NEWPORTDIGITAL: community empowerment through digital inclusion study.

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Abstract

Despite considerable quantitative research undertaken into digital inclusion in the United Kingdom (UK) there remains considerable gaps in academic understanding of effective digital engagement strategies and their impact on individuals and communities. There is also a need for a greater qualitative evidence base of successful practice in this field in Wales and the wider UK. This study offers qualitative evidence on the personal and social impact of community empowerment enabled through a joint digital and social inclusion programme. The findings also provide new insight into the forms of internet use by new adopters in the core non-participating digitally excluded age group of society, those aged 75 and over, and provides new evidence in relation to the beneficial use of utilising the social applications of the internet with these groups. This study increases understanding of the key role played by social enterprise in addressing the digital exclusion of communities. It also highlights the need for fresh consideration of digital infrastructure planning and third sector network engagement in future urban regeneration initiatives to ensure greater opportunity for individuals to enhance their contribution to their community, the local and wider digital economy, and to enhance the quality of life available within that community.

Introduction

In 2008, a Communities First funded project in the Gaer community, Newport (South East Wales) successfully addressed the social exclusion of elder citizens through their engagement with digital technologies. The project helped to rebuild and empower the Gaer community, which had been affected by an urban renewal programme that relocated the former residents of prefabricated housing stock into replacement new build bungalows on the same land.

An action research programme led by the University of Wales, Newport’s, Institute of Digital Learning investigated the most effective uses of digital technology in regenerating and empowering communities. 

This research programme also explored in parallel the philosophy, practice and operating environment of social enterprise as an enabler of digital inclusion and community empowerment. The research attempted to respond to the UK Online Centre’s (2007) Understanding digital inclusion research paper’s call for further research into the soft impacts and the social benefits of digital inclusion and the HM Government’s Communities and Local Government’s (2008) Understanding Digital Inclusion research paper’s call for new investigation into motivational engagement approaches with digital technology and the identification of wider benefits and uses of digital technologies.

The research also builds on the E-Inclusion...
Recycling C.I.C: Bridging the Digital Divide in the UK’s Greenest City (2008) case study (available from http://idl.newport.ac.uk/einclusion and has been driven by the Institute of Digital Learning’s continued dialogue and collaboration with members of Welsh and wider UK Digital Inclusion and Social Enterprise champions and practitioner communities.

This research paper includes a joint component in the form of a multimedia case study resource that is available from http://idl.newport.ac.uk/newportdigital. The multimedia publication was designed to share access to personalised accounts of the impact of the ‘Gaer community empowerment through digital inclusion’ programme had and to offer reflections on the experiences of digital and community engagement.

Core research themes for the action study examine:

1. Effective applications of digital technology in empowering communities
2. The social impact of addressing the digital exclusion of elder citizens
3. The role and function of social enterprise in enabling digital inclusion.

This paper, firstly, explores the digital and social inclusion methodologies deployed in the programme in consideration of wider academic perspectives on the domestication and demystification of technology. Thereafter, the paper evaluates qualitative feedback from new adopters from the core non participating group, focusing on their utilisation of the internet, the social impact of this activity and evidence of learning aspirations arising. The paper then considers the role of social entrepreneurship in enabling effective digital engagement of the most digitally excluded members of our society independent to traditional market forces. The paper then reveals the medium term impact of the Gaer inclusion programme and offers conclusions aimed at policy makers preparing future urban renewal activity.

Research Methodology

The study employed a small scale investiga-
tive action research approach seeking to facilitate knowledge accumulation and transfer in relation to the three core research themes.

The approach to the study was open, in as much as the researchers made no attempt to disguise their role. The nature of researcher engagement with members of the community was through introductions and it was clarified that the researcher role in interviewing Gaer residents was for investigative purposes. The research was primarily, but not exclusively, qualitative. The evaluation of the materials obtained drew on ethnographic approaches in seeking to provide meaning to people’s narrative in interpreting an understanding of both their individual and social lives.

