

## **Workshop report for DISIPRAC: Digital identity security information practices of citizens**

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*Public General Report – issued March 2020*

Peter Cruickshank, Principal Investigator  
[p.cruickshank@napier.ac.uk](mailto:p.cruickshank@napier.ac.uk)

Dr Frances Ryan, Researcher  
[frances@francesryanphd.com](mailto:frances@francesryanphd.com)

Centre for Social Informatics, Edinburgh Napier University, March 2020

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## 1 Introduction and overview

This report serves as a summary from a one-day workshop, DISIPRAC: Digital identity security information practices of citizens, which was held at Edinburgh Napier University on Thursday, 27 February 2020<sup>1</sup>. The workshop was attended by professionals and volunteers who help and support adults in the community to manage their online accounts.

Further work is planned to continue the conversations and progress made during the workshop, but meantime we hope that that this report can be used as a basis for reflection, discussion and possible action by the attendees.

The findings from the day will also be used for academic publication, public engagement work, and as the basis for a proposal or grant application to fund further work, and it is likely that we will be looking for expressions of interest in future projects from the participants and the organisations they work with. The box on the right lists the types of organisations and practitioners that will be interested in this report.

We would like to thank Jess McBeath of Lemon Tree Consulting for her input: even though she could not make to the workshop, she was able to contribute to this report during the drafting stage.

Finally, the COVID-19 lockdown has changed circumstances dramatically since the day, but the fundamental issues remain the same – if anything, it has made the challenges of supporting online identity management even more apparent.

### Who might be interested in this report?

- Age Concern digital buddy scheme users
- Citizen Advice Bureaus
- Council-based library and digital inclusion officers
- Housing advocacy workers
- Local computer clubs
- Simon Community (GetDigital / StreetWorks)
- Social workers
- System designers

### 1.1 Background

The aim of the DISIPRAC project is to research the security information practices associated with digital identity, in particular the sharing of log-in details. The primary focus is online government services, partnering with system owners, citizen support/advocacy groups and other stakeholders to understand how they are supporting (vulnerable) citizens to better cope with increased levels of security for systems that are integral to their every-day lives.

The motivation for this work stems from the ways in which organisations and governments are increasing the security of their online systems [1], which impacts the information practices of system users (citizens, customers). This might result in citizens avoiding use of some online systems, however that is not a practical option as governments move to prioritise online services such as Universal Credit and myaccount [2] (often called ‘digital by default’ or ‘digital first’ [3]). A particular challenge is the data protection risks associated with supporting access to systems. System owners have been aware of the possible impact of digital inclusion [4] [5] and are starting to allow for support of some users through ‘assisted digital’ services or ‘alternative journeys’ [6], but it is unclear if it captures the range of informal support that happens around social proxy behaviours [7].

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<sup>1</sup> This project was funded through Edinburgh Napier University’s 2019/20 Research Funding Competition

## 1.2 Aim and scope

The aim of the workshop was to capture perspectives from a range of practitioners who are involved in helping people access online systems. The aim was to identify (a) issues and challenges and (b) current resources and practices involved in work in this area. There was no intention to identify or propose solutions, though the day was open to collecting suggestions for improvement to practices and systems.

Ethical and practical motivations meant it was deliberately scoped to avoid directly involving account holders. The work was also restricted to consideration of the needs of adult account holders who are able to consent to receiving proxy support. This means we did not consider proxy support for children or for adults with cognitive decline (including dementia) or who are temporarily incapacitated or hospitalised due to illness or injury. These are all important areas that deserve (and are subject to) research in their own right.

## 1.3 Event recap

The workshop ran between 9:30am and 4pm on 27 February 2020. The twelve participants came from a range of organisations from around Scotland and the north of England. This includes local government and housing associations, voluntary groups, community computer clubs, and research organisations. Two additional participants could not make the event but asked to be informed of the results. All participants attended in a personal capacity, and their thoughts, opinions and experiences have been anonymised throughout. A full list of attendees and contact details was sent to participants on Monday, 2 March 2020.

Throughout the day, we worked through three pre-set scenarios, each of which were followed by discussions related to the scenarios or overarching themes from this research.

