



All-Party Parliamentary Group on

Digital Skills

NON-VERBATIM MINUTES

Topic: COVID-19 - Lessons learned for improving digital skills in the future

Date: Thursday 11 June 2020

Time: 14:00 – 15:00, Zoom

Chair: Julie Elliott MP, Chair of the APPG on Digital Skills

Parliamentary attendees

- Julie Elliott MP for Sunderland Central
- Mark Logan MP for Bolton North East
- A researcher on behalf of Gary Sambrook MP for Birmingham Northfield
- Lord Maxton
- Lord Lucas
- Baroness Uddin
- Lord Selkirk of Douglas
- Baroness Barker
- Baroness Hamwee
- Baroness Hooper

Minutes

The Chair, **Julie Elliott MP**, began the meeting by welcoming guests and speakers. She outlined the significant impact that COVID-19 has had on working life in the UK, with 60% of the UK's adult population currently working from home, noting that a return to "*normality*" is nowhere in sight and many of the adjustments that have been made will remain in place for a long time. Julie stated that the crisis has led to greater recognition of the role technology can play in supporting everyday activities, such as online shopping or accessing healthcare and education. She explained the challenges that have arisen, particularly for people who are shielding without access to technology and added that the APPG is hoping to explore how to improve digital skills policy moving forward.

Michaela Neild, External Affairs Manager at Google was the first speaker. She outlined a range of work that Google is doing with the Government on issues relating to COVID-19 and explained that while in some areas, opportunities have opened up, ultimately the digital divide has been exacerbated by the crisis. She stated that Google is currently working on three main projects: their Digital Garage, which provides free digital skills training and is being delivered online, virtual training for primary schools, and national work, in collaboration with the Government, to spread and support online learning.

Julie Elliott MP added that she recommends Google's digital Garage to parliamentarians, before handing over to the next speaker.



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Ken Gaines, Technical Advisor for Digital, City & Guilds began by explaining that City & Guilds is a service organisation, so its strength is in people and interactions with customers. Its usual operations involve a lot of face-to-face work, so a number of adjustments to delivery have had to be made, but the organisation was able to anticipate the lockdown and make provisions for staff taking home equipment, meaning they are close to business as usual. This has involved switching public events to webinars, which have seen a surge in interest, with as many as 500 attendees.

City & Guilds has sought to address the issue of how education switches from classroom to online learning by producing material on remote education and issuing free learning materials for three months. Teaching vocational subjects has presented a specific challenge, as lessons that would normally have spanned a full day and be underpinned with variety and interactivity have had to be broken down into smaller chunks to be delivered effectively online.

Ken agreed with Julie's analysis that this period is likely to result in permanent change, before turning to the necessary next steps. He stated that there will need to be a way around the traditional model of exam-based assessment, with hundreds of students in a room, sitting at desks, writing on exam papers. He argued that the Government should look at providing a server farm that all schools can access, meaning everyone will be able to experience the latest software and assessment, rather than leaving this up to individual school budgets. He concluded by stating that the Government must enable a digital learning future as we move forward.

Julie Elliot MP asked about the biggest challenge that City & Guilds has faced as a training provider in transitioning to digital delivery. Ken explained that the company conducts much of its business via phone, so redistributing call centres and related operations was difficult. He also referred to assessment and exam-based systems, as well as remote invigilation, explaining that ensuring assessment is secure and well-regulated, and that learners can progress, achieve and meet objectives, has been essential.

Julie then introduced **Helen Burrows, Content and Services Policy Director, BT**. Helen provided an overview of what BT has been doing during the COVID-19 crisis and how she has led on supporting individuals who need it. BT has been working with vulnerable people, such as those most vulnerable to COVID, lifting data and price caps and supporting those who need it with bills. It has provided additional connectivity and data support for NHS workers, and is still working with the NHS to see if they can make it free for people to use mobile data on digital consultation platforms. Helen added that this has revealed some structural challenges. BT is also working with the Department for Education (DfE) and has several programmes in the skills space. These are focused on "*skills for tomorrow*"; helping to get people online and, through the "*Tech Top Tips*" campaign with ITV, supporting people to utilise tech.

BT is also reflecting on the lessons it has learned as a business from COVID-19. The crisis has highlighted the imperative to get everyone online and shown that there are two significant groups who currently disproportionately do not have internet access. One is families with children under age 18 who have no fixed connectivity at home, which creates



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problems for remote learning. BT is discussing how to address this with DfE and hopes to have more news soon.

The other group is those most vulnerable to COVID-19; BT has discovered that approximately half of them (700,000 people) are not online. Helen explained that there are about 2.6 million households that are not online, and 93% of them are aged over 55. She added that this links to the issue of age and vulnerability to COVID, and the crisis has shown that this is not just a generational issue that will fix itself over time, as was previously thought. Helen argued that there is a public policy imperative to address this, especially as NHS services are increasingly delivered online.

BT is looking at how to serve these cohorts better, acknowledging that it is about both will and affordability. As an organisation, they will re-examine products and pricing, but there is a need for a supported, cross-industry programme. Helen added that the discussion about network rollout is an engineering programme, but once digital infrastructure is built it needs people to connect.

