Social Security Advisory Committee Response to the Call for Evidence by the House of Lords Digital Skills Committee

1. Introduction

The Social Security Advisory Committee[1] (SSAC) is pleased to respond to the Call for Evidence by the House of Lords Digital Skills Select Committee. The SSAC has a particular interest in the actions taken by Government and others to promote digital inclusion for recipients of Social Security, including raising the level of digital skills among this population.

We understand that the primary focus of the Select Committee's consultation is on the digital skills needed to support the competitiveness of the UK economy. The Social Security system makes a contribution to developing general digital skills in the workforce, for example through provision of skills programmes for the unemployed, however we also wish to highlight the importance of digital skills in enabling those in need of support to access Social Security.

This short paper therefore outlines our views under two main headings:

- Digital inclusion for those accessing Social Security

- Developing digital skills through the Social Security system

2. Digital Inclusion for those accessing Social Security

2.1 Digital skills in the Social Security claimant population

There are high levels of digital activity in the general population, with 82% of people found to be online (defined as regular or occasional internet use) in research carried out during 2012.[2]

However the same research indicates that the DWP's customer profile is different, for example:
- 72% of disabled people were found to be online.
- Only 59% of over 65s were online.

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[1] The Social Security Advisory Committee (SSAC) is an independent statutory advisory body of the DWP that provides impartial advice on social security and related matters.
[2] Digital Landscape Research (Cabinet Office, November 2012)

Also, accessing benefits online is a relatively complex activity requiring a higher level of digital skills than, for example, simply browsing the internet for information or using email.

There are, in fact, significant concerns over the ability of more vulnerable claimants to access digital services. Research by Citizens Advice Scotland[3] showed that in a survey of over 1100 clients presenting with benefit issues:

- Only 54% had an internet connection at home.
- 36% never used the internet, and a further 11% reported hardly ever using it.
- 76% said they would struggle to claim a benefit online.
- 72% said they would struggle to apply for a job online.

Nonetheless, the rate of internet usage in the general population continues to rise, and the relatively new digital service for claiming Jobseeker's Allowance online is achieving high levels of usage, with 88.3%[4] of applications made online in June 2014.

As the digital landscape continues to evolve, with new services, devices and channels emerging, so the skills of those currently at risk of digital exclusion will also evolve. We therefore encourage government to continue to invest in monitoring levels of digital exclusion, in particular among the more vulnerable segments of society.

2.2 Support for Social Security claimants with limited digital skills

The Government Digital Strategy[5] sets out how the government intends to become "digital by default", both to save money and improve access to government services. Consistent with this approach, the DWP's Digital Strategy[6] seeks to increase the use of digital services by claimants, and for example anticipates that by 2017 over 80% of claims for Universal Credit will be made online.

Both of these strategies recognise that there is a need for alternative provision, known as "Assisted Digital", for those who lack the skills or for other reasons are unable to access digital services. There are also legal requirements affecting the provision of alternative means of access to government services[7].

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[3] Offline and Left Behind – Digital exclusion among Scotland's CAB clients (Citizens Advice Scotland, 2013)
[4] DWP Business Plan Transparency Measures (DWP, Updated August 2014)
[5] Government Digital Strategy (Cabinet Office, December 2013)
[6] DWP Digital Strategy (DWP, December 2012)
[7] Bishop Electrical et al v HMRC Tax Commissioners (September 2013)

The DWP is in the early stages of developing its approach to Assisted Digital, currently working with other government departments and carrying out investigative projects[8], and has the aim of agreeing an Assisted Digital approach for its digital exemplar services (including Universal Credit) during 2014[9].

Early indications are that the DWP approach to Assisted Digital will place emphasis on use of third parties to deliver skill development and other support to claimants who are not online:

- The DWP Digital Strategy suggests that, in the longer term, provision of residual non-digital services for those who cannot interact online "may well require the DWP to work through others, better placed to engage with those who need this support".
- For Universal Credit, the Local Support Services Framework[10] sets out an approach to delivering support to those not currently online by working in partnership with local authorities, third sector organisations and others.

While we recognise the benefits of local provision tailored to local needs, we are concerned that this emerging approach could lead to a diminished level of DWP accountability for ensuring that claimants who do not have the skills to access digital services, or are digitally excluded for other reasons, receive the support they need. This is particularly important given the current financial pressures on local authorities and third sector organisations. We therefore believe it is essential that the DWP remains fully accountable for funding and ensuring the quality of support to claimants who would otherwise suffer from digital exclusion.

2.3 Other digital inclusion issues affecting Social Security claimants

A number of other aspects of digital inclusion affect claimants, in addition to lack of skills. While these are not directly related to the subject of this consultation, we briefly include some significant ones here in order to provide a more complete picture of the subject:

a. As referenced above, a significant percentage of claimants may not have access to a computer or internet connection at home.
b. Where an internet connection is available, it may not have the speed/capacity to support complex digital services (e.g. in rural areas).
c. Claimants may have disabilities or health conditions which impact their ability to use digital services, and may not have access to assistive technologies where these exist (e.g. screen readers for the visually impaired).
d. Where a telephone-based alternative to a digital service is provided, the cost of calls may be prohibitive, especially where a claimant depends on a mobile phone.

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[8] For example the Digital Deal which provided funding for internet services and training to social housing tenants.
[9] Action 9 of the DWP's response to the Government Digital Strategy (DWP, December 2013)
[10] Universal Credit local support services framework (DWP, February 2013)

We believe it is important that the DWP's emerging approach to assisted digital addresses issues such as these in addition to providing support for skills development.

Further, it is important that Government overall continues to ensure investment is made in the public infrastructure needed to provide access to digital services, in particular provision of high speed network connections to rural areas and of public access points (e.g. libraries).

3. Developing digital skills through the Social Security system

3.1 Helping claimants to develop digital skills

It can be argued that providing high quality government digital services which are widely used may of itself encourage people to develop their digital skills, although whether this has a significant impact compared to the availability of social media and other online activities is unclear. However, in delivering Social Security and supporting the unemployed, the DWP has a number of important opportunities to help claimants develop their digital skills:

- Jobcentres can currently access funding to provide digital skills training for unemployed claimants in their area (using programmes such as UKOnline, Online Basics and e-skills UK).

- Organisations delivering the Work Programme for those at risk of becoming long-term unemployed can provide similar digital skills training for the claimants they are supporting.

- Jobcentre Plus work coaches can support individual claimants with online tasks such as preparing a CV, searching for vacancies and preparing job applications.

- As referenced above, the Universal Credit local support services framework envisages local partnerships providing digital skills training for claimants not currently online.

We believe these programmes can offer an important way for those with very limited digital skills, and often on the fringes of the employment market, to start building the general digital skills needed for the future workplace. We therefore encourage government to continue to fund these programmes, and to monitor outcomes in order to maximise their effectiveness.

Social Security Advisory Committee
4th September 2014