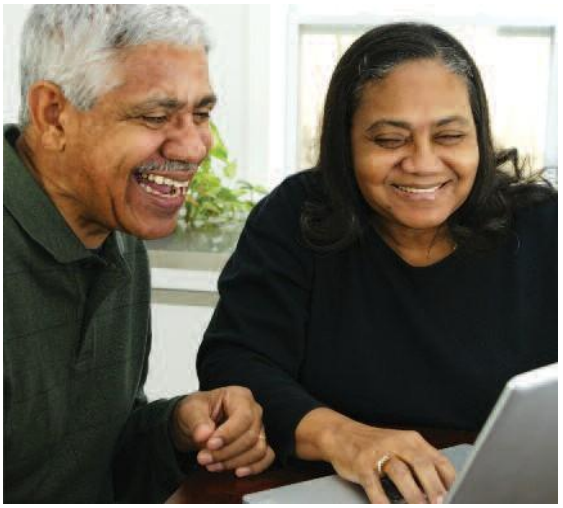
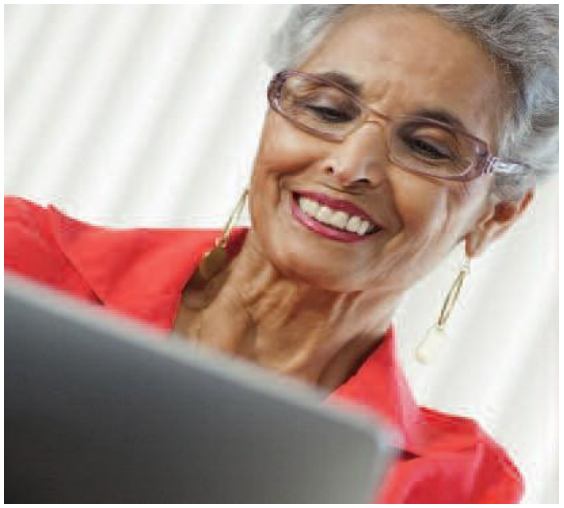
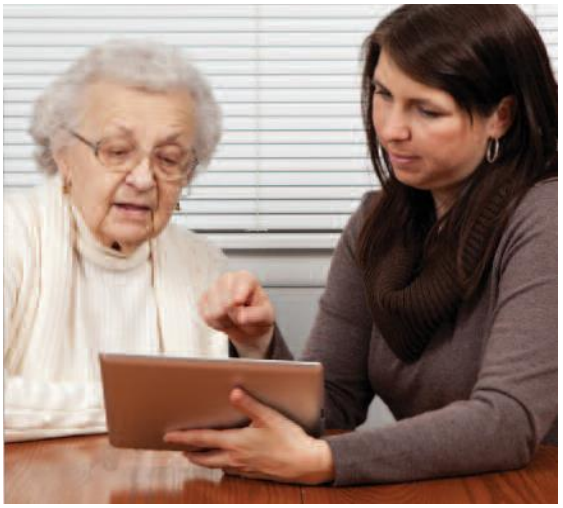
Promoting Digital Participation







The proposition: Community hubs

Meeting older people's technology support needs, developing social communities and reducing isolation

nda PROGRAMME new dynamics of ageing a cross-council research programme

Sus-IT Keeping silver surfers on the crest of a wave

kt equal Exchanging Knowledge | Extending Quality Life

Loughborough University

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Introduction

Digital information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as email, the internet, digital television or radio, have in a relatively short space of time become central to society, economy and culture. Commercial and social uses are many and widespread, and increasingly basic government services are migrating to digital means.

At the same time we are living longer and the size of our 50 plus population is set to grow significantly. This is a powerful population group in terms of political influence, economic impact and societal contributions and the influence of this group is increasing for governments, commerce, public sector bodies and the voluntary and charitable sectors. It is known that digital ICTs have the potential to support older people to live independently, promote social inclusion and facilitate access to commercial and government services. This population is also incredibly diverse such that while some will have had no contact with new technologies (and so they may need help to get online thorough initiative such as Race Online 2012) others are active and enthusiastic users of new technologies.

There has been a great deal of emphasis in the UK and across the globe on getting people "online" (shorthand here for use of the internet and digital technologies) so that the economic and social benefits are truly maximized for individuals, for commerce and for general societal well-being. This is important, particularly as internet access is becoming viewed as a basic human right (Berners-Lee 2011).

