



**Building
Change
Trust**



Turning up the Dial

Digital Social Innovation in Northern Ireland

Sophie Hostick-Boakye / March 2014







About the Building Change Trust

The Building Change Trust was established in 2008 by the Big Lottery Fund with a National Lottery grant of £10million as an investment for community capacity building and promotion of the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector in Northern Ireland.

The Trust supports the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector in Northern Ireland through the development, delivery of, and learning from a range of programmes including commissioned work, awards programmes and other interventions.

Between now and 2018, our resources will be used to support the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector to achieve more and better collaboration, increased sustainability and to be a learning sector which identifies, shares and acts on lessons of others' actions. This work will be carried out across 6 overarching thematic areas: Collaboration, Social Finance, Social Innovation, Inspiring Impact, Leadership and Creative Space for Civic Thinking.

About the Young Foundation

The Young Foundation takes its name from the social entrepreneur, activist and pioneer, Michael Young. For over 60 years, Michael brought together collaborations of the brightest, the best and the most innovative to solve social problems.

We harness the power of disruptive innovation to address the structural causes of inequality. We create new movements, institutions and companies that empower people to lead happier and more meaningful lives. We work with the public, private and voluntary sectors to strengthen their positive impact on communities.

We are The Young Foundation. Join us.
youngfoundation.org

Background to this work

This report was commissioned by the Building Change Trust to support the development of the digital strand of its social innovation strategy. It follows on from the Trust's April 2013 report, 'Growing Social Innovation in Northern Ireland'.

The aim of this research was to inspire through examples of current digital social innovation practice, to engage a wide group of stakeholders and to highlight opportunities for Northern Ireland's Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector.

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Recommendations

For digital social innovation to gain traction in Northern Ireland, it is vital to build a cross-sector collaborative movement of people with a passion for the social in digital social innovation.

However, few social innovations emerge today without an element of technology being involved. Therefore, activities to support digital social innovation should not take place in isolation, but should be a part of the wider social innovation strategy for Northern Ireland being developed by the Building Change Trust and others.

There are three vital steps to supporting this:

1. Convene a **digital social innovation working group** of people from the public, private, voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) and tech sectors and academics interested in supporting and growing digital social innovation. Initially, this core network should be focused on exploring what digital social innovation means for Northern Ireland and on the experiences of the group in this area before identifying initial opportunities or areas for new social digital responses through community engagement and developing a programme of activity to support and nurture digital social innovation. This working group should feed into the wider social innovation working group to ensure cross-pollination and support.
1. Inspire and spark **understanding and awareness of digital social innovation** specifically across the VCSE sector through events and media, but also as part of wider social innovation promotion. Utilise the digital social innovation working group's knowledge and experience of the audience and of hosting events, along with its networks to ensure:
 - a. people at all levels of the VCSE sector are engaged and inspired
 - b. activities have a key focus, opportunity and impact for participants
 - c. collaboration and networking is encouraged and supported

Awareness activities could include sharing case studies in the media, trade press and on current social innovation platforms, networking events and a festival of ideas. Such opportunities and ideas should be explored and developed by the digital social innovation working group.

2. Once a groundswell around digital social innovation has been developed, provide focused activities and support to encourage and develop digital social innovation specifically through various stages of development as per the social innovation spiral model outlined in the Trust's 2013 research on social innovation (see figure 1 overleaf):

Prompts – Develop a **'Geeks in Residence'** programme, placing high-quality, social-minded techies in forward-thinking VCSE organisations looking to develop digital responses to social problems.

Proposals – Host small **challenge prizes for digital social innovation**. At the heart of this should be the opportunities and problems where digital social innovation can make the biggest difference in Northern Ireland. It is important to focus on a specific issue identified through consultation and collaboration with the VCSE sector – for example, bringing together divided communities of young people.

Prototypes –

- a. Work with the wider tech and VCSE sectors to develop and host two **Social Innovation Camps** – one in Derry-Londonderry and one in Belfast.
- b. Develop a **social innovation voucher** scheme to partner developing social innovations with experts in Northern Ireland (such as CultureTECH), in the UK (such as The Young Foundation) or even internationally (such as Trinity College Dublin) to develop opportunities and knowledge.

Sustaining social innovation – Provide **financial support** to digital social innovations at various stages. This could include small grants to support proof-of-concept activities, innovation vouchers to help develop tools for sustainability, and loans, equity investment and business support to help scale the innovation. A key part of any funding is to promote sharing learning (as an output) to ascertain and share what works and what does not in digital social innovation.

Scaling – Explore opportunities for **accelerator programmes** that can provide organisations at various stages of development with support, confidence and expertise to grow. Bethnal Green Ventures provides a three-month accelerator for very early-stage startup digital social ventures, while The Young Foundation’s six-month Accelerator programme focuses on later-stage small but successful social enterprises.

Systemic change – A **social innovation hub** would provide a space for people from the VCSE, public, private and tech sectors and social entrepreneurs to come together and work together. However, such a hub is costly. There are numerous business parks across Northern Ireland that the Trust could explore partnering with to provide spaces for collaboration and superfast broadband for digital social entrepreneurs and enterprises.

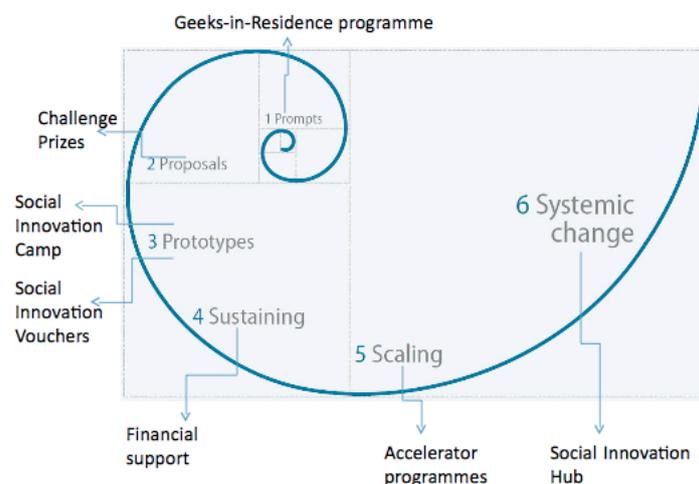


Figure 1: Recommended actions at each of the stages of the ‘social innovation spiral’



1. Introduction

This report was commissioned by the Building Change Trust to support its work on digital social innovation in Northern Ireland.

