British-Irish Council

Digital Inclusion Work
Sector Symposium 2023

Foreword

On behalf of the British-Irish Council (BIC), the Chair of the Work Sector for Digital Inclusion and the Scottish Government, we are delighted (to) present this report on the Digital Inclusion Symposium, "Thriving in a Digital World". The BIC Digital Inclusion Work Sector was established in 2009 and since then, member administrations have maintained their passion and commitment to reducing digital exclusion across these islands. The pandemic and its impact created more momentum in this space than ever seen previously. With everyone required to stay at home, connections with others through digital across our work, business, education and social interactions became crucial to our mental wellbeing, and played a pivotal role in delivering public, private and third sector services. Today, the evidence for digital inclusion remains as compelling as ever. Many across these islands face hard choices between being able to afford connectivity or doing without. The impact of this can be significant, in preventing someone from applying for work, from receiving support through benefits or through human contact with others. This Symposium sought to connect all of us in this space who want to change the digital landscape to make it as inclusive as possible for everyone. The impact of the Symposium could (will) be felt for years to come and (will) make a lasting change to those who are digitally restricted. We hope that this event brought together new partners to tackle digital exclusion and allow(s) everyone to thrive in a digital world.

Summary

The Thriving in a Digital World symposium, hosted by the Scottish Government in Edinburgh on 25 April 2023, brought together a diverse group of stakeholders from across the member administrations' public, private and third sectors. The event showcased an extensive range of projects, policies, and learning experiences in digital inclusion from across these islands and further afield.

The day was enriched by the diversity of perspectives and the breadth of topics covered. Participants gained invaluable insights into the ongoing work of digital inclusion, and many formed connections that are expected to result in future collaborations.

Some Projects Discussed

Government of Ireland's Digital Inclusion Roadmap

The Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO) presented Ireland's Digital Inclusion Roadmap, which aims to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to use digital services in a meaningful way. The project has involved a working group, consultations with voluntary organisations, and extensive national and international research. The Roadmap aligns with the EU Digital Compass and is structured around four key pillars: Business, Infrastructure, Skills, and Public Services. The initiative seeks to address issues related to Access, Affordability, and Ability. Plans are also underway to develop a Digital Wallet aligned with EU credentials. The Roadmap also encourages revisiting front-of-house support and reallocating resources that are freed up by digitalisation. The notion that "digital first is not digital only" was emphasised, and it was announced that further consultation and awareness-building campaigns will be conducted through gov.ie. The Roadmap is slated for publication at the end of June 2023.

The Digital Inclusion Roadmap is a comprehensive initiative that aims to ensure equal opportunity for everyone in Ireland to access and use digital services. It addresses key issues of Access, Affordability, and Ability and aligns with EU strategies.	The Roadmap is not just about digitalisation; it also includes plans for reallocating front-of-house resources and ongoing consultations to ensure that the digital transformation is meaningful and inclusive for all citizens.

Leeds Libraries

Leeds Libraries discussed the vital role that libraries in Leeds play in promoting digital inclusion. The libraries aim to tackle poverty and inequality by offering support for digital access, improved digital literacy, and a wide array of digital content. Extended opening hours and free computer access ensure that libraries are accessible to everyone, irrespective of age or background. Staff serve as digital champions, offering their skills and expertise to those in need. Leeds Libraries have an award-winning online platform that offers videos and tutorials for individuals at various stages of their digital skills journey. A considerable challenge for the libraries is communicating the importance of digital skills training, prompting investments in marketing and communication strategies.

Libraries in Leeds play an essential role in mitigating poverty and inequality through digital inclusion initiatives. Extended opening hours and free computer access make these spaces accessible to all.	Marketing and communication strategies are crucial for amplifying the message about the importance of digital skills training in the Leeds community.

LibrariesNI

LibrariesNI provided an overview of their organisation, established in 2009, as the statutory library service provider for Northern Ireland. With almost 300,000 active customers and over 5 million visits per year, it is the largest single library authority in the UK. Instead of using the term 'digital inclusion,' the term 'digital choice' was discussed, emphasising that people should have various options and opportunities within the digital realm. Strategic partnerships, such as the Go ON NI program with the Department of Finance, are crucial for delivering digital skills and programs. LibrariesNI also focus on reach, reputation, and brand as essential factors in helping the citizens of Northern Ireland adapt to a digital world.