The primary concepts explored through this work were the relation between real world (social) identity and digital identity and the role of professional and volunteers in helping people navigate the space between them. Associated concepts of trust, privacy, proxy and agency were also covered. The scenarios and follow-up discussion questions used as the basis for the workshop are listed in appendix A1. In a final session, participants were asked to design and work through their own scenarios. The scenarios are detailed in appendix A2.

In summary, topics covered were:

- The identification of people who need assistance, and the related issues and challenges
- The concept of 'proxy' and its usefulness as a term
- Determinations of trust and the role that trust plays in the proxy relationships, and the rules or guidelines that should be followed when acting as a proxy.

The rest of this short report covers a summary of the main issues identified during the day. The aim of this report is to highlight challenges and issues so we have deliberately avoided making recommendations. Appendices contain links to further reading and resources.

Finally, the project continues – please contact Peter if you are interested in keeping up with any developments or taking part in future research linked to the issues raised here.

Peter Cruickshank, Principal Investigator  
[p.cruickshank@napier.ac.uk](mailto:p.cruickshank@napier.ac.uk)

Dr Frances Ryan, Researcher  
[frances@francesryanphd.com](mailto:frances@francesryanphd.com)

Centre for Social Informatics, Edinburgh Napier University, March 2020



## 2 Main findings

The points presented below have been gathered from an initial analysis of notes from the day from scenario worksheets, discussion questions, and conversations during breaks. They help to better understand:

- the different perspectives of the stakeholders involved in social proxy relationships,
- common themes that present themselves during proxy sessions, and
- the issues that arise, or have the potential to arise, through the processes.

This section starts with particular issues identified before discussion of some of the general points that emerged.

### 2.1 The service user

In this report, 'service user' is used to refer to the person being helped. There are several other alternatives to this term, including 'client', 'principal', 'account holder' and 'beneficiary'; none is ideal.

Individuals seeking proxy support are generally described as being those with low levels of overall digital literacy, those who lack the confidence to use specific devices, online platforms, or technology in general, and those without access to internet-enabled devices or home connectivity. Typical examples of people who need help include:

- bereaved older adults who previously had more digitally literate partners to manage online accounts for household and personal use
- older adults who have been given technology by family members for the purposes of keeping in touch, but who do not have the confidence or skill levels needed to use them
- adults with generally lower levels of digital literacy who are unable to navigate online systems for government websites including council sites and universal credit
- adults who lack the physical technology to access the internet, which might also impact their confidence and overall skill levels
- adults with cognitive or physical conditions that prevent them from accessing online platforms

It was noted that many of these individuals feel frustration at the difficulty of access to online services, increasing isolation amongst service users.

When it comes to accessing services, it was recognised as being important to look past the self-referrers and consider who needs help, but is not coming forward. This raises the wider question for the support staff about how much of their role is seeking out those who need help.

#### 2.1.1 Issues and risks

A number of issues and risks emerged during the discussions, including:

- Issues around need for ongoing support to manage identity – and questions about how or whether to aim to create self-sufficiency. Behind this is the wider issue of whether digital literacy and digital agency 'rights' or an imposition.
- Risks around creating dependency on help, and how to avoid promises of further support. This can include a need to understand the wider context – for instance the relationship with family members.

- Some service users are being forced (“mandated”) by the DWP to visit digital inclusion officers (e.g. at library) to get help accessing the system. This creates a suspicion of the helpers, creating an additional challenge for trust.
- Role of “informed choice” during the registration process: Service users may not recognise the dangers of what they are doing or the long-term implications of sharing personal information online. There is a concern over the consequences of helping some service users getting online – for instance gambling addicts – and the impact of mental health. Services providers are known to be aware of this to some extent (e.g. “assisted digital” was mentioned).
- There is increasing evidence that offline vulnerability predicts online risk (e.g. [Vulnerable Children in a Digital World](#) [8]) with implications for preventive education for adults as well as children. It is also helpful to differentiate between essential digital skills (e.g. I can change my password, fill in an online form, or use chat facilities to help me solve a problem) with digital citizenship (e.g. I am a responsible, informed, engaged, critical, and safe user of technology so that I can live a good life online).