‘Growing Social Innovation in Northern Ireland’, the 2012 report by The Young Foundation and RSM McClure Watters, identified that, while there are significant examples of social innovation developing in parts of Northern Ireland, there is a lack of widespread understanding of the concept and what it can achieve. We concluded that Northern Ireland needed to grow an infrastructure for social innovation and proposed an approach to mobilise different sectors to achieve the widespread and radical change required to meet the complex challenges communities face.

This follow-up report focuses on the digital innovation side of this. The research underpinning it involved interviews with a wide range of stakeholders, experts and practitioners both in Northern Ireland and across the UK. These explored the characteristics, capacities and culture of the VCSE sector, the quality and distribution of Northern Ireland’s digital infrastructure, the opportunities for collaboration between sectors and the current state of digital social innovation in Northern Ireland. It also included a wide desk-based literature review.

In conducting the research we have been mindful of work already under way – including the work of the Northern Ireland Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment around social innovation. We have also been keenly aware of what makes the social, economic and political context of Northern Ireland unique.

Digital technology has transformed how people, their communities, institutions, governments and countries live and connect, for social good. Northern Ireland has many of its own examples to build on.

Now it’s time to step it up.

2. What is Digital Social Innovation?

Few social innovations emerge today without an element of technology being involved. However, as with social innovation, a clear definition of digital social innovation is not readily agreed and neither is digital social innovation as a concept widely understood.

A number of definitions have emerged. The Nominet Trust’s is simply put as “social innovation using digital technology”¹. Nesta’s is more nuanced: “...a type of social and collaborative innovation in which innovators, users and communities collaborate using digital technologies to co-create knowledge and solutions for a wide range of social needs and at a scale that was unimaginable before the rise of Internet-enabled platforms”².

Our interviews for this research revealed a clear need for a broad definition of digital social innovation that is both understandable and accessible by the VCSE, public, private and digital technology sectors– *“We need just the one definition to help everyone”* – public sector interviewee.

The working definition we therefore propose is a simple one: **the use of digital technology to enable new or more effective solutions to social problems or needs.**³

1 “The Social Tech Guide”, available at <http://www.socialtech.org.uk/>, accessed 21 January 2013

2 <http://www.nesta.org.uk/blog/100-inspiring-digital-social-innovations>

3 Drawn from interviews for this work in Northern Ireland

At its core is harnessing digital technology⁴ to connect, mobilise and empower people, communities, organisations and sectors to help them shape their environments, solve problems and improve lives.

Digital Social Innovation Platforms

Digital social innovation covers a wide range of activities, networks and tools performing a wide range of functions. Research from the TEPSIE programme⁵ identified six platform types that digital social innovations can be mapped on to:

- **Content creation** – enabling communities to provide content and information online
- **Issue identification** – collating new and existing content to identify issues and challenges
- **Matching assets to needs** – providing information on the assets and needs of a community or society to assist people to come together and meet needs
- **Matching finance to needs** – generating funding from a range of sources
- **Solving problems** – encouraging people to solve problems, often using co-creation as the main tool
- **Action on problems** – enabling and organising people, movements and communities to support a cause online or offline

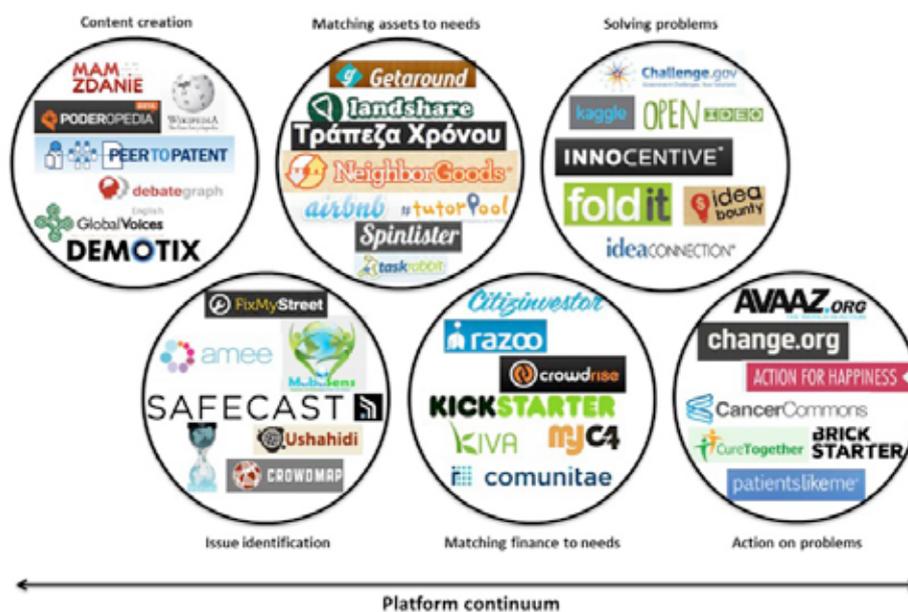


Figure 2: The continuum of platform types⁶

⁴ We use the term “digital technology” in this report to mean online

⁵ Theoretical, Empirical and Policy Foundations for Social Innovation in Europe (TEPSIE). For more information see <http://www.tepsie.eu/>

⁶ Millard, J., Nielsen, N.C., Thaarup, R.K. (2013). “Report on the role of communities and networks in social innovation, and the role that online networking tools are playing”, a deliverable of the project: The Theoretical, Empirical and Policy Foundations for Building Social Innovation in Europe (TEPSIE), European Commission – 7th Framework Programme, Brussels: European Commission, DG Research: <http://www.tepsie.eu>



These form a continuum from creation to action. At one end is the creation of tools and mapping of issues and assets. At the other is harnessing these to address social needs and problems. The illustration below shows a range of digital social innovations, the platform types they typically represent and their position along the continuum.

In reality, most digital social innovation uses a mixture of platform types to meet the needs of the target audience and the overall aim. For example, Shaped.By.Us covers all of the platform types above, while WIMPS focuses on content creation, issue identification and action on problems. However, the advantage of the continuum is in aiding understanding of the kinds of activities digital technology can support and demonstrating the opportunities the web can harness, rather than what digital social innovators should focus on.

