

Cross Party Group on Digital Participation – 23 January 2013

Introduction

WC welcomed members to the meeting and thanked the Royal Society of Edinburgh for their kind sponsorship. The group's vice-convenor had been John Park MSP who had recently left the Scottish Parliament so it was necessary for a new VC to be elected. Liam McArthur MSP, member for the Orkney Islands had agreed to be put forward and there were no other candidates. There would need to be a formal election process which would be conducted via email with CPG members. **Action CM**

Dr Mike Neilson, Scottish Government

WC welcomed the first speaker to the group, Dr Mike Neilson, Director, Digital at the Scottish Government. MN said that it was good to see such a full house because although the digital strategy was the Government's agenda, everyone needs to engage with it to keep the momentum going. SG has set itself a target that by 2015, 85-90% of people in Scotland will get access to superfast broadband with significant improvements for the remaining 10-15%. By the end of 2013 Scotland should be at or above the UK average for digital participation (take-up of home broadband) and higher than the other UK nations by 2015.

There are linkages across the four workstreams of the strategy and the strategy takes a holistic approach. There are participation issues for both individuals and businesses. There are two key projects to deliver for the 2015 target; one in the Highlands and Islands which should be breaking ground within a month and the other 'rest of Scotland' project which will begin digging by the end of the year. For the longer term 2020 work, a key piece of the picture will be the rollout of 4G and mobile broadband services with the 98% UK target and 95% target in Scotland being a very significant step forward. Why does participation matter? There are stark numbers on what individuals and society may be missing out on, a Booz and Co study suggests there is up to £63bn lost from UK GDP due to full rollout/take-up of broadband. MN said that we have seen good improvements in digital participation in Scotland and we are now on par with Wales and NI at 76%. One issue for Government is that of the people who transact online with Amazon etc, research had shown that only 50% would undertake a public service transaction online. This is partly due to past experience but the more people that move online the greater the economies of scale are for all public services. SG have devised a 'Pathway to Participation' covering issues of relevance, access, capability, confidence, risk and speed with supported progress towards participation. SG will also keep pressure up on the deployment of 4G services and are finding ways to scale up some of the localised projects that are starting to achieve results. They are looking for a virtuous circle of **confidence** creating **demand** leading to **private sector investment** which will enable **accessible technologies**.

WC thanked MN for his presentation and asked about closing the digital participation gap. Who requires what and where? MN responded citing a 7% increase in the last year in digital participation showing that there are already improvements however a large proportion of those not online are older people with a particular concentration in Glasgow. Glasgow Housing Association is already looking at targeted programmes and there may be more mileage in the social housing/council sector. WC said he felt the GHA example was a good

one and building digital participation into other policy areas such as housing is something we should seek more of.

A member asked how we can get the telcos to operate to the timescale required to meet the target dates? MN acknowledged that due to State Aid clearance the time available is a year less than planned so it will require a push. Another member asked why targets were set comparatively rather than at an absolute level. MN replied that targets are there as an indicator of commitment to improvement and they are set against other areas that are also improving so the benchmark rises. He said he was not keen to see a 'ceiling' put in place.

One member suggested that one issue with participation could be down to old technology such as the QWERTY keyboard which has little relevance to today's learners and users. English alphabet keyboards are more accessible. Another member responded that voice recognition technology is getting better and will ultimately make the keyboard obsolete; also new tablet technology offers more flexible configurations. The member has been working on bringing the resources of UK Online that are available elsewhere but not in Scotland to ensure consistency for learners as provision is very patchy at the moment. MN said that it was important to utilise UK Online materials in a Scottish context and that he was happy to discuss this. BBC webwise was cited by a member as a good, coherent learning programme and also FE colleges hadn't been mentioned who offer formal certification. This might not be the right route for all but there has to be a point where people move on their enthusiasm to something tangible, Creating and using technology is different to simply being plugged in.

The Booz and Co report cited earlier was questioned in that the figures in it might not reflect current economic conditions; MN said that he would need to look more deeply into the methodology to ascertain this.

A member raised the issue of Government websites and accessibility. The DWP website does not allow those with visual impairments to use a screen reader and the PDF format is not an accessible one. MN said this point was well made and understood. SG is very keen to engage to ensure that Direct Scot is optimally designed in this regard. It was pointed out that all public libraries are signed up to the RNIB guidelines but there are lots of barriers. One project had tried to take the technology out to a shopping centre but people didn't want to do their financial and personal business in such a public forum. Some libraries and job centres are also finding form taking up to three hours to complete online. MN responded that one of the issues is that offline forms have simply been imported online but improvement have been promised with web optimised materials. Some security aspects have also come up with GLOW and there is a need to get consistency across all points where the public sector and the public meet. A member suggested that there are few libraries in remote areas like hers in the Highlands and Islands and restricting public access to libraries also excludes people who don't go to the library, for example middle-aged, male, manual workers. Publicly available Wi-Fi definitely has its place, from experience, after three weeks of good engagement online; people are motivated to buy their own technology. The restrictions of 'locked down' technology in schools and libraries can actually drive people towards making the investment however their confidence needs to be raised before this investment. MN agreed that he would take away the messages around a consistent approach to access and security. If Starbucks can overcome the issues around publicly available Wi-Fi, why can't schools?

With regard to the take-up figures it was noted that there was fluctuations in the available statistics that were difficult to explain. MN said that he had many conversations with Ofcom about confidence levels of statistics and the 7% increase sits somewhere above the confidence level, regardless; the level of digital participation is not where they would want it to be. MN reiterated the need for engagement and if anyone wanted to be kept up to date or to comment they could follow the Twitter feed **@digitalscots**.

