Digitally enhanced or digitally disadvantaged?

A discussion paper produced by Angus Social Policy Team (part of Angus Citizens Advice Bureau (SCIO)).

Content

Introduction

In November 2012, the UK Government launched its Digital Strategy[1]. This paper sets out how the Government will transform the way it delivers services to citizens, including moving services online. The strategy includes an expectation that 80% of benefits applications will be completed online by 2017[2]. This new strategy comes at the same time as the Government's unprecedented changes to the welfare system. Coupled with at least £18 billion of cuts to the welfare budget, this will cause significant upheaval for citizens currently in receipt of benefits.

Angus CAB is concerned that a 'digital by default' approach to welfare benefits could exclude some of the most vulnerable and marginalised members of society from accessing the very services they rely upon. In March 2013, Angus CAB participated in a Scotland wide survey to assess whether our clients had access to the internet and the skills and confidence needed to apply for benefits online. It was found that 19% of clients said they would not be able to apply for benefits online[3]. Recent OFCOM research has confirmed that many people still cannot access the internet, finding that 22% of the UK adult population (about 11 million) do not use the internet at home[4]. Furthermore, Age UK has indicated that internet use is lowest amongst individuals with a low-income[5].

Such research confirms concerns that the UK Government may be taking a one dimensional approach to its digital by default strategy, in so far as that it expects that in a digital age people have the necessary skills, knowledge and availability of online acess to successfully claim benefits. If the Government is to meet its target of moving 80% of all benefits claimants online, then it must take a multi-dimensional approach that takes into account the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalised members of our society to ensure that they are not offline and left behind.

Claiming Benefits

As part of the UK Government's 'Digital Strategy', the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is committed to becoming 'digital by default', which it claims will provide "high quality digital services people prefer to use"[6]. However, by the DWP's own admission, while the wider population is largely online, DWP's customers and claimants are in general less likely to use the internet, with 72% of disabled people being online compared to 85% of non-disabled people and only 59% of people aged over 65 and over online[7]. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that many DWP claimants may find difficulty over accessing services online as the DWP makes its online transition.

Current DWP Digital Services

Jobseekers Allowance

Angus CAB, like many other Bureaux across the country, has seen an increasing number of clients who are told that they must apply for their benefits online. This is a particular issue for people currently claiming Jobseekers Allowance (JSA). The Jobcentre Plus Annual Report and Accounts for 2010/11 details the DWP's ambition to move 80% of JSA applications online by September 2013[8]. However, Pete Challis, the National Officer for Local Government and Housing at UNISON, has recently pointed out that JSA online applications stood at 10.4% as of March 2011 and 19.6% as of March 2012, according to the DWP 2011/12 Annual Report[9]. Therefore, it would seem that the DWP has faced significant difficulties in encouraging people to make online claims. This has had particular consequences for those who are most vulnerable and marginalised within society as the DWP tries to meet its targets, as evidenced by the case below:

> **An Angus CAB client has been asked by the Job Centre to use a computer and found this difficult and stressful as she has never used one before. She suffers from depression and anxiety; she cries every day and her medication has just been increased. She also has high blood pressure and is on tablets for this. Client has had her JSA suspended for 1 month and does not know why.**

As the case above suggests, as the DWP attempts to encourage claimants to make JSA claims online, it disregards the various levels of skill and accessibility available to claimants. Simply asking people to make claims online in order to meet targets set by the DWP without providing levels of IT support will only continue to discriminate against those who lack the necessary computer skills. Such sentiments are echoed by the Work & Pensions Committee when they state that "…Simply removing other channels for claiming benefit will not equip people with the necessary skills and capabilities to make the transition to online claiming."[10]

Looking for work

Those who claim Jobseekers Allowance are required to sign up to a Jobseekers Claimant Commitment when they first attend a Job Centre Plus. According to the DWP, this commitment emphasises a …"claimant's responsibility to do all they can to look for work in return for the support they receive…"[11]. A claimant's Jobcentre adviser can therefore ask them to do a number of things when looking for employment, such as looking through newspapers, contacting employers directly and searching online, either through independent websites or by using Universal Jobmatch. Claimants are then expected to comply with the conditions set out by their adviser or risk being sanctioned if they fail to meet these terms.

