

## What has happened to the Universal Service Commitment?

By Ellen Helsper

This blog post comes out of my confusion and concern about what is happening to digital inclusion policies in the UK. The policies related to universal access to ICT and its contents seem to be in constant flux. The latest activity in this area is the announcement of the **National Digital Conference** (the largest UK event bringing together multi-stakeholder support for a “fully networked nation”). Up until last year this conference was billed as the National Digital Inclusion Conference. There must be others, like me, asking whether this name change indicates a change in direction for the policy makers, third sector and industry behind these initiatives?

There has always been a wide range of actors involved in “digital” policies in the UK but at the moment the Department for Culture, Media and Sports (DCMS) seems to have appropriated most initiatives. They are running both the **Broadband Delivery UK** (BDUK) and the **eAccessibility** programme. Nevertheless, both programmes are outsourced or partnered by other departments and organisations. For example, the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (**BIS**) is responsible for BDUK. The RaceOnline initiatives (**GoOn**), led by Martha Lane Fox (the UK’s Digital Champion) and the **UKOnlineCentres** are responsible for the eAccessibility programmes.

Meanwhile in Europe, official policy has become more coordinated – DG INFSO and Commissioner Kroes are mainly responsible for better defining – steering away from a pure infrastructure focus and aiming for **digital inclusion**. This means specific action points and funding structures in relation to skills, empowerment and social inclusion as well as access and infrastructure. Frustratingly, the UK shows less clarity and consistency over the last few years, evidenced by the number of different action plans and actors involved, including: the universal service commitment (led by **DCMS**), the digital participation plan (led by **BIS**), the digital inclusion action plan (led by **DCLG**), the media literacy strategy (led by **Ofcom**) to name but a few.

All of these are now either defunct or unrecognisable when compared to their original aims. High levels of discontinuity, in both content and in responsibility, has made it nearly impossible to follow up on promises made by this and previous governments.

I tried and failed to find an answer to the question of accountability; it remains unclear who in the UK government is leading on digital *inclusion* and universal *service* commitments for all citizens, that is beyond putting in “pipes” and tackling accessibility concerns of disabled users. Both are important but are only a small part of what previous policies were about.

Policy promises such as the Universal Service Commitment included a commitment to getting quality access to everyone in the UK and to creating a society in which ICTs serve to improve the quality of life. In the current climate – one obsessed with superfast broadband, 4G and skills for the workplace – this broader commitment to universal *service* is at risk of getting lost. The positioning of current policies emphasises infrastructure and employment, not quality of life and inclusion. Perhaps new commitments to these aspects of ICTs will be made soon. Until then, the question remains: who if anyone in government will make firm commitments to *universal service* (and therefore to digital inclusion)? If you read this and know, then please tell me and the other readers where and when they will announce these? They are long overdue.

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