Citizens Online

The value of "Baseline Reports"

Introduction

A core part of Citizens Online's approach to digital inclusion projects during the One Digital Programme was the production of new Digital Inclusion evidence base reports or "Baseline Reports" for clients. These would include the following elements of survey and desk research:

- A review of any local digital exclusion data, derived from national/regional data where necessary
- Mapping of open data – obtained from the 2011 Census, the Department of Work and Pension's StatXplore tool, or from the Office for National Statistics, Ofcom or other public sector datasets
- Mapping of proprietary data – obtained from Experian
- An "organisational" survey of potential members for a Digital Inclusion Network
- A frontline staff digital skills and digital champion survey
- A "Digital Maturity Assessment" focused on the views of Strategic Leaders
- A literature review of any available policy or strategy documentation relating to digital inclusion, social inclusion, financial inclusion or digital transformation relevant to the area.

The objectives of producing baseline reports were to:

1. Provide evidence of digital exclusion to support policy and strategy development and action planning – to reduce duplication and better use resources.
2. Help organisations collectively understand the local landscape with regard to digitally excluded people and opportunities to improve digital skills and inclusion.
3. Engage organisations in partnership and collaborative work

To evaluate our baseline reports, we have paid attention to whether they have been read and utilised and the types of feedback we have received (either during or after their production).

We have been interested in whether they have helped convince partners regarding the scale of the digital exclusion challenge; whether they have convinced funders or partners to commit resources; and whether they have helped project leads and partners to target resources.

We also hoped the reports would contribute to the effectiveness of projects as a whole – prompting partners to develop the digital skills of employees or volunteers, encouraging the recruitment of digital champions (and identifying barriers to their development) and identifying areas for digital transformation work that embeds digital inclusion.

RESEARCH MANAGER'S REFLECTIONS

Much of the feedback we received about baseline reports was not formally recorded, and we have not been in a position to conduct a formal analysis. However, the production of baseline reports has certainly followed the 'test and learn' spirit of the One Digital programme, with the nature of the reports evolving in an iterative way over the last five years. The following represent some of the key reflections having been involved in the production of 13 reports during the programme overall (9 Switch reports completed in Phase 2), reviews of the two Deep Dive reports in 2018 and several additional baseline reports outside the One Digital programme.

FINDINGS

- It is more efficient to utilise standardised research methods, but each project is different and requires the development of new approaches.
- New sources of data and methods of using it have been discovered during the programme.
- Mapping skills have improved – both with the original software we were using, a new software solution, and the development of interactive maps in response to client requests.
- Surveys were constantly refined to better match national frameworks, benefiting from the insights from One Digital partners.
- The design of Digital Maturity Assessments (DMAs) was extensively reviewed as they became popularised in the sector and a range of different approaches were recommended.

- We experienced widely varying levels of engagement with surveys, mainly due to the level of buy-in by local partners.
- We repeatedly attempted to shorten surveys to improve engagement.
- It was often a struggle to communicate the findings of the reports in a way that would lead to co-production of an action plan.
- Working in larger project areas (such as Surrey and Kent) presented challenges in terms of the length of reports and the extent to which it was possible for clients to target resources accordingly.
- It has often been apparent that reports have not been as widely read or influential on future work as we hoped – primarily we have learned to make reports more concise, and to spend more time identifying and working according to client priorities. This creates a risk where the priorities we might have identified ourselves may be sidelined.
- Learning about Experian data led us to first moving away from Experian Mosaic Group and Type profiles and into bespoke estimates around digital behaviour that we commissioned.
- Ultimately the cost of Experian data was not deemed to be adding sufficient value to our reports as our ability to draw insights from open data developed, and the similarity of conclusions drawn to those from proprietary data became apparent.
- We have explored different angles on the appropriate level of granularity of data. Initially focusing on the Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) scale (approximately 1,500 households) to Output Area level (around 100 households) and then toward Ward level (larger and congruent with the areas represented by elected representatives) – with LSOAs highlighted within this.
- Various approaches to report format have been utilised in an attempt to provide clients and partners with short summaries and the full analysis, as well as producing Executive Summaries and Appendices to Reports. We had previously divided work into "Findings & Recommendations" and "Baseline & Evidence" sections.
- For most clients we have built recommendations around geographic focus areas, but on occasion – and perhaps increasingly – we have instead presented thematic 'Pathfinder' projects (usually with a geographical element).

