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Voluntary
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BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS TO DIGITAL INCLUSION

THIRD SECTOR AND DIGITAL INCLUSION IN GLASGOW -
WHAT WE LEARNED FROM COVID

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Introduction

At the start of 2021 Glasgow City Council made available a fund for third sector organisations working to support digital inclusion in the city. The grants were administered through GCVS and aimed to improve digital inclusion by funding training and support projects that worked to develop digital skills within the community.

The pot of £185,000 was awarded to 18 organisations in Glasgow. The organisations work with a variety of different groups across the city, including older people, young people (some care experienced), unemployed, those with disabilities and asylum seekers and refugees.

The findings in this report are based on our visits to these organisations. The purpose of these visits was to see the projects in action, talk to some of the participants and to find out from the people running the projects what worked well and what the barriers to digital inclusion are.

Digital Inclusion

Digital inclusion is the process of working with people in the community to help them get online. It is not just a case of providing people with a device, but making sure they have long term access to the internet and have the digital skills and knowledge to be able to use the devices and internet safely and efficiently.

Digital exclusion and data poverty were already problematic before the Covid-19 pandemic, not least for people meeting the requirements for Universal Credit, but the lockdowns worsened the digital divide. The speed at which organisations and individuals adopted online technology to continue to do their work was remarkable and commendable, but it left many people cut off from essential services, and brought the problems of social isolation and loneliness into harsh light.

For isolated people who were already digitally competent, lockdown offered more opportunities to take part in cultural and social activities. For those who were already digitally excluded, these new opportunities were inaccessible.

This report highlights some of the barriers people in Glasgow faced to getting online and showcases some of the practices that are working and engaging people with the online world. The report demonstrates how threading digital inclusion practices into a variety of services can result in wider benefits to communities. Digital inclusion can have positive impacts on mental health and wellbeing, finances and employability.

Devices

For many people access to a device was the initial barrier to getting online. Often there was a financial barrier to having even a smartphone (never mind a device with a larger, more user-friendly screen).

In the early days of lockdown with home learning and working from home, many families found themselves sharing devices.

Organisations reported families with two or three children, all trying to do schoolwork on the same mobile phone, and the impossibility of quality home learning without devices and data.

Throughout the Covid pandemic, many digital devices were made available to the community. There were schemes that allowed for devices (including laptops, Chromebooks, desktops, tablets and mobiles) to be distributed to those most in need across the city. Some programmes, such as those from Connecting Scotland, provided brand new devices and data connection, while others relied on donations of old devices which were refurbished before being distributed.

Organisations interviewed for this report made it clear that it was not enough to simply hand someone a device and leave them to it. The reality was that most people needed support to be able to use it effectively. It was found that some people lacked the

basic knowledge and confidence to turn the device on and use its basic functions as what may seem intuitive for some was not necessarily the same for all.

Suitability of device for the individual was also often overlooked in the initial rush to distribute devices. For example, this research found that a mobile or tablet might be fine for keeping in contact with family members via Zoom or WhatsApp. For activities such as filling out job applications, Universal Credit applications and completing college or school work, a device such as a laptop or desktop, with a separate keyboard, was a more optimal solution.

Aside from giving out devices, one of the ways organisations attempted to overcome this barrier was to set up lending libraries. This meant more people had the chance to use the laptops and tablets and offered them a chance to try before buying one themselves to see which one would be suitable for their needs. This option was especially popular and successful among housing associations.

Connectivity

The second, and one of the most common barriers to digital inclusion was a lack of connectivity.

Pre-pandemic, many households struggled to afford the costs of broadband. This worsened through lockdown when furlough and unemployment meant lower incomes. This came at a time where due to online schooling the need for more data at home increased.

For some households had to decide if they would keep food on the table or their homes heated. Paying for broadband was further down the list of priorities.

Some households had no internet connectivity. As the cost of living continues to increase, this issue is likely to get worse.

