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Transforming not excluding – the impact of information technology and innovation on later life

Report of a Symposium on digital inclusion
held on 8 January 2015 at the Palace of Westminster



Working in partnership with Age UKs in the South East

SEEFA is the South East England Forum on Ageing. Our aim is to bring people together to influence later life strategies, policies and services to make life better for current and future generations of older people. SEEFA's Policy Panel aims to work with policy makers, service providers and planners to actively engage with them to make later life better now and in the future.

Age UK in the South East comprises a network of independent charities working locally in the community to provide services and activities to inspire, enable and support older people. Age UK's vision is for a world where everyone can love later life.

On 8 January 2015 seventy five later life, digital inclusion and design experts, business leaders and representatives of central and local government came together in Committee Room 4A in the House of Lords at the Palace of Westminster to share views and debate how to work together for a better later life experience. The subject of the Symposium was: transforming not excluding: the impact of information technology and innovation on later life.

The debate was hosted by Lord Filkin CBE, Chair of the Centre for Ageing Better and chaired by David Brindle, public services editor of *The Guardian*. We were privileged to have the following to start the debate: Baroness Sally Greengross OBE, Chief Executive of the International Longevity Centre; Dr Ros Altmann CBE, National Older Workers Champion; and the Rt Hon Paul Burstow MP, former Minister of State at the Department of Health.



Background to the debate

Few would dispute that digital innovation has the potential to transform the lives of us all and bring better health, increased longevity, improved wellbeing and many other benefits.

However, we know that the older you are the less likely you are to be on line. Whilst overall 87% of adults in the UK have used the internet, only 37% of over 75s have used it.*

Around 6 million people aged 65 and over do not have the internet at home, 3.7 million of whom are aged 75+. Age UK states: ‘older people with lower economic wealth, those living alone and those with relatively worse health are less likely to be on line’.

The SEEFA Policy Panel states: ‘Age is a great asset and the older population contribute enormously to the social and economic fabric of society. Our challenge is to make sure the benefits of digital innovation are not denied to those who need it most’.

Peter Dale, Chair of SEEFA, comments: Older people are currently disadvantaged and excluded within an increasingly complex and technology based society – is this a new form of poverty? Society imposes technology driven processes on older people and there is an assumption that everything should be done on line. If older people do not have the resources to buy into the necessary technology or if their understanding of it is limited, then they will be unable to engage with these processes and will inevitably experience exclusion.

But it is not simply about access and understanding. There is a sense in which older people are ‘out of step’ with the culture and values of contemporary society, where, partly as a result of available technology, they face an unfamiliar world of internet deals, multiple providers and complex choices resulting often in paying more for services than they need to. A key question is therefore: is this simply a transitory state of affairs? Will future generations of older people, more familiar with technology, no longer experience such exclusion, or will they face a new set of problems as society changes? Is each generation of older people ‘left behind’ in some way?

* ONS Data Q1 2014 and Age UK Digital Inclusion Evidence Report 2013

Technology already creates benefit for older people. In particular medical technology results in better health and increased longevity. Call systems provide security for 'at risk' older people and enable them to remain independent. There are a number of sophisticated monitoring systems under the umbrella of 'assistive technology' that have the potential to support vulnerable older people in their own homes. The concern is however that this technology is being rolled out too slowly and its benefits are not being felt widely enough. Why is this?

The over-riding issue is: what drives the development of technology and who is it aimed at? It appears that older people are excluded from this area of life in the same way as they are in other areas. Who is thinking about the potential of technology to transform the lives of older people? What work is being done to examine specific ways in which technology could improve day to day life? Is the technology industry, whether the business or academic community, aware of how technology can meet the needs of older people? Or are they more concerned to produce advanced technology as part of the leisure market for younger people, even though some of this technology would enhance the lives of older people? For example, voice command, would help so many older people who through poor vision or frailty struggle to operate their TV remote control. So why, with so much possibility, is society choosing not to deploy its technological creativity to serving the interests of people in later life? Whom do we persuade and who will take up this challenge?



Questions for the Symposium debate

In what was a highly participative Symposium discussion, we heard views from a wide cross section of the audience. The 3 hour debate centred around the following key questions developed by the Policy Panel:

- Is digital exclusion a new form of poverty?
- Is the digital divide actually increasing rather than decreasing?
- Are older people being ignored as a potential market for new digital products?
- How can we maximise what technology can offer whilst retaining the benefits of face to face interactions?
- Would digital products be better if older people co-designed them?
- What can be done to overcome barriers deterring us from using on line communications?
- What key actions can movers and shakers from industry and government make to include the whole population in digital innovation and its benefits?

Key themes

‘Increased longevity is a great asset to us all’

We must think of ageing as a great asset and consider how to maximise continued contribution for as long as possible through later life. Digital developments could be enormously helpful if they can focus in where they can add value.

