A New Governance Model for Delivering Digital Policy Agendas: A Case Study of Digital Inclusion Amongst Elderly People in the UK

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ABSTRACT

The UK has, in common with many developed countries, a growing elderly population, and within this demographic, digital exclusion is now seen as social care issue. This has become a policy challenge for local government that has an equivocal track record, from e-government to smart cities, of implementing digital policy agendas. This failure has been attributed to a policy implementation approach rooted in a model of governance that is no longer fit for purpose. This has been acknowledged by some local policymakers who are now experimenting with new, more cost-effective ways of addressing this challenge. This article examines how one local authority developed a project to co-create digital applications for elderly people. It presents a case study of a new, more collaborative, and innovative approach with urban actors who have not traditionally been involved in delivering this policy agenda.

KEYWORDS

Collaborative, Co-Production, Digital Exclusion, Elderly, Governance, Public Value

INTRODUCTION

There has been policy concern over digital exclusion since the release of the web-browser Mosaic marked the dawn of the internet age. There is little dispute that there was, and remains, cause for concern. The problem is that this has still not been adequately resolved and some commentators now worry that pushing on regardless with other ambitious digital policy agendas, smart cities for example, will only exacerbate existing inequality of access to digital services (see Townsend, 2013). Moreover, this failure to address digital exclusion appears symptomatic of both central and local government’s abiding inability to successfully implement much of its digital policy agenda.

As such, UK local government failed to deliver many of its e-government objectives under the modernisation programme run by the New Labour administration in the early part of this century. Nor was this failure attributable to lack of funding as Wright (2006, p 247) observed, the programme failed even though ‘...no other government has funded or conducted e-democracy initiatives on a similar scale’. The ‘Smart Cities’ programme is another example of an ambitious, well-funded, policy
failing to realise its stated aims. As one commentator (Robinson, 2016) notes, ‘…in the 20 years that the idea has been around, it simply hasn’t made a noticeable difference to economic opportunity, social mobility or resilience.’

And again, it is noteworthy in this context that the UK Government’s Digital Service has recently been evaluated by the National Audit Office who stated: ‘Digital transformation has a mixed track record across government. It has not yet provided a level of change that will allow government to further reduce costs while still meeting people’s needs’ (Clark, 2017).

Explanations for this abiding failure have been attributed to: misguided strategies (Pratchet, 2006); emphasis on the ‘citizen’ as ‘consumer’ (Fagan et al, 2006); and, the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm that has guided the delivery of local government public services for the last twenty years (Taylor& Lips, 2008, Osborne, 2006; Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013).

Nonetheless, the Government’s Digital Inclusion Strategy (Cabinet Office, 2014) places an emphasis on local government to address digital inclusion in its locality. This is a complex policy agenda for local government in the best of times and for an austerity driven English local government these are far from the best of times. The challenge of meeting this policy goal in the teeth of austerity should not be understated. UK local government is confronting increasingly adverse social and economic conditions. Unprecedented levels of cuts to public spending mirror an increasing demand for public services – and this is particularly true in Adult Social Care provision who are dealing with a growing elderly demographic whose level of digital exclusion is now seen as social care issue (Age UK, 2014).

However, there is a growing realisation amongst local policymakers that a new approach for delivering digital policy objectives is required (see for example Co-operative Councils Innovation Network ¹ and one of the winners of the Bloomberg Mayoral challenge: Kirklees Council²). Underpinning this is much academic commentary that has promoted alternative governance or public administration approaches. Osborne (2006), for example, has argued for a more public value orientation in the delivery of public services, an approach that is arguably more congruent with the networking and communicative affordances of digital technologies.

Notwithstanding this, there is little empirical evidence, certainly within the UK, that can be deployed to interrogate the efficacy of a different governance or administrative approach to digital policy implementation. This paper’s contribution is to present a case study of an innovative local government policy approach aimed at tackling digital exclusion amongst the elderly. It will proceed, firstly, by describing some of the issues associated with digital technologies and elderly people. It will then argue that new, more collaborative governance approaches are required if local government is to deliver this policy goal. The third section will present a case study of on the co-creation of digital applications for elderly people. In conclusion, I will discuss the problems and potential for developing a different governance model to fulfil this policy goal and argue that a ‘public value’ governance approach may be best suited.

**Digital Technologies and Older People**

The affordances of the digital age are now such that a United Nations report (2011) declared that access to the internet was a ‘catalyst’ for the enjoyment of human rights and was an ‘enabler’ of economic, social and cultural rights. Recent policy initiatives by the UK government: The Government Digital Strategy (Cabinet Office, 2012); along with the push to promote and develop Smart Cities (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2013), only serve to emphasise the requirement for citizens to possess basic digital skills.

Whilst those excluded from these affordances of the digital world are, in the UK, a declining number there remains a fifth of the population who have no basic digital skills (BBC, 2013) whilst over a tenth have never used the internet (ONS, 2016). The extent of such exclusion within the UK has prompted considerable policy activity by the Government. The Government Digital Inclusion
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