This approach was clarified with participating Gaer residents and it was understood that their qualitative responses and testimony formed the core material for the investigation. Supplementary video capture of the Gaer programme’s instigator and the E-Inclusion team as programme enablers focused on the other research themes for the project. As some video interviews lasted over thirty minutes it was decided to professionally edit the video capture to emphasize key messages from respondents. Whilst this approach was deemed useful for the media dimension of the publication, the researchers endeavored to create a full critique of the Gaer programme in the written dimension of the study.

The E-Inclusion team who developed the social programme were known to the researchers. To ensure a lack of bias regular moments were taken out of the programme to ensure a level of independence for the researchers. It was agreed that all dialogue with the E-Inclusion team would be open and frank so dialogue could help inform a true picture of the Gaer empowerment programme.

All interviews reviewing the digital engagement and social impact on the programmes’ beneficiaries were undertaken in the Gaer community and predominately in residents’ homes. This enabled full investigation into the impact of new adopters of digital
technology in a domestic context, allowing the harvesting of more accurate data due to residents' sense of ease in their own homes. This also enabled the recording of participants' real time computer usage.

With the emphasis on the social impact of digital inclusion activities, the publication adopted a research methodology that utilised multimedia content to offer direct access to individual accounts from beneficiaries. In publishing the media dimension of this study the researchers were influenced by their interest in interactive journalism publication practice. As a consequence the qualitative video materials were presented in such a manner as to provide a narrative of the programme investigated with the focus on the first hand accounts of beneficiaries.

Upon completion of the media publication dimension of this study the researchers accepted an invitation from the Gaer community to present the video based dimensions of the study at the Gaer community centre in March 2009. This event provided the research team with the community's endorsement of the accuracy and authenticity of the publication.

Effective Methods to Empower Communities with the Application of Digital Technologies

The approaches undertaken in the Gaer community empowerment through digital inclusion programme operated in three principal phases. These responded to identified need through the delivery of the programme and remained responsive to wider opportunities for social and digital inclusion arising as a 'by-product' of an empowered beneficiary group. The methodology implemented was tailored specifically to meet the needs of the Gaer community on behalf of the commissioning agents and the spectrum of support needs of community residents. The phased approaches are summarised in the Appendix of this publication and presented diagrammatically in Figure 1.

Warschauer's (2003) consideration of the role of technology in facilitating social inclusion identifies that 'ability' or 'digital literacy' is an essential dimension of enabling social inclusion with technology. He summaries this view point as follows:

A central premise is that, in today's society, the ability to access, adapt, and create knowledge using information and communication technologies is critical to social inclusion. This focus on social inclusion shifts the discussion of the "digital divide" from gaps to be overcome by providing equipment to social development challenges to be addressed through the effective integration of technology into communities, institutions, and societies. What is most important is not so much the physical availability of computers and the Internet but rather people's ability to make use of those technologies to engage in meaningful social practices.

The investigation into the community empowerment through digital inclusion programme methodology deployed in the Gaer concludes that the E-Inclusion team effectively enabled an 'ability' or 'digital literacy' of a community that had little or no prior engagement with computers and the internet. This was achieved in a short period time and delivered through a targeted empowerment approach that maximised the ability of individuals and the community as a whole to overcome their own social isolations, access to services and low level of digital literacy. The emphasis on the social application or practices of the computer in the home appears to have been a key ingredient in the success of the programme. Building on Warschauer's perspective the skills of digital literacy were enabled by creating the perception of computers as domestic tools that enabled greater engagement with other members of the community and wider institutions and agencies. The ability to utilise the new domestic tool effectively offered enhancement in quality of life through digital engagement to meet personal aspirations relating to the application of the technology provided.
Figure 1. Community Empowerment through digital inclusion dynamics.
The success of the Gaer social programme supports this premise and also reveals the focus of the programme design in managing relationships and aspirations of both the individual and the group. Personalised development programmes that responded to the spectrum of individual empowerment or creativity/skills development needs served as the enablers or engagement drivers in utilising digital technology. The hands on personalised, ‘one to one’, ‘always there’ delivery approach also appears to have reduced anxiety and fear levels of programme beneficiaries. The focus of enabling people’s digital engagement from their own homes was a further key dimension for this programme. This approach accords with Boeltzig and Pilling’s (2007) study which investigated successful digital inclusion initiatives in the United States and the United Kingdom. In seeking to offer recommendation to future policy development and digital engagement methodologies they proposed that:

(Digital Inclusion) Projects should take into account people’s needs for long term computer and Internet access if new users’ interest and use is to be sustained. The full benefits of Internet access cannot be realized without home access, and this is particularly the case for older people and people with disabilities.