Throughout this report are case studies reflecting different platform types and a wide spectrum of digital social innovation from the new and small scale to the national and international that are generating change across the world.

3. Some Inspiration From Across the UK

New Disruptive Social Entrepreneurs

Individual social entrepreneurs from all walks of life are creating digital solutions for everything from harnessing people's collective knowledge and experience to holding governments and institutions to account.

They are bringing people together around their locality (Harringay Online⁷), their problems (HealthUnlocked⁸) and their expertise (Ushahidi⁹). They are helping people share knowledge and experiences (Caminahora¹⁰). They are helping to make government and public services more accountable (TheyWorkForYou¹¹) and responsive (FixMyStreet¹²). They are crowdsourcing policy ideas (Changing London¹³) and crowdfunding projects and solutions (Spacehive¹⁴).

They are also supporting each other. Bethnal Green Ventures, for example, was set up by a group of social entrepreneurs as an accelerator programme of business support for people with ideas for using technology to solve social issues. Other examples include hackerspaces such as Farset Labs in Belfast which provide "a place for creativity and technological tinkering" for a small membership fee and hold hackathons to bring people together to innovate around a common interest, such as December 2013's making a difference in the community event¹⁵.

Because of their digital nature, the networks, tools, activities and ventures that have emerged are not bounded by geography or sector. They can be local, national or international. They can be taken up by individuals, collectives, organisations and governments. As such, the potential is huge, and the surface has barely been scratched.

Case Study: Spacehive

"It can take time to educate users on how to use [a new digital tool]. But it helps people to take an idea and believe they can effect change in their community."

Crowdfunding is nothing new. The Statue of Liberty, mosques on the Indian subcontinent and patriotic statues across the world were funded by public subscription¹⁶.

However, the digital platforms for crowdfunding are new, and it is anticipated that by 2015 crowdfunding could provide around £15 billion of finance every year in the UK¹⁷.

7 <http://www.harringayonline.com/>

8 <https://healthunlocked.com>

9 <http://www.usahidi.com/>

10 <http://caminahora.com/>

11 <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/>

12 <http://fixmystreet.com>

13 <http://www.change-london.org.uk/>

14 <http://spacehive.org>

15 <http://farsetlabs.org.uk/blog/hack-for-your-community-with-liberty-it/>

16 Nesta (2012) "Crowding In: How the UK's businesses, charities, government, and financial system can make the most of crowdfunding"

17 Ibid.

Many crowdfunding tools have focused on the creative industries and business development. Spacehive saw a clear market for crowdfunding in the social impact space.

Spacehive was created by founder Chris Gourlay to support innovation in local communities. Rather than having to apply for funding or support from the council to make things happen locally, Spacehive was developed to help people take things into their own hands.

Anyone can start a project and reach out for funding. Projects can be modest or ambitious – £1,079 for an Amble Puffin Festival in Northumberland or £42,126 for an urban park on a Liverpool flyover. Funding comes from a wide range of individuals, companies and organisations.

In a new move to see what can be achieved across sectors, Spacehive is now collaborating with Groundwork, Project Dirt, Transform and the Mayor of London on Pocket Parks – a matchfunding initiative to turn unloved spaces across London into ‘pocket parks’ for Londoners to enjoy.

<http://spacehive.com>

Sectors Using Digital Tools for Greater Social Impact

Digital tools are also providing different ways for organisations and institutions to deliver services and create solutions to both new and age-old problems faced by the public, private and voluntary sectors.

Within health and social care there are many digital social innovations enabling people to take control of their own lives and health, and be more informed, engaged and empowered. These often challenge the traditional boundaries and delineations between professionals, clinicians and patients. Re-Mission¹⁸ is a public-sector funded web and mobile game that helps young cancer patients “take on the fight of their lives”, and to understand and cope with cancer and persevere with difficult treatment. Patchwork¹⁹ aids multi-agency collaboration, currently for those working with children and vulnerable adults, by enabling all agencies to have visibility of other agencies and practitioners working with their clients. SwiftKey Healthcare²⁰ helps address inefficiency by providing clinicians with a medical-specific auto-correct enabled keyboard for smartphones and tablets.

Within the VCSE sector, use of digital tools varies. Charities large and small regularly use social networking sites such as Facebook²¹ to increase awareness and reach. Fundraising websites like JustGiving²² have long been used to facilitate donations. And survey tools such as SurveyMonkey²³ help gather new insights. However, these days this is far from being classed as innovation, and VCSE sector organisations are increasingly using a wider range of new social digital tools to increase efficiency, empowerment and transparency.

For example, some charities are using Slivers of Time, a new platform for local employers, charities and businesses to access local people who want to volunteer and work flexibly.

18 <http://www.re-mission2.org/>

19 <http://patchworkhq.com/>

20 <http://www.swiftkey.net/en/healthcare/>

21 <http://facebook.com>

22 <http://www.justgiving.com/>

23 <http://surveymonkey.com>

Case Study: Slivers of Time

“[Technology is] only as good as what you input, but it can be a very powerful tool if used correctly and fully adopted. You have to suspend your previous ways of doing things. To properly test it you need to be really willing to try new things from a totally new perspective.”

It is thought that in the UK there are 13.7 million people looking for voluntary positions or work with flexible hours every year. How do you find them and match them with the opportunities available?

Slivers of Time was set up in 2006 with support from the Department for Communities and Local Government to do just this.

With additional funding support from the Nominet Trust, Slivers of Time is now a sophisticated online booking tool where people looking for any type of work can indicate when they're available, the type of work they're looking for and key information such as willingness to travel.

Businesses, local authorities, charities and individuals can then access this flexible pool. Local authorities are using Slivers of Time to find local workers to fill positions on a temporary basis, using it as their own recruitment agency and thus saving public money. Informal charity work and flexible care work supporting individuals with personal budgets is also available.

The site is helping those who are either unemployed or underemployed to both earn income and increase their skills and experience in a difficult job market. It also supports community-based volunteering through a time-banking model.

<http://www.slivers.com/>

Digital Social Intrapreneurs

VCSE organisations and local authorities are also developing their own digital social innovations. At a basic level this can be about giving staff smartphones or tablets to enable them to log engagement and interactions.

