Connecting older people:

A workshop report for consultation

Introduction

Older people (aged 65 and over) are the most likely group of society not to be connected to the internet (only 28% of older people are connected[1]). With more and more government and business services going on-line older people will find they are unable to access critical services and miss out on the best consumer deals. An ageing population requires a suitably skilled older workforce but with so many older people digitally unengaged this isn't presently the case. A key question to be answered by policy makers is "What are the implications for an inclusive society or for UK plc as a whole of doing nothing?" The Consumer Panel believes that the present situation needs to be remedied if we are to avoid the increasing isolation and exclusion of older people from our society.

On 12 June 2006, the UK Government, Ministers of the European Union, Member States and accession and candidate countries, European Free Trade Area countries and other countries adopted the EU Riga Declaration on e-Inclusion. It set out a number of specific targets:

- To significantly reduce regional disparities in internet access across the EU, increase the availability of broadband coverage in under-served locations and aim for broadband coverage to reach at least 90% of the EU population by 2010
- Halve the gap in internet usage by 2010 for groups at risk of exclusion, such as older people, people with disabilities, women, and unemployed persons
- Assess (by 2007) the need for new approaches (including legislation and public procurement) to ensure access for disabled users to Information Society tools and services
- To ensure compliance of 100% of public websites to common standard and practices for web accessibility by 2010

In addition to the political work at the EU level, the Government will be reviewing its *Connecting the UK: the Digital Strategy* in 2008 to update it and take it forward. To assist the government in this work, the Consumer Panel published its research *Older people and communications technology* and convened a workshop with deliverers of local initiatives to increase participation, industry, think tanks and government on the 5 July 2006 to discuss what can be done to aid older people to get on-line. The following is a brief breakdown of the key issues that emerged from the day. We are consulting delegates and others on the key policy implications and we welcome your comments.

Presentations

Fiona Ballantyne, Panel Member, Ofcom Consumer Panel, Older People and Communications Technology

James Thickett, Head of Market Intelligence, Ofcom: Consumer Engagement with Digital Services

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[1] Consumers and the communications market: 2006; Ofcom Consumer Panel, pg. 32

[Helen Milner, UFI, Executive Director, Group Strategic Business Development Officer: Helping to Deliver Government Services](#)

[Dr Alan Clarke, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), What is required to deliver policies and programmes to connect Older People to the internet?](#)

[Nancy Johnston, Age Concern, Technology & Communications Development Manager: How to Deliver Programmes on the Ground](#) & handout: [Connecting Older People](#)

Key issues

'Voluntary' Exclusion?
Attitude is important but many can be persuaded
Minimise the cost barrier
Improve relevance, communication of benefits and taster sessions
Improve usability
Improve media literacy skills
Targeted programmes are needed
Resourcing programmes to tackle the divide
Use volunteers to increase skills
Construct a cost benefit analysis
Introduce co-ordination of efforts to achieve digital inclusion
Key policy implications

'Voluntary' Exclusion?

Many thought the term 'voluntary' exclusion, used in the Panel's research, *[Consumers and the Communications Market: 2006](#)*, was too strong. It was argued that a person has to have a clear understanding of what being on-line means before they are able to make an informed choice about whether or not to use the internet. Some delegates felt this was not the case as those interviewed had never been on-line.

Attitude is important but many can be persuaded

Older people are not homogenous. The Consumer Panel's research report *[Older people and communications technology](#)* revealed that whether or not older people choose to be on-line is largely a result of attitude. The importance of peoples' attitude was reflected in [James Thickett's presentation.](#) The research also revealed that a proportion of older consumers would engage if they were provided with the right type of support. This finding was supported by [Helen Milner of UFI,](#) [Alan Clark of NIACE](#) and [Nancy Johnston of Age Concern](#) who also presented at the workshop.

However, people's attitudes are flexible and they may be abstainers one day and resisters the next. And while research may say that attitude is the key factor to being on-line, behind that attitude may lay a whole host of other factors such as their financial position – therefore concerns about cost can underpin an observed attitude.

Minimise the cost barrier

Cost is a factor. Many older people live below the average national level of income and the cost of purchasing hardware, the monthly cost of broadband or the hidden maintenance cost will be a barrier to many. Research by government into this area revealed that 77% of older people[2] had said that cost was an issue to being on-line. It was mentioned that people will give a different level of priority to being on-line against their other purchasing decisions. Some delegates felt that lower costs would enable more consumers to get on-line.

There is also a cost associated with people's time - the time required to obtain the right equipment, to set it up and learn ICT skills. And there may be a further financial cost if a person wishes to attend a course and learn the required ICT skills.