The methodology reviewed in this study helps to reveal a practical interpretation of Bharat and Merkel (2004) consideration that in order for the internet to play a more substantial role in facilitating social and personal empowerment a greater or deeper understanding of the everyday life of individuals from minority and marginalised communities needs to take place. The methodology’s use of personalised development plans with a nurtured community impact has proved successful from this perspective. Figure 2 summaries key community resident instigation drivers. The need for personal empowerment, increased communication and socialisation and in other instances greater stimulation were enabled through the programme. Emphasis on different approaches tailored to individual needs and personal development aspirations took precedence in engaging participants with computers and the internet. The use of social applications of the internet underpinned all of the responses to the key instigation drivers.

The ‘demystification’ approach also appears to have been pivotal in the success of the programme, which involved beneficiaries visiting the E-Inclusion Recycling facility to recognise the effort made in providing beneficiaries with ‘their own’ computer. The beneficiaries first hand experience of seeing a computer being broken down into its component parts, refurbished, and then brought into their homes appears to have eliminated many of the initial barriers to technology and created a sense of ownership in advance of engagement with the application side of the digital tools. The study supports Williams and Stewart (2005) considerations of the appropriation and ‘normalisation’ of technology in which they identify the need for approaches to encompass informal social and cultural processes in achieving familiarity with computer based technologies for marginalised groups in offering opportunity in addressing social exclusion. The demystification method also offers a transferable approach that responds to the OFCOM (2006) study of older people and communication technology. In consideration of barriers to digital engagement and considerations of skills and abilities, this study identified that the vast majority of non users of computers or the internet lacked exposure to these technologies, which raised personal doubts in older people about their ability to cope with learning this form of technology.
Figure 2. Community Resident Instigation drivers.
The home instillation support component of the programme appears also to be a further crucial dimension of the programme’s design. In particular the E-Inclusion engineer’s role in configuring both the computers and broadband in each beneficiaries home addressed a major engagement barrier for residents. Investigation revealed that the additional financial cost of broadband access in the home for most residents on the programme was negligible. This was because residents were already subscribers to digital television packages (predominately Sky and Virgin Media) that also provided broadband within their purchased package. The programme provided residents with an opportunity to access the broadband facility of these packages that they had not otherwise been able to do. This therefore served as a further motivational driver for engaging in the programme.

It was also revealed through questioning of the programme enablers that the start up instillation and support phase evolved into a longer term more informal support approach where, for example, if a web camera or mouse no longer worked they were replaced by the E-Inclusion team at no cost to the programme beneficiaries. This continued care support approach clearly sits outside of traditional market force approaches to computer support and it was acknowledged that the Computer Recycling social enterprise facility was a crucial element in enabling the ability to ‘re-supply’ users with hardware over a longer period than the programme timeframe.

The longer term sustainability of this approach, beyond very effectively channelled altruism, would be a useful focus for further exploration. This experience accords with Williams and Stewart (2005) argument that the abilities or competencies ‘beyond start up’ in addressing technical problems experienced by new adopters are not widely available. It is apparent that the Gaer computer club had enabled a growing independence within the community in addressing problems collaboratively as a group and a community led independence to care for one another in both a social and digital context.

The Gaer programme’s focus of ‘home based’ digital inclusion also accords with Berker et al. (2006) in their consideration of the successful ‘domestication of technology’, when perception of technology in a domestic context move from a negative to positive position and technologies are considered ‘comfortable’, ‘functional’, ‘reliable’ and ‘trustworthy’. At a symbolic level the invited technology becomes part of the family. It is evident that the Gaer programme methodology enabled this with computers providing new domestic tools that somewhat ‘pet like’ offered company and access to family and community networks in new ways. In a number of interviews with Gaer residents it was apparent that the computer was a welcome new tool, in the way that it both enabled new forms of community based communication, but also engaged communication with family members living abroad or at a significant distance. In particular the use of ‘Skype’ was regularly noted as a positive tool and in a number of instances was considered to serve as a replacement for the telephone in a number of households.