However, persuading older people to go online may be easy compared with keeping them there long-term. An issue that is not being tackled beyond some notable localized projects is how to help older people to stay connected given the barriers that they can face and which can quickly erode their confidence. The sorts of barriers faced by older people can include;

- Physical changes, e.g. eyesight, hand dexterity, mobility.
- Psychological and cognitive changes, e.g. confidence, memory.
- Social changes, e.g. family members moving away.
- Technology changes, e.g. new versions of familiar things.

In 2004, the UK government's Digital Inclusion Panel warned that because of such changes there was a real risk that in the medium to long term significantly more citizens will migrate from being digitally engaged to being disengaged than the other way round (Digital Inclusion Panel 2004: 79)

Keeping older people digitally engaged for as long as possible has wide ranging benefits to them, it reduces the call on public services (cost savings) and opens up a market of online commerce, entertainment, communication etc. Added to this, as people who have used digital technologies as an integral part of their lives become older and/r impaired in some way they will still expect to enjoy the social and economic benefits of digital engagement – they will demand it as a basic right! Yet while investment is strong in bringing older people through the 'entry barrier' to become internet users, supporting continued ICT use relies on goodwill, unstable funding regimes and fragmented efforts.

What causes individual people to become digitally disengaged is highly varied. The factors involved manifest themselves in numerous permutations and combinations (ill-health, impairment, bereavement, loss of ICT support, isolation, to name some of the commonly experienced ones). This means that there is no 'silver bullet' to address them and the challenge is to explore, deliberate and recommend hybrid solutions for adoption nationally.

Research into potential solutions to digital disengagement

Research into potential solutions to digital disengagement has been conducted under the RCUK funded ‘New Dynamics of Ageing’ Programme, through the Sus-IT project (based at Loughborough University) and through the EPSRC funded KT-EQUAL (“Knowledge Transfer for Extending Quality Life”) programme. Older people and other potential users of the research in local government, in business and in the third sector have participate throughout. This research has provided a rich understanding of what older people require to enable them to remain connected as they age. As such the findings are highly relevant to concepts such as “digital by default”, “assisted digital” and the delivery of Universal Credit.

It is clear from research that, to be successful, solutions will need to be “socio-technical”. In other words, they will include hardware and software that is user-friendly in its capability to be adaptive and customized to individual needs and human, social and technical support that is affordable and accessible to older and disable people (in the home and in the community). Appropriate venues for such provision will be physical spaces that ate familiar to and frequented by older people and which have an infrastructure – such as those that already exist as libraries or community centres and the new emerging multi-access centres delivering local government services. Innovative funding models and revenue streams will be an essential part of any viable, sustainable blueprint for national implementation to support such community provision. For example retailers, such as supermarkets with a commercial interest in having more people learning to do online shopping and mobile phone/computer retailers interested in reaching the older market, might offer ‘elder-friendly’ demonstrations of ICTs and perhaps offer an advice ‘clinic’ for people encountering problems with their products and services.

Dissemination of key findings and suggested approaches

Dissemination of key findings and suggested approaches to sustaining digital participation of older ICT users as they age has taken place through a series of roundtable events from September to November 2012. Each roundtable considered (i) the issues of digital disengagement by older people and how to mitigate the risks, and (ii) as draft specification of the support requirements of older ICT users and recommendations for the provision of such support across the UK. Each roundtable was tailored to the interests and focus of specific groups of key stakeholders including:

- Older people as ICT users
- Government, public and third sector interests
- Technology providers/mobile phone operators
- Hardware and software product designers and developers
- Commerce and retailers (e.g. online retailers, supermarkets, banks etc).

Representatives of the above stakeholders have now been brought together with the goal of producing a consensus-based draft specification and recommendations to inform the planning and implementation of a solution to deliver on-going ICT learning and support which will be readily accessible in communities and in homes across the UK.

The key features of the proposition to be deliberated are described in the following pages.

The proposition: Community hubs.
Meeting older people's technology support needs developing social communities and reducing isolation

The challenge

Learning to go online is only the beginning of the digital engagement journey. Once the initial learning experience has passed older users' new-found confidence can quickly be eroded by encountering physical, psychological, social and technological barriers. Through engagement with the Sus-IT and KT Equal projects older people have clearly articulated what they need to help them become and remain confident participants and contributors in the digital world, with all the benefits and satisfaction that brings. There are two key areas for improvement: the design of technology products and services, to make them easier to use and more accessible, and the provision of on-going support and capacity building opportunities. Examples of support and capacity building needs include:

- Problem solving/troubleshooting
- Choosing products and software/applications
- Developing capabilities and confidence (from beginner to advanced)

An overarching requirement that emerged from the research was that provision of these support opportunities should be embedded in enjoyable and rewarding activities.

