

Euroship, University of Sussex – Written evidence (FFF0011)

UK Parliament call for evidence:

Designing a public services workforce fit for the future

House of Lords Public Services Committee

The contact for this submission is Dr Rachel Verdin a Research Fellow on the EUROSHIP project. EUROSHIP is funded by the Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement 870698. The UK research team comprises of Dr Ann McDonnell, Research Fellow and Professor Jacqueline O'Reilly, the Principal Investigator on the project and co-director of the ESRC Digital Futures at Work research centre at the University of Sussex.

1. Summary

1.1 This response highlights evidence from EUROSHIP, a major EU Horizon 2020 funded research project, relevant to points 16 and 17 in the call for evidence: how to access hard to reach groups, create user centred public services and respond to user's needs.

1.2 Our evidence spotlights the barriers created by the need for digital identities and by the limited confidence some citizens' have of their digital skillset. This response highlights the importance of ensuring that citizens have the capacity and confidence to navigate the services required for daily life. As such, the public services workforce must understand these deficits and barriers to ensure they are equipped to manage and support these groups.

1.3 This evidence is based on on-going research funded by the EU Horizon 2020 Project [EUROSHIP](#). The UK team is based at the University of Sussex ESRC funded [Digital Futures at Work Research Centre](#). A core focus for our work is concerned with how the digitalisation of public social services are impacting on risks of poverty and social exclusion. The EUROSHIP research project examines this issue in the UK in comparison to other EU countries.

KEY FINDINGS

2. Digital Identities are not user centred

2.1 Research participants flagged how the pre-requisite of having an electronic identity in the form of a passport, driving licence or online credit check effectively restricted them from accessing some public services.¹ This feedback was received from a range of individuals. For

¹ Qualitative interviews were conducted with UK participants having experienced poverty at various

example, from a young mother trying to set up a childcare voucher account, to an older ex-homeless man attempting to understand how much state pension he could expect to receive. The impact of this barrier was significant, increasing their risk of poverty and adding to their sense of marginalisation. Their capability and sense of agency was further eroded, putting them off attempting to access other public services through digital platforms.

2.2 These insights were further explored using quantitative survey data from the [Eurobarometer 460](#) (2017) and [503](#) (2019) surveys.² These surveys were carried out before the pandemic and they reveal how citizens felt about sharing their digital information.

2.3 This survey data shows that more widespread use of technologies to secure online services would encourage usage (i.e., encrypted information or fingerprint recognition). This finding was particularly relevant for respondents in the UK (Eurobarometer, 2017: 17).

2.4 While overall citizens remained sceptical regarding how their data was being used, given the experience of the pandemic, the creation of vaccination passports and the escalation of digitalisations, there may now be a greater appetite to address these concerns.

3. The risk of users not keeping pace with development

3.1 Analysis of perceptions of digital skill levels in the Eurobarometer's has shown some expected differences in the gaps between different communities. The findings highlighted the impact of intersectional inequalities, as factors related to age, gender, education and household composition were relevant in determining how confident respondents were with their digital skill set. For example, the data shows that men, those who are younger, better educated, and living in dual parent households with children are more likely to have a more positive evaluation of their digital skill set.

3.2 The qualitative interviews showed how those at risk of poverty may be less able to meet the requirements specified. Given the divisive nature of these social demographic factors (age, gender, education and household composition), the barriers of access, described above, risk further deepening the digital divide.

points in their life course and considered how they accessed public services online, or not. This included respondents from diverse backgrounds, age groups, abilities and family type.

² Comparative quantitative evidence was amassed from two Eurobarometer surveys and the eGovernment benchmark.

3.3 The findings of the Eurobarometer may also be read in light of the [eGovernment Benchmark data](#). Analysis of these different data sets shows that citizens' attitudes towards digitalisation may not be keeping pace with development. The steady improvement in usability of online public services has not been matched by corresponding increases in positive attitudes and an increased sense of digital competence.

3.4 Ensuring that citizens feel a sense of agency in their ability to use online public services in a way that is meaningful to them is critical, given your goal to ensure services are user centred. In addition, the eGovernment 2021 [country factsheets](#), reveal that while the UK's performance in terms of online public service provision is relatively good, the UK performance is below average for the 'key enablers indicator' (this dimension includes electronic identification, electronic documents, authentic sources and digital post) (eGovernment, 2021: 102). This comparative European data highlights where the UK needs to improve and supports the qualitative findings outlined above.

3.5 Ensuring the public services workforce is fully alert to these digital deficits is critical when envisaging what a truly user centred perspective may look like. Perhaps more importantly this submission also highlights how the workforce may help to ensure that existing gaps do not widen.

4. Recommendations: Creating user centred public services

4.1 Our research shows that a user-focused approach to public services delivery will need to address the barriers to access and deficits identified. In order to do so information is needed to help citizens understand how some online public services may benefit them. The implementation of transparent terms of use may help clarify how their data will be used and in turn allay some of the concerns respondents highlighted.

4.2 More importantly, these developments could also allow for the introduction of more complex electronic forms of identity. The qualitative data has shown the need to offset the restrictive nature of existing requirements. This could be achieved through the creation of a digital identity for those who are accessing social protection benefits.

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