



All-Party Parliamentary Group on

# Digital Skills

## MEETING NON-VERBATIM MINUTES

**Topic:** Addressing the double disadvantage in digital skills

**Date:** Tuesday 25 February 2020

**Time:** 14:30 – 15:30, Thatcher Room, Portcullis House

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

### Speakers

- Julie Elliott MP Sunderland Central
- Miriam Cates MP Penistone & Stocksbridge
- Liz Williams MBE, Director of Digital Society, BT
- Nicola Wallace Dean, Founder of Starting Point Community Leadership Partnership
- Emma Stone, Director of Design, Research and Comms at the Good Things Foundation
- Emma Ward, Head of Digital Social Inclusion at the Good Things Foundation

### Minutes

Chair of the APPG **Julie Elliott MP** welcomed guests and introduced the APPG and its primary aim: to promote the importance of digital skills and to encourage a greater understanding of digital skills for personal, educational and career development. Julie also celebrated the all-female panel of speakers for the event.

Julie Elliott MP then outlined the topic of the meeting, which was to address the double disadvantage introduce skills for the digital age and the role of education. She then introduced speakers Liz Williams MBE, Nicola Wallace Dean, Emma Stone, Emma Ward.

**Liz Williams** introduced herself and her work for BT. She made a comparison between the digital skills crisis and the recent general election. She said that one billion pounds would be needed to train the eight and a half thousand current ‘unskilled’ workers. The digital skills challenge was to manage the digital transformation but people don’t even have Government defined digital skills. Currently, 17 million people aren’t at the digital starting line. For creating an economic digital powerhouse, 32% of the population aren’t at the starting line. Liz highlighted a recent survey on attitudes to technology to understand how people feel about digital skills. The feedback was that people at lower education levels often have lower incomes and digital skills.

What does it mean if you’re offline? 90% of non-users of the internet earn less than the average salary. Businesses need to play a role as well as the Government to get people up to a digital starting point. BT work with young, underemployed adults. The employability programme includes a three-day hackathon to develop an app to respond to an issue they have identified. Often, young people have a different attitude after having their eyes



All-Party Parliamentary Group on

## Digital Skills

opened. There is a risk of double disadvantage but young people can use this to get a new level of aspiration.

**Nicola Wallace Dean** introduced Starting Point, her company, as a small social enterprise from Stockport. The company support people to get online. They have five apprentices from 16-18 who have low digital skills and initially struggled to access their emails and payslips. This contradicts the assumption that young people have good digital skills. There is a fear in small business that young people are going to 'save the day' when they do not come to work with the skills as expected. Starting Point works with local authorities, libraries and housing providers to help people get online. There is a fear about access to reasonable wifi as a barrier to access digital skills. The lack of digital is reinforcing aspects of personal agency which makes personal change harder. An example of this, is that people can't book a GP appointment online. Greater Manchester has some of the wealthiest households in the UK but attainment for children in need in 51%. Without skilled households, you don't have bright futures.

**Julie Elliott** said that there is a problem with the systems, some people think because you can use Facebook you can use digital skills but this is not the case.

**Emma Stone** from the Good Things Foundation introduced herself by saying she used to work at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. She struggled to grasp the scales of digital significance. Digital is changing how we learn, earn, save, shop, spend, how we access essential goods and services and how crimes are committed. Basic skills are no guarantee of social mobility but find it difficult to imagine how lacking skills cannot improve life in this economy. If we do want to support levelling up then we need to focus on soft infrastructure of digital inclusion. Digital and social inclusion overlap. People over 65 are more likely to be offline. Low education, attainment and income usually means you are more likely to be offline. Just having internet access is not enough for digital skills. 9% of the population are offline and 22% are limited users of the internet which is the realities of digital inclusion.

The Marmot Review has a lack of reference to digital. In Coventry there is an emerging issue of digital inclusion. Lack of digital is not a new issue but it is coming up in economic and health policy therefore needs joint social needs assessment. There is a risk of widening inequalities. The important job is to find out how to bring people working on other policy agendas together and work within this space.

**Emma Ward** also from the Good Things Foundation said digital inclusion depends on what happens in the future. The Government have just delivered their biggest investment in essential digital skills for social support in a non-formal setting. This creates safety to tackle barriers. The Good Things Foundation deliver a programme with 190 online centres which has intensive support for learn my way. Blend it learning to little or no basic digital skills which tackles the basics is delivered at a nine year old literacy level and language barriers. The Department for Education has decided essential digital skills will be a qualification. It will be delivered in formal educational settings. 80% of people they support face social exclusion. A third of those are motivated to find work and half report enjoying learning at school, there are high volumes of job seekers using the service. Those who



All-Party Parliamentary Group on

## Digital Skills

have poor learning experiences can still learn digital skills. 78% progress to employment so the model works. The calls to action include welcoming government legislation to tackle online harms. Fraud is a barrier of fear for digital. Welcome the right for the Government to retain the bill and recognise the importance of the community sector. The APPG should invite MPs to see the online centres on the Good Things Foundation website.

Julie Elliott MP then opened the discussion to attendees. The conversation focused on the following key points:

- Helen Milner from the Good Things Foundation said the Government lacks ambition to bridge the digital divide. Seven million people will still lack basic digital skills in 2028. Marmat 2020 doesn't talk about digital and investment needs to be made to ensure everybody has the digital skills they need.
- Miriam Cates MP said there is a role for schools in digital skills. The new generation struggle with digital skills and the industry needs to come in and help. Current people training as teachers do not have digital skills and the skills that are needed for the job.
- A representative from BT said there needs to be a contribution to support online centres and that will tackle the issues.
- A representative from Google said the digital garage is helping 11-18 year olds programme digital skills for work. She said we should find where the digital disconnect is and work out how to fix it. It is not just a skills issue but get to the heart of how and why to get people to a basic digital skills level. There is an importance of going to where being are based and make it easy for people to access what they need.
- A representative from Policy Connect said there is a link between disability and digital inclusion which is linked to education. Digital literacy is on par with literacy and numeracy and to understand this, we must support and measure and create confidence to keep learning and adapting. This is less tangible to measure. Digital needs to be part of every subject and movement into work.
- Unison said 14% of members are struggling to progress due to lack of digital skills and employers won't provide the space for training. There should be a right to retain with STEM learning and engage the SME sector.

Julie Elliott MP thanked the speakers and attendees and said that digital skills is now a life skill now and we must think of it in a different way, she then concluded the meeting.