

Local Trust
trusting
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people

Making connections: Community-led action on data poverty

Community examples

Researched and written by Rosa Robinson, Patricia J Lucas, Ellie Cripps
for Local Trust

July 2021

Local Trust

About these examples

These examples form part of wider research conducted by Rosa Robinson, Patricia J Lucas, Ellie Cripps for Local Trust. They are included in their full report Making connections: Community-led action on data poverty and seek to provide insight into how communities stepped in to tackle data poverty in different ways in neighbourhoods across the country.

About Local Trust

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

About the authors

- Rosa Robinson is a social researcher whose work addresses a range of social inequalities. She is director of Frame Collective CIC, a not-for-profit company specialising in people-centred research, creative engagement and inclusive innovation around health and social inequalities.
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Author acknowledgments

We would like to thank everyone who took part in this research and generously contributed their time and insights. We could not have produced this report without your help – thank you. We are also grateful for contributions and connections shared by the our advisory group members – the Good Things Foundation, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Carnegie UK Trust, Operation WiFi Campaign Alliance, APLE Collective, Community Organisers, KeyRing, and End Data Poverty. Finally, we want to thank Georgie Burr and Ellie Pope at Local Trust for their collaboration and support throughout this project.

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Front cover: Computers at Sale West community centre.
Photo credit: Benjamin Nwaneampeh



Community example: Gaunless Gateway Big Local

Gaunless Gateway Big Local, identified data poverty as being a big problem for single men living in shared accommodation with no broadband connection. The community group wanted to find a solution and invested time asking the men what they would find helpful – they said wifi hotspots around the local area, so that is where we focused the action.

W There [are] all the local places people will go, like churches and community centres, and they could open up their wifi for community use, so we are encouraging that. And we're asking private businesses to consider doing the same. The council has recently put wifi in for shops, so we are asking them if they could extend that for community use too."

Community member, Gaunless Gateway


W Community centres are the big thing that pops up for us. And going forward, we need to get the government to change [its] views and support more because they are essential hubs. When people need to get to speak to doctors or do job searches, they need those spaces with free wifi."


Community member, Gaunless Gateway





Community example: SO18 Big Local


SO18 is leading a project with the Clinical Commissioning Group around digital isolation in Southampton. Volunteers run the project with no budget and aim to give residents the opportunity to be more digitally included by removing barriers to being digitally connected – devices, skills and data. But there are multiple challenges around providing data and understanding people’s data needs, especially when the affordability of sufficient data is often entangled with broader barriers to digital access.

 We’ve funded a pilot study that is geographically focused rather than on particular groups of people. The aim is to increase skills and access in three ways: loan of equipment, provision of data and the provision of a mentor, so we can get people online doing the things they want to do. It is all led by what they want to do so that they have the opportunity to try; great if they want to access their GP online, for example, but if they don’t want to and they just want to go on Facebook, that is fine.”

 Untangling data needs from ‘tech’ needs and support needs is a bit tricky – for some people, they’re all tied up. But when the project has progressed, it should be possible for us to understand more – whether affordability of data was the barrier or if it was something else (or multiple things). For example, we had a couple of people during [the] lockdown, who had been lent laptops by schools but needed dongles from us, as they just didn’t have and weren’t able to get internet access.”

 We can help people get online and improve their skills, but if they can not afford the ongoing data costs, we can not say they need to sign up for a contract because that is not fair. We gave the SIM cards because it was a quick solution, but it is not a long-term solution.”

 We don’t come at it from a data angle exactly. We can give data, but it is hard to give data: who has the contract, who’s responsible? It gets very convoluted and complicated very quickly, so we’ve been giving people prepaid SIMs and dongles and MiFi units along with recycled laptops. But we worry about what happens long term.”

 We’re mid-evaluation we’ve come up with a series of questions to ask people at the start of the project, and then, when they have been involved for a period of time, we ask a similar series of questions to gauge what they can access now that they could not before, how the project has helped them etcetera.”

