

29 June

Why is digital connectivity important for communities during and beyond COVID-19?

This report summarises findings from an event hosted by Local Trust and Good Things Foundation on the topic of 'Why is digital connectivity important for communities during and beyond COVID-19?'

The importance of digital connectivity to create resilient communities, is not a new issue, but the pandemic has seen digital connectivity move from a 'nice to have' to an 'essential' for everyone, and further highlighted pre-existing inequalities. For many Big Local areas and other communities, supporting people to be digitally connected has become a focus of their work. To explore what this change could mean for future policy and practice, Local Trust commissioned Good Things Foundation to guest host a discussion. The session explored community responses to the pandemic and considered how sustainable solutions to this issue could be developed for the future.

Key points

- COVID-19 has shown that digital is an essential, not a nice to have. Digital exclusion is still a significant challenge in communities, we need to collaborate around potential solutions
- COVID-19 has provided an opportunity to rethink how communities use digital to connect and create a more empowered community
- Relationships at a very local level are key to getting new users online

Introduction

On 9 June, Good Things Foundation and Local Trust partnered to co-host an online panel discussion on the question of **"Why is digital connectivity important for communities during COVID-19 and beyond?"**

The panel included:

- Helen Milner, Group CEO, Good Things Foundation (Chair)
- Chris Ashworth, Head of Public Benefit, Nominet
- Andrew Blakey, Riverside Big Local
- Nick Gardham, CEO of Community Organisers
- Melissa Ray, Digital Portfolio Officer, The National Lottery Community Fund

The discussion explored how COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated digital exclusion, whilst compounding pre-existing challenges associated with it. The panel looked at how, despite some public commentary, COVID-19 is not a great leveller and lockdown has not been experienced equally throughout society.

Many people have experienced a shift to digital ways of working and living, from rapidly familiarising with Zoom calls for work and play, to a shift to online shopping and using digital to keep engaged with healthcare information and resources for homeschooling. But, in this time of uncertainty, these things are only more easily available to those who have the means to do so online, excluding a large number of people and creating additional barriers at the worst possible time.

In response to COVID-19, community organisations and groups had to rapidly pivot their services, whilst facing additional uncertainty over their own financial sustainability and future. These organisations used their local knowledge to identify early on some of the most vulnerable groups and people who were at risk of being further excluded by lockdown measures, for example through mutual aid groups created through social media.

We know that UK society post COVID-19 will be different in many ways and whilst hard to predict, digital must play an ever growing role in supporting communities across the UK, this conversation furthered this notion and highlighted ways in which we can work together to make digital inclusion a reality.

Digital inclusion in the UK: when 'locked in' actually means 'locked out'

Whilst the scale of digital exclusion across the UK has been highlighted by the pandemic, it is not new and will not disappear without targeted effort and investment.

In 2019, marking 30 years of the world wide web, inventor of the internet, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, reflected on its future:

“The web has become a public square, a library, a doctor’s office, a shop, a school, a design studio, an office, a cinema, a bank, and so much more. Of course with every new feature, every new website, the divide between those who are online and those who are not increases, making it all the more imperative to make the web available for everyone.”

This certainly speaks to the role digital services are occupying in our everyday personal and professional lives, even more so in the case of this pandemic, with an increased reliance on virtual GP consultations, online banking and shopping. With every new online service existing digital-social inequalities are widened, and the pandemic has served to expose these.

In the UK **1.9 million** households are without internet access, and around **7%** of the UK population (**3.6 million** people) are almost completely offline. An estimated **9 million** people in the UK cannot access the internet or use their device without support, for instance connecting to WiFi or turning on a device. **11.7 million** people, an estimated **22%** of the population are without what are classed as the [essential digital skills \(EDS\) for everyday life](#).

Good Things Foundation, and others working in digital inclusion, have been aware of the UK’s digital exclusion challenge for a long time. But COVID-19 has exposed the scale of digital exclusion people are facing. It has also highlighted the impact data poverty has on communities, with people having to make decisions between data and food. As mentioned during the event, those who have been locked in their homes or advised to shield, are some of the people most likely to be ‘locked out’ during the pandemic. **1.2 million** people in the UK were advised to shield by the NHS, but we know that around **25%** do not have access to the internet. How can they be expected to keep up to date with changing health guidance or access essential services online? Communities have been great at identifying and supporting vulnerable people, but without internet access you cannot necessarily tap into this support. As Chris Ashworth raised, “we are only now hearing the stories of these people”.