### 2.1.2 Avoidance behaviour

Whilst the workshop was focused on the act of supporting others, it was noted that avoidance behaviours are not uncommon for some people who might need support. For example, it was discussed that:

- Some vulnerable people (e.g. homeless people, etc.) will not actively seek support which might mean people need to seek them out for engagement
- An inability or unwillingness to check email on a regular basis might lead to missed notifications or deadlines or appointments, if all communications are electronic.
- Understanding motivation: it is challenging to empower someone who does not want to be empowered (e.g. the purpose of the support is to claim online benefits). Helpers may attempt to improve motivation by engaging with the service user to identify benefits they could achieve from being online (e.g. there’s a great app to help you socialise with family).
- Personal motivations may conflict with online safety regarding identity (e.g. young people share usernames/passwords with a friend despite being aware of cyber security advice). This can be compounded by technology designed to maintain engagement and promote social sharing ([Disrupted Childhood](#) report [9]).
- Resistance to on-line systems could sometimes come from people with very high digital skills (e.g. (former) IT professionals) who are aware of the risks and therefore avoid use of systems that record their details – including social media, and also government services.

## 2.2 The helper / proxy

There were a range of potential proxy supporters who might assist these vulnerable adults to access and use their online accounts. This includes professionals or volunteers at organisations that the individual might use to seek assistance as well as personal connections within their general social circles.

A number of organisations were identified as providing official support by professionals or volunteers:



- Computer club volunteers
- Digital services volunteers, including digital champions at charities
- IT buddies at public libraries
- Platform providers/managers, for example, the provider of pension services
- Staff at Job Centre, Citizens Advice, and similar
- Council support workers, housing support workers.

Outside of these professional or formal roles, support might be provided by family members, friends, or neighbours.

Volunteers (as opposed to professionals) may have more freedom to decide what is appropriate – conversely, though, there is probably more risk for the service user.

### 2.2.1 The role of the helper

Broadly, there is a need to balance empowerment and education of the service user, with getting a task done. Descriptions of the helper role include: career [carer?], training, needs assessment, friend, buddy (issues with *proxy* as an alternative are considered below; it is not considered a term that is helpful to use in a practice context). Broadly, the consensus was that there are two aspects to the role:

- Advocate – acting to get something done on behalf of someone who otherwise would not be able to do it
- Enabler (confidence builder) – a question of teaching, knowledge transfer, to enable the service user to self-support in future

It is important to be clear what the role is in any interaction with the service user.

### 2.2.2 Challenges and points of conflict:

Do the volunteers have the skills and knowledge to help (there is a worry that they could make things worse). In one participant's words: **“first do no harm”**.

At the same time, service users can share too much information or be too trusting. This can depend on levels of familiarity between the proxy and service user, and can be culturally dependent too. It might also be that the helper is too trusting in some situations.

There was a recognition that to provide help, and depending on the service user's skills and equipment, it may be necessary to break rules and terms and conditions of the service, for instance around sharing login details.

There is a risk of blame for the outcome of the interaction – interacting with the system after authentication has its own issues. For example: what if an application for support is turned down? One rule that some follow is to help contain this risk is: **“hands off keyboard”**.

Challenges this raises include:

- How to handle passwords (given that some users aren't even aware of the concept or cannot management them themselves)
- Whether there is a need for the helper to record the support provided (and to whom).
- There may be a need to verify the identity of the person being helped as many of the support activities involve access to (and altering) highly sensitive information. This can create a catch-22 situation...



### 2.2.3 Role of guidelines and training

There was a general consensus that guidelines and training would be useful – but also a realisation that they are often lacking. There was some discussion on what the status of the guidelines should be, who should draw them up, and who should own responsibility for them.

Some support roles already involve recording a risk assessment around clients – e.g. visiting clients for housing support. Several of the professionals are already working within a framework of duty of care, safeguarding and GDPR compliance, but less than a third of the attendees had had any training in this area. Club-based volunteers tend to be more trusting and work in a less formal way, although this varies with the club as some have set expectations for volunteer practices

Culture and expectations have an important role. There was some discussion of the interaction between organisational policies and values – and personal values in shaping good practice by inclusion workers. One idea that came up was a “kite mark” of behaviours.

## 2.3 The terms used

### 2.3.1 Issues with the word ‘proxy’

There did not seem to be a consensus of the best term to describe someone who helps or supports another to use their online accounts. The term “proxy” was questioned early on in the workshop – some felt it has a negative, legalistic connotation. There were also questions about how easy “proxy” is to understand in this context. This led to a discussion about the best use of the word proxy (social proxy vs digital proxy) and other potential terms that could be used. Some participants already use alternative terminology for people who help or support others, such as “digital champion”, “IT Buddy”, or simply “helper”.

