1. Introduction

As the authors of this response to the Call for Evidence, we, Professor Leela Damodaran & Dr. Josie Barnard, draw from our respective research and experience in consideration of this inquiry’s question, "what steps Government and others can take to maximise the potential benefits to well-being and minimise the potential harms that arise from the increasing use of digital technology". The work we bring together here has relevance, to varying degrees, to all the questions posed by the Inquiry. Since responding to the questions individually would result in a voluminous and unwieldy response, we have opted instead to summarise pivotal issues of digital exclusion and focus upon a number of overarching conclusions and recommendations in this short submission. Extensive supporting material is available on request.

The digital divide has been the focus of countless surveys and case studies. We shall not attempt to replicate the enormous body of research here. Firstly, we highlight the well-established and well-documented benefits which accompany increasing use of digital technology and then contrast these with the harms which result from being excluded from these benefits. Secondly, we identify solutions – i.e. ‘What Works’ principles (see below).

Benefits of digital participation:

• Enhanced personal health and well-being;
• Improved economic and life chances;
• Self efficacy;
• The development of new skills and capabilities;
• Enhanced civic engagement and participation;
• Social interaction and cohesiveness.

Harms of digital exclusion:

The benefits listed above are clearly not enjoyed by everyone in the UK. Despite extensive efforts and financial investment to promote digital engagement over more than a decade, in 2019, Ofcom reported that 13% of UK adults do not use the internet. This is a figure that remains unchanged since 2014, with one in three adults never using a computer to go online. This reality means that some of the most vulnerable people in society including lower socio-economic groups and older people are unable to benefit from the significant and life-altering advantages of digital technology and, consequently, lose out on the listed benefits of digital participation.

Efforts to bridge the digital skills gap have, in compliance with the UK Digital Strategy (March, 2017), focussed on promoting the acquisition of digital skills for business and the economy through well-developed ‘Basic Digital Skills’ and the ‘Essential Digital Skills Framework’. These established approaches have reached
many of those for whom they are applicable and relevant. They have left approximately 11.9 million digitally excluded people in the UK whose needs for informal human support to acquire digital skills are largely unrecognised and unmet.

Digital exclusion impacts the workplace, with 52% of the workforce lacking digital skills needed for work. Assumptions that negatively affect digital skills acquisition persist. For example, the widely held idea of the ‘digital native’ (whereby it is assumed that young people, simply because of their age, are adept with all new technology) inhibits young people’s digital skills acquisition and leads to workplaces and policy makers concluding that young people do not need digital upskilling.

Loneliness is a critical problem of the Pandemic. It will be important for citizens to rebuild contacts with friends and relations. Digital technology brings the potential for increased numbers and types of connections between citizens locally and nationally to be built. Citizens will need to be empowered to develop the ability to assess their digital strengths, weaknesses and, importantly, preferences.

Harms of digital exclusion arise as a result of pervasive barriers to digital participation. The common barriers are known and have been identified as the following:

1 Access issues/problems;
2 Low confidence;
3 Support Void;
4 Stress & Fear;
5 Poor Design;
6 Perceptual, motor and cognitive challenges;

The very serious potential harms that arise from the increasing use of digital technology in society are the multiple negative impacts of digital exclusion on these individuals in every aspect of their lives.

To mitigate these harms of digital exclusion, solutions (i.e. ‘What Works’ principles) already exist to counter these common barriers and are listed below:

1 Ease of access;
2 Empowerment of end-users;
3 Appropriate design;
4 Light-touch administration;
5 Continuity of individualised human support at home / in the community;
6 Building confidence;

The solutions are thrown into sharp focus by reports of the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic that emphasise the highly visible increased uptake and adoption of digital technologies, which has occurred at a significantly accelerated rate. This major change is attracting much attention – not least because some of the
changes which are occurring during the Pandemic are in fact changes which have been sought for many years with relatively limited success. Two particularly evident examples are: (i) the move from office working to home working; and, (ii) the rise in the digital participation of many digitally-disadvantaged people, particularly older people.

Far less attention has been addressed to the reasons underpinning the second and unprecedented phenomenon above – yet, unless we understand the factors that have led to increased digital participation, we shall not be able to either sustain change where it is seen to be beneficial or mitigate the impacts where they are potentially damaging.

A consequence of the sheer pace of change in the digital sphere is that, across demographics and age groups, ongoing digital upskilling is and will remain necessary. Individuals’ empowerment and creative flexibility are key components of digital upskilling that can last in the context of fast-paced technological change and so help ‘future-proof’ citizens.