It became evident to the researchers that this social programme methodology supports the recommendations made in Boeltzig and Pilling’s (2007) study which reviewed successful digital inclusion initiatives in the United States and the United Kingdom. They identified that methods seeking to increase digital inclusion of targeted groups would need to involve the provision of free computers and internet access, the provision of long term support to organisations seeking to reach groups and effective partnership working to share resources and expertise. The Gaer programme’s focus on the ‘needs or concerns of target groups in ensuring purposeful engagement with the internet’ also supports Boeltzig and Pilling’s perspective.

The Social Impact of Addressing the Digital Exclusion of Elder Citizens

people over the age of 15 were not using computers or the internet. The Action Plan also revealed that 15% of the UK population - more than six million adults - are both socially and digitally excluded. Only 37% of over 65’s have internet access at home against an all-adult average of 67% and dropping to 22% for those aged 75 or older. The focus Gaer inclusion study was on this core non-participating age group categorised from these statistics as the most digitally excluded.

The mean average age of programme beneficiaries involved in this study was 76.5 years of age with a mean average engagement with computers at the time of the research interviews of 1.29 years. It was clear that the sample beneficiaries could be considered as ‘new adopters’ of digital technology in regard of both the use of computers and accessing and utilising the internet. As a consequence the Gaer study provides insight into the latest uses of computers and the internet by this age group.

As Figure 1 of the Gaer programme methodology identified, one of the impacts of the Gaer inclusion programme was a new active engagement in the digital economy. Within a short period of time it had become a social normality for the programme beneficiaries to undertake a range of transactions in an online context. These engagements concentrated on shopping in the context of online clothing, household goods and media products retail, grocery shopping, holiday ‘research’ and in supporting the purchase of niche products in the form of materials for craft-based hobbies. Such activity required effective use of online search engines and navigation around commercial websites. The ability to undertake online banking for managing household accounting, payment of bills and financial planning was also identified as a valued new skill.

The beneficiaries’ new abilities to engage with the digital economy in these ways were noticeably celebrated as a new literacy that offered enhancement to the quality of the programme beneficiaries lives. The action research identified that there was some identifiable individual excitement, shared cultural merriment in the community and personal development planning identified in relation to eBay and the ability to engage effectively with the eBay website in order to ‘eBay’ as an ‘action’. This was a next step for this group’s advancement in a journey of digital literacy.

A further common internet activity for the Gaer residents was the use of internet search engines to locate information and research topics of interest. These interest topics ranged from holidays, recipes, geography and history information to craft-based interests. The motivational drivers of the quest for new knowledge and information had been apparently successfully enabled through the E-Inclusion teams’ approach. The researchers had anticipated that current affairs may also have been an identified web quest for beneficiaries but this did not materialise with the sample group.

With the exception of the animated use of Skype and email as the principal internet use for the community members (and an identified lack of use of the internet for examining current affairs) these findings are in accordance with the Oxford Internet Survey’s 2007 findings of what activities people across the UK undertake online. The stronger emphasis on the use of social networking through Skype and email is identifiable as a key method in maximising the social impact of the Gaer resident’s digital inclusion. In all cases respondents identified ‘Skyping’ as new skill and digital literacy that was adding value to their engagements online and within the community.

Investigation revealed a preference for Skype over email amongst most sample beneficiaries on account of Skype’s ease of use and the video dimension bringing family and friends directly into their homes for real time visual communication. The social impact of this social application appeared striking. On one level Skype became a social engagement and communication tool to facilitate networking across the Gaer community and to access the support and guidance of the E-Inclusion team. On the other level the social impact and enhancement of quality of life offered from Skype’s live video feed engagement with family and friends, located
at a distance and often internationally, was shared extensively across the sample group. The research also identified that there remained nervousness amongst some Gaer residents that using email could highlight poor written English skills with their peers in the community.

