

Note of Cross Party Group on Digital Participation meeting – 11 November 2014

MSP Attendees

Willie Coffey
Fiona McLeod

Attendees: 28

Willie Coffey (WC) welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked Scottish Enterprise for their sponsorship.

1. Alan Rodden (AR), Digital Participation Policy Manager at the Scottish Government on the Let's Get On campaign.

AR gave an overview of the 'Let's Get On' National Framework for Local Action strategy which aims to raise the level of digital participation in Scotland to help people get online at home, in the workplace and in communities. Ofcom data states that internet access in Scotland has reached 81% of the population (76% fixed broadband take up). Although this shows positive growth has occurred, there is still some way to go to reach the aim of Scotland having the highest digital participation in the British Isles.

AR emphasised that although Scotland is making good progress, not everyone has the confidence and skills to get online without help. The Scottish Government has endorsed the Go On UK definition of basic digital literacy which sets minimum skills requirements such as sending and receiving emails, using search engines, evaluating which websites to trust, and setting privacy settings to keep safe online.

Partnerships have been developed between the Scottish Government and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) to increase digital participation rates. The Let's Get on Near You database allows users to search for their nearest 'hubs' and courses by inputting a home postcode.

AR explained the benefits of the skills pathways which can take users all the way from basic digital literacy competencies to transition onto becoming advanced in professional IT skills. This is designed to help fill the skills shortage in the talent pipeline and meet demand for skilled workers.

2. Gordon McGuinness (GM), Deputy Director of Industry & Enterprise Networks, Skills Development on the ICT and digital technologies skills investment plan.

GM set out the objectives of the Skills Investment Plans, along with the current trends in the skill supply. There is a decline in women and young people from the skills pipeline, an ageing population in the ICT sector, and a growing wage gap between small companies and the large companies who are able to draw the best talent with the most attractive packages. GM notes that some companies are beginning to on-shore IT services back to the UK but difficulties are faced in recruitment.

The Scottish Government has given £6.6m in funding to support the development of ICT skills in Scotland. GM pointed to several schemes which are already underway such as Coding Clubs for young people and Computer Clubs for Girls.

3. Tommy Laughlin (TL), Public Sector Liaison, Scotland IS

TL emphasised that digital technology is a key driver for growth and change in the economy. The all-pervasive Internet of Things is changing the delivery of our public services, and also the way in which people want and expect their services. TL stated that digital growth is driving innovation along the supply chain and that there are no geographical boundaries to the digital economy. Skyscanner was noted for their aim to be Scotland's leading digital software company.

4. Gerry Docherty (GD), Smarter Grid Solutions and Member of Technology Advisory Board

GD outlined some of the key findings from the Digital Economy Survey, implemented to provide an understanding on the level of digitisation of Scotland's businesses and identify where extra support is required.

GD looked to the future, stating that global and digital companies such as Google were likely to push out traditional firms such as energy companies because of their lack of digital investment and foresight. The ICT industry is healthy but short of people; 5% of the working population in Scotland are employed in the sector compared to 8% in the rest of the UK even though the industry does not have the same geographical limitations that affect other sectors.

GD questioned whether Scotland wants to be a nation of users or makers of technology. GD used Ireland as an example of a nation which committed to attracting foreign software companies. During the financial crisis however the talent pool in Ireland diminished and the Government set up the Momentum Fund to encourage skilled talent back into the sector. Scotland needs to add to its skills base to attract foreign companies; the fact that Scotland is the most expensive place to employ IT talent outside of London shows how scarce the talent is.

Discussion

WC asked about community hubs and where the technology is. What if local authorities don't have places, kit or people to help?

Alan Rodden responded that £300k had been made available to libraries to ensure that there were such opportunities available across local authorities. SLIC were managing this process. Hubs can be created anywhere and to discover where there were digital evangelists. WC asked who delivers the training? AR said that the projects were upskilling library staff and creating digital champions from volunteers who step forward. Sally Dyson highlighted that the third sector has a key role and a lot of people not online are already being supported by the third sector who know them, know their needs and preferences and can introduce access in a non-threatening way. They can link use to real life examples and relevant situations that become immediately useful. Learners can be signposted to community hubs and trusted material to help them with their journey.

Michael Fourman said that libraries were part of the solution but are limited in the resource that they can offer and struggle with privacy issues due to their public nature. Some are not immediately accessible and there are geographic differences in what is on offer. Falkirk for example offers a very high level of service and has benefitted from a strong per household investment level. Fiona McLeod commented that it was about collective action, SCVO are create a newsletter which offers a good overview of what is happening in the sector. FM felt that it was time to think differently about the issues, viewing digital skills as training for the job of the future rather than about an inclusion issue. Digital public services will not be the driver for people.

Ian Watson mentioned the skills pathway and as companies move to the Cloud, a third don't have the skills they need. There is a transition that needs to happen, for workers to skill up they need to be able to be creative and to experiment. Gerry Docherty agreed and added that the challenge is not just to enable better use, it's that the message needs to reach the Boardroom, the risks of not re-skilling the workforce are not being properly assessed at this level and the opportunities are being overlooked.

Alistair McGregor (AM) SQA, stated that the use of libraries was commendable but required a strategy that gives the digitally disenfranchised somewhere to go and libraries are not always the solution. There needs to be an obligation as part of the corporate social responsibility of companies to work with the wider community and enhance digital skills.

A member commented on the improvements made to access in Glasgow through community centres and hubs to help people get online. This shows that there are interventions and strategic actions that can be taken by councils and Government. Access in libraries is not going to be enough in terms of meeting demand and the time each person needs to use the ICT facilities. The best place to access the internet and enhance one's digital skills is in the home so developments here are required alongside public access points to work effectively.

