The Social Case for Digital Inclusion

NORTHERN
Housing Consortium
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This is the second briefing from the Northern Housing Consortium's series on digital inclusion. The first briefing, available [here](), dealt with the business case for digital inclusion, looking at how housing associations and local authorities can use technologies to protect income as well as diversify their offer to tenants.

This briefing will move beyond the financial case and on to the social case looking at how digital inclusion is being used by landlords across the North to reduce social isolation, boost skills, spread community cohesion and even help tenants to monitor their health.

The social case for a digital inclusion strategy was once considered secondary or certainly less pressing than the financial case. But it is now clear that many registered providers now see the benefit of prioritising both. Happier, healthier communities with closer bonds and less social isolation are more likely to be cohesive communities with less anti-social behaviour and a greater feeling of that occasionally elusive 'community spirit'.

While we can easily account for the relative success of investing in a digital strategy to tackle financial issues, it is more difficult to account for the cost/benefit of the social case for digital inclusion. The end result of the social aspect of any digital initiative can be as diverse as increasing community cohesion to lowering the number of referrals to local health partnerships. Additionally, there is a social case – as well as an economic case – to equipping tenants with digital skills as it is shown not only to boost employability, but also boost confidence. Such outcomes are difficult to measure in the traditional way.

Research undertaken by BT has shown that the social benefits of getting online are worth more than £1,000 to someone using the internet for the first time. This figure was arrived at from a combination of benefits ranging from financial savings; improved employment opportunities as well as reduced feelings of isolation and improved confidence. The same report also found that the social return on investment of BT's UK digital skills programme [Get IT Together]() is a return of £3.70 for every pound invested.

The Wellbeing Valuation framework, which you can read more about in this report, is another method of evaluating the social impact of digital inclusion. The methodology of this framework asks participants to rate their life satisfaction or wellbeing and then ask many more other questions about their life such as about their life generally, their wellbeing, their physical and mental health and their financial position. When this is combined with vast, already available datasets of national surveys, an analysis can then be undertaken to isolate the impact of any specific aspect of life on wellbeing. This is then valued by finding from the data the equivalent amount of money needed to increase someone's wellbeing by the same amount.

Stockport Homes
Getting Older People Online

Stockport Homes, an Arm's Length Management Organisation (ALMO) that manages a stock of around 11,000 on behalf of Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council, have specifically targeted their digital inclusion strategies towards older people to ensure that they become digitally proficient and not digitally isolated. Rather than an over-arching, ALMO-lead strategy, Stockport Homes have facilitated many individual community groups in bidding for funding to establish and maintain groups with a digital focus as well as breathing new life into community centres.

There was a concerted effort to identify the digital skills of Stockport Homes tenants over the age of 65. Their findings showed 64% of those customers surveyed were not using the internet or not prepared for the move towards the digital age. They also found that there was a strong correlation between computer skills and having regular access to the internet as well as a preference to use a traditional computer over a smartphone or a tablet. In face to face consultations, the two biggest issues identified by residents were the costs of computer hardware and broadband access as well as a lack of knowledge about the benefits of being online.

After this extensive research, Stockport Homes initiated a Digital Inclusion Strategy which emphasised 'increasing customer access to digital media through sustainable, easy access solutions'. To deliver its project, Stockport Homes approached Start Point, an award winning social enterprise and UK Online Centre, based in Stockport that specialises in 'learning where you are' opportunities that target people aged over 65. In 2012 funding cuts were imposed on Learn Direct, a key provider of IT training in Stockport. This resulted in a surge in demand for accessible and affordable computer courses which outstripped demand. Training requests to Stockport Homes alone increased from 95 in 2011 to 375 by the end of 2012.

Initially, £10,340 in funding provided IT taster sessions in Stockport Homes' sheltered housing schemes and 'IT and Tea' weeks delivered by Start Point in partnership with two TRA's. These introductory projects helped them to understand how older people enjoy coming together to learn in a social environment. Building on this, Stockport Homes' Funding Officer has helped many tenants and residents associations grow and develop by bidding for small pots of funding. One particular success has been Oldham Drive Estate Tenants Group which was successful with a series of funding bids to The Co-Operative, Forever Manchester and Manchester Airport. This led to the Oldham Drive Estate Tenants Group being awarded £28,000 of funding in 2013 over 2 year period from the Health Lottery.