The ability to engage more effectively with family and friends through the internet was identified as a major turning factor in the enhancement of quality of life for the Gaer residents. Within the context of family, greater intergenerational engagement with other family members and grandchildren was referred to by the sample group. Respondents were interested in the ease with which young people engaged ‘quickly’ and ‘naturally’ with computers. This appeared to have served as a further motivational driver to learn more about computers and the internet to offer new discussion topics and activities with grandchildren. In several instances new digital literacy was being put to use to provide digital engagement with family businesses, for example the development of small business marketing flyers through desktop publishing applications. Evidence of active citizenship in the form of new social entrepreneurship was reported to the research team and the Gaer Community Network were confirmed to be offering support to community residents in forming new Gardening, DIY and Laundry social businesses.

The qualitative responses in regard to the social application of the internet are in contrast to predominately quantitative findings from Helsper (2008) Oxford Internet Institute’s study that analysed ‘Social Disadvantage and the Information Society’ as part of the HM Government’s Digital Inclusion Action plan for Consultation. In seeking to explain digitally excluded group’s engagement with digital resources the report identified:

… being elderly (and more likely to be isolated, with constrained social networks) reduces the likelihood of benefiting from social applications of the internet.

It is apparent that the methodology used in this study focused on the use of social communication applications enabled through the internet as the principle tools of digital and social engagement in the Gaer. The addressing of experiences of social isolation was supported through the use of Skype and email as key tools in facilitating the development of a joint real world and online social network. Through personal development support the Gaer residents became comfortable and subsequent regular users of Skype and email communication tools. These approaches are supportive of the European Parliament’s (2007) consideration of ‘Ageing well in the community’ where staying socially active and creative through Information Communication Technology solutions for social networking offer opportunity for improving quality of life and reducing social isolation.

The Gaer study supports the findings of Helsper’s (2008) work in relation to the extension of home access as a key barrier to tackling the digital inclusion of the most disadvantaged and also confirms the low aspiration levels to access government services in an online context. This was emphasised through the investigation of the Gaer residents’ willingness to make use of the internet to vote online for local and national elections. It was apparent that in most instances residents preferred the socialisation and ritual of physically visiting the polling station to tender their vote. However, the access of localised care services and the ability to engage with carers and social workers using Skype was desired by a number of residents. In particular the ability to contact these professionals directly through the medium of Skype was particularly desired.

Boeltzig and Pilling’s (2007) transnational study identified that:

In both the United States and the United Kingdom, considerable emphasis has been placed on government information and services being online, and increasingly on the possibility of carrying out online transactions (e-government). The intention has been to deliver better quality, more convenient services to
individuals, and also to increase efficiency and cut costs. While both countries are well on the way to Internet delivery of government services, this does not necessarily mean that all citizens are equally able to access them. In both countries, those who have most to gain from e-government may have least access to it—people on low incomes, older people, people with disabilities—thus providing evidence of a continuing digital divide.

The qualitative evidence from the Gaer inclusion programme study indicates that social care and potentially wider health care services do offer opportunity for increased internet service delivery. Dialogue has taken place between the E-Inclusion team and Newport City Council in regard of the feedback from programme beneficiaries and their desire to engage with their care workers through Skype. The extent to which social care practitioners are equipped with suitable digital skills sets and access to appropriate technologies to achieve these aims offers an opportunity for further investigation.

The evaluation of qualitative responses identified that the programme appeared to have initiated a sense of reinvigorated desire for new forms of lifelong learning classes in relation to the new digital literacy enabled by the project. Mainstream offering of Microsoft Office training had been undertaken by a number of the residents alongside ‘Computing for the Terrified’ classes. The interview process identified that the main internet access for lifelong learning had centred around more informal learning and the enrichment of interests and hobbies including online shopping, model boat building, history, geography, craft, cooking and puzzles. Digital photography was also identified as a popular lifelong learning subject in the community. It was identified that the Digital photography group offered residents additional social contact opportunity alongside the development of further digital literacy skills.