Discussion: “Why is digital connectivity important for communities during COVID-19 and beyond?”

What do we know?

During the event certain themes emerged, touching on what we know already about digital connectivity and communities from this pandemic:

- **Digital is no longer something “nice to have”, it is something communities and citizens “need to have”, but access is a barrier**

This pandemic has highlighted the importance, and society’s increased reliance, on digital technology and digital means of communication. One of the strongest themes from the discussion is the consensus that for communities and citizens, digital is an essential - a

“need to have” not a “nice to have”. Whilst digital has been shown to be essential for communities, as Chris Ashworth highlights:

“the knock-on effect of its power and use means that those services, particularly essential services have leapt ahead into the digital world before a lot of communities and sectors of society have caught up”.

There are also underlying issues in the distribution of digital access and data poverty across the UK. Local Trust’s [Left Behind](#) research suggests that amongst other factors poor connectivity - physical and digital – make a significant difference to social and economic outcomes for deprived communities. These issues around digital connectedness became increasingly evident during the pandemic. Nick Gardham commented that “across our network we were hearing not only can they see the primary issue people were facing around food, but a secondary issue around digital connectivity”.

This sentiment is shared by the network of community partners who have experienced huge demand for devices and connectivity solutions through the [DevicesDotNow Campaign](#).

- **Communities are best placed to identify vulnerable people, and have responded rapidly**

Personal relationships with people at a hyperlocal level have enabled community groups and organisations to respond rapidly to support those at risk and those facing difficulty. There have been amazing but unsurprising stories of how our community partners have responded, from [Fareeha at Being Women developing an app for food sharing](#), to [Safety First CTC providing bags of help to their communities](#). Across Big Local Areas this has also been evident, with pre-existing local relationships proving a valuable foundation for [identifying those who might be digitally excluded](#) and using this knowledge to connect people to the specialist support they need.

A recent report by Locality, stated that “Community organisations have been the ‘glue’ linking mutual aid groups with private and public sector responses.” During the event, Riverside Big Local resident Andrew Blakey explained how Riverside explored options to help communities support each other to purchase Zoom licenses, equipment and WiFi hubs. As Nick Gardham highlighted:

“we learnt very quickly that localised responses were going to be key to providing immediate solutions”.

This refers to an example in Lambeth of a community partnership crowdfunding campaign for devices for those in Tulse Hill, an area where 1 in 6 households are without either WiFi or digital devices. Despite differences in circumstances, resources and the communities themselves, nationwide local grassroots organisations have frequently risen to the challenge.

- **With a reduced motivational barrier, trust is vital when engaging people with technology**

There was consensus that trust proves vital to engage people with digital technology, and an acknowledgement, that one of the biggest barriers to learning digital skills in “normal times” has been removed: motivation. When discussing how Riverside Big Local had begun to get individuals in the community to mentor each other, Andrew Blakey remarked that “if you know someone you trust you will actually try and follow them”. This was echoed in the chat panel:

“Trusted connectors and resources are key – developing confidence from the outset and breaking down the obstacles so people feel they can tackle the barriers to accessing digital”.

Despite challenges with providing support during lockdown, the panel were in consensus that trusted relationships help people to be less wary of possible digital pitfalls, such as online scams or some negative mental health outcomes associated with online use. Melissa Ray commented that it is “a risk worth us having a go at, and trying, adapting and iterating until we get it right”.

Furthering this point, Andrew Blakey went on to say; “you have to work through really, really local networks that people trust so they can say, ‘I’ve had this, this happened, what do you think?’ And then actually they will learn from those people.”

- **COVID-19 has changed ways of working across sectors**

Melissa Ray commented that there have been “ways of working and cultures born out of the digital world” and “how do we move and take action whilst learning and taking things as a learning process”. We know that many businesses, community organisations and charities at a national and grassroots level have had to pivot their services rapidly to respond to the needs of their beneficiaries.