‘Some people appear to have been forgotten’

There was agreement that the digital divide is widening. This applies to people of all ages but is particularly noticeable with increasing age.

‘We have exploded the myth that this is a transitory problem’

Digital exclusion is not a transitory problem. Even those who are currently technologically competent run the risk of being left behind due to the volume and pace of change. We must not assume in our planning that at a fixed future date the problem will have gone away. Change is always going to be ongoing and the need to adapt faces all ages.

'Take a long term view of the costs of digital exclusion'

The point was made that we cannot afford not to make digital developments accessible to all. If we are to reduce healthcare costs, keep people working past 65, drive economic efficiency etc everyone needs to be included. If digital technology is to pay dividends we should be planning for the long term and investing now.

'Treat people as individuals, not just as older people – and find out what they want'

There was concern that assumptions are being made by digital innovators about what older people want and these assumptions could be based upon misunderstandings. There was a strong call for drawing upon older people as a source of information to improve product design.

'If we work together we can come up with something good?'

Where there is genuine collaboration between those using products and services and the providers, everyone benefits. It was felt that the concept of co-production should not only be embraced but also better understood.

'Good design is about simplicity'

Complex design can be off putting. The point was made that barriers faced by the digital novice could feel insurmountable. People feared expensive repairs, cyber crime, lack of technical support, break downs, built in obsolescence etc.

It was said that designers from industry and public services tend to 'go for the novel and attractive' rather than building on what has already been shown to work. There is a tendency for technology to make things faster and smaller while people really want things to be 'simpler, slower and bigger'.

Access to broadband posed another barrier, especially in rural areas where we find a disproportionate number of older people.

'Older people could be digital champions and trail blazers'

The more we are inclusive in our thinking, the more helpful ideas we can come up with. The best way to learn about new things is to have an enthusiastic helper.

'Older people know what they want. We need to take notice'

There was acknowledgement from the industry that older people know what they want. There was a call for better listening because this could pay dividends. Specifically mentioned were: free broadband access, using our TVs rather than laptops, a \$7 computer, already developed in the US, reliable hardware, reliable helpdesks, simple instructions.

'Give us the choice'

A fear was expressed that we are being given no choice but to go on line, alternatives being withdrawn or being expensive. Sometimes it feels as if older people are 'blamed' for being out of date or resistant when in fact they just do not have information. There was widespread agreement that we should not be thinking of replacing face to face communications altogether.

'No business can afford to ignore the needs of older consumers'

A question was posed about how the older consumer is viewed in the digital marketplace. Did the older consumer have enough information about products? Is marketing primarily directed at younger age groups? Or maybe there were too many misunderstandings and stereotypes about 'older people' as consumers. Was the industry 'missing a trick' in potentially ignoring this group?

'Local Authorities should take a leading role: The Care Act is an opportunity'

The Care Act was seen as an opportunity for local authorities to use digital technology to help them fulfil their new duties to provide preventative services to maintain people's health.

Having access to good quality information about care, health, finances, local services is known to be important in promoting independence and preventing admissions. Enabling patients to become experts in their own conditions is known to be a factor in reducing ill health.

Paul Coles, Chair of South East Age Concerns, comments: When responding to the challenge of the Care Act providers of preventive health and care services should plan ahead bearing in mind older peoples' wishes. The Care Act under Paragraph 6.34 states that if a person does have substantial difficulty, the local authority must find someone appropriate and independent to support and

represent the person, for the purpose of facilitating their involvement. Information technology can assist local authorities in their provision of care as part of a package of support. Local authorities should be working with their providers of independent advocacy to ensure that advocates understand the full range of technological assistance provided by the authority and have the skills to assist older people in understanding how technology can help meet their expressed needs. Local authorities should consider setting up supported user groups where older people can learn from their peers on how to maximise the benefits of the supportive technology provided.

Age UK's report 'Promising Approaches to Reducing Loneliness and Isolation in Later Life' * identifies that 23% of people aged 75+ who live alone do not see or speak with someone every day. Local authorities and providers of digital products and services should look at developing local based social media platforms as part of a menu of services to combat loneliness and isolation in older people.

* Campaign to End Loneliness: Kate Jopling, January 2015.

What needs to happen next?

SEEEFA and SE Age UKs are committed to engaging further with later life, digital inclusion and design experts, business leaders and representatives of central and local government, combining forces with the Age Action Alliance, The Age of No Retirement and the academic community.

Local Authorities should consider their role in assisting all members of the community with digital access and ensure older people are not excluded. Opportunities need to be created for partnership working with local organisations, including more intergenerational initiatives.

When responding to the challenge of the Care Act providers of preventive health and care services should plan ahead bearing in mind older peoples' wishes.

Businesses should realise the enormous potential of the later life market.

Providers of digital products and services should look at working with older people on 'co-producing' the design of goods and services. There is so much more that could be achieved.