The following case shows that in some cases, sanctions are being applied where clients have not used the internet to apply for jobs, despite not having access to a computer or the skills to be able to use the internet:

> **An Angus CAB client had been sanctioned because the Jobcentre thought that he was not "actively seeking work". The client is in his 60s and a widower and was sanctioned for two weeks for not applying for jobs online. The client had literacy problems and was unable to use a computer but had been actively applying for jobs in person and by phone. Left without income for two weeks, the client asked the Jobcentre how he was expected to feed himself. The client reported that the Jobcentre adviser replied that it was "not our problem".**

The above example highlights that Jobcentre advisers expect clients to have the necessary IT skills to look for employment online, rather than taking into account the circumstances of each individual client. This line of argument is supported by recent evidence given by Cait McIntosh, a Community Learning & Development Worker for the Arbroath Learning Shop. Cait raises concerns that JSA claimants with literacy difficulties, dyslexia or autism are:

"…receiving sanctions for being unable, not unwilling, to cope with the level of literacy, processing and organisational skills required of them in order to meet their [JSA] agreements…while seeking employment."[12]

Cait also stated that claimants are expected not only to use the Universal Jobmatch search, read job adverts, complete CVs, write Cover Letters and use email, but to also record their attempts to find work. Cait argues that "…it is clear that those who have long-term literacy difficulties are at a clear disadvantage."[13] Again, first-hand evidence from Angus CAB supports claims that the complexity of forms, literacy problems, and health conditions are factors in potentially disadvantaging some people in the push to go digital.

> **A single Angus CAB client in her 30s had recently changed address and had had a delay in payments on her ESA. She had managed her relationship with the Job Centre through the phone and personal contact. The client has difficulty reading and has attended the CAB to get help with form filling and reading letters. She has limited access to the phone and no access to a computer.**

Therefore, it is clear that the DWP's online transition will affect those who have difficulty in accessing online provisions, either by lack of experience and confidence or through disability. An approach that expects all those who claim benefits and are in search for employment to have the necessary IT skills will not only put them at risk of being sanctioned but further marginalise them within communities.

The Digital Approach to Universal Credit

The introduction of Universal Credit (UC) will see it replace 6 existing benefits (Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance; Income-related Employment and Support Allowance; Income Support; Working Tax Credit; Child Tax Credit and Housing Benefit) with a single monthly payment paid into a claimants account. From April 2013, UC has been gradually rolling out throughout Great Britain, with Inverness being the only Council area in Scotland to have it introduced. DWP plan to make UC available in each part of Great Britain during 2016, with the vast majority of claimants moving onto UC during 2016 and 2017[14].

All Universal Credit claimants will be initially signposted to a self-service online channel, and other channels will be used as an exception rather than the rule[3]. There will be no paper form, but telephone claims may be completed where appropriate. Where online and telephone claims are not appropriate, the DWP will provide face-to-face support to complete online forms in exceptional circumstances. Iain Duncan Smith, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, estimated to the Work and Pensions Committee that 30% of UC claimants would have no difficulty moving to online benefit claiming; that 33% were willing to change and would be able to do so with some support; and that the remaining 37% would require a greater level of support[15]. Thus, in total, 70% of all UC claimants will require some level of support in order to make their online claim. Therefore, by its own admission, the UK Government accepts that support will have to be provided to some claimants in order for them to make UC claims. Towards providing such support, the DWP advises that claimants should contact their local council or local Job Centre to get help with claiming UC online or getting access to the internet[16].

Tackling the Digital Skills Deficit in Angus

Figures suggest that the poor and low paid in Scotland have least access to computers. Ofcom recently found that only 1 in 3 Scottish households earning less than £17,500 per year had broadband, compared to 56% of equivalent households in the rest of the UK[17].Online access throughout Angus is reflected in the Angus Online Survey Report which found that:

- 54% of Angus CAB clients had internet access at home, compared with 68% across Scotland.

- Just 35% of Angus CAB clients said that they would be able to apply online for benefits, whilst 19% stated that they would not be able to apply for benefits online.