Improve relevance, communication of benefits and taster sessions

People will only go on-line if they are convinced there is 'something in it for me'. Benefits and services – not technical information - need to be advertised, explained and demonstrated.

Industry advertises its products and services using technical jargon (e.g. broadband speeds, gigabytes, ram). These terms are meaningless to many people, including those who are already connected. Also industry is marketing to a plateau-ing market of those connected and thus ignoring a substantial latent market – people yet to connect. Between 2004 and 2005 there was a rise of only 1% in households having access to the internet.[3]

Relevant content is needed to encourage use.

Taster sessions are valuable. They involve demonstrating websites and on-line network groups of possible interest such as gardening, cross–stitching, life histories on-line banking, holiday searches and booking facilities, as well as finding government services via Directgov.

Improve usability

User-friendly interfaces are a key component to increasing the confidence of new users of ICT and benefit everyone. This is also true for those services that use computer-type delivery platforms (e.g. public kiosks that deliver information on government services).

Improve media literacy skills

Consumers who are digitally unengaged often lack the skills needed to use the equipment and go on-line. Also, some may have concerns about the quality of the information found on-line and/ or security issues, e.g. of personal information and viruses. These broader literacy skills are required in addition to the technical skills needed to use the internet. It was noted that the Department for Education and Skills (DFES) does not have media literacy as one of its policy objectives.

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[2] Connecting Older People: Helping to Deliver Government Services; Helen Milner's presentation, slide 13
[3] Consumers and the communications market: 2006; Ofcom Consumer Panel, pg. 32

Targeted programmes are needed

Many older people often lack the confidence to 'experiment' with unfamiliar technology for fear of breaking the equipment. Older people need the support of suitably skilled people to teach them in a safe environment. This environment has many components. The physical environment is an important element. Many older people may be deterred by formal education – they may have had a bad experience of education as a child. They may doubt their ability to learn new skills and may not have thought about education for decades. Those who have attended formal ICT training may have had a bad experience. To overcome this, it is important to think about locating the programme in informal and familiar settings (for example, at home or in community halls and care homes). Each location has its own intrinsic values and advantages and they all have their limitations.

Sessions facilitated or taught by appropriately skilled peers on a one-to-one basis or alongside peers are also important in creating a safe environment. In successful programmes the trainer acts more as a mentor than teacher. Inter-generational teaching has been used but there is concern that this would be a less acceptable alternative to many older people.

Programmes must focus on older peoples' learning needs. They need appropriate programmes tailored to their skills level - which invariably requires a course that starts from the very beginning (e.g. how to turn the computer on, what is a mouse).

The technology skills demanded of consumers are not just required when using computers. The courses could recognise and assist people in the use of the many other similarly-challenging delivery platforms (e.g. ATMs, touch screens for purchasing rail tickets).

Resourcing programmes to tackle the divide

There was consensus on what made a good programme. However, the lack of support for co-ordination and financial resources to scale up these programmes nationwide limited the positive impact such programmes could have on the digital divide.

Many successful projects cannot increase their scale because they do not receive the required funding. Industry (e.g. Microsoft, Intel, BT) provides financial support for initiatives. In Scotland, digital inclusion initiatives have been supported by the lottery. There is a need for an evaluation programme to understand which projects work in order to target resources more effectively. It would also be helpful to the voluntary and community sector to be able to access central information about possible sources of funding. A yet more efficient option would be a centralised source of government funding for digital inclusion.

DFES has a lifelong learning strategy yet funding is restricted to time-limited, qualification-focused courses for working age people. Funding needs to be made available to support informal teaching by volunteers.

Use volunteers to increase skills

Because of concerns about budgetary constraints and understanding of what makes an effective program, volunteers were seen to be the most realistic route to increasing the provision of appropriate skills training. Volunteers are likely to be older people because of people's time constraints. This may prove helpful. However, volunteers are not necessarily available at the right time nor have the required skills set. More needs to be done to increase the numbers of people volunteering who have the right skills and increase the skills of other volunteers

There is need to look strongly at the voluntary and community sector as it is this sector that has the experience and the expertise to deliver sustainable solutions and not the government. People are not guided by government but by friends, families, peers and communities. What government can do is to try and create a mechanism to engage more effectively with this group at a local level and provide network support.

Construct a cost benefit analysis

To have an impact on Government policy and to draw in all the potentially beneficiary departments (e.g. Department of Health (DoH), Department for Work & Pensions (DWP), it was suggested that the business case in terms of cost-savings for public bodies by delivering services on-line taking into account the required financial support to help older people on-line to access these services should be made. It was noted that this is a highly complex task. But as part of the government on-line service trials in the south west a cost benefit analysis is being undertaken. It was thought that the study could be utilised to create the business case. It was recommended that case studies of the retail sector's experience of putting services on-line would be another useful resource.