People experiencing data poverty before the pandemic often used public Wi-Fi in libraries and community buildings to stay connected. Some organisations reported members of their community standing outside closed public buildings during lockdown trying to connect to the Wi-Fi.

As a solution to overcome this barrier, some organisations were able to source Mi-Fi devices. These were a welcome but were a short-term fix. This is due to many only providing 6-12 months connectivity, and often at a high financial cost for organisations.

The connectivity was temporary and one organisation reported difficulties with signal and connecting to the network in some of the old tenement flats with thick walls.

A sustainable solution to this problem is free at point of access community wireless networks. Connectivity is increasingly regarded as a basic utility and free access through public spaces would be welcome. Housing Associations are particularly well placed to address this problem in some communities.

“ I was able to go online and search for college courses with the teachers... this has been hard because the library has been closed for many months but in the café I have the help I need ”

Skills

This research found that, for some people, formal digital courses could be off putting or daunting. Some organisations had originally planned to run formal courses but found that they needed to be more flexible and adaptable.

What worked best were informal, small group or one-to-one sessions that could easily be personalised to the needs of the individual. People started out with different levels of skill and knowledge and learn at different paces.

Each individual has their own priorities for what they want or need to do online. For these reasons (and because people were often using a variety of different devices) classroom style teaching around digital engagement was not successful. Some of the organisations that brought in outside instructors to deliver training sessions struggled to get people engaged.

Community led sessions were successful when the volunteers or digital champions were people from within the local community. Peer-to-peer learning was the most successful way of increasing digital inclusion.

It built familiarity and trust, resulting in higher levels of engagement and enabling people to develop their skills at a pace they were comfortable with, for the purposes they needed. Some peers who offered digital support were able to do so in community languages other than English which was very important for minority ethnic communities.

Language

Language was a common barrier to digital inclusion for people whose first language is not English.

Many of the digital inclusion resources and handouts are also in the English language. Teaching from such resources creates an unintended barrier to digital skills.

Some organisations working with minority ethnic communities told us their members often have poor levels of literacy, even in their own language, which can often be a difficult barrier to overcome. Most people seeking support with digital inclusion want to learn or improve their English but it can make it more difficult and can prevent a person using the device to its full capacity.

Foreign language keyboards as well as installing translation apps could help to overcome this obstacle. Having digital inclusion resources such as handouts and instructions translated into common international languages would also aid in overcoming the language barrier that occurs within digital inclusion programs.



Learning Environment

The building and space where digital inclusion sessions were delivered was also important.

Many projects felt it was crucial that participants had a familiar, safe and relaxed space to come and learn from. One organisation was based in a purpose built, new building that offered comfortable learning spaces. The use of such a space meant that participants could also be signposted to other services on offer and users of other services in the building could drop into the digital sessions for support.

Other projects were based in cafes and offered drop-in style sessions. This relaxed atmosphere allowed people a bit more flexibility, especially those who might struggle to commit to set hours over a number of weeks. For a lot of people, being able to access help with specific digital skills while sitting somewhere with a cup of tea and cake was more accessible than sitting in a formal unfamiliar learning environment. This led to greater engagement from participants as well as a keenness to further develop their digital skills.

Another barrier to people attending digital inclusion sessions is childcare. This issue can particularly impact minority ethnic communities and refugee and asylum-seeking families, who can often be more isolated with fewer family and friends in the area.

One organisation offered activities to entertain children while their parents were learning and one hired additional staff to provide childcare while the digital sessions were taking place.

There were higher costs involved in this approach which the organisation reported often meant they were less successful with funders, but this approach allowed them to reach people normally excluded from these activities.

Case Study

MILK CAFE

A report by the Scottish Refugee Council released at the end of 2020 looking at the effect of Covid19 on refugees and asylum seekers highlighted digital inclusion as one of the main areas needing addressed. People with unsecure status and particularly women with families are more at risk of missing out on vital services and resources by not having access to digital devices or the knowledge to use them. We have found this to be true amongst the women and families we support.

