



Smart Places Seminar 5.1

Designing Digital Solutions to the Challenges of
the Voluntary Sector Seminar

Harlow Health Resource Centre

20th November 2019

Executive Report



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Background

Following the Essex + Herts Digital innovation Zone (DIZ) Smart Place Seminar 5 'Empowering Community and Voluntary Services Through Digital' it was agreed that a follow-up session, facilitated by Anglia Ruskin University (ARU), should be organised to explore in more detail how digital solutions might be developed to address specific challenges faced by the Community and Voluntary Sector in the delivery of their services. A 'design hop' organised by CAST (Centre for Acceleration of Social Technology) was held in the Summer which was a first opportunity for voluntary sector organisations to look at defining their future through digital and it was hoped that the findings coming out of this design hop would then inform the work at Seminar 5.1 'Designing Digital Solutions to the Challenges of the Voluntary Sector Seminar'. The ambition was for implementable projects to arise from the seminar and design hop that would generate mini consortia explore funding opportunities to develop a solution.

Preparatory Work

Throughout the Summer of 2019, ARU proactively contacted a range of local Community and Voluntary Service Organisations (CVS) that had been identified by CVS partners on the DIZ Advisory Board to discuss some of the service challenges they faced and to explore in outline potential digital approaches to solving these challenges. As a result of the direct engagement ARU were able to identify a number of key themes around digital opportunities or needs faced by CVS organisations.

Key Digital Opportunities and Themes Highlighted for the CVS Sector

- Development of apps to demonstrate how donations are used and who it has helped
- How can digital showcase projects supported and the impact of this eg. a dynamic info-graphic?
- How can digital enrich the donor experience?
- Can digital be used to process and approve video applications for funding/support online?
- Search Engine Optimisation – how can organisations ensure that they appear at the top of digital searches?
- How can digital be used to develop more accurate self-assessment tools to tailor CVS services better for users?
- What is the best/most effective way to interact with different cohorts via digital technology?
- How can digital be used to set up, run and collate info/data from online focus groups?
- How can digital be used to collect qualitative data that will benefit both service providers and users?

Academic Support

In order to support the discussions at the seminar and to assist in the development of potential real-life solutions and business cases ARU identified and engaged a number of ARU academics with relevant expertise which is relevant to the topics. These academics covers a wide range of subject areas including Early Intervention, Mental Wellbeing and Vulnerability; Leadership and Management for Third Sector Organisations; Digital Design; Cyber Security & Connectivity; Transitions from Care, Urban Resilience and Participatory Research; Sustainable & Resilient Health and Social Care; and, Software Development.

Key Digital Challenges Faced by the Third Sector

The Seminar started with a welcome and introduction from Clive Emmett outlining the role of the CVS and some of the key challenges that they are facing where 'digital' might benefit them. These included:

- governance
- quality assurance
- finance
- fundraising
- marketing
- recruitment
- resources and equipment
- meeting space availability

The next stage was to give an overview of the challenges and insight gathered by ARU from the CVS organisations that had been engaged with that Summer:

- Collection & allocation of funding/engagement with donors & potential donors
- Enabling new forms of online applications for support/funding – e.g. video applications
- Tech as an assessment tool/better tailoring of output for service users
- Using tech to engage different cohorts & collect data from them effectively and securely – focus groups etc.
- Enabling effective commercial hire of resources & facilities (incl ticketing) – accessible to all
- Effective management of volunteers – communication & scheduling of resources
- Improving digital links to LA'S & service providers (GP's etc.) – raising awareness of our services
- Accessing potential users of our services more effectively and safely – care homes, schools etc.

Group Discussion

A group discussion followed on challenges where digital could offer solutions. These included:

- The challenges around digital uptake within third sector organisations from both a 'top down' (management downwards) and 'bottom up' (service user upwards) perspective
- Operational challenges (e.g. comms & marketing) and strategic challenges (measuring value and impact) and how digital could help address these
- The need for organisations to visibly demonstrate what has changed as a result of their work (impact) and how this is sustainable – as opposed to just measuring activities vs key performance indicator targets
- The need to identify 'hard to reach' groups of service users and better understand how to engage them
- The barriers to digital adoption within third sector organisations including:
 - the fear that 'computers will take our jobs'
 - the resistance of service users who don't use technology
 - the fear that tech will replace a physical relationship
 - the age and incompatibility of tech in many organisations
 - the fear of a 'big brother' environment created by technology
 - the poor availability of training for third sector colleagues

The group then discussed which of the challenges that we had discussed could be developed further into an ongoing collaborative project.

The Proposed Project

It was agreed that before work can begin to identify any digital solutions to help address challenges within the third sector, the first step should be to identify the barriers to digital adoption in the third sector within the DIZ region. Until these barriers are understood and addressed the effectiveness of any digital solutions could potentially be compromised.

The initial suggestion was that the following work could be undertaken:

Stage 1 – a literature review by ARU to establish what research has already been carried out (nationally and internationally) into the barriers to digital adoption within the third sector

Stage 2 – map the third sector organisations within the DIZ region and engage them

Stage 3a – issue a survey to a representative number of these third sector organisations to gather data on the barriers to digital adoption

Stage 3b – possibly host a conference/workshop attended by a number of third sector organisations to share findings and capture further evidence

Stage 4 – collate findings and publish a white paper outlining the key barriers to digital adoption in the third sector with the DIZ region

Once these stages have been completed ARU and the DIZ will be in a much stronger position to develop a programme to help to remove or overcome these barriers and identify viable digital solutions to the key challenges faced by third sector organisations in the DIZ region. More importantly it should also be possible to implement these solutions far more effectively.

The above proposal is very much a draft at this stage and may change as discussions progress – it also depends upon available funding and team capacity.

Clearly this is a significant programme of work to undertake and it was suggested that the £10k seed corn funding from ARU might be used to complete the Stage 1 literature review (subject to costings). The project would clearly need further funding to progress and would need additional funding from external bodies such as the Thriving Third Sector Fund to achieve this.

Next Steps

ARU to identify additional academic expertise required and engage academics

CVS lead to contact the Thriving Third Sector Fund to gauge their interest in the project

ARU to feed back progress on the above to the wider DIZ Advisory Board, collate feedback and establish a working group in early 2020 to ensure that all interested parties have the opportunity to be involved in the ongoing development and delivery of the project