



The Young
Foundation

Digital solutions: tech-powered responses to 21st century crises

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June 2022

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About this paper

On 11 May 2022, the government published the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, proposing legislation it believes will help spread opportunity more equally across the UK.

As the UK's home for community research and social innovation, The Young Foundation is invested in this agenda.

We are a not-for-profit, bringing communities, organisations and policymakers together, driving positive change to shape a fairer future.

Working to understand the issues people care about, The Young Foundation supports collective action to improve lives, involving communities in locally-led research and delivering distinctive initiatives and programmes to build a stronger society.

Digital technology has been at the core of community responses to recent and ongoing national and international crises. This paper explores the potential to develop digital civic infrastructure to support our national growth and drive levelling up.

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Introduction

‘Increasingly, we are recognising the value of grassroots social action on national and global challenges. But is there a way to better co-ordinate individual and organisational responses through technology?’

As the white heat of the pandemic looked set to cool last year, the words ‘Covid recovery’ and ‘building back better’ started to gain currency. Then came the Omicron wave, with stuttering stop-start lockdowns, the rolling impacts of the cost of leaving [the EU], a deep hole in our public finances and a cost-of-living crisis. The next horseman appeared: war in Europe, already killing tens of thousands, with millions seeking refuge and heightened instability in geo-political relations. We have seen both the United Nations and the Governor of the Bank of England talk in apocalyptic terms in relation to global food shortages and famine. And our changing climate lurks forever in plain sight.

While we hope for and work toward better times, we continue to face emergencies as a result of everything we have encountered since early 2019 - and it would be folly to think we will not meet further, perhaps even existential, crises as the months and years roll on.

What has been evidenced over the last two years is that these kind of crises require responses at many different levels. And, increasingly, we are recog-

nising the critical value of grassroots responses to national or global challenges - whether that’s the swift deployment of tutors for kids missing out on education, citizens providing homes for refugees, neighbours supporting vulnerable people during Covid, or communities helping those whose homes have been flooded. Co-ordinated social action, at a local level, is a necessary part of a functioning 21st century society.

Matching help with need

This prompts a question: is there a way of increasing and better co-ordinating individual and organisational responses through technology? If airbnb can rapidly expand the global accommodation inventory and broker 356 million nights of accommodation securely via a relatively frictionless experience, why can’t we exercise similar levels of social imagination and digital innovation to meet critical civic needs?

Governments of different hues have had no shortage of interest in IT, and while they have overseen some epic fails (National Health Service Programme for IT, to name the biggest), there have

also been some successes. The Government Digital Service – once described as the best start-up in Europe – has focused on changing government services and the ways in which citizens interact with them. To varying degrees of enthusiasm and effect, local government has also sought to change how it interacts with people online. But there has been far less consideration, if any, given to how citizens and civil society interacts with itself – and with state support – to meet acute and chronic needs that demand urgent, distributed, civil society responses.

The current UK Government demonstrated its attraction to this idea through the creation of the NHS Responders App (building on the exceptional work of GoodSam). And all the instincts about its potential to enable the swift deployment of skills, resources and capacity where they are needed were right. But the mindset underpinning the execution is still steeped in a belief that the purpose is to connect citizens to government, not citizens to what they need. These are not always the same thing.

Communities leading the way

Let's take the example of the pandemic. Days before local authorities were co-ordinating action, and months before the central NHS Responders app was available, local people were self-organising through existing community groups and setting up new mutual aid groups. Many of those were organised through WhatsApp - which provided a 'good-enough' co-ordinating platform for mutual aid to happen. Because it was available to anyone with a phone, WhatsApp was an enabling force;

critical infrastructure for hyper-local organising. This happened chaotically at first, and was increasingly marshalled by emerging community leaders. When it arrived, the NHS Responder app was useful for sure, but it lagged significantly behind hyper-local efforts; and if there is ever a comparative analysis of the impact of each, I suspect the haphazard matching of supply and demand through platforms that enable peer-to-peer connection will be proven more responsive and effective.

In another example, earlier this year, we saw the unceremonious and public dismissal of Randstad as the £32m contract holder of the National Tutoring Project, responsible for brokering access to tutors for kids who had fallen behind in their education as a result of the pandemic. Following this sacking, the Education Secretary chose to direct all tutoring funding directly into schools. This move was welcomed by schools, being best-placed to determine where and how tutoring should be deployed for their pupils. But alongside devolving funding for commissioning tutoring provision, if there had been a platform to assess providers, their locality, their capacity, impact and so on, could that have been another way to help teachers co-ordinate supply and demand?

In a similar vein, we've seen the creation of the Homes for Ukraine scheme; where households and organisations are able to register their interest in providing a medium-term home for refugees. Sensitive and safe matching is a difficult task, but for households, there is currently no way to connect

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with a local organisation who is looking for hosts, nor resource to assess your suitability. Again, we have no data, but my guess is that a very large proportion of those citizens who had the good heart to offer their homes through registering with the service - and who have been thanked through press headlines for doing so - had expected the service to broker suitable connections with Ukrainian families. We now have a situation where people are finding each other through Facebook, with local government and other agencies co-ordinating hosting, inspections and safeguarding in patchworked ways. Our systems are pitifully out of date for making that work effectively.

Building a better way

Co-ordinating what people need with people and places who can meet those needs is not always easy. But, taken together, the attempts made with these previous schemes show us several things:

- There is rarely a problem in identifying and registering hundreds of thousands of people and organisations to participate in civic schemes; schemes

that require hyper-local effort but have national collective impact.

- While these schemes are distinct and specific to a challenge, fundamentally they all seek to solve the same problem: matching resources, skills and capacity to where it is most needed – usually quickly. They have different needs for ensuring trust, safety, accountability but are all variations on this central theme.