At a deeper level, digital social innovations are stemming from the public sector using open data. Cornwall Council worked with a local small business to develop Shaped.By.Us²⁴ – a tool to make local good ideas and answers to local challenges happen. Kirklees Council worked with a local social enterprise to develop Who Owns My Neighbourhood?²⁵. This uses land ownership data to help people find out who owns plots of land in their neighbourhood so if they want to use a field for a community picnic, paint a mural in a yard or set up a friends groups for woodland, they know where to start. The Creative Councils programmes run by Nesta and the Local Government Association supported many other examples, including in Bristol, Lambeth and York.

²⁴ <http://cornwall.shapedbyus.org/>

²⁵ <http://whoownsmyneighbourhood.org.uk/>



Cúnamh ICT, a social enterprise from Derry-Londonderry, has developed Social Impact Tracker²⁶ – a tool enabling organisations to capture and report on their social impact. HACT, a charity, social enterprise and industry-focused think/do tank established by the housing association sector, has created a suite of mapping products to help housing associations access data to aid decision making and understanding of the needs of the communities they work in²⁷. And WIMPS²⁸, Where Is My Public Servant?, aims to make politics accessible to young people.

Case Study: Bethnal Green Ventures

In 2010, the entrepreneurs behind Social Innovation Camp started Bethnal Green Ventures, an accelerator programme for people who want to use technology to affect social change.

Focusing on supporting very early-stage new digital startups, Bethnal Green Ventures is an intensive programme of support over 12 weeks, culminating in a public Demo Day, where the teams present what they've created to an audience of investors, potential partners and customers. It runs two cohorts per year for 10 teams of two to four people, including one techie, with viable ideas and the time and commitment to take part in a programme of activities to support the development of a product or service.

The programme also provides £15,000 of funding, access to a network of specialist mentors, links to investors and work space for digital social entrepreneurs to support the development of their new digital product. In return, Bethnal Green Ventures requires six per cent equity in the new digital social venture.

By supporting promising new digital social ventures, regardless of who has come up with them, Bethnal Green Ventures aims to launch new ventures having a social impact. Since launching, some new digital social ventures supported through the accelerator have raised between £50,000 and £500,000 for their ventures and 45 additional jobs have been created.

In addition, an alumni community now supports, creates and runs more digital social startups.

<http://bethnalgreenventures.com>

26 <http://socialimpacttracker.com>

27 <http://www.hact.org.uk/>

28 <http://www.wimps.org.uk/>

4. Opportunities for Digital Social Innovation in Northern Ireland

A Strong IT Infrastructure

“In nurturing digital social innovation, an IT infrastructure that is ubiquitous, high quality (in terms of bandwidth and power) and affordable on the supply side is very important.” – tech sector interviewee

Northern Ireland is well-equipped with IT infrastructure, with reportedly some of the best infrastructure in Europe and 93 per cent of homes and businesses able to receive broadband through BT Openreach’s fibre network. In 2013, 75 per cent of Northern Ireland households had access to the internet – on par with the UK average. Northern Ireland also has the widest availability of fibre broadband in the UK²⁹.

However, some interviewees remarked that the standard broadband available does not meet their needs, either because of speeds or location:

“I would challenge the idea of good infrastructure. If you’re an office worker any broadband is good. Most people are on the minimum broadband and it’s not good enough.” – tech sector interviewee

“Broadband in rural areas is an issue.” – public sector interviewee

But superfast broadband could soon be a reality for Northern Ireland. The Hibernia North Atlantic cable, a transatlantic telecoms cable, runs 22 miles off the coast of Northern Ireland. In 2010, Project Kelvin connected Northern Ireland directly to this cable and thus to the United States and Europe, improving the speed at which businesses can connect and trade information internationally³⁰. In addition, Project Kelvin created a high-speed terrestrial fibre optic ring around 13 towns and cities of Northern Ireland, creating new opportunities within Northern Ireland.

For some interviewees, this infrastructure is seen as excellent and mostly problem free, but for many social entrepreneurs, citizens and new social ventures the superfast broadband provided by Project Kelvin is not easily accessible. While it provides high-speed internet, which can impact massively on trading, installation starts at £2,000.

“The additional link in Northern Ireland has had no affect on locals as it costs so much to install.” – tech sector interviewee

Belfast City Council is working to “make Belfast a super-connected city... [aiming] to enable city wide access to a network providing speeds of at least 80Mbps... [with] high speed ultrafast capacity for businesses that require it, such as the creative industries which send large volumes of data”³¹. This will include the Belfast Connection Voucher Scheme to help businesses and charities install high-speed fibre connections, metro wireless for Wi-Fi access across the city and public Wi-Fi hotspots. But this does not address dissatisfaction with broadband access beyond Belfast.

In addition, Northern Ireland has several business parks that access the Superfast Broadband network – Northern Ireland Science Park (NISP) in the Titanic Quarter of Belfast, Omagh Enterprise Park, Weavers Court in Sandy Row and the Derry Science Park. These parks provide spaces for entrepreneurs and enterprises to rent, but are focused on commercial businesses and innovation rather than social enterprise and social innovation.

²⁹ Ofcom (2013) “Communications Market Report:: Northern Ireland”

³⁰ <http://www.hibernianetworks.com/project-kelvin/>

³¹ <http://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/business/investinginbelfast/superconnected-belfast/superconnected-overview.aspx>



Consequently, there is not yet a space for socially focused digital innovators to work together and access this.

A Shared Idea and Inspiration

“People need the opportunity to see what is on the horizon and what people are doing that is interesting and that they could develop.” – VCSE sector interviewee

Many of those we spoke to felt that social innovation as a concept is only just beginning to gain traction across Northern Ireland and that digital social innovation is even further behind.

Definitions of what digital social innovation means varied, and there was not a shared understanding among those we spoke to. For some, it is using online digital tools to support social innovation, such as crowdsourcing ideas for new services or creating online networks to map crises. For others, it is finding new ways of using digital technology, such as using it to measure and track social impact or facilitate online petitioning. Others still feel the focus should be on bringing people together to develop new solutions and skills with technology as the enabler.

Some considered that these differences reflected the fact that little was happening around digital social innovation in Northern Ireland. Some felt it was happening in Northern Ireland, but under the radar, leading to limited experience and awareness of digital social innovations.

