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Evaluation of Digital Communities Wales

Summary

1. About Digital Communities Wales

- 1.1 Digital Communities Wales (DCW) is a Welsh Government digital inclusion programme delivered via a contract awarded to the Wales Co-operative Centre. The contract, worth £1.6m (excluding VAT) runs from 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2017 with the option to extend for a further two years. DCW builds on two previous digital inclusion initiatives, namely Communities@One and Communities 2.0.
- 1.2 Unlike its predecessors, DCW adopts a more indirect delivery approach to addressing the effects of digital exclusion with the emphasis being on facilitating and co-ordinating digital inclusion activity. As such, the programme's aims are to complement a wide range of activities with partner organisations across the public, private and third sectors to reduce digital exclusion and help meet the Welsh Government's policy goals as set out in the Digital Inclusion Framework and Delivery Plan.

2. Research aims and methodology

- 2.1 The aim of the evaluation was to identify the emerging effects of DCW including the programme's structural form and operational practice as well as its effectiveness and operational efficiency.
- 2.2 A range of methods was used including a literature review of policy and programme documents and monitoring information. Primary research was undertaken with a sample of 50 partner organisations which the DCW programme supported. Research was also undertaken with:
 - Front-line delivery staff and volunteers trained by the programme (via semi-structured interviews, observation work and a web survey)
 - 'End' service users participating in digital inclusion support activities offered by DCW partner organisations
 - Programme stakeholders including Wales Co-operative Centre staff, Welsh Government officials and members of the Digital Inclusion Programme Board.

3. Key findings

Policy and Programme Context

- 3.1 The key Welsh policy documents ‘in force’ at the time DCW was designed, clearly supported continued public sector intervention to reduce levels of digital exclusion amongst key groups.
- 3.2 The Welsh Government’s refreshed Delivering Digital Inclusion Strategic Framework and Delivery Plan, published in March 2016, acknowledges that there have been important achievements in reducing digital exclusion but that there remains more to be done.
- 3.3 Data shows that around 84 percent of Welsh households have internet access¹. This is an increase of 18 percentage points from 2010 but the data shows a relatively stagnant picture between 2015 and 2016 suggesting that the remaining households may be harder to ‘convert’.
- 3.4 The Digital Health and Social Care Strategy for Wales highlights the potential opportunities associated with technology in terms of the broader health agenda.
- 3.5 The implications of an announcement by the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Children² to consider phasing out the Communities First Programme will need careful consideration in terms of any potential impact on the delivery of DCW and more broadly on the availability of digital inclusion support services in deprived communities.
- 3.6 The Programme for Government (2016-2021)³ reaffirms the high level policy commitment to digital inclusion.

Programme Design and Rationale

- 3.7 The main recommendation from the evaluation of Communities 2.0 was that the Welsh Government should allocate resources for a more limited successor programme that would act as an advocate for digital inclusion working with and through partner organisations in the public, private and third sectors but would not itself deliver front line activity.
- 3.8 The specification for DCW set out a clear evidence of need and operational context for the programme. It also set out a series of over-arching aims, specific objectives and detailed requirements that were entirely in-tune with key policy drivers and the learning derived from prior evaluation.
- 3.9 The specification for DCW set out a series of four KPIs and targets for the two year contract period. These related to:
 - The number of organisations supported (target of 800)
 - The number of individuals helped by supported organisations to engage with technology (target of 30,000)
 - The number of individuals helped by supported organisations to become more employable (target of 1,000)
 - The number of volunteers to be recruited (target of 1,000) and utilised (target of 1,000).
- 3.10 Qualitative evidence from partner organisations and DCW stakeholders shows a high degree of support for the rationale and the changes introduced to the design of the programme (as compared with Communities 2.0).

¹ Ofcom, Communications Market Report Wales 2016.

² Made on 13th October 2016

³ Welsh Government, Taking Wales Forward, September 2016.