WC thanked MN and introduced Professor Michael Fourman of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

Professor Michael Fourman, Royal Society of Edinburgh

The RSE are conducting an enquiry to follow up their work Digital Scotland. The thinking has moved from 'Reaping the Benefits' to 'Spreading the Benefits' about digital technologies. The ideas offered through the Digital Scotland and the House of Lords paper was for an open access, fibre hub based, national network. Looking at roll-out maps, it seems that access hasn't changed much although speeds have increased to areas already served, potentially deepening any existing digital divide. Distances between populations are relevant especially if the technology adopted is fibre to the cabinet. How we use the internet could determine which technologies would be most appropriate. There still hasn't been much progress and we don't have a picture of how people spend their day. Some interesting research has been done by the Oxford Internet Institute on reasons for non-use. People can exist in city type metropolis without sharing a physical space, linked by communities of interest.

Public services will not drive people online – enjoyment and wanting to will. The question remains as to how we go from social media, games and entertainment to delivering civic participation, access and contribution to knowledge. Transacting online carries risks and users need to be aware of how to protect themselves; the risks and motivations need to be balanced.

In the course of the enquiry the RSE will meet with communities, launching on 11 February. The consultation will run from March to July and will report in November 2013. Some events will be held to facilitate the review, one in Dumfries in March primarily looking at business use and another in Hawick that will look at the rural disadvantage. RSE would welcome any suggestions or comments on the events.

A member commented that although some people are getting across the skills gap, there is a danger in making the assumption that if people or pupils can do one thing they can do others and also that they have the motivation to do more. Another member said that she had found that SMEs who don't engage tend not to engage at an individual/ personal level either. Now, the choice may not rest with the business; services such a Trip Advisor can encourage SMEs having an online presence – essentially being driven by customers. A question was raised over spectrum availability for machine to machine communications. MF answered that he thought that given the relatively small amounts of data required for this, it is unlikely to cause a capacity crunch. It was suggested that there was education in e-commerce available to support SMEs, however their awareness of it is low. The RSE were asked how far they will go in terms of identifying priority areas for digital participation. MF replied that the review will look at the risks, the value and the development of democratic participation

online. The priorities will in some cases identify themselves however in order to get a strong impact there needs to be a lifestyle change amongst those no online to start doing things online.

A member commented that there seemed to be two key themes emerging throughout the discussions of the evening. One is consistency of approach in terms of branding of support materials and access and the other is stratification and targeting the right people with right tools and messages, the best solution will find a balance between those. There followed a discussion around the rollout of other services such as utilities and telephony and what academic or research studies might exist that could help illuminate priorities and successful approaches. It was thought that some studies on the rollout of electricity in the US and Canada might be helpful although there were many differing and unique factors associated with other rollouts in the past.

WC thanked MF for his contribution and welcomed John Hunter of Hunter Associates to the meeting.

John Hunter, Hunter Associates

JH said that there was a lot of attention paid to the 1% who cannot access broadband when there was a very sizable 23% who have access but don't use it. The 1% can be solved with money whereas the 23% are more complex. Half of housing association tenants in England do not have access against the benefits such £200 per year of savings that can be made, those online are 25% more likely to find work and children who are online are likely to achieve two grades higher in education than those not online. Free or group WiFi can offer consumers reducing the need for bundled deals where 'free' broadband can often be absorbed into a larger monthly payment over a longer period of time. There are many solutions to reduce costs of both access and hardware. PCs and laptops can be built more cheaply by reducing the amount and complexity of kit in them. In taking away the screen you can use an existing TV and run non-proprietary software such as Linux. Google Cloud reduces the need for large internal hard drives and from there you can offer a good consumer proposition with a simple browser. JH demonstrated his device called 'Giraffe', named after the animal who browses. It is intended to be simple and affordable because it works with technologies that already exist in the home; a set top box and TV. It would retail at around £80 which buys the interface, wireless keyboard and router.

A member asked who this product was aimed at. Giraffe was designed to serve two different markets; those people who do not want or need a complex computer and also those who already have a main computer and would like to have an affordable second option. A member asked about training for the device, the group had seen the interface and how to get to key, selected services such as Gmail but how would users with little or no knowledge set up these accounts? JH replied that the manual was in development and the interface itself would provide step by step instructions to users. He would welcome any advice from trainers to help develop the manual. A comment was that support for learning for light users was difficult because their cost per use is very high. How would access be paid for? JH responded that pay-as-you-go mobile broadband access was feasible although free WiFi would be a good option to serve many people in proximity to each other such as care homes, sheltered housing etc.

Another question was raised specifically around technical support. JH said that the Giraffe used a very small piece of software that was not especially complex. It could simply be returned to the vendor or a friend or family member could assist. The system has been devised with the UK market in mind and has been localised for consumers here to cater to a particular niche audience.

WC thanked JH for his presentation and demonstration.

Any Other Business

A member raised an issue around accessibility features on the Amazon Kindle. It is not possible to use screen readers with the device which excludes people who need this support from a very attractive resource. It was suggested that the CPG could send a letter to Amazon to get their position on the issue and Vicki Nash also offered to raise the issue with the Scottish member of the Communications Consumer Panel. Another member suggested that the issue be highlighted to the Scottish Parliament's European and External Affairs Committee since Amazon where a global business. It was agreed to report back on these actions at the next meeting.