“It comes down to a lack of exposure. In London, you see exciting innovative programmes. When you see ideas you can tweak them to fit to something else. In Northern Ireland it’s a density issue, not a smart issue.” – tech sector interviewee

For many, the language of ‘digital social innovation’ was felt to be alienating, leading some to believe that it is inherently difficult and complex, and only the likes of Steve Jobs could do it, or alternatively that it was ‘really’ about cutting jobs and costs.

“A lack of clarity and definition makes it harder for people to recognise what each other is doing as being usefully similar.” – funder interviewee

Using language that is accessible is therefore key. The working definition we suggested above is: **the use of digital technology to enable new or more effective solutions to social problems or needs.**³²

Case Study: Social Impact Tracker

“You could say the process was a good example of both digital and social innovation. We harnessed the university technical expertise and blended this with our understanding of the sector social needs.”

Social Impact Tracker began as an in-house management information system for a community mental health charity from Derry-Londonderry. Its purpose was to enable their organisation to manage their operations through IT and as a means for reporting and monitoring their non-financial data.

Its first break into enterprise came in 2005 through a contract from the Community Foundation for NI to design a similar system for 12 community organisations. This allowed for the social enterprise to be set

³² Drawn from interviews for this work in Northern Ireland

up and the beginning of the digital journey. For the next five years the development of Social Impact Tracker was led by feedback from its third sector clients. However, by 2010 the business sustainability and performance, accessibility and reliability of the product was an issue.

Through an Innovation Voucher from Invest NI the company identified the School of Computing & Intelligent Systems at the University of Ulster to improve its development methodology, tools and processes.

As a result, the team was re-skilled on a new open technology framework, and Social Impact Tracker was reengineered as a web-based data application. The new customised platform enables organisations to self-assess and report on their own social impact. It opened up new markets, making it accessible by small or large-scale organisations with multiple projects, sites and users. In addition, a network of social franchise partners was created across the UK.

<http://socialimpacttracker.org>

Upping the Ante on Cross-Sector Collaboration

“The social sector shouldn’t be expected to know where the leading edge of innovation is. Tech guys can create platforms but they miss the content. You need to connect the two. But the problem is they never meet and they don’t speak the same language. There’s not much incentive to get them working together. If they can’t know each others’ needs they won’t come together to work together.” – tech sector interviewee

Digital social innovation is ‘sector-blind’. The examples throughout this report show that it can come from individuals, communities, organisations and companies associated with any and all sectors. Moreover, the literature around social innovation emphasises that sectors become irrelevant:

“Many of the most successful innovators have learned to operate across the boundaries between these sectors and innovation thrives best when there are effective alliances between small organisations and entrepreneurs and big organisations which can grow ideas to scale. Innovations then scale up along a continuum from diffusion of ideas to organic growth dependent on the mix of environmental conditions (including effective demand to pay for the innovation) and capacities (managerial, financial etc.).”³³

This is particularly the case with digital social innovation which, we argue, can only thrive when sectors collaborate and come together.

There is an emerging commitment to this type of collaboration in Northern Ireland. At the highest level, this is apparent through the work on social innovation by DETI’s Foresight and Horizon Scanning study into social innovation and the opportunities for the Northern Ireland economy.

There are also practical examples at different levels of scale. Extra Care³⁴, a large voluntary sector provider of public sector funded domiciliary care in Northern Ireland, is looking at ways in which information can be easily shared between care workers and health professionals to support independent living. Collaborations

33 Mulgan, G., (2007) “Social Innovation: What It Is, Why It Matters and How Can It Be Accelerated” London: The Young Foundation

34 <http://extra-care.org/>



are taking place between colleges and universities and the business sector through Invest NI's Innovation Vouchers for small and medium enterprises to access expert support through knowledge providers.

A memorandum of understanding exists between the Permanent Secretaries of the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment with Invest NI for Connected Health – a new model for healthcare delivery that will use technology to provide healthcare remotely³⁵. The University of Ulster and Invest NI have developed the Connected Health Innovation Centre³⁶, bringing together organisations to look at commercial opportunities to transform healthcare, targeted research in e-health, digital health, tele-health, tele-monitoring, disease management and home-based care.

Additional efforts have been made outside the public sector. CultureTECH, for example, ran a pilot internship for techies to spend time in art galleries developing new ideas for tech tools. This pilot was based on the Geeks in Residence programme from Sync in Scotland, which connects “high quality digital talent with forward-looking cultural host organisations so that the hosts can evolve the way they relate to technology and technologists”³⁷. Residencies can last up to six months and have four elements: first, exploring opportunities that best uses the geek's talents and match the host's interests; second, making a tangible prototype; third, coaching the host's understanding of development and design by sharing methods, thinking and networks; and fourth, sharing the story of the residency at events and in a special magazine.

In 2013, the Building Change Trust and London-based organisation Social Innovation Camp³⁸ collaborated to hold a Social Innovation Camp weekend in Belfast. However, this was not well attended, whether due to the need for more intensive groundwork, underdeveloped networks in Northern Ireland or a limited understanding of digital social innovation.

Tech sector interviewees working in a similar space were clear that more groundwork with the tech sector is necessary before hosting another Social Innovation Camp.

“Social Innovation Camp is a great idea. But in Northern Ireland there's a scale issue... You need to do lots of little things first to build a groundswell and get people collaborating without expecting an output for a couple of years.” – tech sector interviewee

“You need to draw people in... but it depends on if you have street cred. Social Innovation Camp wasn't known here... You need to engage with connectors... [Furthermore] people want direction. You need to tell them what they're turning up for. We ran Code for Pizza and told people the head of the ambulance service was coming and we would talk about data for helping them. We spent £87 on pizza and drinks and got 300 man hours of work – that's good value.” – tech sector interviewee

What we do know is that all interviewees stressed the importance of bringing people together but felt there is currently far too little interaction between sectors to support digital social innovation.

“You need to get the right people talking to each other and also ensure a culture change to get people to hold and attend events and talk about design.” – Tech sector interviewee

35 For more information see: http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/connected_health_mou_dhssps_and_invest_ni_2.pdf, accessed 24 January 2014

36 <http://www.ni-chic.org/>

37 <http://www.welcometosync.com/geeks/>

38 <http://sicamp.org/>

The level of collaboration and cross-fertilisation is far from where it needs to be for digital social innovation to flourish. It needs to be dramatically accelerated if it is to make the level of impact in Northern Ireland we believe it can.