Programme Implementation

- 3.11 The proposed project delivery plan submitted by the Wales Co-operative Centre, contained an appropriate package of activities in-line with the programme specification document for DCW.
- 3.12 The staffing structure set out in the Wales Co-operative Centre's proposal, was appropriate and commensurate with the scale of the requirement in the specification document.
- 3.13 The Wales Co-operative Centre has been proactive in cultivating contacts amongst 'new' organisations under DCW, whilst supporting organisations already known to them.
- 3.14 Partner organisations demonstrated a clear understanding of the transition between Communities 2.0 and DCW suggesting that the Welsh Government and the Wales Co-operative Centre have been effective in communicating the differences between the two programmes.
- 3.15 The retention of delivery staff with relevant experience and expertise (built up during Communities 2.0) has been a helpful feature in the delivery of DCW. Feedback on the knowledge, professionalism and enthusiasm of DCW delivery staff, particularly those who deliver training, is positive.
- 3.16 There was a mix of prior experience relating to digital inclusion activity amongst the sample of partner organisations. Overall, there was marked increase in awareness and delivery of digital inclusion related support over the past few years – notably in the social housing sector.
- 3.17 The impending roll-out of Universal Credit was a key motivating factor for partner organisations' involvement with DCW.
- 3.18 The support received by partner organisations fell broadly into five categories, namely: training, the preparation of a whole organisation digital inclusion strategy (referred to as a Digital Inclusion Engagement and Improvement Plan or DIEIP), the acquisition of IT equipment, support with partnership working and support with volunteering.
- 3.19 The redistribution of Communities 2.0 legacy equipment⁴ was appropriate and there were no major issues with the process involved. However, the utilisation and usefulness of the equipment is mixed.
- 3.20 Training was by far the most popular form of DCW support used by partner organisations in the evaluation sample. Feedback on the quality and relevance of DCW training was positive and the tailored nature of the training is particularly valued. The training is being delivered in a technology neutral way in line with the objectives of the Digital Inclusion Strategic Framework.
- 3.21 The awareness and perceived value of DIEIPs is very low even amongst those partner organisations that have received one. The quality and consistency of DIEIPs is very variable and could be significantly improved. Welsh Government officials and Wales Co-operative Centre staff are aware of this and key improvements are already being implemented as part of a process of continuous improvement
- 3.22 More than 150 organisations have signed up to the programme's Digital Inclusion Charter since February 2016. The Charter has the potential to be a useful complementary tool to the DIEIP, but should not be seen as a substitute for it.

⁴ Mainly consisting of laptop computers and tablets.

- 3.23 Where DCW has helped source and train volunteers that subsequently support partner organisations via placements, there is strong attribution to a range of positive outcomes. There is potential for this element of the programme to be strengthened through the confirmation of more volunteer placements.
- 3.24 Emerging work by DCW in the health sector has been well received and has the potential to lead to new, positive outcomes aligned with the Digital Health and Social Care Strategy for Wales.
- 3.25 The Programme's website is informative and well designed. Social media activity instigated by the programme is also influencing discussion about digital inclusion with DCW being ranked as one of the most 'influential brands' in relation to digital inclusion and accessibility⁵.

Performance

- 3.26 Two of the programme's KPIs relate to individual service users and the Wales Co-operative Centre has little control over these, relying on data provided to them by partner organisations. Appropriate monitoring and auditing systems are in place and a conservative approach has been taken to data returns provided by partner organisations. However, the value of committing programme resources to monitoring such indirect individual KPIs and the extent to which 'beneficiary' level outcomes can be isolated and attributed to DCW, are both debatable.
- 3.27 Overall performance against the targets to date is positive and the direct targets relating to organisations assisted and volunteers recruited should be achieved by the end of the two year contract period.
- 3.28 The target set for the KPIs relating to volunteer utilisation (being set at the same level as volunteers recruited) does not recognise the challenges associated with 'placing' recruited volunteers. As such, it is highly unlikely that this target will be met by the end of the current contract period.
- 3.29 The programme has achieved an appropriate geographic coverage across Wales' 22 local authorities.
- 3.30 In terms of programme budget, there is an under-spend to date due to staffing issues, but overall financial performance appears to be within acceptable parameters. The costs per organisation assisted and volunteer recruited are broadly in-line with those envisaged. However, costs per volunteer deployed are much higher than envisaged because of the challenges faced in placing volunteers.

Emerging Outcomes and Impacts

- 3.31 A key outcome from the work of DCW to date has been a perceived improvement in digital inclusion awareness and in particular the knowledge of staff and volunteers. This was strongly attributed to training.
- 3.32 In some cases, DCW has helped increase the capacity of partner organisations to deliver more flexible, outreach digital inclusion services. However, very few of the 50 partner organisations in the evaluation sample were able to directly attribute this increase to the programme itself. In this context, attribution was strongest where DCW had helped facilitate the placement and training of additional volunteers to boost capacity and capability.

⁵ Source: Onalytica.