The action research programme identified that a number of the empowered Gaer residents had self initiated their own social forums outside of the programme’s planning and implementation approaches. The group developed a monthly computer club and a separate monthly coffee morning both held at the Community Centre to offer a face to face dimension to the social network of the Gaer community otherwise supported by online communication (in addition to their meeting at computer classes). A number of other programme beneficiaries self initiated their own creative group focused on making art works from non-hazardous electronic waste that could not be recycled by the E-Inclusion team. Also a number of residents had received support from the Gaer community network to undertake mentor training to develop their skills in active citizenship in supporting other community members to make use of computers and extend social aspiration activities.

These findings offer support to the policy call from Help the Aged’s 2008 Learning for Living policy document that focused on the need for citizenship and ICT literacy. In consideration of the Government’s Take Part, ‘the national learning framework for active learning for active citizenship’ Help the Aged identify that:

There is no commitment to offer this type of learning: the Take Part framework simply provides a manual for learning providers to ‘enable’ them to develop programmes of citizenship learning to help adults gain the knowledge, skills and confidence they need to become empowered as members of their communities. In the current climate of reduced funding for informal learning and adult learning in general, it seems unlikely that these initiatives will be taken forward.

The Gaer findings support the arguments put forward by Slack and Williams (2000) who considered that social learning approaches were required in regard to the social uses of Information Communication Technology in communities and the manner in which these need to focus on a complex web of interactions, articulations and understandings that constitute a technology as it is currently active and utilised in society.
The social programme approaches taken in the Gaer appear to have strong parallels to the Age Concern digital inclusion project active in the Neath and Port Talbot area of South Wales (funded through the Communities @ One initiative). Future research could focus on comparative study of the ‘Go for IT’ project methodology and the approaches employed by the E-Inclusion team in the Gaer community.

Reference was made during the action research programme to the Community’s interest in engaging with Second Life as an additional form of social networking and exploration of the internet. Any additional study on the longer term impact of the Gaer residents’ digital engagement may wish to explore the outcomes of this interest in relation to ease of new adopters’ engagement with emerging internet based technologies and activities.

The Role and Function of Social Enterprise in Enabling Digital Inclusion

The social business approach that underpinned the Gaer programme accords with Chell’s (2007) work into defining ‘Social Enterprise and Entrepreneurship’ models in the early part of the twenty first century. Chell argued that:

Social entrepreneurs have the intellectual capacity, the thought processes and the imagination to recognise opportunity based on their technical and/or professional experience; they have the social and personal networks that add non-material human and social capital resources; and they have the personal ability to make judgements about appropriate courses of action that will result in the pursuit of an opportunity of socio-economic value based on the realisation of a competitive advantage. All businesses involve customer choice. Competitive advantage confers rarity or some other socio-economic value that social entrepreneurs can create. In these ways social and community enterprises can become self-sustainable; indeed they can create social and economic change through the development of a vibrant form of doing business.

The Gaer programme study clearly identifies that the E-Inclusion Recycling social business consultancy model operated without grant aid and in so doing enabled a greater entrepreneurial approach in the pursuit of social and digital inclusion for the E-Inclusion team operating outside of perceived targeted grant aid restrictions. The business exerts competitive advantage in offering consultancy services to communities seeking to address their own social and digital exclusion. The ability to create income generation activity that creates surplus for the company enables the opportunity for increased social and economic impact by expanding business activity that seeks to help increased numbers of people and maximise the impact of the company’s mission. The lead programme enabler for the E-Inclusion team identified simply that:

The standard business is focused on making money and there is absolutely nothing wrong with that. A social enterprise is wired on making money to help people. So therefore the more money you make the more people you can help. The more money you make the less you rely on funding which leaves social entrepreneurs to be creative. They can be entrepreneurial in the way that we have been to address a social issue.

Wessel’s (2008) in evaluating approaches that enable digital inclusion on a regional scale identified:

Strategies to overcome a digital divide are not simply about access to ICT but involve the development of skills, improving literacy including digital literacy, generating relevant e-services to encourage use, and fostering capacity in developing participation in various internet related communication, activity, and knowledge-generation. To foster eInclusion therefore involves providing training and supporting participation in ICT related activities, whether at work, in education, in political participation, in culture and in everyday life. Everyday life is an important dimension in
fostering inclusion because situations of exclusion are experienced and managed in everyday life and the take up and use of ICT is negotiated in everyday life.