Different sectors, and individuals, each have something to bring to the mix.

“Digital social innovation can come from anywhere. The minute you pigeon hole it you lose it. Social is about community and getting people from different backgrounds together.” – Academic interviewee

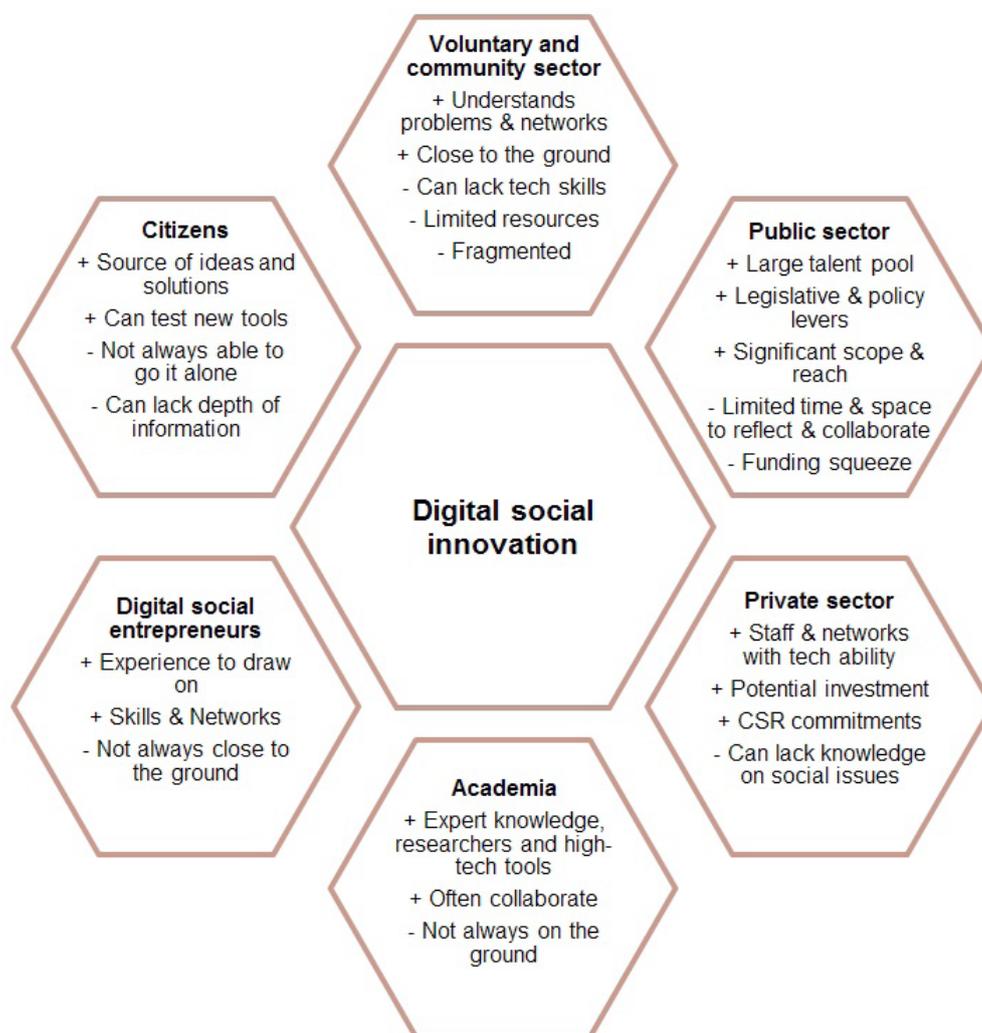


Figure 3: Collaboration for digital social innovation in Northern Ireland

The VCSE sector is at the grass-roots, working in and with communities. It is close to the problems people face, wider social issues, needs and assets. It also understands how and where people currently get and access support. Where there is often a gap, however, is around technology and its opportunities, as well as fragmentation in the sector. Most organisations have lots of ideas, but are small and do not have the capacity to develop new digital tools or programmes. There is also often the reality of competition between them, and a possible resulting reluctance to collaborate and network.



“There is a wealth of voluntary sector experience that can be brought.” – public sector interviewee

As across the whole of the UK, **the public sector** in Northern Ireland is historically large. It has its own legislative and policy levers and tremendous scope and reach, with a large talent pool to draw on, as the work in health described above shows. However, funding squeezes, coupled with often limited time and space to reflect and collaborate, mean that there is a feeling that lots more could be done and achieved with digital social innovation.

“We should be able to get much more out of what the public sector produces. How can we exploit the huge public sector machine?” – VCSE sector interviewee

The private sector has staff and networks with technical ability and is able to invest in potentially commercially viable and fruitful ideas and innovation. Many companies and/or individuals also take their corporate social responsibilities very seriously, but may lack the knowledge and connections to achieve maximum impact with these.

Academia, in the form of colleges and universities, has expert knowledge, research capacity and often high-tech tools. It also regularly works collaboratively. However, universities and colleges are not always able to access people and communities in the way that other sectors can.

Citizens are both a powerful source of ideas and a catalyst for change – as customers, users of services, voters, activists and as members of communities and families. Finding a way to harness this is key.

“As a core baseline we need to understand user needs and problems and merge them with the top spec people who can translate needs to technology.” – academic interviewee

Digital social entrepreneurs have been leading the way in many cases, either working alone or in partnership, off the cuff or with support from accelerators to develop new digital social innovations. Some are looking to collaborate on new digital social ventures, while some are willing to share their experiences to help others. Working with these entrepreneurs could help unlock new ideas.

However, our interviews did reveal a wide range of assumptions about other sectors – for example, that the private sector has money for digital it is not giving up, that the public sector is stifling innovation, that the voluntary sector always works in silos due to fear of competition. There was also a sense that “everything happens in Belfast and Derry” but not across Northern Ireland, and there is a culture that makes collaboration difficult.

Such preconceptions are not uncommon. However, work is needed to dispel them. An honest and open dialogue and understanding of respective strengths and weaknesses of sectors, and exploration together of real opportunities for collaboration, is vital. The appetite for collaboration is there – it now just needs to be harnessed.