- 3.33 The work undertaken by DCW to establish and re-invigorate local digital partnerships has added value and has strengthened collaborative working arrangements in some areas.
- 3.34 In a limited number of cases, work by the DCW programme has led to partner organisations making strategic, organisational level changes relating to digital inclusion. Where this was evident, the implementation of a meaningful DIEIP, the adoption of the Digital Charter and strong involvement in a local partnership were contributing factors.
- 3.35 There were significant challenges in securing access to service user ‘beneficiaries’ via partner organisations as part of the evaluation process. Service users were (as expected) understandably unaware of DCW. This meant that establishing levels of additionality and any direct attribution to the programme was extremely challenging and as a result, fieldwork only generated a limited amount of evidence relating to positive outcomes for service users.
- 3.36 Service users gave positive feedback about the digital inclusion activities provided by partner organisations that they had engaged in and could identify a range of positive, mainly intermediate or ‘soft’ outcomes such as increased confidence and reduced isolation.
- 3.37 The nature of the indirect and largely disconnected relationship between DCW and partner organisation service users raises the fundamental question as to whether it is appropriate to consider or categorise these people as ‘beneficiaries’ of the programme.

Links with other Wales and UK Initiatives

- 3.38 The Welsh Government Digital Inclusion Unit has been active in linking with UK wide digital inclusion forums and initiatives, disseminating experiences, key learning points and good practice from the DCW programme as they emerge to help inform policy responses.
- 3.39 There are some short-term and relatively easy opportunities for DCW to link more closely and share further learning with the Superfast Cymru initiative (e.g. around supporting social enterprises and horizon scanning research).

The Future

- 3.40 Most of the stakeholders and partner organisations consulted as part of this evaluation argued the case for continued intervention and an extension of the DCW programme. Their views were informed by the still emerging picture in relation to the roll-out of Universal Credit and the data relating to digital exclusion in Wales which shows that the issue persists for a small but significant proportion of the Welsh population.
- 3.41 Those that advocated the need for continued intervention argued that the training element of DCW should continue but that more should be done to raise awareness of the other strands of support available with a particular focus on ensuring that the programme secures a sustainable legacy from the Welsh Government’s investment in digital inclusion over the past decade.

4. Recommendations

Recommendation 1

The Welsh Government should exercise the option to extend the contract for delivering DCW by a further two years to March 2019.

Recommendation 2

The focus of delivery during the extended period (years three and four) should be firmly on generating a sustainable legacy from the Welsh Government's investment into digital inclusion over the past decade. As such, the programme should continue to offer training to front line staff and volunteers while intensifying the production of training resources, content and materials that can be made universally available on-line. The Wales Co-operative Centre should also intensify its efforts to help secure placements for volunteers already recruited with partner organisations. This is likely to mean more follow-up activity with existing partner organisations and slightly less emphasis on recruiting new partner organisations. The KPIs for the extended contract period will need to reflect this.

Recommendation 3

During years three and four, there should be a clear focus on continuing to improve the quality and consistency of DIEIPs as a legacy product of the DCW programme, in-line with their original intention as whole organisation strategies. These documents need to be strategic and comprehensive and the 'handover' to partner organisations needs to be thorough so that staff at all levels are aware of what they can do to mainstream and support digital inclusion and how. This work should complement the Digital Inclusion Charter.

Recommendation 4

The co-ordination and partnership development function of DCW should continue. An additional part of this work over the next two years will be to support local partners to identify and assess the impact of any future decision to withdraw Communities First on the digital inclusion landscape. More broadly, the emphasis should be on ensuring that local partnerships become self-sustaining and will be in a position to continue their work without the need for continued intervention. The development and co-ordination of partnerships to further explore the benefits of technology in the context of health and social care should also be continued during the extended delivery period.

Recommendation 5

If the Welsh Government decide to extent DCW, the KPI package for the programme should be revised and refined. In particular, the Welsh Government should:

- a) Reconsider whether indirect 'individuals engaged' KPIs relating to service users are meaningful and add value and whether the monitoring overhead associated with this aspect of the programme can be justified. Our recommendation is that they should be dropped and that the potential impact of training in terms of the type and number of front line service users that could benefit should be assessed upfront as part of more robust whole organisation digital inclusion strategies
- b) Refine the volunteer KPI to focus more on volunteer placement and deployment in years three and four. A realistic, but still ambitious target would be that 50-60 percent of the volunteers recruited are actively deployed in placements where they deliver digital inclusion activity

c) Consider replacing the 'individuals engaged' KPIs with indicators that are more in-tune with the legacy focus of years three and four. Specifically, we would recommend the introduction of an indicator related to the adoption of comprehensive DIEIPs by partner organisations and an indicator relating to local digital inclusion partnerships that are operating on a sustainable footing (i.e. could and would continue without on-going external support from DCW)

d) Retain the KPI relating to new organisations assisted but set the target for this at a more modest level that reflects the need to offer additional support to organisations already engaged (e.g. around volunteer placements and following up on actions set out in more in-depth DIEIPs).

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

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