- Where the government of the day needs help from a wide variety of people and providers to tackle a serious, pressing challenge, the funding to build the necessary infrastructure is found. But each are commissioned independently, separately, often too late, and usually in a bespoke fashion. Although I'm happy to be proved wrong, I suspect few offer residual infrastructure that may be used after the period of commissioning is over.

‘In the pandemic, before local authorities co-ordinated action, local people were self-organising through new and existing groups. Although chaotic, this matching of supply and demand was effective.’

Tech-powered support for human crises

At The Young Foundation, we are interested in finding creative, digital solutions that lean into the strengths of a central government, but where government takes a fundamentally different role in the execution. HMG's Government as a Platform infrastructure of shared digital systems makes it easy(ier) to develop user-centric government services. Now is the time to develop a new approach; one that is fit for a public service system in which communities and civil society are a fundamental, core part.

In order to begin this thinking, let's re-conceptualise how we think about infrastructure, innovation, investment and immediacy.

1. Building infrastructure

Through the government's Levelling Up agenda there is a rightful focus on the physical, social and civic infrastructure that exists in the places we live; libraries, youth and community centres, parks et al, which have hollowed out over the last decade.

We are starting to see a stronger focus on rebuilding this infrastructure, with communities, increasingly looking to asset-transfer, advocating for a Community Power Act, supporting community businesses, and building a greater evidence for the social and economic value of doing so – all championed by The Young Foundation, among others.

In contrast, when most of us think of digital infrastructure, our imagination usually extends to 5G, or universal broadband connectivity across the UK. We do not tend to think of what a civic digital infrastructure could or should be, nor do we make the connections between physical and digital civic infrastructure. We might exercise a little social imagination by asking a few basic questions:

- How much more physical civic space might be unlocked if there were a national 'civic space' booking platform, where anyone can book anything from a community centre to an empty retail unit for an afternoon?
- How much more social action might we see if



‘It’s time to find creative digital infrastructure solutions that lean into the strengths of central government, but have communities and civil society at the core.’

there were genuine, collective visibility of unmet needs and unused assets in a community?

- How can we connect ecosystems of providers of voluntary and social enterprise services for acute needs (debt advice and so on) to bring those collective services far closer, more quickly, to those who need them?

2. A new approach to technological innovation

We need to take a more expansive and mature approach to technological innovation.

Expansive to challenge a peculiar disdain towards innovation that incorporate social and civic aims, as if designing-in a broader set of outcomes (beyond the economic) must inherently be a stifler - not a creative agitator - of innovation. Some of the most exciting and intellectually and morally satisfying innovations seek to do both. They also serve a wider purpose, pointing to new ways of working that challenge old ideas and outdated assumptions about what’s possible – or what people won’t engage in.

And mature because investors, government, philanthropists have spent years tinkering around the edges, supporting digital social innovations with (largely grant) funding, but have not yet internalised the reality that some of the platforms and services that serve a civic and social need do not have a consumer- or citizen-facing business model. Neither, arguably, should they have one.

Most of the innovations which were spawned in the early, heady days of the sharing economy

were great ideas: Streetbank (lending things to neighbours), StreetClub (B&Q’s neighbour platform to encourage more sustainability through DIY in households), FloodVolunteers (matching skills, household goods and homes for those affected by flooding in the Somerset Levels); Echo (brokering peer learning and skills exchange between SME’s in a local area) – the list goes on and on. What they lacked was any serious investment, and what they couldn’t often find was a revenue stream. However, these platforms exposed and grew community capacity. They built social, local capital and connectedness – and a sense of belonging; of feeling useful and needed in the place you live.

3. Investment

Thirdly, then, we come to investment. Dismissing or discounting the many digital social entrepreneurs already innovating with technology in favour of piling investment into a centralised approach to digital civic infrastructure would be counter-productive (in the way that a national youth volunteering initiative might deliver long-term damage to local providers of youth services). However, there is scope to explore the necessity for investment in a ‘platform’ for connecting and scaling initiatives that are focused on getting skills, resources and assets to the people and places where they are needed – quickly and safely - and that show high potential for delivering significant civic and societal impact if operating at a national scale.

Questions for discussion

This paper explores various models that have reached different levels of success and proved helpful - or not - in a range of contexts. Our aim is to discuss and consider digitally-enabled, technology-based, community-organised civic action in response to contemporary crises - and to explore models to develop a digital civic infrastructure, matching human need with resources in local areas.

Big questions remain:

- Does the central hypothesis hold up? Is there potential for national, civic, digital infrastructure to support mutual, reciprocal support in our communities, particularly in times of crisis and acute need?
- What are the key pinch points and concerns for local government in co-ordinating in times of acute need? Is there a place for an 'off the shelf' enabling, co-ordinating infrastructure?
- Is there potential to open up greater visibility and inventory of physical buildings and assets through technology?
- How have centralised solutions (such as NHS Responders) and grassroots organising (unconnected with formal institutions/volunteering) demonstrated their respective strengths?
- Could greater investment in digital civic infrastructure support trends in increased participatory practice for local government?
- Does this work in support of - or does it unhelpfully ignore - issues of access to digital kit, skills and connectivity?

The final, and perhaps most crucial question, is around urgency: if we want to see rapid results,

supporting people through crises they're facing right now, what could we do *today*? How could we use technology to increase access to the things people really need as they navigate the cost-of-living crisis?

Digital must, surely, lie at the heart of our human responses to 21 century crises, enabling us to address emerging 'long emergencies', supported by technology, and capitalising on changes in how people come together and interact as communities.

Please share your reflections and comments on these questions directly with Helen at helen.goulden@youngfoundation.org



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