“At the moment, lots of people are doing similar stuff across Northern Ireland which doesn’t work. They’re not joining up.” – tech sector interviewee

“I’d be keen to discuss [Geeks in Residence] further” – Mark Nagurski, CultureTECH

“Digital Circle NI can promote things.” – Matt Johnston, Digital Circle NI

Case Study: Shaped.By.Us

“Communities are often quite disparate – people who are busy can get involved at a time and place convenient to them rather than going to a typical community association group.”

When Cornwall Council wanted to find a practical way to address local issues it started a Big Design Challenge to give communities the power to come up with solutions.

The council worked with a local service design agency, Sea Communications, to develop a website where citizens could list local problems and challenges and collaborate to solve them.

The initial website prompted hundreds of challenges and ideas, but those with legs were taken forward by the council offline. It wanted a way to give communities this power, using online to facilitate initial engagement.

Through Nesta’s Creative Councils programme the partnership accessed support to develop the website, transforming it from a crowdsourcing tool for ideas into a more user-friendly project

management and collaboration mechanism for solving local problems. Public data was added to help people better understand local issues, along with a database of councillors and MPs to engage.

Shaped.By.Us is now becoming a place-based open innovation platform that brings about collaboration between local people and the public, voluntary and community and private sectors; a place where people don’t moan, but where solutions are creatively co-developed. People can share an issue – for example, ‘this area has a high level of child obesity’ – or create a challenge – for example, ‘how can we ensure that people in this area are getting the right food and nutrition?’ Others can get involved through research, generating ideas, sharing inspiration or sponsoring solutions.

<http://cornwall.shapedbyus.org>

Supporting and Incentivising

Support for digital social innovation can come in a number of ways – through networking, incentivising, business support and funding.

Funding and support is available in Northern Ireland for commercially viable digital innovation work. This includes the Creative Industries Innovation Fund and Invest NI funding for more general commercial and exportable digital innovations. Invest NI also offers Innovation Vouchers for £4,000 of support for small or medium-sized businesses, including social enterprises, enabling access to one of 39 knowledge providers – universities, colleges and research organisations – in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

“If a social enterprise comes up with an idea to develop a digital social innovation platform but isn’t sure if it can be done, we have innovation vouchers that provide support to...scope out if it’s doable.” – public sector interviewee

As in most places, our interviews revealed tensions between the commercial and social aspects of digital social innovation. They also illustrated the challenges of charities wanting to be self-sufficient and risking being considered “too commercial” or being seen as too dependent on grants. However, for many digital social innovations profit is a vital part of sustainability. There is, of course, no obligation to make a profit – for example there’s no real money to be made from some digital social innovations like TheyWorkForYou



– but for many digital social innovations creating some profit helps to pay for staff and administrative costs, while also being reinvested in the organisation or community for greater social impact – for example, as is the case with Social Impact Tracker.

However, there was a collective sense that there is a lack of funding and support for primarily social (rather than primarily commercial) digital innovation work, whether this be by existing charities, social enterprises or individual entrepreneurs.

Beyond Northern Ireland, the Nominet Trust invests in projects run by charities, community groups, statutory bodies and social enterprises across the UK. Projects have to demonstrate how the internet can help improve the lives of individuals and communities. However, such investment comes in funding rounds and competition is fierce, with the trust receiving many more applications than there is funding for.

VCSE organisations and entrepreneurs wanting to digitally socially innovate in Northern Ireland know they can do more. Our interviewees had a wide range of ideas about support, both financial and otherwise, that would enable this. These included:

- Challenges and competitions to stimulate ideas, particularly those requiring cross-sector collaboration and partnership – *“Challenges, competitions and competitive funding can help people to do things against the norm. It can encourage people to come together to develop cool ideas – you need to facilitate that process to get people excited.”* – tech sector interviewee
- Proof-of-concept funding – *“We need initial funding to support the initial development of an idea, before giving more funding to develop the idea further.”* – VCSE sector interviewee
- Using the example of schemes such as Invest NI’s Innovation Vouchers to partner with other types of digital and social innovation organisations and experts across the UK or even internationally – *“[You could] open up placement opportunities to organisations like Nesta and The Young Foundation.”* – public sector interviewee
- Business support to build in financial viability to digital social innovations – *“Usually, the time when services are needed more is when there’s no money. It’s about thinking about opportunities for business models. An income stream... is important in terms of sustainability. You can’t be beholden to government funding or people’s good will.”* – academic interviewee
- *“If you have to come back to the funding trough every year, it’s more difficult.”* – tech sector interviewee
- Support to allow for iterations – *“It’s very difficult to find the sweet spot. The only way is to constantly iterate and never stop. You need to understand in digital social innovation you will never have a final product... just a new version.”* – academic interviewee

Underpinning this needs to be a culture of funding and support that accepts that success will come by taking risks in supporting, trialling and developing digital social innovations, and one that shares all learning – good and bad – reframing “failures” as experiments and learning opportunities.

“Funders need to understand and welcome learning. Failure is ok! An outcome for funded activities could be to produce a learning document to help others to see what to do and what not to do.” – tech sector interviewee

Case Study: WIMPS (Where is my Public Servant?)

“Young people from some backgrounds don’t often get a chance to shine, so the website can be an important place for people to find a voice and say what they want to say.”

After the Good Friday Agreement and at the dawn of a new political era for Northern Ireland, Paul Smyth and a small group of educators wanted to help young people to respond to the challenges and opportunities that a post-conflict environment brought for citizens. They created Public Achievement to work with teenagers from tougher social realities to help them find their role in the new Northern Ireland.

Built on a youth work tradition, WIMPS – a project of Public Achievement – works with young people in an informal setting to increase their interest in society and engagement in important issues.

Young people from across different communities (but focused on a locality – for example, West Belfast, Enniskillen and Foyle) come together on a weekly basis into WIMPS crews to create video stories about local areas, issues, activities and more to share their thoughts and experiences. Crews also create video “hotseats” – interviews with Northern Ireland MPs, MEPs and MLAs – to find out the answers to the things that matter to them. They also learn to campaign, understanding that a meeting with a politician is often only a small part of a much longer process.

