

National Digital Inclusion Conference

Tuesday 24th April

Closing Speech

Pat McFadden, Cabinet Office Minister.

I know that my colleague Stephen Timms began this morning by setting out the broader context on policy and the major challenges facing government, including for example the background to our strategy to improve access to broadband. As a Minister at the Cabinet Office, I have an interest in digital inclusion from a variety of angles – Social Exclusion, Transformational Government, Information Sharing, and working with my colleague Ed Miliband who has responsibility for the Third Sector.

This agenda is hugely important because as technology develops, its capacity to empower people increases. The easy access to information

about prices can help us seek out a bargain in either good or services. The 24 hour nature of internet services means they are more accessible for people juggling with the time pressures of work and family responsibilities than traditional office based services. And the access to email, social networking sites and photo sharing can be crucial in keeping families and friends in touch when they live in different parts of the world.

All of this is empowering and liberating for people. Those a lot smarter than me in this room may know how some of this is going to develop in the future. I don't pretend to be able to predict that but one thing I do know is that it's not going to stand still. There will be new applications, and new ways of empowering people through technology. And as people become more empowered by technology in the future, the question of who has access and who does not will become more urgent.

If course, this won't be true for everyone and I think it's too simple to draw the conclusion that everyone not using new technology is somehow socially excluded, poor or left out of society. Sometimes, they will be making a choice, and they're free to do so. Their lives will not be greatly diminished by not using a computer or sending emails. Many of those who could be described as being on the 'wrong' side of the digital divide are not socially excluded.

But in addition to those who choose not to use technology, there are those simply shut out. For them it's about not having the opportunity, not a matter of choice. And it's not a surprise that this is often about poverty and income and that those shut out of other worlds are shut out of this one. A family struggling to pay their bills will struggle to have a PC in the house or a broadband connection. And this matters in terms of access to information and opportunity.

As the labour market changes and the requirements for skills and qualifications and familiarity with technology increase, and as society itself changes, I believe it is essential that we focus on expanding opportunity and ensuring that people are not cut off because of their background or income. We want a country where people can achieve their potential, be everything they can be.

That's why the huge investment in technology in schools is so important. I regularly visit schools in my constituency and at both primary and secondary level there has been a transformation in access to technology in recent years. As one child in a primary school in my constituency, referring to the laptops in the classroom, told the Ofsted inspector, "these are our pens and paper". Not only pens and paper of course but access to a worldwide library of information unimaginable to schoolchildren of my generation and those that went before.

And outside school, UK Online centres have an important role to play. I visited two yesterday in Greenwich and heard from people, most of them over 50, who were using new technology for the first time to do everything from sending emails, to jobsearch to design and print.

I believe we have to think creatively about how we increase access in the future. How do we increase access to the most people with the best value for money for the taxpayer? Will it always be through PCs? What potential is there for using mobile phones, which are owned by more than 90% of the population and which, with the newer handsets, have access to the internet? What more use can we make of digital TV as its use becomes ever greater? Government has a role to bridge this opportunity gap, but so too I believe do technology and software companies. What more can we do together to extend opportunity?

This issue is of course not just one that affects the UK. Over Easter I had the opportunity to visit India for a few days where I saw some pioneering work to use ICT to improve service provision to Indian citizens. In a country which combines both great expertise in software and IT with major infrastructure and poverty challenges, the solutions will not be the same as ours. But what we do have in common is a desire to use IT to empower people, regardless of their income. In India, the likelihood is that a countrywide system of landlines will be bypassed as instead, the effort in telecoms is to ensure universal mobile infrastructure. When it comes to online services, states like Andhra Pradesh are setting up service centres where citizens, the vast majority of whom do not own computers or have direct access to the internet, can pay bills and do a number of other transactions without queuing up at separate offices. And even in remote villages kiosks with internet access are being developed which not only create access to the internet but also create jobs and provide an

income from those managing these online service programmes.

So the circumstances are different but the underlying question is the same – how do we use technology to make people's lives a little bit better, a little bit simpler?

And this brings me to one other issue critical in this debate. A great deal of effort in recent years has gone into what I would term the front of the screen. Putting services online, ensuring people have access to PCs to use these services and so on. But if technology is to be used more to combat exclusion and empower people, what happens behind the screen is also critical. Stephen Timms touched on some of this this morning but let me just give you an example of what I mean. The reform of the pensions service means that a process that used to take weeks and require a great deal of form filling is now done over the phone, backed up with home visits if necessary. In addition, the Pensions

Service is sharing information with local authorities to enable easier claims for Council Tax Benefit, instead of forcing people to go through similar processes with both the pensions service and their local council.

In education colleagues are currently looking at how the take up of Free School Meals by low income families can be improved – using technology at local authority level to cut down on the bureaucratic hoops which too many parents and carers are still jumping through before they can claim free school meals.

David Varney talked about the burden of people suffering from bereavement having to report it over and over again to different parts of government. Hilary Armstrong and I found the same sense of frustration from some people suffering major problems in their lives when we were developing the Action Plan on Social Exclusion last year.

The phrase “data sharing” may make some people uneasy, but what it is really about is making sure Department A of government talks to Department B to make someone’s life a little easier and to ensure they don’t have to keep telling the same story over and over again. Or perhaps, as exists in London, a database that shares information between providers of services to rough sleepers to ensure not only that homeless people have a bed for the night but that they get extra help in other areas too . It cannot be a principle of liberty that different bits of government and different agencies don’t talk to one another when doing so could make life easier for those they serve .

The issue here is not solely about technology. It is about whether we can take a model of public service which was cast in an age of mass production and greater uniformity and recast it to produce more personalised services for today’s world, geared to people’s individual, and different circumstances.

Of course, there are fair and important questions about safeguards for the public as information sharing and more personalised services develop, because the public must have confidence in what is being proposed. But Government has nothing to fear from an open discussion of this for what is planned is not Big Brother but an attempt to make life simpler for the public. There is real potential for improved service delivery for the public, making services more personal rather than one size fits all and for giving people some precious time back through getting this “behind the screen” area right in the future.

Digital inclusion on its own it is not the single answer either to eradicating social exclusion or to transforming the delivery of public services. But it can be part of the solution. Whether it is Chain, that database helping London’s homeless , or the innovative work of Digital Challenge which has shown the potential and creativity there is in many

local areas for using technology to help in this regard, it can reach out in ways we would not think of at first glance.

So it is important we keep up our work on this. In the end, it is not about technology. It is about aspiration, potential and empowerment. If we want a society where everyone can be all they want to be, achieve as much as possible, and take pride in doing so, then this agenda must be part of it.

So thank you to today's organisers and let's hope we can work together on this in the future.

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