The solution to these challenges proposed below was developed collaboratively between older people, researchers, third-sector providers and other key stakeholders.

The solution

Community Hubs to provide an accessible, readily available ICT support infrastructure for all across the UK. These Hubs will enable older people to solve their problems, engage with friends and family, and pursue their passions, enabled by their use of information and communications technologies. In short, to manage their lives better and enrich their life experiences. By creating diverse communities of digitally engaged older people, they will also offer a rich and important resource to designers and developers seeking to create useful, usable and accessible ICT-based products and services for older people.

Community Hubs will meet older people's ICT support needs by:

- providing opportunities for varied forms of digital engagement to meet the wide-ranging needs and aspirations of older people;
- being user-driven and locally run, reflecting local needs and local assets;
- offering independent trusted advice in a 'clinic' or 'helpline' style, with advice on solving
- ICT problems and choosing products and software;
- enabling older people to engage in activities of their choosing,
- E.g. digital photography or joining health-related networks so new skills are purposeful.

"We should not consider increasing online presence among older people on its own; it is easier to bring people together as a community and to make using the internet part of that."

Adam Hillmore DWP 2011

Most importantly, Community Hubs will be socially embedded:

- They will use existing community venues such as drop-in centres, multi-access centres, village halls, libraries, schools, clubs and pubs;
- They will be informal and welcoming, offering opportunities to drop in for a coffee, meet friends, pursue hobbies in a relaxed and familiar setting with like-minded people;
- They will provide a venue for bringing different generations together in inter-generational initiatives led by local schools and colleges, enabling children and young people to give one-to-one support;
- They will enable people to share knowledge and pass on their skills.

The benefits

By supporting digital engagement in a way which meets the expressed needs of older people, Community Hubs will help to sustain on-going IT use and prevent or defer digital disengagement. They will enable older people to continue to access and enjoy the wide range of social, economic and other benefits that being online can deliver, and to remain independent for as long as possible. The social environment, as well as the social opportunities afforded by connectivity, will promote inclusion and help to reduce isolation. These benefits could in turn lessen demands on other (formal and informal) support systems for older people.

In supporting sustained online participation of older people, the Hubs will offer significant benefits for businesses that provide online services, e.g. banks and retailers, and for the public sector by supporting the use of online government services by the general public. The Hubs will also provide a platform for retailers and service providers to demonstrate their online services, provide information and support, build capacity in the older population, encourage customer loyalty and develop customer engagement. They will provide retailers with marketplaces for technology products (including assistive technologies) and opportunities for 'pop-up shops' and 'try-before-you-buy' services.

By creating diverse communities of digitally engaged older people, Community Hubs will provide opportunities for hardware, software and web accessibility designers as well as those researching and developing services for older people to come along and find out about their users' needs and preferences, and to trial and test prototypes and products. In turn this will enable them to better target and design products and services to appeal to the older market.

The funding

Securing funding from various sources will be essential if the Hubs are to meet the two key requirements for support which is (i) widely available across the UK and (ii) available on an on-going basis. In developing the proposition of Community Hubs, older people sought better use of existing venues and ICT infrastructure as a cost-effective approach to adopt. It is clear that there is significant value and benefits from having pro-active and enthusiastic online participation of older people for businesses and government alike. Both in terms of increased business and cost savings, investment in the Community Hubs would seem to make good business sense.

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Meeting the needs of older people

Social activities

- Meet and make friends
- Relaxed, familiar surroundings – halls, libraries, pubs etc.
- Coffee and cake mornings
- Show-off photos/films made together
- Swap knowledge and tips

Information/advice

- Readily available independent trusted advice
- Help with choosing products and software/applications
- Knowledge share, swap tips, give & receive advice
- Where to find help outside of the hub.

Hobbies/online entertainment

- Digital photography
- Family history
- Crafts (e.g. card making)
- Virtual worlds and games
- BBC iPlayer, ITV Player, 4oD

Try before you buy

- Smart phones; Software; Applications

Lifestyle

- Online communication (e.g. Skype/e-mail) and social networking (e.g. Facebook/MSN/Instagram)
- Online shopping
- Paying bills (e.g. paying council tax)
- Using price comparison sites
- Accessing public services (e.g. renewing vehicle license)

Problem solving and competency building

- Troubleshooting and problem solving (hardware and software)
- Managing computer and internet security
- Identifying and meeting accessibility needs
- Building competency and confidence – extending existing skills and acquiring new ones
- Participation in research and development

Health benefits

- Social contact both 'face to face' and ICT enabled
- Online access to health professionals

ICT community hub

Delivering benefits for key stakeholders

Public sector

- Assisting users to access local/national government online services (e.g. Universal credit, Housing, Adult social care)

ICT designers and developer's

Including hardware, software, website and accessibility designers

- Research Users' needs
- Trial and test prototypes and products

On-line retailers

- Demonstrate their online services
- Provide on-going learning and support
- Build capacity in the older population
- Encourage customer loyalty
- Develop user/customer engagement

Health professionals

- Facilitate early intervention
- Enable remote access to older people
- Opportunities to gain an awareness of the interfaces and technological aids that may be available to support older people in retaining their engagement in ICT and therefore increasing autonomy and independence.