We secured funding from GCVS and Glasgow City Council at the start of last year to help us to address this imbalance and shift power back into the hands of the community we work with. We were able to employ two women who have lived experience of the UK asylum process and provide them with training to become digital champions. We provided a series of accessible and culturally appropriate classes and workshops to other New Scots Women over the next 10 months that were always

really well attended. It transpired that the classes were as much about socialising and building community as they were about gaining skills and knowledge. The women all supported each other in their learning and shared what they knew to help build each other's confidence. MILK has always been a place for making connections and these classes were no different. The women who attended them to gain digital skills didn't want to leave once they had their certificates and many of them now go to our peer support group on another day.

The classes were so popular that the two tutors were given more training and we are now hoping to run an advanced computer skills class alongside our beginners one. Even though the current funding has finished we can't stop running the classes, they are in such high demand and they offer so much more than just digital inclusion it doesn't seem fair.

Engagement- 'The Hook'

A difficult barrier to overcome was people's willingness to engage with digital.

Some organisations experienced an initial struggle to get people involved. Engagement with older people was particularly difficult. One organisation that worked to support older people found they could sometimes be reluctant to take the free devices and support on offer. This was for several reasons such as: a fear of breaking the device, general wariness around internet safety and potential scams, taking up volunteers' time, thinking that they are 'being a nuisance' and generally feeling that someone else may benefit from it more.

To overcome this barrier, most organisations found they had to make the digital inclusion sessions relevant to the user. They had to find out the individuals' interests and needs to find 'the hook' that engaged them in the online world.

For example, for older people this might have been looking at old photos of the area they grew up in, watching old films, connecting with family and friends or ordering online shopping. For others it could be online learning or applying for jobs. It was important to identify useful digital skills that people could use in their daily lives.

Successful digital inclusion projects wove digital skills into other activities on offer. For example, one organisation ran a Christmas card making session where they used Canva to create and send personalized Christmas cards. Others used cookery classes to weave in digital skills and some used supermarket vouchers to advertise food support and teach people how to order online shopping.

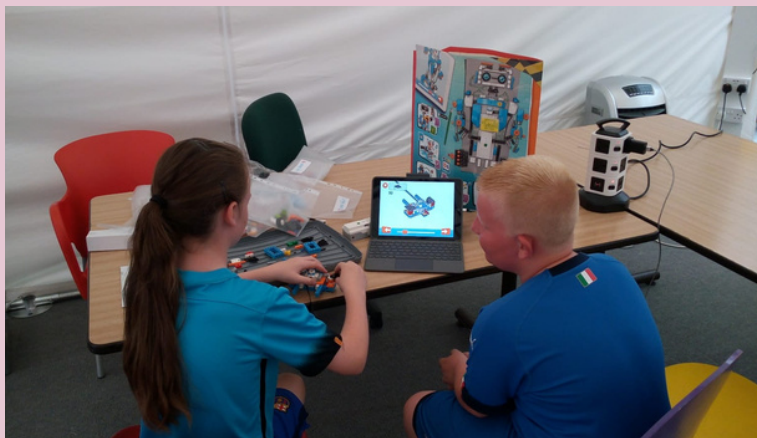
Another interesting point to note was that some organisations avoided using the words 'digital inclusion' in their advertising of the sessions as they found that and other technical sounding phrases were off-putting to some people.

A small number of organisations warned us to be careful of the assumption that everyone will want to be digitally included. People of all ages (though more common in older people) sometimes do not wish to learn new skills to get online. For some it might be a security fear or just that they don't know the full range of what's on offer online. Others were wary of the digital world because of fears of toxic social media.

People who are digital refusers may require more targeted support if we don't want them to be left behind.

