ONLINE GOVERNMENT-OFFLINE OLDER PEOPLE?

A summary of E-Government and Older People in Ireland North and South
INTRODUCTION

E-government is the use by governments of information and communication technology (ICT) to benefit people and businesses as well as improving the efficient working of government itself.

The successful transition from face-to-face or telephone-based services to e-government is dependent on citizens having access to the internet (whether through a computer or smartphone) and possessing the skills or support to enable them to access public services online as and when they need them. This paper provides a summary of the key findings of a commissioned research project E-government and Older People in Ireland – North and South (Hardill, 2013). The project examines ways in which governments can ensure that older people are not left behind as public services move online.

KEY FINDINGS

E-government policy is at broadly the same stage of development nationally in NI and ROI (Hardill, 2013).

More services can be applied for online in ROI than in NI, a reflection that ROI currently leads the EU in e-government (EC Directorate for Information Society and Media, 2010).

NI (as evidenced in UK national data) is slightly above the EU27 average and ahead of the other UK regions in terms of access to broadband, and ROI slightly below for access to a computer and the internet (Eurostat, 2011).

The number of older adults in households across the two jurisdictions with a computer and the internet is increasing. However, the proportion remains below those for other age groups (Central Statistics Office, 2012; NISRA, 2011).

Within households with ICT, some members are ‘e-excluded’: they do not use, and have no interest in using, ICT (Hardill, 2013).

In both jurisdictions there is limited use of public services online by older adults, as revealed in both published statistics and the qualitative study (Hardill, 2013).

In ROI, people aged 65 and over living alone are two-and-a-half times more likely to have a computer in the household than those living with others: 56% compared with 21% (Central Statistics Office, 2012).

In ROI, people aged 65+ living on their own are more than two-and-a-half times more likely to have broadband access than people in the same age group living with others in the household (Central Statistics Office, 2012).

The over-55s in NI are less likely to have broadband than those in the rest of the UK (Ofcom, 2012).

In NI older men are much more likely to have ICT facilities than older women: 29% compared to 19% (NI Continuous Household Survey 2010/11).
In ROI, people aged 65 and over living alone are two-and-a-half times more likely to have a computer in the household than those living with others: 56% compared with 21% (Central Statistics Office, 2012).

E-government is about a progression from the simple provision of information electronically to full integration across government of electronic service delivery (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2001). Countries at the forefront of developments in e-government have moved to a unified, whole-of-government model, where a single portal is provided where citizens can access all government-supplied services online, regardless of which government authority provides them (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2012).

Effective e-government cannot be achieved unless there is universal access to information and services to vulnerable groups, residents in isolated rural areas and people with disabilities (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2012). Thus, e-government also requires digital inclusion whereby all people should be able to participate in the growing knowledge society.

For older people to access public services online, they need access to the relevant equipment (smartphone or computer with internet access) and a specific skill set, ‘internet self-efficacy’. Unlike younger age groups, older people did not learn about ICT when at school and not all older people used ICT when in paid employment. ICT skills have often been acquired in later life. As a result the nature and quality of ICT training and support is critical in supporting older people’s development of ‘internet self-efficacy’ (Hardill & Olphert, 2012). It has been demonstrated that once older people have access to, and acquire the skills to use it, ICT can become part of everyday life. This is illustrated by US research that shows that 70% of people aged 65+ who had started using the internet stated that they typically use it every day (Zickuhr & Madden, 2012).

A digital divide persists that is linked strongly to educational attainment, income and age. Data from a UK study shows that 61% of internet non-users had no formal education qualifications, compared with only 6% of those with a higher education qualification who were internet non-users (Blank, 2012). The same research also shows that a person’s level of income was positively correlated to internet use. Some 43% of those retired people with an annual income of £12,500 or less were internet users, while 99% of those with an income more than £40,000 were users (ibid). Among retired people in the UK, ‘just not interested’ was cited as the most common reason for not using the internet and giving up using it; ‘do not know how to use’ was the second most common reason for non-use, while for retired people ‘not for people my age,’ ‘computer not available’ and ‘too expensive’ were also presented as reasons for non-use (Dutton & Blank, 2011). These same sentiments were found in a study undertaken in 2009 by the Work Research Centre & Age Action of older people in ROI which found that while the numbers of older people using ICT was increasing, a large proportion of older people stated that they were just not interested in learning about ICT. This survey recorded that 23% were interested in learning more about mobile phones, 39% were interested in learning more about computers, and 39% were interested in learning more about the internet. Lower levels of interest in acquiring ICT skills were found among the groups that most need to be reached, including the older old and those with lower levels of educational attainment (Work Research Centre & Age Action, 2009).
E-GOVERNMENT POLICY IN IRELAND NORTH AND SOUTH

E-government policy is at broadly the same stage of development nationally in NI and ROI.

It is possible to access information on issues such as pensions and social welfare allowances, home help, home care, residential care, public housing and free travel online in both NI and ROI. Some services such as pensions can be applied for in NI but not in ROI, while it is possible to apply for home care online in ROI but not in NI.

In both jurisdictions information for broadly the same services is available online, but twice as many services in ROI can be applied for online than in NI, a reflection of the fact that ROI leads the EU in e-government – as revealed in the 2010 benchmarking study (EC Directorate for Information Society and Media, 2010). But e-government in both jurisdictions has not yet reached the stage where users have an online identity or account. An exception is the Revenue Online Service in ROI which is a leading e-government initiative where most tax-related services can be conducted purely online using a secure login.

Local government websites in both NI and ROI are at an earlier stage of development in terms of offering e-government services than national websites. A dedicated section for older users on local and national sites can make access to e-government easier for older people who are not internet-proficient.