Julie Elliott MP concurred that the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, which she sits on, has been looking at the rollout of digital infrastructure, and it is not as easy as it looks. She added that the fact that half of the shielding group is not online has been a huge challenge during the COVID-19 crisis, as much of the information issued by the Government has been online, meaning many MPs have had constituents reach out to look for other ways of accessing information. Julie then introduced the penultimate speaker, Tim Scratcherd.

Tim Scratcherd, Operations Director, Education Technology Alliance (ETA) explained that his organisation had not required many changes in practice due to COVID-19 as it was already an online company. Two key opportunities have arisen from the crisis: firstly, ETA's Schools Award has been shown to be a valuable audit and planning tool for schools, many of which have come to the ETA with more questions, and secondly, the crisis provides an opportunity for greater networking and sharing of best practice.

Tim explained that the schools struggling with remote learning are those where a lot of pupils don't have access to devices or the internet. Many schools have been able to create successful learning continuity and are sharing best practice. Online learning has the same objectives as classroom learning, so for schools that already had an established online learning environment, the transition has been more manageable. Tim explained that more schools aren't focusing on digital skills and online learning due to cost and time. He added that a key question that has arisen from the crisis is how schools will learn from it and be supported in future.

Julie Elliott MP then introduced **Helen Milner, Chief Executive of the Good Things Foundation**, who was the final speaker. Helen explained that the Good Things Foundation works with thousands of community organisations, many of which have had to close during the lockdown period, although some have been able to operate virtually. Good Things has removed all barriers to its online learning platform to encourage the advancement of digital skills because, Helen explained, the experience of a pandemic in a digital age exposes and



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exacerbates digital exclusion. She added that age is typically a significant indicator of whether a person is online but noted that 44% of those offline are under age 60. Helen stated that data poverty is also a widespread problem, as many people own a device but cannot afford data and may be choosing between data and food.

Good Things has partnered with Future.Now to create the Devices.Now initiative, which aims to get devices into the hands of the clinically vulnerable; people who are shielding. They have not received government funding but are working closely with a number of organisations offering pro bono funds. The initiative has supported more than 2,000 people in ten weeks, but has a waiting list of over 8,000, which shows the extent of need.

Helen explained that the people who Devices.Now has supported have found vital human connection and information through the service, which is ready to be scaled up, but needs money and support. She argued that digital inclusion for the future is needed to weather challenges that are ahead, such as a second wave of COVID-19 and the recovery period. Helen stated that Britain needs to be 100% digitally included, which requires government spending on digital inclusion and skills as a percentage of the spend on digital infrastructure. Just a small portion of what has been allocated would make a huge difference. She concluded by stating that people in Britain have not experienced the pandemic equally – many have been left excluded and exposed and are reliant on charities, businesses and community organisations.

Julie Elliot MP stated that she could not “*speak highly enough*” of Devices.Now, which needs money to deliver services that are greatly needed. She added that the internet is a utility now; it is as important as electricity. She then invited parliamentarians to ask questions of the panellists. The questions focused on the following key points:

- **Lord Selkirk of Douglas** raised the issue of adapting Parliament and utilising its resources as proceedings are conducted in an adapted format. **Julie Elliot MP** emphasised the importance of including members who cannot be in London through remote and virtual measures.
- **Baroness Uddin** expressed concern about how the digital divide affects vulnerable women in minority communities in particular.
- **Baroness Barker** asked about the extent to which the development of new technologies is user-led or provider-determined, explaining that access to digital services during lockdown has been vital for LGBT+ young people but there are concerns about the safety of those isolating with relatives who are not supportive.
- **Baroness Hamwee** pointed out that a shift to online learning may disadvantage children in social situations, leaving them ill-equipped for the future.
- **Helen Milner** addressed both Baroness Uddin and Baroness Barker’s questions, emphasising the importance of having trusted organisations and partners working within communities to support people online. She added that remote, virtual support provided through the heart of the community through Devices.Now’s “*hyper-local*” model benefits many disadvantaged people, such as women experiencing Domestic Violence, as it put them in touch with community organisations.



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- **Ken Gaines** answered Baroness Barker's question, stating that City & Guilds has had to adapt its worker to what its users can do, accommodating issues with software and access to broadband. He also address Baroness Hamwee's question; agreeing that getting children back into a social environment is key.
- **Tim Scratcherd** also addressed Baroness Hamwee's question. He stated that COVID-19 has provided an opportunity for reassessment of how schools support children who are disadvantaged and preparing them for life as well as teaching students to pass exams.
- **Michaela Neild** added that Google is funding a number of charities, including Devices.Now, and is proactively assessing areas where funding is needed. It has provided technology to allow people to say goodbye to relatives in hospitals and care homes and has funded both employment support and food security organisations. She noted that there is a tension between user-led and company-led services, but Google examine trends in how people are using their products and focus on that, to create new things and prioritise what people find most useful.

Julie brought the meeting to a close by thanking speakers and participants. She also mentioned the APPG's call for evidence into how COVID-19 has impacted different organisations and what is needed from policymakers to support digital skills in the future.