Community example: 100% Digital Leads

100% Digital Leads focuses on digital inclusion. The team, which Leeds Council employs, works with voluntary sector organisations and communities across Leeds, helping accelerate digital inclusion through a range of cross-sector partnerships, funding programmes and support.

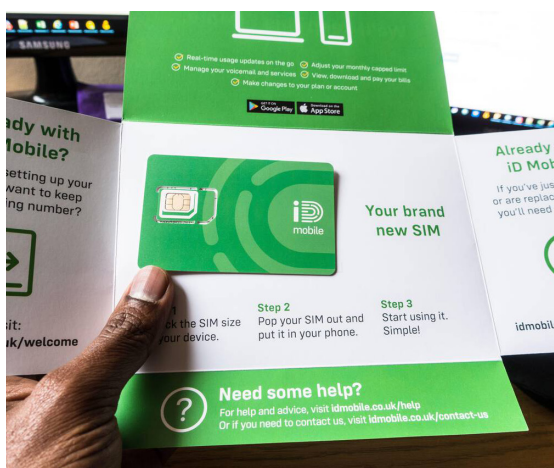
Over the last few years, 100% Digital Leeds has run a tablet-lending scheme with a data package. However, during the pandemic, it became oversubscribed, and data poverty emerged as a core component of the team's work to get people online:

During the pandemic, 100% Digital Leeds has distributed £130,000 of equipment and data to community organisations – often grassroots ones – to enable them to get equipment and data. But providing sufficient data to meet people's needs is challenging:

“Everything we've been saying for the last two or three years has been brought into sharp relief over the last 12 months. We always said that people lacked motivation to go on online because they didn't think it was for them. But what I've seen over the last 12 months is that the big issue is a lack of sustained access due to the unaffordability of data. Data poverty is a big problem for the bottom 20% of the population in terms of their wealth.”

“SIMs with preloaded data are expensive, but contracts aren't accessible to people, and organisations don't want to take on the responsibility of contracts. And trying to apply for funding is difficult because funders always ask, 'How are you going to make this sustainable?' That is the crux of the problem.”

“We might be able to get data packages out to people, but they're just for six months, or 12 months. We can administer all of that, but we need some sort of bigger solution, like a social tariff or something like that. Data poverty is a societal thing. It is not something we can just solve in Leeds.”



Community example: MyClubmoor Big Local

MyClubmoor Big Local in Liverpool has worked with local people without internet access throughout the pandemic, providing them with devices and data to get online. The group secured small pots of funding from multiple sources to fund the schemes but feels frustrated that its efforts have had limited reach and impact.

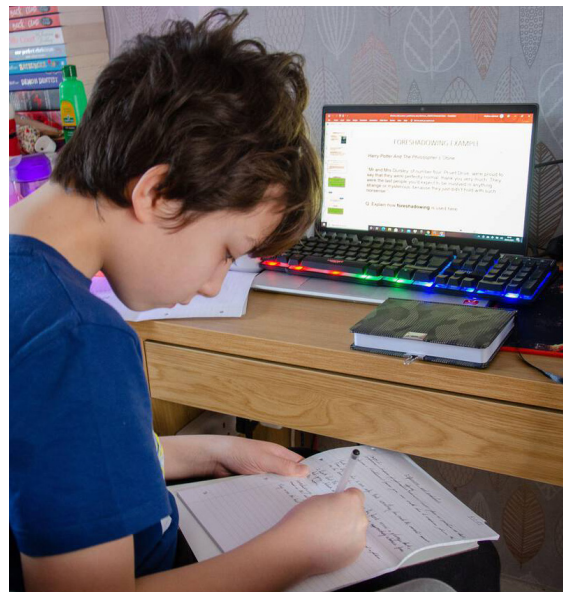
“ We identified that there were children and some local vulnerable elderly people who haven’t got any access to the internet, so we worked closely with the schools and with people we knew didn’t have any equipment and had been providing tablets with prepaid SIMs. We identified whether they needed a tablet, whether they needed a SIM or whether they needed both.”

