of digital channels, services and technologies are being harnessed in the quest for accountable individuals and organisations.

Without an adequate action plan on digital inclusion, aspirations for broader participation and social equality will not be achieved. ”

Chapter One (Q1): Definition of digital inclusion and nature of the problem

The current definition, linking social inequality to direct and indirect exposures of digital technology, leans heavily toward a government perspective. Given the ownership of the action plan this is no bad thing – but the bespoke definition of ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ means the statement lacks impact. Consider this alternative definition: “Creating equal opportunity to harness the power of digital technology for better futures”.

The nature of the problem is well understood but lacks detail on the softer drivers and barriers such as trust, security, language, identity versus anonymity etc.

Chapter Two (Q2): Why is digital inclusion important?

Further to the segments of finance and access to information/advice in this chapter there is a third area of ‘information poverty’. Internet-only deals, online auctions and trading, e-billing, e-tariffs, digital music downloads comparison services and the ability to purchase overseas are excluding segments of the community in a fiscal context. Citizens without the new array of digital choices are literally paying a premium for their exclusion.

Secondly there are the simple benefits of connectivity and communication, such as keeping in-touch with friends, family or relatives. Mobile messaging allows us to react instantly in the modern knowledge economy.

Chapter Three (Q3): Barriers to engagement

The barriers expressed in this chapter are logical but focus too much on individual inadequacies. For example, a lack of motivation is cited as a barrier whereas the reverse may be true – a ‘tech savvy’ individual may prefer offline intervention and is motivated to escape digital transactions for the benefits of traditional ones. The barrier in this instance is fatigue as much as it is preference. Diversity must be respected.

The frustration mounted at digital technology is often the result of bad design. There are wide differences in the ergonomics, aesthetics and reliability of digital products and services which result in ease-of-use issues.

Entry level, lower cost items which are likely to be purchased by the kind of people that this plan targets (such as cheap set-top boxes) are more likely to suffer from these design inadequacies. Design and skills are therefore interlinked. Arguably no extra skills should be required to use a good digital product or service, the increased use of natural user interfaces such as ‘touch’ and ‘voice recognition’ are testament to this.

Chapter Three (Q4): Effective ways to remove barriers

Simple skills such as typing proficiency or a grasp of electronics combined with standardised advice on the complex range of solutions would be beneficial. As the consultation explains, the technology market specialises in creating jargon and hype to attract custom - expert evaluation is therefore valued for making informed choices. There needs to be better regulation on how technology is marketed to citizens – such as broadband speeds. Frameworks or standards should exist for comparison sake.

A possible approach to design and skill barriers would be to generate a rating or labelling system for digital consumer products which takes ease of use into consideration – similar to the energy labelling scheme. Much of this analysis is already done by independent organisations such as the Consumers' Association (Which? magazine).

Confidence and awareness could be heightened at the national level with a museum of digital science, digital equipment loans or long-term purchase schemes. In terms of trust and security, antivirus and firewall software could be issued to all households, as has been the case in other commonwealth countries.

Chapter Three (Q5): Current and next generation access

There is a risk that NGA will be unfairly priced or monopolised and that early broadband adopters will be penalised due to their contractual obligations. A two-tier digital divide could form, particularly as current generation access is likely to drop in price and if the roll-out of NGA is not uniform. Coverage, particularly of wireless technologies, could form economic drivers such as increasing the price of encapsulated properties.

The benefits of NGA are likely to be the initial consolidation and reduction in price of household services such as high definition television, radio, telephony and health monitoring. The disadvantage is that the reliance on digital services will increase and infrastructure restrictions may result in worsening digital services compared to previous analogue equivalents, resulting in a reduced appreciation of the benefits. In emergency situations, analogue solutions are often preferable (consider radio).

Chapter Three (Q6): Empowering communities and partnerships to address risks

Communities should have the freedom to regulate and influence their own internet ring – such as displaying a local intranet landing page to local subscribers. Communities should be able to receive statistics about the digital data flow in their locality and compare it to national figures to determine the suitability of local services. A satisfaction question in the regular Places survey would be a good initial approach.

Chapter Three (Q7): The direct use of technology

While the concept of specific targeted benefits is endorsed, ICT interoperability and longevity must be considered as it is an essential aspect of becoming digitally resourced. There is a risk that people are further alienated by investing in digital technology which rapidly becomes obsolete or is not backward compatible, such as HD-DVD. It would be useful to set-up a 'readiness rating' of particular technologies to indicate by how much they have been adopted or at what point the technology is in its lifespan so that citizens may benefit from an optimal investment period.

Chapter Four (Q8): Indirect digital inclusion

The indirect opportunities and risks are reasonably well defined although the risks, particularly on digital fraud and identity, could be expanded.

