Case Study - Mapping digital exclusion, the Brent perspective

Identifying the strategic need

The London Borough of Brent is home to 330,000 residents in North West London. Like all local authorities, Brent faced an array of challenges resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, some of which hit sections of the community harder than others.

At the end of 2019, Brent officers commissioned a company with expertise in digital inclusion to identify the percentage of Brent residents who were digitally excluded. This was part of Brent's wider digital transformation work and would help understand the level of digital skills and access in the borough. The research revealed that 18 percent of Brent residents are completely off the grid, with no access to the Internet. A further 11 percent only have access to the Internet via a smartphone.

The research also showed which wards in the borough had more digitally excluded residents than others. In the early days of the pandemic, Brent officers realised they needed to do more than just roll out training packages to deal with digital exclusion; they needed a richer view on what digital exclusion looked like in the borough.

Developing the solution

Working with the London boroughs of Barnet, Kensington and Chelsea, Southwark and Westminster, Brent was able to join a collaborative project run by LOTI called Mapping Digital Exclusion with Data. The project was awarded a total of £75K from LOTI's Covid Innovation Fund.

To create a map of digital exclusion, the project used multiple open-source datasets, as well as qualitative and quantitative research through surveys and interviews with residents. Each borough validated a long list of open datasets against locally held data and intelligence for their ability to explain digital exclusion locally.

As part of this project, Brent joined with the London boroughs of Barnet and Southwark to commission external research from EY Seren, to understand how certain groups of residents interact with digital services provided during the pandemic. By providing residents with digital devices, the project was able to assess the benefits and issues with doing so and how to apply this learning post pandemic.

The project also produced a set of 24 personas to show how digital exclusion affects particular groups of residents. Brent, alongside the others, validated these personas through interviews with front line staff.

Considering the ethics

The project was interested in unearthing any unintended consequences of mapping data in this way. The project team considered different ethical frameworks and chose the government's Data Ethics Framework. The team used the questions in the framework to guide them through various ethical considerations for the project, recording the answers and applying a self-assessment score to identify which aspects of the project needed more work. Going through the process helped the team to make changes as the project was being designed and delivered including opening up the work to scrutiny and feedback from an early stage.

Armed with the results of the assessment, the project team created a presentation to step through the issues and discuss the overall assessment summary and challenges arising from the project. The team presented the findings to Brent's Data Ethics Board, as this is the only data ethics board in London. The project sought advice from the Board on the challenges set out in the slide below.

Key Challenges Arising from The Project

- Data Interpretation risk - downstream decision-making
- Risk of most affected being least aware for downstream initiatives (e.g. DE, ESOL, Disabled, Hard-to-Reach)
- Public / end users & established channels for engagement & scrutiny
- Longevity & community of DI expertise (Governance for managing long-term Outcomes)
- Ability to respond and deliver demand
- Right to be forgotten / off-line

The discussion at the Board meeting resulted in actions for the project team to review. The feedback from the Board included:

- Think about how thresholds are used so that groups, individuals or geographic areas are not being unfairly selected or excluded.
- Take care not to make individuals directly identifiable from the data, particularly where there are small cohorts involved.
- Review activity to date to ensure decisions are transparent, have integrity and are fair.

As a result of the feedback, the team:

- Ensured third party researchers used rigorous anonymisation techniques.
- Discussed thresholds and their impact in analysis and committed to continuing to do this in future analysis.
- Included a recommendation in the Digital Exclusion Mapping Toolkit (a guide enabling other local authorities to replicate the mapping work in support of their local projects) to conduct an Equalities Impact Assessment for Digital Inclusion interventions made based on mapping insights, this being the point at which specific groups could unfairly excluded or included.

The Data Ethics Framework encourages projects to regularly revisit the ethical assessment, particularly when there are any changes to the data collection, storage, analysis or sharing processes.

Realising the benefits
Brent has benefitted from working in collaboration with other London boroughs, learning from others' experience and thinking through the issues associated with digital exclusion before applying it locally. The learning will inform the development of business cases and procurement strategies. This includes the creation of a business support fund that will provide devices and digital skills to local businesses, and the introduction of a new separate fund to provide devices to digitally excluded pupils in the borough.