PROJECT LEAD PERSPECTIVES

As part of Deep Dive project interviews conducted in June 2019 with Local Project Managers, the following questions were asked:

- Can you remember your involvement in the baseline report – were there findings that changed your view of the project or findings that needed to be corrected because of your own the ground knowledge?
- How was the baseline report received when first shared?
- How did it feed into the development of the action plan?
- How useful has the action plan been during management of the project to completion?
- Was the baseline report used at later points during the project?
- How was the process of creating the baseline review?
- How was this received when shared?

Our Gwynedd Project Manager provided the following comments regarding the baseline process for Digital Gwynedd (among others):

- "The data was… really spot on. And it was particularly interesting the stuff [that was done] with bus routes and transport… I found it fascinating that that [place] was a central hub. That changed my view of how it was set up. It was quite correct… it made me think as, as a guy who's always been at work and drives everywhere, never uses a bus. But our target audience, are much more likely to be bus users. Yeah. It does make sense to apply it, doesn't it? You've got to think all angles, who is it is, you know, who is the typical customer? How do they travel? In a rural area? What do they do?"
- "I do distinctly remember Gwynedd Council, even though they could see all the stats and figures there, they wanted us to concentrate on working age people a lot" [linked to strategic objective].
- "[But it did encourage us to] to push more to … the more rural outlying areas… we could have got figures [for helping End Learners] by just going into the large towns like Caernarfon and then Bangor. But we didn't do much at all in Bangor, to be honest, because it was an easy target."

- "I don't think they did [all read it] … [and particularly with the later Baseline Review] I think we know that there wasn't much interest in it… [it] was less interesting."

Our Brighton & Hove Project Manager provided the following comments:

- "You end up going where there's energy… It doesn't necessarily map on to where the greatest need is all the time. There's so much need in different ways… at least you'll be hitting some of it, and as long as you're doing something that is working at that time… You've got your evidence and your research and data and then you're like *"okay, on the ground, there's energy and need over there"*. I'm going to go there and run sessions and engagement work."
- "What can we use from this whole baseline analysis? That it kind of justifies and makes the case for the work… I think the Baseline sounds really useful when it comes to understanding the problem and being able to make, you know, to actually rely on evidence, especially when you're making this hard pitch [persuading funders there is a case for resources and investment]"
- "The baseline review was interesting, because there was a lot of stuff that we wanted to see anyway… was confirming what we were meant to be doing. I wonder if we'd been saying something totally different, what that would have meant to the decision making but I don't think it would have changed because it also depends how engaged and powerful or influential your group is. Our [Steering] Group just wasn't very… kind of went with the flow? So it helped me as a Project Lead more than it helped the Steering Group"

PARTNER PERSPECTIVES

In Spring 2019, Citizens Online circulated an online partner survey, inviting people who had worked with us during the past three years to fill it in.

74 responses were received in total - DBH (57) and DG (17). All but one of these answered a question asking them to rate the value of different elements of the project "to you and your organisation so far"; from 1 as the lowest score indicating very little or no value, to 6 as the highest score indicating a significant value.

Figure 1 shows that for the survey respondents, "Research and analysis work produced by Citizens Online (i.e. Baseline Report)" was one of the least valued parts of the work, alongside Monitoring and Evaluation Activities. In the chart below we have ranked it marginally higher, due to 15 respondents providing a score of 6 or 5 compared to 13 for Monitoring and Evaluation. However, a higher proportion of respondents were "Not Aware" of the Research work (27 compared to 20). While few respondents rated the Research work of low value (one respondent provided a value of 1 and three gave a value of 2), the work was nonetheless clearly deemed less valuable than the Partnership Development work (more than twice as many respondents giving this scores of 6 or 5: 37), or the Professional Digital Champions (PDCs – which 35 respondents identified as having the highest values of 6 or 5). While this finding is disappointing, it is consistent with feedback we received about the lack of engagement with research reports. It is worth noting that research reports were important to funders, the Partnership Development work (highly valued), and also to PDCs in assisting their understanding of local digital exclusion issues and targeting support sessions. In short, it is not possible to treat elements entirely in isolation.