The table below is a tentative summary of the way the concepts are used in different contexts. Feedback and suggestions for clarification and improvement would be welcomed.

	Digital	Legal	Social
<b>Service user</b>	Account holder	Principal	Service user
<b>Identity</b>	Individual Fixed (or explicitly updated)	Certificates (e.g. birth certificate)	Constructed/ contextual/ changing
<b>Trust</b>	Proof-based; true/false	Contracts, Power of attorney	Conditional, Fuzzy, Two- way
<b>Proxy</b>	Explicit delegation rules (e.g. ‘digital assistance’, ‘guardianship’)	Agent	Proxy, buddy, champion?

### 2.3.2 The role that trust plays

The concept of trust was discussed in a variety of forms throughout the day. Trust was generally discussed as a mutual understanding between the proxy and account holder. However, it was not generally discussed as a primary motivator when determining who should be helped. Issues included:

- Trusting in one’s own abilities to support someone, but also in the other’s ability to understand or accept the support. It implies competence and integrity of the helper by the service user.
- Trust builds over the course of a proxy relationship (which may involve multiple meetings).

- There needs to be trust in processes and regulation (both internally at the organisational level and externally in relationship to laws or platform regulation).
- There is an inherent power difference between the helper and service user which could influence levels of trust and participants did not share concerns about how their own online identity may be compromised (e.g.as digital literacy increases, would service users attempt to connect online with helpers?).

## 2.4 Systems

The systems discussed ranged from registration for garden rubbish collection with a local authority, through to the UK government's pension portal (see box). Several were identified as giving particular problems, which might increase the need of seeking and receiving proxy support.

The experience of the participants was that systems are written for the needs of the IT-literate, rather than the needs of clients, for instance with poorly written information on portals / websites. Indeed, being forced online can turn someone into an incompetent. As noted by one participant:

**“Digital first makes people incompetent”.**

Workshop participants noted several issues with systems in general. These include:

- Ongoing developments such as the introduction of two-factor-authentication (2FA) will create new issues for scenarios like this, especially in circumstances when the system provides no alternatives to online access.
- Accounts that remain logged in on devices, which make it important to have passwords for the device itself (especially in the context of dependence of many service users on cheap Android tablets).
- Different methods of authentication are needed for different platforms – there is no single identity infrastructure or common interface which adds to the frustrations of users.
- One specific example that emerged was a common requirement for an email account as the basis for registration and establishing a digital identity, and further need to check email on a regular basis. But many service users do not use email and do not have an email address, and are likely to forget to use or check an email account they might create to register for a system; this makes recovery of password and access to the digital identity an issue.

### Systems that came up in discussion

- Universal Credit
- Government Gateway
- Gov.uk (HMRC pension and tax systems)
- Edinburgh City Council brown bin registration
- EdIndex (a hub to apply for council housing or housing association properties in Edinburgh)
- JobCentre
- ISP email clients
- BT Internet
- Facebook
- Amazon

## 2.5 General points and impact of wider context

An unexpected issue that came up was the dependence of many service users on cheap (low powered, not supported) Android devices, with impact on their experience (and security, given the lack of patches) in attempting to access systems.

When considered in the wider context, it is apparent that the need for social proxies extends beyond a simple lack of digital literacy skills due to old age.

- Poverty and mental health acting as barriers to the use of technology and online platforms.



- At the same time, digital skills are on a spectrum – everyone has some knowledge and some gaps. Even practitioners in some circumstances need help accessing systems, and many old people are competent IT users.
- There is a need to be aware of **power** balance between everyone involved, and boundaries around what the roles allow – with different expectations depending in the organisation and role of proxy.

There seems to be a more positive attitude to support in Scotland, as compared to the rest of the UK – for instance, digital inclusion officers are not typically supported by local authorities in England; there was also some discussion of the approach to service design in Scotland [10].