'Silver Surfers' clubs established by Tenant and Residents Associations (TRAs) across Stockport began as small groups of older people who were keen to increase the number of people using community centres. Stockport Homes collaborated with the TRA's and Start Point to set up weekly computer drop-in clubs and sourced £52,000 to provide modern IT equipment, broadband access and training. Stockport Homes' Repairs 1st team volunteered its time and expertise to refurbish two community centres into modern and now well-used community assets.

Stockport Homes have attributed their success to the partnerships that have brought together customers, staff and Community Learning Advisors enabling skills and resources to be shared. Tenant and Residents Associations were empowered to establish their own community computer hubs, developing their skills in bidding for funding, managing large budgets and effectively running their local community centres. Projects have encouraged a shift away from formal IT training to community learning in a supportive setting, grounded in an ethos of enjoyment, common interests and sociability.

The initiative has produced clear outcomes for individuals and communities by connecting people both socially and digitally and transforming community buildings into appealing meeting spaces. Most importantly, Stockport Homes believe their initiative is sustainable because it has given *local people* the confidence, skills, knowledge and equipment they need to support each other in learning and getting online.

Since 2011, £120,000 in external funding has been sourced which has enabled the delivery of 19 community and sheltered scheme projects, including the establishment of three successful tenant-led community computer hubs that have brought older people and communities together. Funding has provided 18 months of tuition, IT equipment and free broadband access and regenerated community venues into inviting and modern meeting spaces.

Leeds Federated Housing
The HUGOs

Perhaps one of the boldest strategies for taking digital inclusion to the community can be found at Leeds Federated Housing, a social landlord with a stock of around 4,000 most in Leeds, Harrogate and Wakefield. The Helping U Get On (HUGO) initiative is part of Leeds Fed's skills and training programme but its remit extends far beyond that. It also provides a pop-up business school, activities for families and children (nail art etc.) as well as partnering with other local organisations such as the Live Well Project.

In addition to a conventional, static HUGO centre at Leeds Fed's office offering employment and skills training; Leeds Fed has an IT hub as well as an innovative HUGO bus. The HUGO bus (pictured below) is a specially adapted bus that serves as a travelling community centre and IT hub, travels around Leeds, Wakefield and Harrogate taking the chance to learn digital skills to the doors of more difficult to reach communities such as elderly residence schemes as well as a regular stop at a Job Centre Plus in the area.

The digital inclusion element of the HUGO project has sought to create a narrative through the use of the fictional Hugo family compromising of a grandfather, two parents, two children and a dog. Each generation of the family are at various stages of digital awareness: the children are digital natives, the parents are occasional users and the grandfather digitally isolated. The storytelling element of the project is backed up with an active Twitter and Facebook presence as well as a successful blog with consistent traffic.

From January 2014 to July 2014, over 1,500 people from the local community have visited the HUGO centre and by the time of publication, the centre had had footfall of over 2,000 through the centre with over 230 different individuals registered in the IT Hub and 100 registered on the HUGO bus. The reach of the campaign is backed up by tenant's satisfaction with the project. When polled recently, tenants scored the service with a 96% satisfaction rate based on receipt of 42 surveys.

The project itself was match-funded by the Department for Work and Pensions' 'Digital Deal' scheme and Leeds Federated Housing. A total of £80,000 was raised to use on this project which covered staff training as well as the all-important HUGO bus. The bus itself is staffed by one member of staff from Leeds Federated Housing but uses Digital Champions and volunteers from the community as well as Leeds's three universities. By utilising the community, the HUGO bus is able to run courses based on their volunteers interests such as a genealogy course which is run by a history student from one of the local Universities.

Knowsley Housing Trust
The Gaywood Online Project

Knowsley Housing Trust (KHT), a housing association with stock of around 14,000 in Knowsley on Merseyside have taken an interesting approach to digital inclusion by involving partners from across the health and social services to use digital technologies to reduce referrals to partner organisations. The specific focus of the project is health – with particular focus given to referrals to GP practices and walk in centres. The thrust of the project was born out KHT's desire to combine a digital inclusion strategy to help tackle other issues.

