Position paper on why connecting older people is important

Background

1. We live in an era when being on-line is becoming more and more a necessity of life and less and less of an optional extra. Public information and other central and local government services are increasingly going on-line. A widening range of consumer services and products are available either only on-line or at lower prices if bought on-line. Maintaining contact with family and friends may be either quicker or cheaper – or both – than traditional modes of communication.

2. While these advantages of on-line connectivity apply to all groups in the community, they are especially relevant to older people, many of whom may be less mobile than younger people. However, the Consumer Panel's tracker survey, *Consumers and the communications market: 2006* shows that people aged 65 and over are the least likely to be connected to the internet: in the UK only 28%[1] of older people are connected, compared with 57%[2] in the rest of the adult population. Many in this age group do not view being connected as having any relevance or benefits to them. This lack of connectivity and ICT skills is a serious matter not only because many older people are failing to take advantage of the benefits of on-line connection, but also because the UK population is ageing and an ageing population will require a suitably ICT skilled older workforce, skills that can help people engage in high quality work.

3. The Ofcom Consumer Panel considers that it is a timely moment for government and other key stakeholders to develop a strategy for helping older people become connected. The government is reviewing and updating its *Connecting the UK: the Digital Strategy*, it has adopted the EU Riga Declaration on e-Inclusion and it has announced that it will connect 800,000 children from low income families to the internet to ensure they are not disadvantaged.

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[1] Consumers and the Communications Market: 2006; page 32
[2] Consumers and the Communications Market: 2006; page 32

Why aren't more older people connected to the internet?

4. To understand why a markedly lower proportion of older people have an on-line connection, we commissioned attitudinal research into people's reasons for declining to engage with ICT. Our research *Older people and communications technology* was published in July 2006 and the following are the six key conclusions of the report.

- Attitudes towards internet access are complex and varied. Users of the internet can be segmented into *Absorbers* and *Self Starters*; non-users can be divided into *Rejecters* and the *Disengaged.*

- Absorbers had learned how to use computers at work and are now part of the digital age. They are rational and functional in their attitudes towards technology and easily absorb technology products and services into their lives.

- Self Starters who had no training at work had taught themselves ICT skills. They are a very diverse group so far as age, income, location and health are concerned. Attitude and character appear to be the key determinants.

- Current non-users are not all Rejecters of the internet as some previous surveys have suggested. The majority of non-users, the Disengaged, might well be interested given the right circumstances.

- The Disengaged are largely consistent in the reasons they give for not getting on-line – for example, lack of skills, ability and motivation. Many were afraid - afraid of the unknown, of breaking the computer, or appearing foolish in the eyes of younger tutors and fellow-learners. Given appropriate support and assistance, many in this group might well be able to overcome their concerns and fears. The environment for learning needs to be tailored towards them: courses (free if possible) run by older people, for older people and designed for genuine beginners.

- The Rejecters are unlikely to respond to any attempts to engage them. They are a diverse group – from busy grandmothers to contented hobbyists. Their reasons for not involving themselves with ICT are similarly varied. They are happy to opt out and are unlikely to change their attitude.

Exploring what actions need to be taken

5. The Consumer Panel hosted a workshop to discuss how to help older people get on-line. It was attended by the deliverers of local initiatives to increase on-line participation, industry, think tanks and government representatives. The following is a brief breakdown of the key issues that emerged from the day. A full copy of the report can be found at:

http://www.ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk/publications/Connecting_Older_People.pdf

- **Voluntary exclusion:** Many thought the term 'voluntary' exclusion', used in the Panel's research, *Consumers and the Communications Market: 2006*, was too strong. It was argued that a person has to have a clear understanding of what

being on-line means before they are able to make an informed choice about whether or not to use the internet.

- **Support:** Attitude is important but many people might be persuaded to connect if they are provided with the right support.

- **Cost:** Cost is a factor in going on-line. Many older people have an income below the national average. The cost of buying hardware, the monthly cost of broadband and unexpected maintenance cost will be a barrier to many. Government research revealed that 77% of older people said cost was an issue in being on-line.

- **Policy co-ordination:** No one Government department appears to 'own' the digital inclusion issue, either in terms of strategic policy-making or at an operational level. Organisations involved in providing programmes to help older people go on-line don't know where to go for advice and support.

- **Usability:** The usability of software and hardware needs to be improved. Also, improving people's media literacy would increase their confidence in using on-line information and understanding security issues such as viruses.

- **Benefit of being on-line:** People will only go on-line if they are convinced there is 'something in it for me'. Benefits and services – not technical information - need to be advertised, explained and demonstrated.

- **Taster sessions:** Taster sessions to introduce people to the internet are valuable. They involve demonstrating websites and on-line network groups that are of relevance or of interest to people.

- **Learning environment:** Older people need the support of suitably skilled people, preferably drawn from the same age group, to teach them in a supportive, informal and familiar environment, as many of them may previously have had a bad experience of education and doubt their ability to learn new skills.

- **Advertising and marketing:** Much of the technobabble of the industry's marketing – megs, capacity, disk size and so on – is a massive turn-off for many older people. The emphasis needs to be on the uses to which the technology can be put – buying cheap holidays, genealogy or whatever - rather than on technological specifications which mean little or nothing.

- **Voluntary sector:** Many organizations in the voluntary and community sector, such as Age Concern or Digital Unite have the experience and skills to deliver sustainable solutions, rather than the government itself. However, government support may be needed if they are to develop and sustain effective programmes.

Policy Recommendation

6. Older people are at present less likely to be connected than the rest of the population. Not only are many older people not getting the benefits of access to the

internet, but society as a whole is losing out because a significant number of people have not developed IT skills. There is a need to think beyond the current preoccupation of ensuring UK-wide access to broadband and focus on how take-up can be increased among those who are not at present connected – especially older consumers.

7. A number of voluntary and community organizations are currently involved in designing and delivering training programmes to familiarise older consumers with IT techniques and to illustrate the benefits that being on-line can bring. It quickly became apparent at the Consumer Panel's workshop that most of these organizations are working in isolation, developing their own programmes from scratch with little or no knowledge of what other initiatives were being launched.

8. The Consumer Panel considers that there is an inexpensive and cost-effective way to increase the effectiveness of the delivery of existing small scale training schemes, to encourage the development of new ones and to harness the extremely high expertise and skills of the voluntary sector in this area.

9. The Panel recommends that the government should set up and manage a portal which would provide a resource supplying information and exchanging ideas on training methods used to introduce older consumers to on-line working - what works and what doesn't work – and on funding sources.

10. A portal holding up-to-date information on best practice in delivering training programmes would contribute towards an improved standard of programme delivery and help avoid duplication of initiatives in local areas.

11. The portal should also hold information on funding – who is offering funds, when and to whom. This information would help maximise the efficiencies of programme funding by organisations such as the Alliance for Digital Inclusion or government itself.

12. This small scale and relatively simple information sharing activity sponsored by central government would make a difference to what happens on the ground.

February 2007