

Whose Responsibility is Digital Inclusion?

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What a delight to be asked by Oxford Internet Institute and IPPR to comment on “Who is responsible for Digital Inclusion? Which government department should hold the mantel?”

Its a delight is because we have been asking ourselves the very same question for the last few years.

Lets come clean about Citizens Online and our staff. We describe ourselves an independent national charity focusing on the use of ICT by socially excluded communities, but its all just a cover.. In reality, what we actually are, are secret agents, secret agents with one purpose in life.. to find out what Government is really doing with the digital inclusion agenda.

What we have is a real life crime drama, someone surely must be responsible for digital inclusion. We say its key to our knowledge economy; surely someone must care and must do their best to solve this issue? This is a whodunit.. and we have finally realised what the answer is and we are astonished... listen in, let me tell you more...

Our lives as undercover agents take us into many departments and it is a life of danger. We have to share secrets among departments, we have to actually tell them what the other departments are really doing. The departments work hard to keep their own patches and budgets separated from each other, pretending that their work has no relevance to anything the other departments are doing.

Mysteriously though, they will talk to each other when they realise they need to come up with a “strategy” (in quotes) and this will look much better if they can re-launch someone else’s’ work and re-quote someone else’s’ out of date data to keep up the appearance of activity.

The secret agent life is a life of continual frustrating work, as the civil servants come and go and you get invited to yet another round of briefing and relationship building. Its clearly a ploy to keep

you busy, keep you guessing and keep you believing the holy grail of sustainable funding is just around the corner.

No stone is left unturned in our investigations and we must give our labour away for free in order to cultivate our sources of information. So here are some of the key suspects in our quest to find those holding responsibility for digital inclusion:

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, lovely building that Elland House, talk to people on the 4th floor, no idea what those on the 7th are doing, who are flabbergasted when you tell them what those on the 2nd floor are doing.

ODPM E-citizen project “to promote uptake of government services, but best to avoid hard to reach groups because, well they are too hard to reach, ok we will look at them after much pressure, but don’t talk to us about digital inclusion, its more than we want to deal with”

ODPM e-innovations funding, included some money for digital inclusion projects, they asked if Citizens Online would judge the next round of them, only an 8 stage process, what you want to be paid, oh, forget it then..

ODPM –The improvement and Development Agency supporting the e-champions network and researching good practice in digital inclusion by local authorities. They have actually paid citizens online for some work, so we like them.

ODPM regional agenda- ask the regions what they are doing on digital inclusion and the steer they have, what a lot of confusion! Citizens Online have started working with some of the regions.

ODPM –again, the Social Exclusion Unit, we asked them in 2004 what they were doing on digital inclusion, they told us they’d done a nice report in year 2000. They were so off the pace, we thought that was a joke. Then this year they picked the agenda back up in a consultation on ICT and social inclusion and actually paid Citizens Online to get involved, so we like them too now.

Lets move our investigations on..

And its not all the usual suspects.. for example, just last week the Minister at the Foreign and Commonwealth office asked us for a briefing for the World Summit on the information society, could We thought that was a joke, then help shape the agenda for the UK meeting and could we turn up and run the work stream.. (but could we make our own way to Tunisia for the jolly).

Home Office, they are concerned about how well the community and voluntary sector use ICT, so they set up a ICT hub consortium, could citizens online please be on that.

Another key suspect, the DFES, they just launched their e-Strategy on 15th March which Citizens Online had fed into. In the small print it said they would coordinate digital inclusion across Government. Surely an admission of guilt! Had we found the criminal at last responsible for this digital inclusion thing?

We couldn't be sure, because just that same week, two days later out of DCMS, OFCOM launched their Media literacy strategy also claiming the role of signposting. Citizens Online took part in their consultation. OFCOM and DFES weren't aware of what each other was doing. We cunningly shared the information to see what devilish plans they'd come up with around working together and what one of them said was, and I quote "I've now seen their Strategy but not yet worked out how we should respond/react to it. Once I'm clear about that I'm sure we will need to talk again to make sure we don't get in each others way" Fantastic commitment to interdepartmental working.

Then just to confuse us even further 15 days later, the DTI and Cabinet Office launch the Digital Strategy and claim THEY will coordinate across Government! They are going to ask OFCOM to lead on Home Broadband take-up. Is that part of Media literacy then? Cabinet Office don't mention it so we can't be sure. What is this Media Literacy thing anyway.. well its almost entirely digital inclusion when you read the definition. .. but just to confuse you lets introduce a whole new terminology..