> LibrariesNI emphasises 'digital choice' over 'digital inclusion,' advocating for a variety of digital opportunities and options for Northern Ireland's residents.

> Strategic partnerships like the Go ON NI program are essential for the implementation and success of digital skills training in Northern Ireland.

Communities NI

Supporting Communities as an independent charitable organisation in Northern Ireland focused on community participation, active citizenship, and building inclusive communities. At the core of their mission is digital inclusion, which extends beyond basic tasks like checking emails to encompass how people interact with the world. Through the Go ON NI digital skills project, nearly 4,000 people have gained basic digital skills and 96% expressed interest in further training. A key aspect of the programme is online safety, educating participants on safe practices such as keeping devices updated and verifying website legitimacy. Colm also showcased an inspiring video where digital skills training recipients discussed the transformative impact of the programme on their lives.

> Digital inclusion is more than just acquiring basic skills; it's about transforming how individuals interact with the digital world. The Go ON NI project has been highly effective, with 96% of participants keen on further training.

> Online safety is an integral part of the programme, ensuring that participants not only gain digital skills but also understand how to navigate the online world securely.

Cyber Security Centre Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Cyber Security Centre is focused on improving the region's resilience against cyber attacks. Working with the public, private, and third sectors, as well as citizens, the centre aims to enhance knowledge of online security and boost online confidence. The CyberUK event, held in Belfast for the first time, was discussed as part of a broader initiative to bolster Northern Ireland's cyber resilience.

Cyber resilience is crucial for thriving in the digital world; hence, the centre's focus is on broadening people's knowledge about online safety and increasing their confidence in digital spaces.	Public and private sector partnerships are crucial for advancing cyber resilience, as demonstrated by the CyberUK event held in Belfast.

Digital Strategy for Wales

The Welsh Government's Digital Strategy for Wales, published in March 2021, comprises six missions steered by an iterative Delivery Plan. One of the major themes is digital inclusion, specifically Mission 2, aimed at equipping people with the skills and confidence to engage in an increasingly digital world. Ministers have different responsibilities for various Missions in the strategy, which aligns with their portfolio areas. The pandemic has shifted the discourse on digital inclusion, making it a pressing concern across all policy areas linked to public services.

The Digital Strategy for Wales puts a strong emphasis on digital inclusion as its Mission 2, aiming to empower individuals with the required skills and confidence for the digital world.	The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped the focus on digital inclusion, making it an integral part of public service policies.

Minimum Digital Living Standard

The Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS) is a benchmarking tool that adapts as technology and skills evolve. The MDLS methodology takes a citizen-centric approach and encompasses a range of 'entry-level' digital goods and services. Two MDLS research projects are underway: one in the UK funded by the Nuffield Foundation and the other in Wales funded by the Welsh Government. Initial results identify several barriers, such as connectivity issues and affordability, which the final MDLS reports, due later in 2023, will explore further.

MDLS serves as a flexible benchmark for digital inclusion, incorporating both technology and skills. It is designed to adapt to technological changes and new skill requirements.

Research is underway to validate the MDLS across various household types, identifying key barriers like connectivity and affordability that need to be addressed for widespread digital inclusion.

Digital Communities Wales

Digital Communities Wales (DCW) discussed the current state of digital exclusion in Wales. According to the National Survey for Wales, 7% of the population is digitally excluded. DCW operates on joint funding from the Welsh Government, encompassing both social justice and health sectors, with a total contract value of £12 million. The health funding aspect is crucial for impacting the health sector. DCW underwent an evaluation in 2021, which resulted in a theory of change and a new set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to provide a clear future direction. DCW's model focuses on collaborating with organisations that directly assist digitally excluded individuals, operating across Wales and in various sectors.

The session emphasised the importance of the joint funding from social justice and health sectors, especially the latter's influence on healthcare digitalisation efforts.

The 2021 evaluation was a turning point for DCW, introducing a theory of change and new KPIs that outline a clear roadmap for the programme's future.