- 23% of clients said that they could not apply for jobs online, even with help.

- Difficulties faced by clients in applying online for jobs and benefits included a lack of experience and confidence with computers as well as worries about the application process[18].

Therefore, it may be argued that as claimants begin to claim for benefits online on a more regular basis, Angus CAB will see an increase in the amount of clients who need assistance with the online process. For instance, in 2011/12, Citizens Advice Bureaux in Scotland helped clients to complete 19,463 benefit forms – that is 75 for every working day[19]. In the same period, nearly a quarter of all benefit enquiries to Angus CAB involved assisting with form filling.

> **An Angus CAB client in his 50s wanted help to complete a benefit claim for his children having recently separated from his wife but was caring for the children. The client has difficulty with reading and also asked for help translating a letter from the DWP.**

Thus, Angus CAB anticipates increasing demand from clients seeking to gain a digital access. This demand can only be met with adequate resources. At the moment, Angus CAB is under- resourced to meet such a demand.

Meeting the Demand

As has been stated throughout this paper, as clients may find difficulty in accessing online services (either through such as disability or lack of knowledge and confidence), the UK Government's Government's 'Digital by Default' strategy may exclude some of the most vulnerable and marginalised members of society from accessing the very services they rely upon. It is therefore essential that in order to meet this IT skills deficit support is provided so that clients can be competent and confident in using online services. As stated previously, Angus CAB anticipates a rise in the number of clients who seek help with accessing digital services. Thus, it is important that support is provided throughout Angus; however, although Angus provides some IT support services, it currently lacks the facilities and provisions to meet such a demand[20].

Current facilities include:

- **Libraries**: Angus has 7 full-time libraries, each with their own IT suites where individuals can access the Internet. While membership is free and open to all residents and visitors, computer availability is subject to high demand and a one-hour restriction on computer use. Free computer taster sessions (2 x 1.5 hours) are available at all libraries throughout Angus. Ultimately, supporting individuals to complete job and/or benefits applications extends outwith the library staff job description, and, given the public space, anonymity and confidentiality cannot be ensured.

- **Angus Digital Skills Academy**: operates in Arbroath, Forfar, Montrose and Brechin. It is open to people who are currently receiving Jobseeker's Allowance or Employment & Support Allowance (for those in the work-related activity group). The academy supports individuals to develop skills in the use of computers and the Internet towards enabling better use of IT in home life, at work or in the wider community. However, the only referral route to the Angus Digital Skills Academy is through Job Centre Plus. It runs over four weeks and participants are expected to commit a minimum of 6 hours per week to developing their digital and employability skills. At present, funding has ended for the Angus Digital Skills Academy but the Angus Community and Learning Development Service remains hopeful that funding will become available in the near future.

- **Job Clubs**: the Community Learning and Development team of Angus Council deliver a number of 'drop-in' facilities at job clubs throughout Angus. They can assist with CVs and applications, interview techniques and visits to employers, colleges and training providers. They also run a number of short courses on a range of topics, including using computers for the very first time.

- **The Arbroath Learning Shop**: although its main office is in Arbroath, it also operates in Forfar, Montrose, Brechin, Kirriemuir and Carnoustie. The Learning Shop is a free 'drop-in' Community Learning Centre for adults, which can help with writing, reading and computer skills, making a CV and using Universal Jobmatch, as well as additional help for those with dyslexia and other learning difficulties.

As Universal Credit begins to be rolled out throughout the country and more emphasis is placed upon online job searching (resulting in more people attempting to get the IT skills that they will need in order to have a source of income through claiming benefits and searching for jobs), it may be suggested that such resources as noted above in Angus will begin to be stretched. It is therefore essential that various stakeholders and organisations throughout Angus take note of the IT skills deficit that is all too apparent throughout Angus communities and discuss ways in which this IT skills deficit can be met. In the next section, the Angus Social Policy Team discusses the impact that the UK Government's 'digital by default' strategy will have in Angus and recommends potential steps towards tackling the IT skills shortage. *(Note:*