CONNECT COMMUNITY TRUST

Case Study



Youth Digital Summer Sessions

Throughout our summer program we ran the “Digital Detectives” program. This focused on learning about online safety and other digital issues in a fun way. We had sessions on digital safety both while on screen and off screen, Hacker Tag (our new take on a traditional game of tag), quizzes, and online games. We also were able to purchase Lego boost which we have set up as “Vernie” a Lego robot that has been used to teach basic coding. Everyone young and old who have used Vernie have thoroughly enjoyed it and has been a fantastic piece of equipment to add to our programs.

Community Litter Picks

Over the years we have regularly had groups of young people and adults take part in litter picks around the area, Last year we introduced “litterati” while out in the community. Using litterati we were able to log individual pieces of litter and plot where we found them in the area on a map. We also have the ability to create a community challenge where individual families are able to contribute to the greater goal. Litterati was used on an iPad and was a fantastic introduction for people who hadn’t used iPads/tablets before as it was user friendly and also had multiple tasks that could be performed. We found it a fantastic tool to have to add something digital to our existing activity.

QR Code Trail and Allotments

We worked with young people to create digital artwork which we then linked to QR codes and placed around the area. For every QR code scanned by families they were awarded points which they were able to input into an app and compete.

After the success of this pilot we expanded our QR code use into our allotments – we now have a short trail throughout our plots which provide info on what is currently growing, what animals we have and how to care for them. This will change seasonally and has been a big hit with plot holders and local people. We are working on installing a permanent WiFi connection into our allotments and recently have received funding for a bird house with a camera which will also be added to our trail in the near future.



Equalities

Making sure everyone in the community has an equal opportunity to access the digital world can often present additional barriers to overcome and it's important that no one is left behind.

As well as the specific issues faced by minority ethnic and refugee and asylum-seeking communities, disabled people and women also faced particular issues. This is especially true when more and more essential services are being transferred online, such as blue badge renewals etc.

People with a disability or impairment often face additional barriers to using devices. Apple devices have been developed to be more accessible for people with certain disabilities, but they tend to be more expensive. In terms of delivering training, some people might need: sign language interpreters, finger spelling, writing in larger font, captioning etc.

One organisation working with deafblind adults employs guide communicators to help members use digital devices and take part in online groups. Aside from the extra financial costs, it takes 2-3 years of training to become a guide communicator.

Digital inclusion needs a value for money approach, but this doesn't always mean using the cheapest options as this can lead to many people being excluded. Although costly, by providing resources to reduce the barriers for those who have certain disabilities, it can bring a real-life

changing impact to individuals as many disabled people can now work from home or connect with their friends online which can reduce loneliness.

Glasgow Disability Alliance are producing a full report on the issues disabled people face when getting online, which is due in April 2022.

Some organisations reported that digital inclusion was a way of empowering women. They offered women only sessions and gave the women the skills to set up their own email address, social media accounts, phones and access to their online finances. This is something that otherwise would be done through their husbands.

Having these digital skills gave the women some independence and empowered them to have their voices heard. For example, schools and other community groups will often use online surveys or emails to communicate and gather opinions.

“ I don't have to ask my children every time I need to meet with our lawyer or anyone else on zoom anymore. I can do it myself and this feels very good ”

Mental Health & Wellbeing

Successful digital inclusion projects often integrated developing digital skills across their work with the community, rather than as a stand-alone service.

Some organisations used digital to improve people's mental health and wellbeing throughout the lockdowns and pandemic restrictions, whether by using video calling apps to connect with family and friends, apps to play games, accessing Zoom events, streaming videos or using mental health apps (such as Calm and other NHS apps).

Others offered online befriending support or moved their activities online for those that were housebound and isolated. For example, one organisation continued their Woodland Walks by the facilitator using a tablet and pointing out different plants and wildlife, something they'll likely continue post pandemic for those that have difficulties attending real-life woodland walks due to disability or other factors.

One issue that emerged was 'screen fatigue'. Some people were growing tired of being online and increasingly missed in person contact. One organisation working with young people also noted the pressures and ill effects on mental health social media can have on young people. They showed them how to switch off from technology and escape the pressure young people often feel to live the 'perfect' life portrayed on social media. They also helped them to recognise and deal with online bullying.