Ethical and Sustainable Digital Inclusion - Gartner

This session focused on the intersection of ethical and sustainable digital inclusion. The speakers revealed that in Scotland, 64% of children own a tablet while the remaining 36% do not. They underscored the environmental impact of these devices, with each tablet responsible for 119 kg of CO_2 emissions. A transformational change is urged to reduce this impact. They highlighted initiatives like refurbishing laptops to ensure every child in school has access to a laptop, thus maintaining inclusivity while reducing environmental harm. The conversation also touched upon the need for a multi-faceted policy approach, considering cultural, economic, and environmental impacts. They called on the government to move beyond merely numerical considerations to address this as a systemic issue. Finally, the speakers discussed how tech companies could work on recyclable technology and engage in a circular economy to counter rapid obsolescence due to software updates.

A multi-pronged policy approach is required to address digital inclusion, one that balances inclusivity with environmental sustainability. This includes refurbishing laptops and urging tech companies to adopt more recyclable practices.

The problem is systemic and fundamental to society, necessitating a cultural shift among consumers and a rethinking of practices by both government and tech companies. It's not just about numbers or connectivity but about creating an ethical and sustainable digital landscape.

Manchester City Council

In the session, the focus was on the importance of collaboration for addressing both local and strategic challenges related to digital inclusion. The speakers emphasized the longstanding symbiotic relationship between Manchester's combined authorities, highlighting how a local understanding greatly enriches the digital inclusion narrative. Social housing programmes have been instrumental in making strides towards greater digital inclusivity. While digital inclusion has always been a complex issue, the pandemic exacerbated the situation. Both speakers stressed the role of organisations and local authorities in providing support. They argued that digital inclusion should be a manifesto commitment and pondered whether government intervention could further build trust in these initiatives, such as placing official logos on promotional materials.

Local understanding and collaboration among Manchester's combined authorities have been invaluable in promoting digital inclusion, underlining the importance of a grassroots approach to tackle the issue effectively.

The complexity and urgency of digital inclusion demand it to be a manifesto commitment, with possible government intervention serving as a trust-building measure.

Greater Manchester Combined Authority

Greater Manchester Combined Authority pointed out that Manchester ranks as the eighth most deprived city in England, with 21% of households left with less than £30 at the end of each month. The speakers discussed how collective bargaining among multiple organisations has led to more significant amounts of funding being secured for digital inclusion projects. They highlighted the Greater Manchester Databank initiative, which has provided 20,000 people with free SIM cards. Instead of distributing devices to individuals, they opted for a strategy of giving them to organisations for a more extensive reach. They are also collaborating closely with social housing providers. The key learning highlighted was that digital inclusion is a universal service and obligation that needs to be integrated into public services like healthcare.

Collective bargaining has proven effective for securing more substantial funding, showing the power of organisational collaboration in driving digital inclusion.	Digital inclusion is not an isolated objective but a universal service that must be tightly interwoven with public services. This includes healthcare and social housing, underscoring the multi-sectoral approach necessary for achieving maximum impact.

Your Digital Champions Need You

This session examined the dynamic challenges of digital inclusion, highlighting the shift from a pre-pandemic focus on digital skills to an emphasis on connectivity and devices. The speaker pointed out the value of a place-based approach that takes health and social care considerations into account. Digital Champions were described as the linchpin in these efforts, serving as change-makers in all sectors. They not only help people get online but also understand the motivations and barriers, such as privacy and security concerns, which were highlighted in the Lloyds Consumer Index. The speaker shared insights from partnerships with Connecting Scotland and SCVO, advocating for a multi-sectoral collaboration to tackle the systemic issues around digital inclusion effectively.

Digital Champions are indispensable in the digital inclusion landscape. They serve as change-makers and problem-solvers, understanding both the motivations and barriers faced by those seeking to be digitally included.	Digital inclusion is a complex, systemic issue that needs a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach. This involves everything from addressing connectivity and device issues to alleviating user concerns about privacy and security.