In the comments we heard that;

“one of the things that has been highlighted throughout COVID-19 is not just that some people are excluded but that those organisations or institutions who would not consider themselves in this bracket are actually having to play catch-up and adopt digital mediums as a regular practice rather than an add-on to non-digital mediums. Schools and the NHS would be prime examples of this.”

Indeed, we have seen in the previous report between NGLN and Local Trust that the very relationship between public services and communities has fundamentally changed during this time, with digital technology being key to this shift.

What next?

During the pandemic we have seen digital connectedness highlighted as an essential and the role that communities can play in supporting greater digital connectivity has been clear. However, the pandemic has also exposed and raised awareness of some of the dominant barriers for meaningful digital connectedness in communities. The discussion at

this event demonstrated the willingness and desire for the progress made in the pandemic to continue, and for action to tackle any barriers.

To build on this understanding going forward, we should be looking to:

- Shift the public narrative away from viewing digital connectedness as nice to have towards it being a need to have - or perhaps even a utility.
- Work together within digital inclusion spaces and beyond to build a shared understanding and common goal to raise awareness of the need for investment in solutions for the digital exclusion related challenges faced in communities including; lack of connectivity, data poverty and digital skills support.
- Recognise and support the work of grassroots groups making progress on digital connectivity at a local level, in order to encourage local relationship building that leads to change and use this to build a movement to shift the dynamics of power regarding WiFi and data usage.
- Continue to raise awareness of the importance and value of community voices, and their experiences, in the design and development of both digital technology and the policy and systems that lead to its use.

Whilst there is a great hope that COVID-19 can act as a catalyst for change, there are challenges ahead as well as opportunities, including:

- Conversations around shifting power to communities have the potential to be politicised or overlooked, we need to be mindful of communicating the “buy in” for stakeholders across sectors. To do so will involve the need for open conversations at a cross-sector level about what is possible and viable.
- Changing the public narrative on what digital means in society will involve a large educational piece with many people viewing smartphones as a luxury despite essential services becoming largely digital-first. Careful consideration will need to be made in how the message can resonate with those with little first or second-hand experience with the issues of affordability, access and low digital skills.
- There is potential for difficulty in ensuring those in a diverse range of communities have access to support with digital and a voice in the digital technology decision-making process- from technology design to implementation through policy. It is essential that no one is left behind, so we must identify the ‘connectors’ e.g. social workers, and existing networks to reach communities that have been excluded by the design of public systems and build from there to create a more inclusive environment.

Further resources:

During the event, we heard about various different projects and organisations working to make digital inclusion a reality, including:

- **Operation Wifi:** a call to the government for an open WiFi network for all communities during COVID-19.
- In Australia, [Optus](#) allows **data gifting** to other Australians, which are pooled and redistributed to young Australians to allow them to fulfill their potential.
- **Zero-rating:** this is where access to certain websites are “free to charge” and without an associated data cost of using the 4G/5G network. Since the pandemic [02 has been the most comprehensive](#) in zero-rating sites, with over 20 essential sites such as Citizens Advice and Mind having no cost for access.
- [Jāngala](#) the not-for-profit that brought WiFi to Calais, providing internet access solutions for those in needs.
- **Community broadband:** this can take many shapes and forms, some of which are outlined in government guidance [here](#).
- **Devices to those who need them during the crisis:** More information on the national campaign DevicesDotNow can be found [here](#). More information of the local crowdfunding example in Tulse Hill can be found [here](#).

About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision-making into the hands of local communities, to enable them to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live.

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding through our work supporting local communities make their areas better places to live, and to draw on the learning from our work to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place

localtrust.org.uk

About Good Things Foundation

Good Things Foundation is a social change charity that supports socially excluded people to improve their lives through digital. Digital technology and community action is at the heart of everything we do. We bring together thousands of community partners to make up the [Online Centres Network](#), reaching deep into communities to help people gain the support and skills they need to change their lives and overcome social challenges.

The [Learn My Way](#) online learning platform used in our centres and beyond, has given thousands of people every year a clear path to gain the digital skills they need. Meanwhile our Design and Research Team continually design, test and evaluate innovative interventions, finding out what works so we can scale up the programmes that make a real difference to people's lives.

goodthingsfoundation.org