There was a general feeling that there needs to be awareness (by all parties) of the wider context: that the impact of (UK) Government policy changes has been to shift the cost of (accessing) social care to the third sector, and that the proxies cannot assume that the digital system is created by a rational, benevolent service provider. The system may be designed to save money by making registration/access difficult, and official sources can give bad advice (for example denying the existence of offline services). Systems may be designed to be difficult to access even for those who are comfortable using technology ([11][12] are example stories).

### 3 Feedback and lessons learned

Feedback from the workshop has been overwhelmingly positive. There was a common theme that emerged from the feedback forms that suggest many participants have been motivated to look at how their own organisations manage social proxy activities, with several participants noting a need to revisit their existing policies and guidelines, or create them. For example, one participant noted that because of the workshop, they will “consider internal policies and strategies [to] help our staff feel more empowered and protected when helping service users digitally”.

One of the clearest messages from the feedback was that participants would like to be kept informed and updated about this and any future or related research. In addition to staying informed, most participants noted that they would be keen to remain engaged with the researchers and other participants from the workshop. Contact details were shared between the participants to help facilitate this.

The event was a success in that it provided us with a good foundational understanding of the issues faced by practitioners when supporting adults in the community to access their online accounts. Some of the lessons we learned include:

- It would be good to allow more time to review worksheets in more detail, including the adding additional details to notes. However, this would have caused the day to run over time, or less time would have been available for discussion.
- We could have captured richer data by recording sound, however that would have proved difficult to capture and to transcribe.
- It would have been good to have more time to share real-world examples of the issues that participants have faced in their roles, allowing us to discuss them as a group. This might have brought more issues to light that could be considered for future research.
- The data collection worksheets were a useful resource in their own right, and participants noted interest in using them with their organisations. We have therefore included a template in an appendix.

During the day, participants were asked to identify the sources of information they found useful in their work in this area: the list can be found in appendix A3.

## 4 Conclusions

From the outputs of the workshop have helped identify areas of challenges in in relation to supporting access to online systems.

Although we do not feel that we can directly make recommendations from this report, we hope that it helps clarify some of the issues that developments in online systems are creating for practitioners and the people they are helping.

We will use these findings as the basis for a number of further outputs. This includes:

- A full analysis of the data gathered during the day
- An academic paper evaluating the results
- Public engagement work to share these findings with the wider public in and around Edinburgh
- Further research on this and related topics, once the appropriate funding has been identified and secured

To best serve the needs of adults seeking proxy support, researchers and practitioners will need to work together. We hope that the output from this workshop will be used to support funding for a future larger scale research project. Potential partners include age-related charities, computer clubs, community volunteer groups, and employers of digital inclusion workers.

## Endnotes

- [1] For example The Scottish Government's (2017) *Cyber resilience: public sector action plan* <https://www.gov.scot/publications/cyber-resilience-strategy-scotland-public-sector-action-plan-2017-18/>
- [2] A simple, secure way to access a range of Scottish public services online using just one username and password <https://www.mygov.scot/myaccount/>
- [3] Scottish Government *Digital First Service Standard* <https://resources.mygov.scot/standards/digital-first/>
- [4] <https://hodigital.blog.gov.uk/2017/02/27/sharing-best-practice-on-assisted-digital-and-digital-inclusion/>
- [5] CILIP (2018) *UN Special rapporteur: Universal Credit, broadband internet access and UK public libraries* <https://www.cilip.org.uk/page/UNSpecialRapporteur>
- [6] For example as described in a project presentation: "Online Identity Assurance 'Show and Tell'" at <https://youtu.be/3pEX90l0ot0?t=877>
- [7] <https://public.digital/2018/09/21/i-should-have-renamed-assisted-digital/>
- [8] Vulnerable Children in a Digital World (2018) <https://www.internetmatters.org/about-us/vulnerable-children-in-a-digital-world-report/>
- [9] 5 rights foundation (2018) *Disrupted Childhood* <https://5rightsfoundation.com/static/5Rights-Disrupted-Childhood.pdf>
- [10] The Scottish approach to service design <https://www.gov.scot/publications/the-scottish-approach-to-service-design/>
- [11] Citizens' Advice (2018) *Too many people struggle to make a Universal Credit claim* <https://wearecitizensadvice.org.uk/too-many-people-struggle-to-make-a-universal-credit-claim-f445df443cb9>
- [12] Children's Commissioner (2019) *Universal Credit – "This system is so difficult to find your way around."* <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2019/01/24/universal-credit-this-system-is-so-difficult-to-find-your-way-around/>



## Appendices

### A1: The discussion material: scenarios and follow-up questions

**Scenario 1:** A person in their 70s is seeking help accessing their XXXXXX account (account of your choice, possibly an official government portal). They generally receive assistance from a family friend, but that person is unavailable. They have never used the Internet or an online account independently and do not know what to do. However, they have a notebook that has all of their login details for their various online accounts and would like you to help them.