Smart Island Initiative

The Isle of Man Government presented the Smart Island initiative, an Internet of Things (IoT) project aiming to use technology and data to create inclusive societies. The initiative emphasises collaboration with key industries to capture real-time data for the benefit of all residents. A major priority is Positive Behavioural Outcome, designed to help the Isle of Man thrive. Among proposed projects are air quality devices in classrooms to enhance learning environments.

To promote understanding of the initiative, educational infographics will be utilised. The speaker also discussed the engagement of ministers and leaders as Smart Island champions to align the project with broader government strategies. Practitioners and experts are being consulted to design solution-oriented projects, with skills, motivation, confidence, and access being considered key elements in project design. The speaker also mentioned small scale trials, such as the First Steps to Digital Literacy training, and the crucial role of the new Get Online Centre in digital skills training.

> Collaboration with key industries and stakeholders is central to the Smart Island initiative. This will involve collecting real-time data and using it to promote Positive Behavioural Outcomes and inclusivity on the Isle of Man.

> The focus is not just on technology but on educating the public and fostering digital literacy. Small-scale trials and new centres like the Get Online Centre are instrumental in identifying gaps and tailoring support for users.

E-Estonia

The Symposium heard about efforts made by the Government of Estonia to 'go digital'. The speaker outlined how 99% of state services were online in Estonia, how 51% of voters now vote online, and the way in which, in Estonia, a tax declaration can be completed in under three minutes. Important to all of this is inclusion and IT literacy, as is cybersecurity. In discussion, the Symposium talked about the challenges of engaging harder-to-reach audiences and of workforce.

> Key to making digital government work in Estonia has been building the necessary digital infrastructure, political readiness and willing, a programme of training for the public and officials, and simple design.
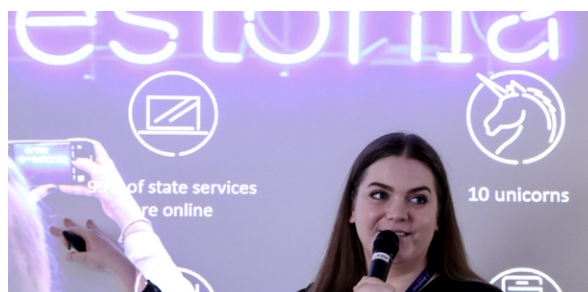
Symposium Programme - 25 April 2023

9.00

Open Networking, Stalls and Exhibition Space

Vodaphone, Microsoft, BT, Lead Scotland, People Know How, Tech We Trust, Maddie Is Online, Digital Ethics Gold Badge

9.40

Introduction from Scottish Government

9.50

Cross-Sector Collaboration Panel

Scottish Government, Isle of Man Government, Meta, Learning Foundation and Digital Poverty Alliance, Vodaphone, Meta

10.20

Welsh Government's Digital Strategy

Welsh Government

Minimum Digital Living Standard for Wales and for the UK

University of Liverpool, Good Things Foundation, Loughborough University

Digital Communities Wales – Digital Confidence, Health, and Wellbeing

Cwmpas

11.10

Periodic Table of the Internet and User Centred Design in Digital Inclusion

Snook

11.30

Workshops

Cyber Security and Digital Inclusion

NI Cyber Security Centre, Supporting Communities NI

Education and Cross-Sector Collaboration

PwC, Digital Jersey, Government of Guernsey, Government of Jersey

Ethical and Sustainable Digital Inclusion

Garner

12.00

Lunch

12.35

Digital Inclusion in the City of Manchester and Greater Manchester: Collaborating to Address our Local and Strategic Challenges

Manchester City Council, Greater Manchester Combined Authority

13.00

e-Estonia – Digital Public Services, Infrastructure, and the Future

Government of Estonia

13.30

Breakout Presentations

Your Digital Champions Need You

SCVO

Digital Choices – Inclusion Through Libraries

Leeds Libraries, Libraries NI

Isle of Man Government's Smart Island Initiative

Isle of Man Government

14.00

Keynote speech

Scottish Government

14.15

Breakout Presentations

Government of Ireland's Digital Inclusion Roadmap

Government of Ireland

Making Sense of Media

Ofcom

Digital Infrastructure and Connectivity

14.50

Open Networking & Symposium Close