

British Academy - Technology and inequality - Call for Evidence

As the leading digital inclusion charity in the UK, Good Things Foundation welcomes the British Academy's Call For Evidence in addressing the relationship between inequalities in access to digital technology and existing social inequalities. We hope that by drawing on our work, we can contribute to the much-needed evidence base on how the Government can support in fixing the digital divide and eradicate imbalances across our nation.

- **What mechanisms are available for Government to support access, uptake, and investment in digital technology in a way that doesn't entrench or exacerbate inequality?**

In drawing on our lessons from past instances where Government has played a role in facilitating access, uptake, and investment, we will be drawing on our Department for Education (DfE) funded Future Digital Inclusion programme: how the programme helped mitigate inequality across the country and how it exemplifies the community sector as a mechanism available to Government in eradicating inequalities.

Our DfE funded (and prior to that, Department for Business, Innovation, and Skills) Future Digital Inclusion programme supported our Network model in England between 2014-2021. We saw the impact of investment into hyperlocal provision, coordinated by us at a national level: over 1.5 million people were supported to learn basic digital skills, with 84% of people supported by a centre progressing to further learning, 36% progressing to a course leading to a qualification, and 74% accessing online government services for the first time due to the programme ([Future Digital Inclusion, 2019](#)).

Our model draws on the power of the community and voluntary sector, as our National Digital Inclusion Network (the aforementioned 'Network') is made up of over 5,000 unique, local organisations across the UK – from public libraries, grassroots charities, to community centres – who offer an informal learning environment to people who face multiple disadvantages, and are often disengaged from education.

The Government's FDI investment into our model and the community sector – a vital mechanism available to the Government – led to outcomes which were both impactful and eradicated inequalities. The programme was also significantly cost effective, as Network members accessed a capacity building grant which supported them in integrating basic digital skills learning into their wider services. Services included: employability and financial health support; physical and mental health activities; opportunities to socialise and volunteer; adult learning; and information, advice, and guidance. FDI's average cost per learning outcome was £15, reflecting the strengths of the community sector in reach, engagement and flexibility of support - coordinated at national level.

- **How can digital technologies be harnessed to improve policies that tackle inequality, their design, and the equitable delivery of public services?**

Our experience with Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service Digital Service pilot enables us to draw on examples of digital technologies and equitable access to public services - the project of which generated a lot of material around principles and good practice in this area, again showing the power of the community and voluntary sector.

Our work with Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS) between 2017-2021 provided face-to-face Assisted Digital support for people who would otherwise be excluded from accessing these services. Through our National Digital Inclusion Network, we designed, tested, delivered and evaluated a face-to-face Assisted Digital service for new HMCTS online services.

Centres in our Network – as well as organisations identified through the Litigants in Person Engagement Group (LiPEG) – piloted a Digital Support service with our support, providing assistance to people who would have been unable to submit a digital form independently.

In total, 1,221 Digital Service users were supported over 1,274 appointments and 1,147 forms submitted. Users supported typically had one or more barriers to entry, including – but not limited to – ESOL needs, stress caused by a life transition, low digital skills, and limited internet access.

Laid out in our [final evaluation report](#), we learnt many lessons from the pilot - several of which are relevant in addressing digital technologies and how they can be harnessed. They rely heavily on the support, knowledge, and expertise of the community sector.

In no particular order, these were:

- Central provision – in this case, of a HMCTS Digital Service – needs to enable community-based organisations to best serve users in their local context, and guidelines need to be flexible enough for local centres to integrate the service in their existing delivery models;
- Onboarding should be tailored to the expertise of the centres and communication to the centres needs to be clear yet infrequent, so as not to be missed;
- A users' needs need to be front and centre of the service design, considering how they can receive the support necessary to resolve the issue fully, signposting remote support if applicable, enabling their use of the appropriate support channel for them, and providing additional support (e.g. emotional) too;
- Contextual factors need to be considered, such as a community organisation's expertise in delivering public services, their wider outreach network to likened organisations (welfare service providers and/or benefit advice centres), consent processes and existing case management processes, and the mechanisms available for managing staff resource and their willingness to use, ability to use, and capability in seeing the benefits of digital services and platforms;
- Finally, we noted that a clear triage criteria was necessary to recognise a users' needs when working nationally with varied community organisations, as was the ability to provide centres with sufficient context and a process that lessened their administrative burden and provided sufficient signposting to their users if further support was required.

Though our project was specific to HMCTS, findings unearthed how digital technologies and the value of the community sector – again, coordinated at a national level – provided equitable delivery of public services.