“ Next, we found some budget within our plan that we could allocate to this issue. But it is just touched the surface. Originally, we identified £10,000. Then we worked closely with our local councils – they gave us £3,000, which [could] give to the schools and a few local people.”

“ Initially, we agreed to pay for the wifi for 12 months, but obviously, it is gone on longer than we thought, and it is still going on. So, we’ve identified another £10,000 from our budget, and we’ve given each school £2,000. The local councillors match-funded that with us, so we [could] give them a fair bit between us and the council we could give them a further £4,000.”


“ Look, we know it is just really touched the edges; it has not really done a lot.”


“ And what is missing, as far as I’m concerned, is something nationally. The government needs to really take stock here because it is so sad. You don’t realise, until you start this work, just how many people are out there in need. It is something you just take for granted, either on your phone or a computer at home, but how many people out there are missing this? So, that is all we’ve been able to do so far, but we’d love to do more.”



Community example: Big Local Central Jarrow


Central Jarrow is an area with high levels of digital exclusion. Big Local Central Jarrow has developed a programme to help get people online by providing data and devices, which it is rolling out at a small scale to test how the solutions meet local needs. Implementing the pilot has not been smooth sailing. The team has concerns about scaling the solutions to provide sustainable, affordable, ongoing access to the internet to its community.

 We are very conscious that digital has massive implications and in Jarrow, eighty-six per cent of the population of residents is withdrawn. Part of that percentage is people who have the internet in their home but only use it for TV and nothing else. It is a massive, massive issue, and it is not an easy fix."

 We've been working with communities who might not get online because they haven't got the data or the skills or the equipment. So, I've been ringing people up in the community to see how we can reach them and support them to find out what support they might need. And we're making community links with GP surgeries, so they can help us target people as well."

 Our partnership board is committed to improving digital technology, but we don't want to rush into just running out, buying a lot of equipment and giving it out. So, we have set up a task group and will be running a small pilot. We've

identified partnership board members and a couple of the residents that have come to our coffee mornings every week, who, during [the] lockdown, have had issues getting online because they live in sheltered housing, so the internet's very intermittent. If it goes off, they have to wait till somebody from the Housing Association comes in and gets them reconnected, which sometimes can take a week."

 We've partnered with Good Things Foundation, signed up as a learning network, and they have provided us with a mentor from BT, who has identified equipment – a device and data – that we can use for the pilots: the best cost for the best data package. [We find] a lot of people can not commit to a contract because of the credit checks. So, it is finding data that does not require a credit check, and that means they don't have to commit to a monthly contract, so [that] they can dip in and out."

W We'll start with this small pilot with four to six residents we know, and they will give us feedback. And then, we will work with our GP surgeries, which have link workers attached, to identify patients that live in our area who don't have access to the internet. Then we will do another small six-month pilot and evaluate whether the devices and routers are suitable. Our board has committed quite a bit of money across the next two years to try and improve things."

W At the moment, the pilot is one device and router per household, but each router will cater for up to eight connections via the BT mobile network. We've just purchased our first lot of devices, data, and routers - we are trying small wifi routers with 20G data and a Fire 7 tablet. I must admit, I don't like any of them, though. I spent two full days last week setting up four but connecting it to the data is a problem because every single SIM has got to have its own email address."

W The other thing is that the tablets are OK for social media internet searches etcetera, but there is a worry that people could be lured into purchasing big time off Amazon due to all the adverts that pop up. We may need to invest in spending the additional £10 to have tablets without the adverts. It isn't an easy fix, which is why we've gone cautiously. Once we are happy with the equipment or have identified alternatives, we will work with groups and partner agencies to identify those in need of support."





W We'll want to look at how we sustain it in the future and how people can maintain that level of connectivity. We don't want to give people data and devices for six months, and then after six months, they haven't got anything. Initial findings from my perspective, after setting up the tablets and routers, is that managing the data package on a larger scale will be unmanageable - we are using a Smarty data group plan - so we may revisit getting on board with Hartlepower's [Get Connected Community wifi]."