Introduce co-ordination of efforts to achieve digital inclusion

Addressing digital inclusion requires co-ordinated effort across a number of Government departments. This effort should include those who are the beneficiaries of enhanced internet usage, e.g. DoH, DWP, and the Department for Transport (DFT) as well as those with more direct responsibilities for delivering a successful digital inclusion policy, e.g. DTI and DFES. However, not all of these departments have targets that reflect this. In addition, nobody 'owns' the digital inclusion issue – either in terms of strategic policy-making or at an operational level. There are numerous programmes being undertaken delivered across Whitehall but there is no overarching policy team that reviews what needs to be done to ensure people use the services once they are on-line.

Policy suggestions

The following are policy suggestions that emerged from the workshop. Please note: the suggestions do not necessarily reflect the views of every participant. The Consumer Panel is currently reflecting and prioritising these suggestions in dialogue with key stakeholders and we welcome any feedback you may have.

Government

1. In light of the Riga 2010 declaration, the Minister of State for Industry & the Regions at the DTI should take a co-ordinating role across the relevant government departments for digital inclusion policy. The role would include evaluating and producing best practice policy for the UK's digital inclusion projects and ensure that resources (financial or otherwise) are of an adequate scale, sustainability and targeted effectively

2. To aid efficiency, the Treasury should be the central source of funding for programmes that help people get on-line.

3. Government should produce a cost-benefit analysis of the current digital strategy and desirable improvements drawing on the experiences of the British Retail Consortium's use of on-line services. This analysis should review what impact the move of services to online has been and what the economic and social implications are for UKplc if nothing is done to promote and enable older people's connectivity. The government could draw on the experiences of the British Retail Consortiums use of on-line services and their evaluation programmes when scoping this project.

4. DFES' remit should be expanded to include older peoples' formal and informal ICT education within its life-long learning strategy and media literacy.

5. The DTI should review whether incentives can be made available to employers to encourage staff to volunteer and teach ICT courses. The initiative should be supported by a recruitment campaign for volunteers.

6. The DTI should review the financial assistance / subsidies it provides consumers to overcome the initial hardware and ongoing cost barriers to internet usage.

7. The DTI should work closely with the appropriate bodies in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales and the Regional Development Agencies to include digital inclusion issues in their economic and social inclusion agendas and to take a co-ordinating role for inclusion programmes.

8. The DWP should enforce the accessibility legislation for websites.

Industry

9. Industry, retailers and content providers should help create an environment where being on-line is seen as relevant to older people through accessible advertising language and content provision. It was felt the BBC has a key role to play in promoting the benefits of internet take-up and could do a "web-wise week" targeted at older people.

10. The retail sector, led by the Radio, Electrical and Television Retailers' Association (RETRA) should provide advice that suits older peoples' equipment purchasing needs.

11. The CBI should work with relevant partners to improve media literacy training for the older workforce. A joint partnership between the CBI, the TUC, government and the third sector could help improve older people's media skills.

12. Industry should better co-ordinate it's funding and support of the third sector's programmes for older people to help foster best practice and sustainability.

Ofcom

13. Ofcom should continue to monitor the outcomes of geographic de-averaging in the broadband market and ensure that availability and innovation of all communication services are available to the UK as a whole. It should ensure that a beneficial regulatory environment delivers affordable solutions to all citizens and consumers.

14. As part of its Section 10 duties Ofcom should work with the Disability Rights Commission, Royal National Institute of the Blind, the Royal National Institute for the Deaf and other key disability stakeholders, manufacturers and software developers so that useable equipment and software are developed.

15. Ofcom should continue to promote media literacy and promote awareness and understanding of the internet and its use. It should encourage older peoples' learning by working with education providers and manufacturers and work with all key stakeholders be they industry, charity, government and the appropriate bodies in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

The Third Sector

16. The third sector should deliver programmes tailored to the needs of older people. They should draw on best practice which has emerged from programme evaluations. This has shown that this should include internet taster sessions.

For all

17. All those involved in improving digital inclusion should think beyond the traditional view of an internet connection and PC terminal and look at digital solutions and different delivery platforms that can enhance older people's digital engagement and lives.

18. Where appropriate, the lessons learned and the infrastructure developed to assist vulnerable consumers to make the switch to digital TV should be harnessed. Lessons could emerge from the training provided by retailers to its staff in helping consumers make the appropriate purchasing choices or the assistance provided to help install and use the equipment.