Technology providers/retailers

- Pop-up shops
- Try-before-you-buy services
- Marketplaces for technology products

"The courses that we run here, not so much the accredited courses, you will have the same people quite deliberately coming at the same time to become friends. You'll have more of that than you would with the accredited learning…"

Saltburn Centre, Trainer

Contact Us
Please contact us if you would like to get involved with any aspect of this programme to develop community venues to promote digital participation of older people or if you would like to know more about the research on which the proposition is based.

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Community hubs – meeting older people's ICT learning and support needs

ICT learning and support for older people

Learning to use new technology is only the beginning of the journey to competent and confident use of information and communication technologies. Many older people encounter challenges and frustration in usage, including physical and cognitive limitations (especially with memory), inadequate support and/or technology problems/changes. The majority of ICT courses and campaigns to promote internet use are centred on initial learning - rather than on sustained usage. Once training is over, older people can feel alone, anxious and frustrated when experiencing problems with on-going ICT use. Findings from the Sus-IT project indicate that on-going provision is patchy, limited and often has to rely on unstable funding regimes and fragmented efforts and goodwill.

As part of the Sus-IT project, a digital engagement survey of over 750 older people was conducted. This showed that 56% of older people said they regarded support as the most important factor in sustaining their digital participation. Evidence also indicated that older people would like ICT learning and support opportunities that are user friendly, accessible affordable, local, adaptive and embedded in purposeful and enjoyable activities. Similarly, findings from the research suggest that once older people are doing what matters to them, facilitated by ICT use, they are more likely to be motivated to continue their participation in the digital world and to progress to being 'digital by choice' in other areas of their lives.

To meet the requirements articulated by users, possible solutions were explored in a co-production process involving older people, practitioners and researchers. From this process, the concept of community hubs or clubs emerged. This has now been developed as a detailed and well-informed proposition (see http://kt-equal.org.uk/uploads). This proposition, extensively deliberated with a range of key stakeholders, has given rise to a forward action plan, which is included in the consultation report by St George's House (see http://www.stgeorgeshouse.org).

Community hubs proposition

Community hubs are envisioned as a one-stop shop, enabling older people to solve their problems, manage their lives, enhance their well-being, engage with friends and pursue their passions empowered and enabled through their use of technology. Evolving from existing venues, hubs will facilitate a social experience, build confidence, prolong digital engagement and reduce the stresses and anxiety commonly associated with a lack of ICT support. The activities of the hubs will reflect local interests and promote a sense of ownership and empowerment. Furthermore, the hubs could serve as a source of trusted independent advice to support users in the procurement of appropriate technology to suit their needs. Enriching their life experiences by creating better opportunities, community hubs will create a nation of digitally engaged older people who are comfortable and competent in the digital world.

Sustaining digital engagement

Community hubs will assist in sustaining usage of ICTs by older people and will prevent or defer digital disengagement. Helping older people remain independent, the hubs will allow access to the wide range of social, economic and other benefits that being online can deliver.

Promoting inclusion and helping to reduce isolation, community hubs will therefore ease the demand on other support systems for older people. The hubs also offer benefits to businesses, providing a platform for retailer and service providers to demonstrate their online services, provide information and support, build capability in the older population, encourage customer loyalty and develop user engagement. Additionally, community hubs will provide opportunities for hardware, software and web accessibility designers to evaluate older users' needs and preferences, and to trial and test prototypes and products. In turn this will enable better targeting and improved design of products and services that appeal to the older market.

Funding and sustainability

Many resources will be required to ensure community hubs become widely available across the UK on an on-going basis. The use of existing but underused venues (some of which will already have an ICT infrastructure) to accommodate hubs offers a cost-effective way to promote digital participation of older people. It is clear that significant value and wide-ranging benefits can be expected from having a pro-active and enthusiastic online older generation – offering advantages for businesses and government alike. Both in terms of increased business and cost savings, investment in community hubs would seem to make good business sense, as they offer potential benefits to the digital economy and to society at large.