Community example: Hartlepower's Get Connected community broadband

Hartlepower is a Hartlepool-based social enterprise that has innovated 'Get Connected,' a wifi solution for those who cannot traditionally access broadband contracts.

Until recently, Hartlepower's focus was helping around 1,200 residents a year save money on energy bills by keeping their gas and electricity supply active, finding the correct tariff and managing bills. Then it became apparent that local people were facing similar challenges with broadband supply. Hartlepower responded by developing Get Connected, which is enabling people to access affordable data. As Hartlepower Director Paul Hewitson explained:

 **The work we started around broadband was connected to my career, as I had been working in the telecoms industry since the '90s until very recently. We joined up with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which supported us as part of its 'get connected' research group. Working with different community groups and our local authority, we worked out who is not connected and understood that the way people pay for and manage their energy currently is different to broadband. People who could not afford broadband at all were managing to pay for their gas and electricity through prepay, which means no contracts and [it is] easier to manage your payment.**

 **We designed a broadband product that was easy to subscribe to, easy to install, and worked with Three mobile - our broadband is based on and uses the 4G mobile network - and Three hosts the network. We researched widely and decided on a router that is a 'broadband in a box' solution: it is shipped to the customer, is easy to connect...as long as it is near a window in your house, and you've got a reasonable mobile phone signal, you will get a wifi connection. It is £20 a month, which is as affordable as we can make it at the moment. There is no contract, people pay for the month ahead, and if they want to suspend and take it back up again, later, they can. We think it is quite a good deal, as you can not get broadband without a contract anywhere else really.**

 **Our internet access is based on 600G of data a month. It's not unlimited, but if you get through 600G of data a month, you are using an awful lot of internet. People can order on our website, but local authorities and different community groups have the option of subsidising the cost for users. "We're flexible - we can tell**

from the system what credits are being applied, so if you wanted to have 50 customers paying for the service at £10 a month, we could do that. So, we can completely tailor how it is paid for.

W We've connected people that didn't have broadband before, over 200 connections in Hartlepool for local families. And our local authority has allocated a budget for connecting 200 more residents – that is to fund the router and three months of internet access.

W [The] Joseph Rowntree Foundation has been fantastic, supporting us through the first year to get the project off the ground, providing funding to develop all of the back-end systems and the support service we've put in place. It took a lot of time and effort, and research to get the systems right – things like content filtering that you just take for granted when you've got a broadband connection. We were really conscious that this was going out to vulnerable people and children, or people who have never used the open internet.

W What I will say to other groups taking action [to get people online] is, I wouldn't recommend what we did if you haven't got telecoms experience; it is very complicated. When you try to negotiate deals with big telecoms providers, they just want to see cold hard cash, and they are risk averse. We had a lot of meetings and did a lot of work that went unpaid – the time it took to negotiate the terms of the contract etcetera. We need strength in numbers of the customer to negotiate, and with no customers, it was very hard. On the positive side, the support that we have had from Three and from [airtime provider]



Mobius, who we've been working with, has been nothing short of fantastic. I am quite proud of where we've got to with such a small team – there is only half a dozen of us [at] this point.

W Now we've got an established community broadband service that can supply to any address in the UK, and we have the capacity to scale the social enterprise. If we can get good numbers, we can renegotiate our wholesale terms and pass those savings on to the customers. But if we break it up and encourage groups to replicate what we've created with Get Connected, it will dilute it, and we will never achieve the scale and cost-saving.

W It is been a good year, but there is a lot more to do, and we've plans to offer different types of service. There is a huge change in the broadband industry going on across the UK. We need to be in at the front, making sure that people can afford to get a service at a fair price and not disenfranchised [and] left behind. If community groups, trusts and local authorities can join, it can be scaled, and we can do something about data poverty. There is an awful lot of talk about the digital divide. We've got a real cracking solution. It would be good to get people to use it because it is been designed by the community for other communities."

Interview in May 2021

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.

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