

Spreading the Benefits of Digital Participation

A Response to the Royal Society of Edinburgh Inquiry, June 2013

1. What do you think are the current benefits of digital participation and using the internet?

The internet has become a part of everyday life for a significant proportion of the population, offering benefits in several areas, including: direct access to information and resources to support lifelong learning and democratic participation; more convenient/widespread access to services and goods, which may also be cheaper online; enhanced communication opportunities; access to wide and varied forms of multimedia entertainment and cultural content; enhanced employability; and the wider economic opportunities associated with engaging with the digital marketplace.

Digital participation opens up all of these benefits to individuals, which then brings associated benefits to wider society.

2. What are the potential benefits?

Although technological advances in the future may mean that there is huge potential for the internet to evolve and offer new benefits in other aspects of life, the real untapped potential at the moment lies in transforming the benefits that are currently experienced by some into a reality for all citizens.

3. How can the benefits be maximised?

The key to maximising the benefits for all of society is to secure the digital participation of a greater number of citizens in our society, by ensuring that adequate opportunities for digital participation exist for all. Digital participation cannot be seen as a fixed endpoint that we will reach by a defined date; as technology continues to advance - bringing rapid changes in hardware and software platforms, and the services they enable - there will be an ongoing need to support our population to keep pace with advances in the future.

Scotland's public libraries have an established track record in supporting digital participation through the network of around 520 branch libraries - from the implementation of free internet access in Scotland's public libraries back in 1999, right up to the most recent round of [Public Library Quality Improvement Matrix](#) (PLQIM) funding which enabled such innovative programmes as Aberdeenshire's *Cool Computing for Couthie Customers*, the *Grangemouth Digital Work Club* and Glasgow Life's *Silver Surfers*.

These library programmes reach out to all members of our communities, encompassing those who have been identified as being at most risk of digital exclusion, such as older people and those on low incomes¹. Scotland's public library network is an integral force in combating the digital divide and can play a significant role in maximising the benefits of digital participation, extending these to all in society.

4. How can the benefits be promoted?

Scotland's library network makes a significant contribution to promoting the benefits of digital participation, from the user education programmes delivered in school, college and university libraries, to the beginners computer classes held in public libraries.

5. How could Scotland benefit from wider digital participation and use of the internet?

National benefits of wider digital participation could include: an information literate population with the ability to succeed in education; increased economic output from harnessing the advantages of the digital marketplace, as well as the productivity benefits of a more highly skilled workforce; improved communication and collaboration within and between our communities; and potential cost savings associated with being able to offer a greater number of public services online on a 'digital first' basis, in keeping with Scottish Government strategy and the recommendations of *The McClelland Review*².

Obstacles

6. What risks do you associate to digital participation?

The main risk associated with digital participation lies in measuring participation solely in terms of access to the internet. Although internet access is of obvious concern, consideration must be given to what constitutes meaningful participation; not all internet users can be considered active digital participants. For example, it is not sufficient for people to be able to download and use the latest apps on a range of devices if they cannot complete an online job application, or find relevant and credible information on health issues. Meaningful digital participation can only be achieved if we support our citizens towards information literacy.

7. How can such risks be addressed?

It must be recognised that digital participation and internet use are not one and the same; rather, full digital participation relies not only on know-how regarding technology but also on information literacy skills. For full and active digital participation to be achieved, people need to acquire the associated skills – to search effectively, to evaluate information, to be aware of copyright and licensing restrictions and to observe internet etiquette. School

¹ Scotland's Digital Future: *First Annual Progress Report and Update- 2012*

² *The McClelland Review of ICT Infrastructure in the Public Sector in Scotland* (2011)

libraries have a pivotal role to play in this process, and should be supported in embedding information literacy in library programmes to contribute to delivering the *Curriculum for Excellence*. Public libraries have a role to play – alongside libraries in colleges and universities – to ensure that information literacy can be developed throughout life.

8. What prevents you from using digital technologies and the internet?

The reasons given for not using the internet in *Scotland's People Annual Report: Results from 2011 Scottish Household Survey* only present part of the picture, and the Carnegie Trust UK report *Across the Divide: Tackling Digital Exclusion in Glasgow* raises some challenging issues about the nature of the problem that must be addressed in order to secure wider digital participation.

Any solution must take account of the availability of the technology – the combined cost of devices and connectivity will always present a significant barrier for some, therefore, we need to ensure that access to the internet and technology is made freely available. However, as technology advances in the future, our population will need ongoing assistance to keep pace; those who are confident digital participants today could very well find themselves excluded in 10, or even 5 years' time due to the rapid rate of change.

Incentives

9. What could be done to increase your use of digital technologies and the internet?

At the most basic level, the use of digital technologies and the internet should focus on what value they have to offer to people in their everyday life. More people will make the switch to using online services if they believe that doing so offers some added value, such as saving time, money or effort. The problem at present is that this perception does not exist for the 25% of Scotland's population who do not use the internet; perhaps because, for them, the effort required to do things online is greater than the traditional method.

The Scottish Library and Information Council is working with the Scottish Government Digital Participation team in order to address this situation. We are currently developing a resource to highlight free public technology access points and learning opportunities in our communities, including public libraries and other organisations. As well as being presented digitally via a postcode searchable website, this information will also be reproduced in alternative formats to facilitate distribution to those groups most at risk of digital exclusion. In addition to this, SLIC is appointing a dedicated officer with responsibility for developing the public library digital learning offer. We believe that this will maximise the efficiency of public libraries in contributing to the digital participation agenda, and increasing the use of digital technologies and the internet across the whole population.

10. What incentives could be used to increase digital participation?

The greatest possible incentive for digital participation is for it to make life, or at least aspects of it, easier or better for its users. For this to be achieved, people need to be in a position to take advantage of digital technologies. As a society, we need to ensure that all of our citizens have access to technology and have the means to develop their skills in order to make full use of that technology. Content creators also have an important role to play in developing user friendly, accessible online services that encourage take-up amongst less confident web users.

The Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC) is the advisory body to the Scottish Government on library and information services. SLIC offers leadership focus and support to a membership base that includes public library services as well as libraries in schools, colleges, universities and a broad range of specialist information services.