Being digitally connected throughout lockdown certainly helped improve people's mental health and wellbeing, although it was not the perfect solution to every problem. However, there is a general consensus that, without digital inclusion and connectivity, the impact of Covid on mental health would have been worse.



CASTLEMILK HOUSING ASSOCIATION

Case Study

We are based in Castlemilk, an area of aspiration and activism however subject to structural inequalities resulting in widespread multidimensional poverty and social exclusion, including digital. Our project promotes digital inclusion through an ambitious framework that has as its core a place-based and asset-based approach: local people are huge assets through sharing their experiences, time to upskill and support others, solutions, and their dusty or broken tech to be refurbished.

We tackle digital exclusion, particularly with those who are traditionally under-represented, through a multi-layered approach that addresses key issues of digital disinterest, access to devices, data poverty and digital repair skills through innovative methods and partnership working. We have successfully:

- Created **digital hooks** tackling digital disinterest, resulting in involvement based on people's interests such as online art, cooking, virtual woodland walks and 'Bangin' Food 'n' Bingo, an intergenerational project designed by our Youth Advisory Panel that brings approx. 50 older adults together with 7 teenagers every month, in partnership with The Senior Centre
- Enabled participation and meaningful involvement where community members make decisions on project delivery, shape funding application and have access to **Digital Champion training** to support friends, neighbours and fellow community members
- Founded a **Castlemilk Digi-forum**; tackling wide-scale digital exclusion requires a partnership approach. We bring together 12 local organisations to share skills, resources, and learning. With funding we organised Digital Skills training for these organisations to better enable them to tackle digital exclusion and created a shared Digital Inclusion Strategy that we collectively deliver
- Created '**Digi-know? Repair & Refurb**' in partnership with The Repair Cafe Glasgow, to embed circular economy and skill development within the project for a more sustainable response to digital exclusion
- Developed a **Digital Lending Library** with ongoing resources to lend to individuals and partner organisations to tackle the immediate need of no devices or Wi-Fi. We've sourced 170 tablets, 250 WiFi connections, 8 laptops, 8 desktop computers and 40 smartphones for those experiencing digital exclusion alongside support to use beneficially: in 2021 alone, we engaged with people 675 times.

Financial Inclusion

Many organisations carrying out digital inclusion work noted that digital inclusion was closely linked to financial inclusion, and enhanced digital skills could help tackle poverty.

They helped their users to order shopping online, complete their blue badge renewals, apply for fuel grants and taught them how to use comparison sites to find better deals on their broadband, energy suppliers and phone bills.

Most statutory services moved online and people needed support to apply for council tax reductions and local income support payments.

While it's not a universal panacea for poverty, increasing digital inclusion should be part of the wider approach.

Employability

Similarly, digital skills can undoubtedly help people to find and sustain employment.

Some organisations linked their digital and employability programmes. They used digital skills training to help people write their CVs, apply for jobs and prepare for online interviews which were much more common throughout lockdown.

One organisation's main purpose was preparing participants for work and focused on quite specific digital skills, such as online warehouse stock management and using Excel spreadsheets.

Although young people are generally thought to be quite "tech savvy", when it comes to more formal methods of communication, such as writing emails or using the internet to carry out job searches, they often need some support.

Recommendations

Based on our discussions with the third sector, we found the most successful ways to increase the extent of digital inclusion were:



Access to devices

Helping people to access the appropriate devices (not necessarily the cheapest) for their particular needs, and helping to support the costs of data.



Personalised support

Each individual learns in different ways and at different speeds. They have different things they want to achieve online, and they often have different devices from the person 'training' them.



Peer led support

People are more likely to engage if they are receiving support from someone they know or trust or someone who has similar life experiences. Being approachable and relatable is important.



Community based support

Organisations already established have gained the trust of the community over the years and are better placed to offer digital support.



One to one support

Smaller groups or one to one support gives people the chance to get the most out of the support on offer and is easier to manage.

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