Discussion

As discussed previously, the Angus CAB Social Policy Team is concerned that the 'digital by default' strategy will not only exclude the most vulnerable and marginalised members of society from accessing vital services but also those who lack the skills and confidence to successfully use IT services. Furthermore, if the UK Government fails to take into account the needs of claimants, it runs the risk of excluding them from accessing services, due to lack of availability not lack of need and intent on the part of claimants. Simply asking people to make online benefit claims or apply for jobs online, without providing necessary levels of support, will continue to discriminate against those who lack necessary IT skills. Additionally, the Team remains concerned that sanctions will continue to target those who lack IT skills, which will not only affect their financial situation but will leave the problem unresolved (particularly if support is not provided), resulting in increased likelihood of incurring sanctions in the future.

With the roll out of Universal Credit and the emphasis on online claiming, it is likely that a greater number of individuals will need support. For instance, only 35% of Angus CAB clients stated that they would be able to apply online for benefits whilst 23% stated they would not be able to apply for jobs online, even with help. Even internet access throughout Angus remains an obstacle, with only 54% of Angus CAB clients stating that they had internet access at home. Thus, it follows that a greater number will be attempting to access services towards provision of support or internet access. However, although Angus does have resources available to tackle the IT skills deficit, the expected increase in demand with Universal Credit roll out will see such resources being put under strain. Therefore, below are a number of recommendations that should be considered to ensure that Angus is fully prepared to meet the IT skills deficit towards guarding against residents who are not online (or without other access and IT skills) being left behind.

Recommendations

The Angus CAB service will have to adapt its delivery of services due to the onset of the 'digital by default' strategy and the increasing demand from clients needing assistance with online services. The following recommendations should be considered:

- Assess Capabilities: assess the capabilities of clients and their access to digital resources. Realistically, this would leave CAB more time to support individuals who are most vulnerable (e.g., no PC, no PC skills), but would ultimately mean referring others to access resources elsewhere. This would also entail creating an assessment tool with which to measure and determine digital capability.

- IT Hub: employ more volunteers to specialise in online support. Additionally, CAB could create an IT Hub where a few or more clients can access online resources with support in one room. However, confidentiality and anonymity cannot be ensured in this regard. Furthermore, the implementation of this Hub would rely heavily on additional funding – to train more volunteers and to acquire further digital resources (e.g. computers, network routes).

- Enable Home Visiting: this would entail staff supporting clients in their own home. Additional funding would be needed, however, to equip staff with portable digital resources such as a laptop/tablet if clients were not in possession of a computer. Likewise, a risk assessment would have to be undertaken, and a personal safety component included in the training for prospective advisers.

- Increase Hours: length of applications for benefits and jobs vary; they are, however, a time-consuming process. Ideally, CAB could increase its opening hours to accommodate the extra time needed for such applications. This would require additional funding, however[21].

The following recommendations should also be considered by a number of stakeholders and organisations throughout Angus to ensure that their services are equipped to meet the demand of Angus residents in the near future:

- For Claimants with Additional Learning Needs or Disabilities: referral to appropriate disability advisors to assess claimants' needs and agree individual plans for additional support/reasonable adjustments in job search. For example, more time to complete certain tasks, instructions in an agreed form (i.e. written as well as verbal instructions recorded on mobile; agreements about how best to access computers)[22].

- For Claimants with Dyslexia: at present, the Universal Job Search site does not take into account the needs of adults with dyslexia/Special Learning Disabilities (SpLDs). Changes should be made to make the site dyslexia friendly - for example: personalized speech readers; font changes; coloured backgrounds; suitable log-in user names[23].

- Angus Digital Skills Academy: as the current funding for the Angus Digital Skills Academy has come to an end, we would recommend highly that Angus Council make additional funding available to support those jobseekers who lack sufficient IT skills and enabling them to gain employability skills.

- Increased Partnership: a more joined-up approach should be taken between Angus CAB and other local organisations, such as the Arbroath Learning Shop, to ensure that individuals who lack IT skills are referred to such organisations towards helping them develop such skills.

