Written evidence from Good Things Foundation (CTS0077)

1. Introduction

Good Things Foundation is a social change charity, helping people to lead better lives through digital. Active in the UK, Australia and Kenya, we work in communities to engage people who are excluded from the digital world, helping them build the confidence and skills they need to use technology to achieve personal outcomes, from finding employment to increasing health and wellbeing. In the UK, we work with the Online Centres Network, over 5,000 grassroots organisations in all areas of the country, from small charities, libraries and community groups to social enterprises and housing associations.

Good Things Foundation is submitting this evidence to highlight the benefits of Face-to-Face Assisted Digital (AD) support being piloted by Her Majesty’s Court & Tribunal Service (HMCTS) for those who are digitally excluded or require support to use digital services.

This paper also provides evidence to support the view that HMCTS has taken sufficient steps to evaluate the impact of reforms implemented so far, and how made sufficient commitment to evaluation in future.

In our view, HMCTS has consulted effectively on the reforms and maintained effective communication with Good Things Foundation as a partner and relevant stakeholder.

2. What we know

A significant proportion of the UK adult population is either offline or use the internet only in a limited way - for example, less than once a week and across a narrow range of tasks. 12% of UK adults are non-users of the internet, and 25% of all internet users are ‘limited users’\(^1\). These people are more likely to be unemployed or on low incomes, have left school at 16, and be in social classes DE.

Digital exclusion in the UK is holding back economic growth and stalling social inclusion. In 2018, 11.3 million adults lack one or more of the basic digital skills for life and work\(^2\). At current rates of progress, by 2028 there will still be 6.9 million people without these skills. At Good Things Foundation, we believe that everyone in the UK should have the confidence, skills, support and access to use digital technology to participate in society and benefit from the digital world.

\(^1\) A Blueprint for a 100% Digitally Included Nation

\(^2\) Bridging the Digital Divide
Good Things Foundation’s experience of delivering digital social inclusion programmes over a decade shows that it is critical to build digital inclusion into all forms of social interventions and programmes that support those who face social and digital exclusion, and in a way that recognises each individual’s needs and helps them to achieve personal goals or to address personal barriers. By piloting a face-to-face Assisted Digital service for its customers, many of whom face social exclusion compounded by crisis, HMCTS are creating a critical opportunity to understand how assistance with Government digital transactions can both support access to justice for the most vulnerable, and build digital confidence and skills.

3. What is Assisted Digital?

Assisted Digital (AD) means providing help for people who need to use online services but don’t have the skills, ability or access to do so on their own. AD support could be face-to-face, on the phone or through webchat.

Good Things Foundation is working with HMCTS to pilot face-to-face Assisted Digital support for HMCTS customers. Online Centres who have signed up to be part of the pilot support individuals who lack digital skills, ability or access to provide access to a digital device, help people understand the HMCTS service they need to complete, understand the online guidance provided, help people navigate the online form and get to the point of completion.

4. Our approach

Since March 2018, Good Things Foundation and HMCTS- along with 18 of our community partners in the Online Centres Network - have been testing how best to provide face-to-face Assisted Digital support to people accessing HMCTS online services. Through referrals from HMCTS Customer Contact Centres and outreach into local communities, Online Centres have offered face-to-face assisted digital support for people across the following online services:

- Civil Money Claims
- Divorce
- Probate
- Social Security and Child Support
- Single Justice System (eg. TfL fines, DVLA)
- Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and Employment Support Allowance (ESA) appeals
- Help with Fees.

Phase 2 of the Project is now underway and will see the programme extended to 25 Online Centres by August 2019.
Good Things Foundation and HMCTS are working collaboratively using an open, design-led approach to this project, with a focus on testing, iterating and learning from both service users (HMCTS customers) and delivery agents (community-based Online Centres). This involves user testing, design workshops, monitoring and analysing user data, regular interaction with Online Centres, and interviews and visits with both Online Centres and service users.

This is a trailblazing approach in Government, allowing a service to be designed reflecting the real, lived experience of socially excluded people, and creating the opportunity to test and challenge core assumptions in Government policy - specifically the definition of Assisted Digital support as originally conceived by the Government Digital Service, and to what extent this is sufficient and reasonable as the basis for policy and commissioning in the future.

Evidence from the pilot so far is showing that for those facing the greatest barriers, community-based approaches, free at the point of delivery and combining a blend of online and offline support, are effective in securing the engagement of HMCTS customers who are excluded from the digital world.

Insights from the pilot include:

- Guidance is an important part of the Assisted Digital process. Assisted Digital is not just about filling in a form, help also needs to be provided for customers to understand the service that they are applying to and the legal process that this entails.
- Assisted Digital responds to overlapping barriers: people may access it both because they aren’t confident accessing a digital service and because they aren’t confident interacting with Government services. Some people need Assisted Digital support even when they use the internet in their everyday life. This is because the stakes are high when interacting with Government services: “I’ve never done it online, I’ve always booked with somebody in case I make a mistake.”
- To date, the most effective way to promote the availability of Assisted Digital has been through the support that community centres are already providing. For example, a person may present to an Online Centre who wants to appeal their PIP decision. In that case, the Online Centre may make them aware of the assisted digital support they could receive as part of the help that they will receive at that Online Centre.
- Assistance helps applicants to translate their experience into a clear case that is ready to be submitted to HMCTS. Support from someone who is familiar with the appeals or application process can help the applicant highlight the right information in their case and provide the right evidence. This process is necessary for some customers, no matter what channel they are using to
interact with HMCTS. The successful face-to-face assisted digital appointments have incorporated this kind of support.

As well as giving assistance with online HMCTS services, the people and organisations delivering the pilot are equipped to offer ‘wraparound’ support, signposting people onto basic digital skills courses, connecting people to local community activities and offering people employment support and opportunities. This is an important additional dimension of the model of Assisted Digital commissioned through community organisations, and its value - in terms of creating confidence and self-efficacy for beneficiaries - is not currently captured in Government policy or commissioning mechanisms.

We are continually evaluating this project in detail to understand what works and what doesn’t work. Ultimately, we want to know how face-to-face assisted digital support can help HMCTS customers, which customers and why.

5. Conclusion

The face-to-face Assisted Digital pilot project commissioned by HMCTS and delivered by Good Things Foundation provides an important opportunity to test how AD can best be delivered for those facing the greatest need, and to challenge how digital assistance and inclusion should be supported across Government in the future. We would recommend this approach to other Government departments, in particular the emphasis on embedding an Assisted Digital offer within community-led organisations.

HMCTS should be commended for commissioning the project, and for working in an open, collaborative and design-led way with a charity partner to address issues which are of critical importance for Government as a whole.

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