It is clear that the Gaer programme has identified the social enterprise goal of enabling a positive social impact from their business activity has enabled this 'fostering' or facilitation role for social and digital inclusion. The focus on both social aspects of exclusion and the use of digital technologies as tools to enable greater social inclusion has enabled digital inclusion as a 'by-product'. This by-product has developed new literacy in the use of digital technology and, in so doing, served also as an engine of greater individual and community capacity building. The fostering and nurturing of these new human relationships and sense of comfort with computers was encapsulated in the ‘e-service’ approach embedded in the programme. This approach, in working freely of traditional market forces, appears to have enabled and encouraged the helping of others as a consequence of the social enterprise philosophy in practice. The essence of which appears to be the focus on enabling positive relationship outcomes with other people and with technology.

This is supportive of Newholm et al's (2008) study which considered an effective strategy to engage computers and the internet and the manner in which excluded groups were unlikely to utilise formal sources of technical help in acquiring key knowledge attributes as novices. They identified that those excluded from the knowledge society required a range of support measures from hardware, software and internet start up through to a network of 'friends'. In this instance the social enterprise team were considered informal in their approach to the Gaer residents and also informed and friendly in their personalised support approaches for the residents.

The social entrepreneurial approach as the cornerstone for the programme responds to the issues identified in the European Parliament's (2007) Action plan on Information Communication Technologies and Ageing which identified:

Access, accessibility and user-friendliness of devices and services are prerequisites for the inclusive delivery of advanced services for the ageing society. Mainstream ICT products and services rarely address the needs of the older population. Currently the market is not investing sufficiently in innovation for meaningful and affordable solutions for older users. There is a need to break the vicious cycle of insufficient adequate solutions, awareness, economies of scale of standards and sustainable business models, which leads again to insufficient investment in research and innovative solutions.

Whilst the European Parliament do not point to social enterprise as an enabler of the innovative solutions it is clear that the impact revealed in this study provides policy makers with an insight into the role of the Third Sector in effective community engagement and delivering a sustainable business approach focused on enabling the digital inclusion of excluded citizens. The extent to which the partnership approach between social enterprise and the grant funded community development sector enabled a community’s social regeneration in partnership with technology serves as a potential new focus for future study.

HM Government’s Digital Britain Interim report (2009), in consideration of effective strategy necessary to enable digital inclusion and the potential that digital technology can offer to enhance quality of life for all UK citizens in the digital age, identifies that:

The necessary education, skills and media literacy programmes to allow everyone in society to benefit from the digital revolution will be a central part of the Digital Britain work and key to our success. We must ensure that being digital is within the grasp of everyone. If we do not, we risk leaving significant parts of our society disenfranchised and permanently behind the mainstream. In so doing, we would fail to secure the full potential of these technologies for our country.

It is evident that the Gaer programme offers an insight into the type of approaches offered
by social enterprises, approaches that differ from main stream, private and public technology providers and that offers a vital contribution to the strategic mix required to enable much greater digital engagement of excluded groups.

Summary of the Medium Term Impact of the Gaer Programme and Reflections on Future Research Opportunities

Since the completion of the social programme for the Gaer community in April 2009, it is worthy of note that the self-generated monthly community events continue at the Gaer community centre with 'self help' and 'peer mentoring' continuing independently of the now concluded empowerment programme. A number of the social programme’s beneficiaries have undertaken mentoring training to help strengthen this interest in supporting others. Other beneficiaries have formed a creative group who visit the E-Inclusion Computer Recycling premises in Pill to create art works from non recyclable electronic waste. The E-Inclusion team continue to support residents when asked for advice or home IT maintenance support. This is undertaken at no cost to the Gaer residents as part of their social contribution ethos and is in part enabled by the nature of the host social enterprise as a Computer Recycling facility that IT hardware (such as a mouse or monitor) can be changed promptly with negligible impact on operational costs for the business.

Learning from the success of the programme in the Gaer, other Communities First wards of Newport in Stow Hill and Ringland have now commissioned the E-Inclusion team to undertake the same programme for their communities. In these communities the empowerment drivers will be different to the Gaer experience of long established community networks experiencing major change through an urban renewal programme. It is recommended that further research be made into the resident empowerment drivers of these wards and their social and individual goals from engaging with the programme.