References

1. UK Cabinet Office (2012). *Government Digital Strategy*. Retrieved from http://www.publications.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/digital/strategy/government-digital-strategy.pdf. As cited in Voices from the frontline: digital by default. (Citizens Advice Scotland, 2013).

2. Department for Work and Pensions (2012). *Digital Strategy*. Retrieved from http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/dwp-digitalstrategy.pdf. As cited in *Voices from the frontline: digital by default*. (Citizens Advice Scotland, 2013).

3. Angus Citizens Advice Bureau (2013). *Offline and left behind: a briefing from Angus CAB.*

4. Ofcom (2012). *Communications Market Report: Scotland*. Retrieved from http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/cmr/cmr12/Scotland_CMR_2012_final.pdf. As cited in *Voices from the frontline: digital by default*. (Citizens Advice Scotland, 2013).

5. House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee (2012). *Universal Credit implementation: meeting the needs of vulnerable claimants, Third Report of Session 2012-13*. Retrieved from http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmworpen/576/576.pdf.

6. UK Cabinet Office (2013). *Government Digital Strategy: December 2013*. Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-digital-strategy/government-digital-strategy. [Accessed: 24/02/2014].

7. House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee (2012). *Universal Credit implementation: meeting the needs of vulnerable claimants, Third Report of Session 2012-13*. Retrieved from http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmworpen/576/576.pdf.

8. Department for Work and Pensions (2011). *Jobcentre Plus Annual Report and Accounts 2010/11*. Retrieved from http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/jcp-annual-report-and-accounts-2010-2011.pdf. As cited in *Voices from the frontline: digital by default*. (Citizens Advice Scotland, 2013).

9. House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee (2012). *Universal Credit implementation: meeting the needs of vulnerable claimants, Third Report of Session 2012-13*. Retrieved from http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmworpen/576/576.pdf.

10. House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee (2012). *Universal Credit implementation: meeting the needs of vulnerable claimants, Third Report of Session 2012-13*. Retrieved from http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmworpen/576/576.pdf.

11. UK Government (2014). *Universal Credit*. Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit/overview. [Accessed: 03/03/2014].

12. Written evidence from Cait McIntosh (January 2014), Community Learning and Development Worker (Angus Council).

13. Written evidence from Cait McIntosh (January 2014), Community Learning and Development Worker (Angus Council).

14. UK Government (2014). *Universal Credit*. Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit/overview. [Accessed: 03/03/2014].

15. House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee (2012). *Universal Credit implementation: meeting the needs of vulnerable claimants, Third Report of Session 2012-13*. Retrieved from http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmworpen/576/576.pdf.

16. UK Government (2014). *Universal Credit*. Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit/overview. [Accessed: 03/03/2014].

17. Ofcom (2012). *Communications Market Report: Scotland*. Retrieved from http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/cmr/cmr12/Scotland_CMR_2012_final.pdf. As cited in *Voices from the frontline: digital by default*. (Citizens Advice Scotland, 2013).

18. Angus Citizens Advice Bureau (2013). *Offline and left behind: a briefing from Angus CAB*.

19. Citizens Advice Scotland (2013). *Voices from the frontline: digital by default*.

20. Angus Citizens Advice Bureau (2014). *Digital drawbacks: paper is out but is everyone in? – A Briefing from Angus CAB*.

21. Angus Citizens Advice Bureau (2014). *Digital drawbacks: paper is out but is everyone in? – A Briefing from Angus CAB*.

22. Written evidence from Cait McIntosh (January 2014), Community Learning and Development Worker (Angus Council).

23. Written evidence from Cait McIntosh (January 2014), Community Learning and Development Worker (Angus Council).

Angus Citizens Advice Bureau is a member of The Scottish Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux: Scotland's largest independent advice network. CAB advice services are delivered using service points throughout Scotland, from the islands to city centres.

The CAB Service aims:
to ensure that individuals do not suffer through lack of knowledge of their rights and responsibilities, or of the services available to them, or through an inability to express their need effectively

and equally
to exercise a responsible influence on the development of social policies and services, both locally and nationally.

The CAB Service is independent and provides free, confidential and impartial advice to everybody regardless of age, disability, gender, race, religion and belief and sexual orientation.