Alongside training in the theory of filmmaking, journalism and media to give young people the skills and confidence to create video stories and “hotseats”, these offline activities are empowering young people from difficult backgrounds with the skills and confidence to get involved in civil society. Public Achievement’s civic youth work model helps young people to better understand and engage with the society in which they live.

The project also has an online element to it, creating additional impact.

The WIMPS website shares crews’ videos, meaning that the young people’s interviews and stories can be shared and watched by a wide range of people – from young people to politicians and anyone in between. A bespoke political search means that young people can identify and message all their elected representatives from council to EU Parliament level, by entering their postcode. They can also identify an individual Northern Ireland politician by typing in their first or last name. The website also provides a space for young people to create and collaborate on campaigns, with campaigns to end all “punishment attacks” and for more homeless shelters in Belfast amongst those that are gaining following.

In addition, social media activity is integrated into all elements of WIMPS and plays a vital role in supporting the project. Facebook is used for WIMPS crews to network in private and to engage more widely with interested individuals – the majority of the “likes” on Facebook are from professionals aged between 35 and 45. WIMPS has also built up an engaged following on Twitter, with almost all MLAs and many leading journalists following and engaging with it.

By equipping young people to interview, shoot and edit discussions with politicians and decision makers and to make videos on their own experiences, sharing the results online and engaging a wider audience through the website and social networking sites, WIMPS is helping many young people to develop a public voice and giving them a chance to say what they want to say.

<http://wimps.tv/>

Increasing Open Data

Open data is supporting digital social innovation the world over.

“Access to data helps [with digital social innovation]. It would allow people to work on something and you could pull people in on a voluntary basis [to help] if they are interested.” – tech sector interviewee

It is not within the remit of this report to investigate how open or otherwise different datasets are in Northern Ireland. However, Northern Ireland is opening up its data, sharing files on current and historical MLA data, such as questions tabled by members since 2007 and how members voted³⁹. Data.gov.uk, a searchable database from the UK government, also includes Northern Ireland data.

Open data is seen as *“one of the big issues in cities of the future”*. There is an appetite among interviewees to explore data, but there is a feeling that the skills are not widely available to make the most of it and that a network and collaboration to bring people together with the skills to analyse data and generate tools to use it is vital.

“There is lots of open data stuff happening but it’s very much on the supply end. The government provides the data but doesn’t build the ability of citizens to access and use it.” – VCSE sector interviewee

Case Study: Change.org

“In the modern world people are engaging in politics in different ways. Online is a good starting place.”

Petitioning has been around a long time, including during the anti-slavery movement in the late 1700s. At that time, gathering people behind such a cause was difficult and required time, money and infrastructure.

Change.org has revolutionised this, enabling support to be garnered for petitions at lightning speed and scale. Now the world’s largest petition platform, Change.org was born out of a discussion between two brothers about “people who stand on the side lines”.

Launched in the United States in 2007, Change.org has enabled 50 million people worldwide to get involved.

Funded through an advertising model, it enables anyone to set up petitions and canvas support for them online. It encourages communication between citizens, petitioners and decision makers. Its highlights include the successful campaign for women to be represented on English bank notes, and that for Iain Duncan Smith, the British Work and Pensions Secretary, to live on £53 per week – the weekly income of a market trader he was challenged by in a radio interview.

Much of its success comes from inspiring others to have a go.

<http://www.change.org>

³⁹ <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/>



5. Conclusion

Northern Ireland is fertile ground for digital social innovation. It has a solid infrastructure, significant intellectual capital, passionate and talented people and openness to international ideas. The appetite for collaboration is there, as is inspiration when the surface is scratched. Northern Ireland is also of a size where physical collaboration is eminently possible and social innovation, though new, is taking off.

Northern Ireland's circumstances are not necessarily all unique. It faces the same issues as many others: rising life expectancy, climate change, growing diversity of countries and cities, stark inequalities, rising incidence of long-term conditions, behavioural problems of affluence, difficult transitions to adulthood and happiness⁴⁰.

However, some are.

“There are a unique set of social issues stemming from a sustained period of conflict and division within communities such as:

- Restorative justice and re-conciliation;
- Peace building and bringing divided communities together;
- Re-integration of ex-combatants into employment; and
- Trauma and victim support.”⁴¹

To make a difference to the issues highlighted above, collaboration and support is vital to identify the biggest opportunities for digital social innovation in Northern Ireland. And only once those opportunities have been identified will the solutions be created.

This will also happen by connecting different types of supporters and funders – from public to charitable to corporate to philanthropic to governmental – to make the whole far more than the sum of its parts.

Within this context, the Building Change Trust can be a strong catalyst to making change happen.

40 Warnock, R (2013) “Harnessing the Power of Social Innovation to Drive the Northern Ireland Economy”, Northern Ireland Executive (Draft)

41 Ibid.

Appendix 1: Research Consultees

Chris Martin, Open University

David Prendergast, Trinity College Dublin

Davy Simms, Public Achievement

Ed Anderton, Nominet Trust

Frankie McCourt, Invest NI

Glen Mehn, Social Innovation Camp and Bethnal Green Ventures

Jaime Pérez-Benavides Acuña, Caminahora

Jeremy Millard, Danish Technological Institute

John Gerard-Dinsmore, Trinity College Dublin

Juliet Cornford, Social Enterprise NI

Justine MacKinnon, Standby Taskforce

Kat Sladden, Change.org

Kathryn Woolf, Shaped.By.Us

Mark Nagurski, CultureTECH

Matt Johnston, Digital Circle NI

Maurice Meehan, Public Health Agency

Michael Johnston, Invest NI

Niraj Dattani, Spacehive

Nuala Kilmartin, Belfast Metropolitan College

Peter Baeck, Nesta

Peter McCafferty, Social Impact Tracker

Paul Smyth, Public Achievement

Rachel Collier, Young Social Innovators

Rickard O'Connell, Slivers of Time

Roger Warnock, Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Sean Doherty, Health and Social Care Board

Sinclair Stockman

Stephen Gray, NICVA



Notes





Building Change Trust



The Building Change Trust was established by the Big Lottery Fund with a National Lottery grant of £10 million as an investment for community capacity building and the promotion of the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland. The Building Change Trust is registered as a company limited by guarantee in Northern Ireland (NI0711812) and is registered as a charity for tax purposes with the Inland Revenue (XT11390)

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