In addition to these new Communities First commissions Newport City Council’s Lighthouse project has engaged the E-Inclusion team to offer the same social programme to a number of their clients. The Lighthouse project, offered in partnership with Taff Housing Association and Cefnogipobl (Supporting People), seeks to provide low level housing related support to people in their own homes; to encourage independence skills and confidence in living successfully in their own homes and to reduce loneliness and increase engagement with their local community. In this instance the programme beneficiaries are distributed across the City of Newport and the support offered is therefore not community ward centric. It is recommended that further study be undertaken into the modifications required to the existing social programme’s delivery methodology and the social impact of these digital inclusion related approaches in enabling the establishment of new Pan-Newport social networks for recognised isolated groups.

In response to the public service delivery opportunities identified in this research a further complimentary research theme could be connected to the Lighthouse project to consider barriers and enabling approaches for Newport City Councils’ Social Services Directorate to empower Social workers and other Care professionals in using digital approaches to enhance the service they offer their clients (such as Skype communication and email electronic calendars reminder functions).

This research programme has identified the successful use of Skype as a common digital tool of contact and facilitation of community for the beneficiaries of this social programme. Future researchers that seek to build on this body of work may wish to consider using this tool for qualitative interviews with a broader spectrum of programme beneficiaries on future projects.

Finally, future comparative studies could also investigate the ability of other Cities and rural communities’ to undertake the same
social programme approaches without the underpinning E-Inclusion Computer Recycling social enterprise. Beyond the philosophy of social entrepreneurship the Recycling facility appears to be an integral cornerstone resource dimension of the programmes design. A study of this nature would then test the full transferability of the E-Inclusion social programme approach to wider community empowerment contexts where such resource community owned Computer Recycling is not currently offered.

Conclusions

In the context of the Gaer project explored in this study it is evident that digital technology can serve as an effective tool in a set of wider social inclusion approaches that enables both personal and community empowerment. The positive social impact is evident and was enabled by a focus on ‘relationship building’ both in the context of community relationships and in relation to human computer interface approaches. In the context of the Gaer community’s experiences of urban renewal, beyond the usual reach of digital inclusion research, it is evident that the opportunity for future urban regeneration programmes to consider the digital context of the new community infrastructure needs to take a higher precedence. The need for new methods of developing new community networks through online engagements requires effective infrastructural planning alongside targeted digital engagement activity. In responding to the Digital Britain interim report this need was articulated effectively by Dodson et al. (2009) on behalf of the DC10 Plus Network:

We propose that all Cities and places are mandated to produce digital master plans that will guide their digital future over the coming years... The opportunity now is to build new digital infrastructures and services which provide the foundation for new jobs and skills, new ways of working and a new quality of life that will serve the locality and its people and businesses well for decades to come. All homes and businesses need to be connected so that the local ‘offer’ will be second to none, properly future proofed and sustainable.

Arguably policy makers and planners when instigating regeneration that accounts for community networks and online engagements should also undertake mapping of Third Sector organisation partnership opportunities to engage these ‘community assets’ in enabling the digital literacy of excluded members of that community. Increased digital literacy levels will be required to ensure a realisation of the benefits from the new digital infrastructures and in so doing provide new opportunity for individuals to enhance their contribution to their community, the local and wider digital economy and improve their quality of life within that community.

The HM Government’s focus on the use of digital technology as a tool for tackle social exclusion is supported by this study. In particular, the addressing of elder citizen’s social isolation in part by utilising social applications of the internet accords with Government thinking on digital inclusion. It is also apparent that the application of digital technology for these ends needs careful planning and clearly identified social goals (beyond the digital inclusion of citizens) to prove most effective. Both personal and community empowerment of elder citizens enabled through social entrepreneurship and philanthropy has been paramount in the achievements of the Gaer community inclusion programme. The role of community owned Computer Recycling social businesses as a further cornerstone in underpinning the achievement of digital inclusion, outside of traditional market forces in excluded communities is also considered of relevance to policy makers and community bodies when exploring strategic and operational digital engagement and electronic waste management planning.

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