OK, Lets return to our investigations of DFES. Cybrarian project to develop a simpler interface to the internet (least that's what I think it is) and we are part of the stakeholder groupings, can't tell you the number of briefings Citizens Online have done or been asked to on that.

DFES through UFI - UK online centres, Citizens Online sit on a forum that started looking at sustainability possibilities, the possibilities are endless, the funding isn't, it finished a while ago, many centres are closing, have broken kit, no marketing programme, no trained staff- check the reality against the spin.

DFES ICT in Schools, just asked Citizens Online to brief them on what Government is doing, because they want to figure out the home schools links agenda.

DFES Parents online, DFES Skills Strategy White paper, Learning and Skills Council and their unhelpful funding models, Citizens Online talked to them all championed the cause, told them what the others are doing.

OK, Lets leave that usual suspect and go back to another –the DTI, they championed Home Computing Initiatives and asked Citizens Online to work with the Advisory group on promoting digital inclusion and also to establish an Industry body to promote digital inclusion. We seemed to be infiltrating DTI well, but then our mate Stephen Timms got reshuffled, the DTI staffing slashed and no one wanted to talk to us about digital inclusion, though they seem to be rising phoenix like at the moment with the Digital City Challenge.

Another strange suspect for our investigation- the Department of Constitutional affairs no less, Citizens Online just agreed to participate in their Critical Friends Forum for e-democracy. Or the National Audit Office, could Citizens Online be on their group to look at older people and e-services.

The e-Envoys office was a prime suspect before being disbanded. They coordinated the rebranding of other people's activities and called it the Get Started campaign, launched at a Citizens Online event in Newcastle. They asked Citizens Online to be on the Digital Inclusion Panel and its working group and to help set up an industry body to follow on from that. They also asked Citizens Online to speak at the e-Summit. Now e-Envoys are no more and the new e-Government Unit have been more than clear that they don't hold the agenda, though they own Direct Gov and the drive for Government services online.

Our investigations take us into Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Wales had little activity on this agenda and Citizens Online are just shaping up a major programme with them. Scotland looked like the leaders to us, but then their programmes came to an end with no clear exit strategy and continuation thinking. Northern Ireland just asked us for some meetings.

DWP asked us in one location to be their digital inclusion coordinator to create joined up approaches with job centre plus.

I could go on and on, but I think you get the picture.

And Oh dear, now I've blown our cover at Citizens Online and no one in Government will talk to us again. Worse still, they might never give us core funding again- oh well no change there then!

So who could be this owner of the digital inclusion agenda for Government?
Whodunnit?

Its that weird time in the plot when the investigator must investigate themselves.

Citizens Online strives to be a thought leader on digital inclusion, to hold the knowledge and to share it, to network partners and promote the work of our colleagues in other charities specialising on aspects of the agenda (for example AbilityNet or The e-Learning Foundation).

We realised you can't really do one bit of social inclusion or one bit of ICT usage, you have to look holistically at the agenda and work with communities to find solutions. These are community development approaches, in some ways as old as the hills. We took these methods in a programme called EverybodyOnline and saw a seven fold increase in internet usage compared to national figures, we do allsorts of community building work along the way. There's an increase in home usage of Internet in our project areas too amongst **C2DE** groups, 6% higher than national figures (up to 13% in one area), so there's a business case for involvement by industry.

What's best is that in our five years of activity, we didn't get reshuffled, didn't get voted out and didn't take the next move in our civil service, grey generalist career.

So whodunit? who really is the Government's digital inclusion unit? This investigator begs your indulgence for the arrogance that could be displayed here when I say that I believe Citizens Online have played that role. Unofficially and certainly not paid for by government.

Who has paid for it?

Industry, our Alliance for Digital Inclusion partners have understood the importance of the strategic coordinating role, alongside the delivery of projects on the ground. AOL, BT, Cisco, IBM, Intel, Microsoft and T-mobile are all supporting this work.

So a plea to the new Government, see industry as partners and not as cash cows. And value the knowledge of Citizens Online and our other Third Sector colleagues. We had work hard to get it.

And get your own digital inclusion unit that we can all work with and so stop this crazy tour around Government departments, If you want to outsource a digital inclusion unit, however, we'd be delighted to apply...