The aim of the project is, through use of health monitoring apps and websites, to reduce referrals to local partners (such as walk-in centres, GP surgeries and A&E departments) but also encourage tenants to regularly use digital technologies in the hope they will become more digitally proficient. KHT approached numerous local partners before settling on a deal with Knowsley Public Health.

After conducting research across their properties, KHT decided – based on a good mix of age demographic and a below average digital proficiency – that Gaywood Green in Merseyside to act as a pilot for the programme. The infrastructure of Gaywood Green, a series of 4 tower blocks in Kirkby, Merseyside, was particularly beneficial as it was easier to equip these blocks with Wi-Fi than it would have been to equip 256 individual properties.

With capital provided by Knowsley Public Health as well as other sources such as the Big Lottery Fund and Knowsley Housing Trust's own money, KHT were able to equip each tenant with a tablet device; access to a walled garden of websites including health monitoring websites and apps as well a variety of helpful websites including essential council services and job search sites, plus useful health, housing and bank services. The money provided by the Big Lottery Fund has been earmarked to provide training, advice and support for the first nine months of the project.

Alongside the free service, residents will have the choice to upgrade and purchase discounted full Wi-Fi access on a pay-as-you-go basis, an option that has been specifically designed to give families flexibility if their income fluctuates throughout the year. This will allow them to view the full internet for as little as £10 per month with no long term contract, line rental, credit check or installation fee.

The Gaywood Online project will be monitored by customers taking a health questionnaire at the beginning and end of the initiative in addition to on-going analyses of calculating the number of referrals to local health partners from the Gaywood Green area. KHT and their partners also plan on-going, regular focus groups and control groups to supplement the analysis of the project's efficacy.

As with any major project involving complex IT systems, the board of KHT made clear that there should be a rigorous market research and a strict business proposal outlining the positives and negatives of the initiative. It was only after 2 years of planning that the project was given a green light. Additionally, there were issues with finding an Internet Service Provider willing to provide a cost-effective service. This was overcome through use of in-house IT teams.

In the future, Knowsley Housing Trust as an extension, plan to extend the scheme so it will offer low cost Wi-Fi services to up to 900 local businesses within a five kilometre radius and should the initiative be successful, it could be rolled out to cover up to 14,000 homes across Merseyside. The idea of the project has proved so popular that several housing associations across the country are considering replicating the idea for their tenants.

Magenta Living
Digital Deal & Wellbeing Valuation Framework

Wirral Partnership Homes, a registered social landlord with a stock size of 12,400, have a wide-ranging digital deal programme that offers training, advice and support as well as discounted and refurbished computer hardware. But the real innovation in the approach of Magenta Housing Group, is their method of calculating the social and well-being impact of their work in their communities using the Wellbeing Valuation.

Using digital inclusion to overcome social inclusion among older tenants was a key component of Magenta Living's Digital Deal activity. Magenta Living concluded that digital exclusion was overwhelmingly a matter of choice and that motivation ("I'm too old") and perceived value ("There's nothing online for me") are much greater barriers than lack of access and skills.

Magenta's solution was to put socially inclusive engagement at the centre of their strategy, beginning with a marketing campaign in partnership with local social enterprise Fourteen19, who developed a promotional puzzle book designed to appeal to older tenants that presented information about computers and the internet alongside ICT-themed word and picture puzzles. Magenta followed up their marketing campaign with nineteen digital awareness-raising and learning events between January and May 2014, taking place across their sheltered schemes and high-rise blocks as well as venues in the wider community.

Tenants had previously reported that they had been put off by overly formal sessions that had been delivered in some sheltered schemes, which led project staff to place an emphasis on informality and the social aspect of getting online. They asked tenants to 'bring your own device' to events, and providing a troubleshooting service, engaged those narrow and lapsed users who already owned a device but didn't know how to use it to its full capabilities.

Volunteers from across Magenta's customer base were recruited and trained as Digital Friends. Their work centred on encouraging and raising awareness among those attendees who were uncertain about what the internet and being digitally proficient held for them, while Digital Inclusion Promotional Assistants (Magenta staff) concentrated on delivering skills training.