Figure 1: Project elements by value to organisation[1]

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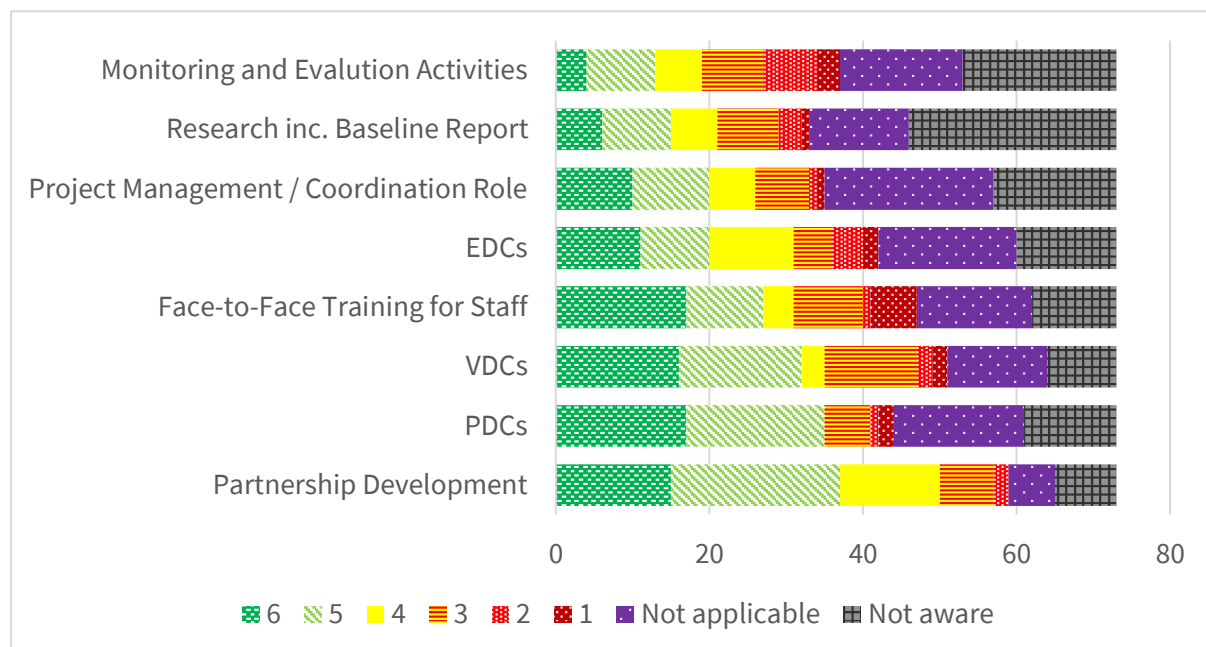
[1] EDC = Embedded Digital Champion; VDC = Volunteer Digital Champion; PDC = Professional Digital Champion (employed by Citizens Online)

CONCLUSIONS

It is hard to assess the overall value of the baseline reports, as they are so central to the model that we have no example of a project completed without one as a 'control' to compare against.

It is clear that engagement with reports by partners has often been low, but that reports have been of significant value to funders, Project Leads and Digital Champions in directing resources to areas of greatest deprivation and need – with the distribution of UELs matching to at least some extent our attempts to identify target areas.[2]

The survey results have helped us to deepen our understanding of local issues – including barriers to recruitment of EDCs and VDCs. Sometimes this process has helped with work to overcome those barriers, but in other places there has not been the time or local buy-in to address these issues.

In reviewing the Digital Brighton & Hove and Digital Gwynedd baseline reports, we found that there were many other factors changing in the digital inclusion landscape over just a two-year period, that it is extremely difficult to identify a project's impact, specifically in any data around internet take-up or digital skills improvements.

Our key learning has been that our baseline reports are sometimes considered too long or provide an overwhelming level of detail and data, which may not be considered useful or referred to at a later date. Through the One Digital programme we have increased our emphasis on developing tangible action plans within the research outputs and decreased the volume of data shared with clients.

We continue to develop, refine and simplify our baseline reports and find that they do provide a useful prompt for discussions around the actions that can best promote digital skills and inclusion in the areas where we work. They also prove invaluable for some clients, for whom they become the leverage and business case to secure other resources and funding for digital and social inclusion activity.

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[2] We do not expect every learner to be a resident of a target area – as we expect digital exclusion to be a problem across a project area even if risks are higher in particular locations.