The Pandemic has put under the spotlight many pre-existing issues in society such as deprivation and inequality. The inequalities revealed included the wide variation in levels of digital capability that exist in society. It is increasingly evident that the digital capabilities necessary to function in the workplace are a long way out of the reach of many of the 11.9 million people currently digitally excluded in the UK. In the past, substantive investment in digital ‘upskilling’ has been addressed to people of working age. What is required now is to balance this with efforts to promote widespread participation.

**Recommendation**

Our recommendation, informed by wide-ranging research, is to address digital exclusion as cause of significant and enduring harms and exacerbated by a dramatic upsurge in use of digital technologies as an ongoing impact of COVID-19 by implementing the following steps:

- Encourage and promote the emergence of welcoming, small-scale, low-cost, accessible, informal and easily recognisable digital hubs/ clubs in familiar venues in communities.
- Co-create free, sustainable digital support for people in local community hubs and clubs which are ‘Go-To’ spaces where people can depend on availability of in-person learning, help and advice that is relevant to all aspects of their digitally-enabled lives (including: managing their finances; accessing healthcare and government services; education; communication with family and friends; travel; shopping online and taking part in cultural and leisure activities).
- Enable the delivery of readily available digital support that is user-led and responsive to local needs through the small-scale, localised nature of these digital hubs/clubs.
- Adopt an holistic approach to one-to-one digital support for all, making it as simple and non-threatening as possible to gain reliable help, acquire new skills and stay connected. Extend the simplicity to a light-touch approach to administration and evaluation.
• Ensure that learning experiences are as informal and supportive as possible, enabling users to gain the confidence and security to pursue their goals and passions and to follow their own agenda.
• Support training with focus on development of creative flexibility that empowers and so enables robust, sustainable digital upskilling.
• Utilise publicly-funded buildings, existing infrastructure, skills and assets already present in many communities as venues for developing digital hubs in familiar, informal, welcoming venues, keeping costs low, promoting sustainability and local ownership.
• Consider carefully the issue of appropriate stewardship of widespread community-based digital hubs. Achieving a consensus on this would arguably be the responsibility of local councils and involve trusted entities, with an on-going, sustainable and reliable presence in the local community (community groups, faith groups, local councils etc).

There are strong arguments for provision that has the primary purpose of enabling digitally (and often socially) disadvantaged people to participate in the digital world being publicly and corporately funded. Governments worldwide, national institutions such as the NHS, and global businesses including banks and technology companies benefit from people everywhere being able to participate confidently in the digital world. Organisations that are dependent on widespread digital participation for their success are well-placed to take responsibility for underwriting and enabling the roll-out and continuity of the essential underpinning digital support infrastructure. There is a compelling case for major global beneficiaries and corporate users of online systems to take responsibility for funding universal access to the internet, a freedom that is increasingly recognised as a human right.

Connectivity should complemented by readily-available digital devices and accessible human support in local venues in every community, at no charge to the end-user. Underwriting sustainable and on-going resourcing by stakeholders as indicated above could enable and underpin confident and comfortable digital participation without incurring financial cost to end-users. Significantly, such a guarantee of reliable digital and support infrastructure in every community for use by everyone in it, irrespective of their personal financial situation, would liberate numerous small charities, community groups and organisations from time-consuming, recurring requirements to fund-raise to pay for such provision. Freedom for such organisations from the demands and constraints of compiling and submitting competitive funding bids and grant applications would free resources in those organisations to enable and empower the digitally-excluded to join the digital world in rewarding and worthwhile user experiences.

It is through such widespread, community-embedded, confident and comfortable digital participation “that the Government and others can expect to maximise the potential benefits to well-being, and minimise the potential harms, that arise from the increasing use of digital technology”. The know-how to achieve this exists. What is required now is for the findings and recommendations to be actioned with well-resourced, local, community leadership, and ‘grass-roots’ involvement.
Select bibliography:


Damodaran, Leela; Burrows, Helen (2017) 'Digital skills across the lifetime – existing provisions and future challenges: How can slower adaptors to changes in technology be equipped to develop and maintain digital skills for (a) the increasing proliferation of online services; and (b) the future workplace?’ *Foresight, Government Office for Science*. Government Office for Science: Digital Technologies and Social Inclusion (DTSI) Group


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