One Assistant took the initiative to create a number of printable worksheets to support learning on popular topics including email, Facebook, internet banking and online shopping, recognising that users of computers and the internet often find the familiar format of paper hand-outs reassuring. This approach has been followed by other registered housing providers such as Gentoo, a Sunderland-based registered social landlord with a stock of 32,000. Gentoo have found that while the paper hand-outs may be reassuring, they require constant updates as websites constantly change and refresh their layout.

Magenta's approach, with its emphasis on social contact and inclusion, has resulted in a good ratio of beneficiaries to engagements, with 31% of those engaged going on to undertake training, all of whom went on to make online purchases for the first time. Internal referrals have further strengthened the offer for tenants and helped to put digital at the centre of support services, with learners in difficulties referred to financial inclusion or safeguarding teams as appropriate.

To improve home access and increase ownership of devices, Magenta worked in partnership with Eco-Systems (formerly Partners IT), who provided affordable recycled desktops and laptops; and Partners Credit Union, who offered low-cost credit to help tenants spread the cost of purchase. They also worked with a consortium of Housing Associations working with HACT to apply the Wellbeing Valuation framework to evaluate the social impact of community investment activities.

Social Impact by Projects
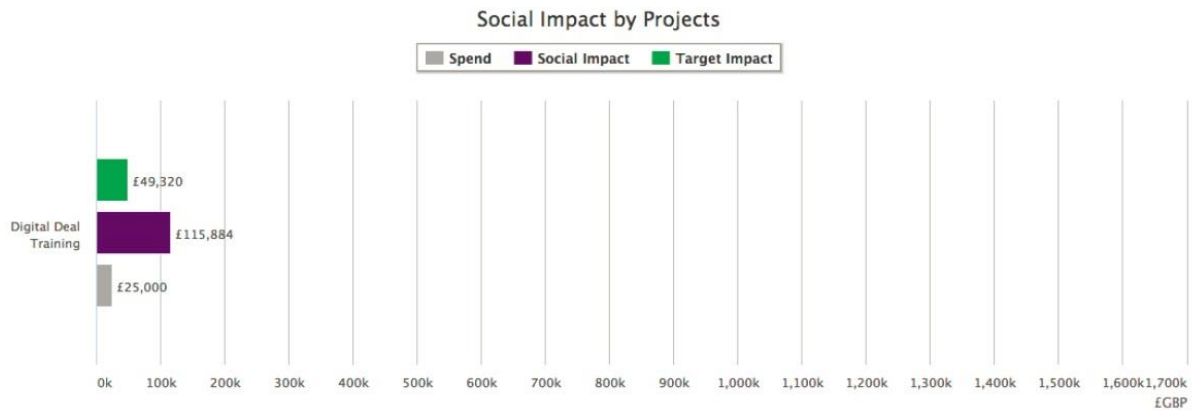
Using the Welling Valuation framework, Magenta Living have calculated that the Digital Deal Training programme has had a social impact of £115,884 against a social impact target of £49,320 with a capital outlay of £25,000 which was a combination of Magenta's own funds and match funding from the Department for Work and Pensions Digital Deal programme.

Conclusion

Across the North, it is evident that many social housing providers are doing their upmost to ensure that their tenants aren't left behind as many services go online-first and even online-only. As our first report articulated, housing providers are driven by a need not only protect their own income, but maximise the income of their tenants in a political climate of cuts to welfare. In this report, we have seen just a few of the fantastic initiatives undertaken that focus on the social aspect of digital inclusion be that increasing community cohesion, helping older people get online to reduce loneliness, facilitating community groups to bid for funding and regenerate community centres and even helping tenants monitor their physical and mental health.

The social case for digital inclusion isn't an easy one to make. As mentioned, the political climate of austerity, tight budgets and efficiency savings mean that any measure undertaken by a housing provider – be that a registered housing provider or a local authority – must be rigorously tested, evaluated and analysed. The relative complexity of evaluating the social impact of a particular initiative will hopefully be overcome by the innovative approach of some Northern housing providers through greater use of the Wellbeing Valuation framework.

The ubiquity of digital technology now means that there are few problems that cannot benefit from a digital strategy. As we have seen in this report, something as simple as rejuvenating a community centre can be achieved through repurposing its use as a digital hub. Additionally, a project to monitor health outcomes and encourage residents to track and chart their health may yet prove to have a positive effect on relieving some pressures on local health services.