Chapter Four (Q9): Raising awareness of indirect benefits

Additional trials are welcome, particularly those which directly compare online and offline approaches. Unfortunately there has been a tendency to ignore digital options in early stages of experimentation – such as participatory budgeting – on the basis that digital is an afterthought or expansion of trials rather than an initial reference point.

Challenges, competitions, competitive-funds, study visits, regional thematic networks, awards, incentives and demonstrations in areas of high public concern (such as road pricing) are possible strategies.

Chapter Four (Q10): Public services and the socially disadvantaged

I believe that overall public services are doing a good job at targeting the socially disadvantaged - to the extent that they risk isolating mainstream Britain.

Chapter Five (Q11): Examples of good practice

There are many other examples of digital inclusion but good practice must be defined by scenario such as demographic. For example, ePetitioning is very effective in Bristol but still only 38% of the BME population are represented compared to 94% of the 'white' population.

Many good practices are prematurely abandoned by government and the inability to create long-term sustainability is denting confidence.

Chapter Five (Q12): Successful digital inclusion strategies

I believe that the offline strategies with solid marketing components have had the most success. Particularly those that target local initiatives and the direct delivery of backbone service such as health, jobs or transportation.

Chapter Five (Q13): Supporting better partnership approaches

Drivers for change are hampered by mix of national priorities. A common observation with equal benefits would assist partnership approaches.

Chapter Five (Q14): Government intervention in digital exclusion

This is a delicate area and government should avoid interfering with issues that hamper competitiveness or innovation. However, government must have diligence in maintaining a fair and proportionate response beyond pure economic considerations. For example, securing NGA for rural areas which might be of high benefit yet yield the lowest investor returns.

In my opinion, government should have a lesser say of how technologies operate but have more regard for the protection of the national infrastructure, enforcement of standards, safeguards and promotion of trust among citizens.

Chapter Five (Q15): How can the impact of current activity be maximised?

In many cases, good practices are preached but not practiced. For example, participatory budgeting has not been adopted by central government. Public buildings are not obliged to have energy monitors, consultations are not consulted-on electronically. More attention needs to be focused on motivating groups of stakeholders in *key positions* rather than end-users.

Chapter Six (Q16): Proposed principals

While comfortable with the proposed charter principals there is no forward determination of these. I would therefore like to see more predictive statements or diagrams over the life of the action to show how the situation might evolve, with or without the proposed intervention.

In terms of achieving cross-sector buy-in and in conjunction to my response in Q1 I suggest that the first and last principal is revisited along the lines of:-

Direct Benefits. Capacity building for citizens, groups and organisations: Assist and motivate the most disadvantaged to achieve increased independence and opportunity through access to digital technology and skills.

Sustainable Benefits. Sustainable development: Monitor and evidence the risks and opportunities of emerging digital technology which can engage the otherwise excluded and minimise environmental impact.

In addition to a fourth principal:-

Protected Benefits: Government Pledge: Prevent the marginalisation or deepening of exclusion through increased transparency, fair portrayal, promotion and safeguarding of equal benefits for all.

Chapter Six (Q17): Support of actions

The proposed actions, particularly the emergence of an expert taskforce, are very encouraging. The Digital champion role is key and nominations should be allowed from members of the public so that this is appointed democratically. The expert network should be in some way linked to the international circuit, such as the newly appointed European thematic network for eInclusion.

I would like to see more hard-hitting actions around awareness, particularly education, such as a qualification in digital literacy.

Chapter Six (Q18): Baseline determination

I would like to see the collection of grass-roots, raw metrics such as the number of people using eBay in a particular area or data traffic on cellular networks. Transient data, such as the number of people operating digitally in an area, is as important as the baseline facts.

Chapter Six (Q19): Role of the Digital Champion

Apart from the description provided in the consultation document the role should encompass the requirement for the individual to personally practice and have experience in pioneering the delivery of digital technology on a practical level. That individual should have a connection or understanding of basic public attitudes, perhaps a technology convert, not necessarily an expert. In my opinion, preferably a media icon such as Sir Alan Sugar or a BBC technology reporter.

Chapter Six (Q20): Most effective action

Government should take greater steps to co-ordinate the actions of multiple departments and agendas. It **must** practice what it preaches in terms of greater participation of stakeholders in the formulation of policy and decisions, such as ensuring that the website of the chosen digital inclusion Minister is an exemplar and not broken, as it is currently and on the day of the launch of the consultation.

It must form and put tangible resources into supporting more regional working groups such as the Yorkshire & Humber eInclusion task-force.

Chapter Six (Q21): Any other issues

There seems to be a shift in terminology from “eInclusion” to “Digital Inclusion” and I am interested to know the rationale. The problem with the latter is that not all technology is or will be digital (for example, how about quantum technologies?) – the beauty of ‘e’ is that it clumps technologies together but the prefix can also be the cause of confusion or linked to unworthy legacies.

My preference is the action plan for “embracing, incorporating and mainstreaming the advantages of new technology”.