### Confidence in using the Internet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Confidence in using the Internet</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age 15-24</td>
<td>74%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age 25-39</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 40-54</td>
<td>68%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age 55+</td>
<td>60%</td>
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</tbody>
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Source: Eurostat, 2012b

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES ON E-GOVERNMENT

Knowledge and use of e-government services is low among older people according to focus groups and interviews conducted by Hardill (2013). Reasons for this include lack of interest, fear of using the internet and concerns about online security, cost and a lack of skills and confidence. Both formal and informal training approaches could help with sustaining the use of online services e.g. older people consider informal support from family and friends as essential if there was to be an advance in the uptake of e-government services.

Sustaining use of services is vital to the development of e-government. Training can be provided, whether through formal or informal means, but follow-up is important in order to sustain the use of ICT skills among older people.
In ROI older people cited lack of skills as the main factor restricting use of the internet (Focus Groups, Hardill, 2013).

Older people in this research themselves conclude that e-government is inevitable and that they will have to get on board. However, the focus groups with older people and interviews with practitioners for this research identified a number of barriers that need to be addressed in order to achieve e-inclusion and use of e-government services. These include cost, access to broadband, overcoming the knowledge divide, security fears, availability of training courses and the lack of relevance of ICT to the everyday lives of some older people.

In NI older men are much more likely to have ICT facilities than older women: 29% compared to 19% (NI Continuous Household Survey 2010/11).

E-inclusion and e-government are intertwined. Hence, e-inclusion must be progressed for e-government to work effectively. Fast development of technological advances necessitates the provision of constant support to sustain people’s use of digital technology, and to maintain and develop their skills and confidence.

In households that include people aged 60+, broadband access and internet usage are much lower than in the total population in both NI and ROI (CSO, 2012; NISRA, 2011).

For some people e-government could mean diminishing access to information and services. E-government can only bring about the cost-savings so vitally needed in these difficult economic times if e-inclusion is geared to helping the digitally excluded, as well as supporting people to sustain their digital engagement.

INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS

DENMARK NATIONAL STRATEGY

In 2007, the government published a national strategy for e-government, Towards Better Digital Service, Increased Efficiency and Stronger Collaboration (The Danish government, Local Government Denmark (LGDK) and Danish Regions, 2007). The strategy focused on making gains from the digitalisation of services through improving services to citizens and businesses, enabling resources to be transferred from administration to citizen-focused services and cross-governmental collaboration at all levels. It was supported by funding of DKK 268 million to implement the 35 initiatives. Ministries and other public agencies in Denmark have worked together to ensure connectivity to ubiquitous and affordable broadband, education of citizens to increase digital literacy, e-accessibility, addressing the needs of older workers and older people in general, promoting cultural diversity in relation to inclusion, and promoting inclusive e-government (Ubaldi, 2010).

SERVICE CANADA

Service Canada was created in 2005 to improve the delivery of government programmes and services to Canadian citizens, by making access to them faster, easier, and more convenient. It offers a single portal for access to federal government services in Canada, through different media such as online, by telephone or through Service Canada centres. A total of 78 services are available through Service Canada, which works across departments, agencies and other public bodies. An important role of Service Canada is reaching out to individuals and communities who might otherwise have little or no access to its services. Outreach services can be scheduled by communities on a regular basis, while Service Canada staff can also work with communities in times of need, such as a natural disaster or a local unemployment crisis.
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research highlights that e-government and e-inclusion are linked. E-government requires a transformation in the way in which public services are delivered and e-inclusion aims to ensure that people are able to participate in the growing knowledge society. E-inclusion needs to support people getting online, as well as supporting people to sustain their online presence. It is also important that e-government is accessible to all citizens in terms of providing websites that are easy to read, easy to navigate and easy to find information on.

The success of e-government is dependent on citizens being confident internet users, possessing a specific skill set, being able to establish and maintain an internet connection, and being able to navigate websites (Hargatti, 2008). Barriers that impede older people in using e-government have been identified by older adults who participated in the focus groups, as well as by key stakeholders, including cost, access to broadband, lack of skills, availability of training courses and the perceived lack of relevance of ICT to the everyday lives of some older people. These barriers must be addressed to prevent older people being left behind in the transition online. Efforts must be made by service providers to communicate the benefits of using online services to older people. In addition ongoing monitoring and assessment of online service provision should be undertaken to ensure accessibility and usability for older people.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. To be effective, e-government must take a whole-of-government approach that links central and local structures.

2. Among older adults in ROI and NI, there is both a low level of awareness and a low level of uptake of e-government services. Lessons can be learned on how to equip older people for change from the successful TV digital switchover strategies employed across the UK and Ireland.

3. E-government should be a key component in formal training courses and peer support programmes developed for older people, especially for those older people with no previous e-government engagement.

4. E-government and e-inclusion must be seen as a dual strategy for government, and the identification of key target groups, e.g. older people with lower incomes, low educational attainment and older women, is vital.

5. Greater analysis of usage and non-usage of government sites is required in the development and refinement of e-government services.

METHODOLOGY

This project used a mixed methods approach involving: desk research, analysis of existing data sources, focus groups with older people and interviews with practitioners NI and ROI. Focus groups were held in November 2012 with 31 older adults, 16 residing in ROI and 15 residing in NI (two in urban areas and two in rural areas). In total, 21 interviews were conducted with people from the ageing sector, government information services and local councils.

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In ROI, people aged 65+ living on their own are more than two-and-a-half times more likely to have broadband access than people in the same age group living with others in the household (Central Statistics Office, 2012).

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