TL explained that SCVO are rolling out projects into third sector organisations to enable them to upscale themselves. Graduates, usually with ICT backgrounds, are being taken on to work within the organisations and help them deliver better digitally to their client group, but this is just part of the story alongside initiatives such as library hubs.

Douglas White (DW) from Carnegie Trust reflected on the digital society more widely from hubs in communities up to boardrooms. He noted that we have come a long way but there is still a long way to go. DW likens the situation to that of cycling in the UK where the push to win podium places occurred at the same time as grass roots introductions to cycling.

GD emphasised that the journey we are on will not end as the bar will continue to be raised and we will always need to be digitally better, bigger and faster.

Vicki Nash (VN) enquired where the thinking behind the digital skills shortages in boardrooms is being captured and fed in.

Brian McLeish (BM) from Scottish Enterprise responded that there has been a lot of intervention in businesses, although too often this is focused only on SMEs and not enough is done to address the problems in the largest companies. Examples of interventions include the Digital Leaders Programme operating across local government and aimed to upscale the skills of those in government office. The Digital Champions Programme is aimed at CEOs

who understand what is happening in technology and how important it is to champion what it can do in businesses.

Mairi MacLeod said that it was good to see a holistic overview happening. While the funding of projects from EU pots and SCVO was welcome something more should be made available from the domestic pot. The findings of the business survey were similar to those of the Communications Consumer Panel's survey.

It was thought that the Business Excellence Partnership and Education Scotland were looking at skills from each perspective. Liz Leonard commented that large companies could enhance skills work through their CSR activities working with schools and colleges. GD said that the connections with schools were good and while there were a lot of spot interventions it could potentially do with being more coordinated. LL wondered that an overarching policy lead might help in the same way that SCVO were currently doing. Sally Dyson of SCVO said that they had got positive feedback where they were sharing activity and they hoped to publish activity via the Digital Scotland website to prevent duplication and to shorten journeys to good outcomes. There were a number of engagement events planned aiming to foster cross sectoral collaboration.

Michael Fourman (MF), Royal Society of Edinburgh, questioned how we are going to take the interventions that are happening and scale them up across the country as often digital participation strategies are only helping very small percentages of people. On education, there is yet to be digital literacy imbedded in the curriculum and the number of computer science teachers continues to fall. MF commented that there hasn't been enough done in schools yet.

GM advised that Education Scotland are intervening and large organisations will be given educational platforms. Better knowledge sharing is needed however, and work which spans education and corporate Scotland. AM contributed that as part of Curriculum for Excellence, there is an entitlement of every young Scottish learner aged 3-15 for digital skills in schools, but the challenge comes for maintaining this in those older than 15 when qualification choices are made. There have been declines in young people taking computer qualifications. However there are also not enough teachers trained in ICT subjects to fill the gaps. GM supported this by agreeing that changes in the curriculum would be welcome but these changes would not be enough without significant structural changes to address the falling teacher numbers and attitudes to computer subjects. MF added that all teachers should be trained in proficiency in IT.

WC commented that young people don't seem to want to make technology; they want to use it instead. WC agreed that radical intervention was needed to structurally change teaching in schools and universities.

Claire Mack (CM) commented that the missing link here was the General Teaching Council. The teaching of computer sciences hasn't appeared to be recently on their agenda and CM questioned whether anyone in the room had engaged with them on this.

A member offered to follow up with a contact at the General Teaching Council regarding new standards of basic digital literacy in schools.

WC asked GD whether there were any other international governments we can learn from on this topic. GD responded that computer science in many other countries sits alongside science subjects, whereas in this country it's aligned as 'business administration'. Changes are therefore needed in the positioning of ICT in schools but also with the general perceptions often associated with the subject. GM noted the gender differences in technology understanding, and negative perceptions from females who aren't interested as often associate computer science with 'geeky pasty boys'. By changing the image of ICT we are likely to get more females and younger people taking up the subject.

MF commented that computer science is not inherently gendered, as in other countries there are more women than men in the sector, largely because IT is usually a job that can be done from home. Gender inequalities are therefore put on by us.

Ian Watson said that teaching staff at all levels need to be better equipped, especially when it comes to their understanding of social media. No matter what subject is being taught, if you don't understand the channels to learn and share information you won't connect. This is not a digital world anymore, it is the world. GM commented that the SQA advisory council had held a discussion on technology in education, the impacts of it and the ability to manipulate technology. WC added that attitudes to access do not help, there are restrictions to prevent access from within an educational sphere. GD said this was the same for the public sector and many large organisations. Douglas White said that there was perception that this type of interaction doesn't constitute 'work' or valid tasks, GD said they had seen stats that suggested 25% of businesses didn't think there was a role for digital in their future business strategy.

GD stated that 25% of businesses questioned in the Digital Economy Survey did not see a role for digital in their future growth, and there were a significant number of small companies who simply didn't see that they were required to develop digitally. This demonstrates the lack of knowledge in the benefits digital can bring going forwards.

MF contributed that the focus on business today had been very helpful as usually the CPG has most discussion centred on how to get people digitally started and those who are at risk of exclusion in society. MF additionally mentioned the infrastructure issues linked to today's debate and queried what was being done about the core telecoms infrastructure in Scotland as he warned otherwise the likes of Skyscanner may simply up and leave. MF warned we must not forget to address the infrastructure problems as otherwise we will not be able to implement any of the participation strategies discussed.

VN and CM suggested addressing questions on infrastructure at a future CPG session as they agreed there was a great deal to say on the topic.

WC wraps up the meeting thanking the speakers for their presentations and all in attendance for their contributions. The next meeting will be in February 2015.