#### Questions from discussion 1:

- How do you identify who needs help?
- What are the issues and challenges in identifying those in need of help?
- How do you determine who to trust when offering assistance? What are the concerns with making these decisions?

**Scenario 2:** A gentleman has come to a computer club seeking assistance in accessing his online pension accounts. He had previously been to the club where a volunteer helped to set up his online account. However, the volunteer used their own email address and mobile number to set up the account. The account owner knows his account numbers and login details but is unable to access emails or text messages which is necessary for making updates to the account – including changing the primary email and other contact details.

#### Questions from discussion 2:

- What is your role in general, as related to assisting others?
- What are the rules and guidelines that you are meant to work within?
- What is your role in practice, regardless of rules? What conflicts are there with the rules?
- What issues do you face when dealing with the users?

**Scenario 3:** A single mother with limited digital literacy skills has been told by the Council that she must manage her benefits through their online portal. She does not have an email address or access to an Internet-enabled device capable of filling out online forms, and is uncomfortable using computers. However, if she doesn't use the online system, she risks losing her financial benefits and other support services.

#### Questions from discussion 3:

- What key concepts or issues have emerged for you?
- Is "social (digital?) proxy" a useful concept? What does it mean to you?

**New scenario:** Using blank scenario sheets, participants will be given the opportunity to create 1-2 of their own scenarios + work-through

#### Wrap-up discussion:

- Are there best practices that could be developed or implemented? Who should write or own them?
- What questions has the workshop raised, how they can be answered (another workshop? different kind of research?), and who should answer them?

## A2: Additional scenarios

The workshop participants were invited to create additional scenarios that would allow other issues to be explored. Three such scenarios were generated.

**Scenario 4a:** A senior citizen has received a laptop (tablet) as a gift from a relative. The relative has shown them how to use the device, but the lesson was rushed (and incomplete?). The reason for the gift was to keep in touch with family and they would like to learn how to use the device.

**Scenario 4b:** A user of the computer club in sheltered housing has developed dementia. Increasingly, a helper is called on to help them access Facebook to keep up with relatives in Australia and to access their favourite music.

**Scenario 4c:** A middle-aged man with tenancy begs on the street. He was getting benefits, but they have been stopped. He has no digital literacy or access to a device. However, he will engage with a support worker on his terms, which means in the streets.

## A3: Further reading and resources

Participants were asked “what resources should we know about”. The following were identified:

- Critical use of Google search engine
- SCVO resources, including Essential Digital Skills Framework:  
<https://scvo.org/support/digital/participation/skills>
- GetDigitalScotland: <https://www.getdigitalscotland.org/>
- Digital buddies at Age UK:  
<https://www.ageuk.org.uk/get-involved/volunteer/become-an-age-uk-digital-buddy/>
- Learn My Way – the Good things foundation:  
<https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/learn-my-way>
- Local computer clubs – e.g. Fountain Bridge Computer Club, Scottish Seniors Computer Club
- Understanding Citizen Data Literacy – Me and My Big Data – Simeon Yates, Liverpool (Launch 28 Feb 2020):  
<https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/humanities-and-social-sciences/research/research-themes/centre-for-digital-humanities/projects/big-data/team/>
- Digital Access for all: <https://digitalaccessforall.co.uk/>
- One Digital UK – website and knowledge hub. Advice on setting up and sustaining digital champion (DC) projects: <https://onedigitaluk.com/>
- Digital North Lanarkshire project, offering formal and informal digital courses for all ages: <https://www.digitalnl.co.uk/> (covers North Lanarkshire area only)

Details of additional resources would be welcomed.

## A4: The worksheets

An editable Microsoft Word document is available online at:

<https://www.napier.ac.uk/research-and-innovation/research-search/outputs/workshop-report-for-disiprac-digital-identity-security-information-practices-of-citizens>

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