

Northumberland VCS | Assembly

Making digital inclusion a reality for individuals, communities and the voluntary and community sector in Northumberland

Discussion report

Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, technology has played an important role in ensuring that many of us could continue to work and learn, be kept informed and stay connected with our family and friends. However not all of us have been able to do this because of not being able to afford the technology and connectivity and/or not having the skills or confidence to be able to use technology effectively. The pandemic has really brought home how important it is to ensure that everyone is connected and it is those who are not that are the most vulnerable in our communities who need the support to get online. Accessing shopping, connecting with family and friends, and being able to do schoolwork are just some examples where online access has been so important during the crisis. The impact of digital exclusion has been isolation and loneliness, particularly amongst older people. The lack of internet access also contributes to the poverty premium, as the cheapest goods and services are often only available online.

What do we need to do to help people get online?

First, we need to understand who the people are who are digitally excluded in our local communities.

Voluntary and community sector organisations and the public sector - health and local authority should be aware of individuals that are digitally excluded in their communities.

Studies show that overall non-users are increasingly older, less educated, more likely to be unemployed, disabled, and socially isolated. Ipsos MORI identified employment status, educational qualification, and age as strong predictors of whether a household has internet

access or not. Older people have consistently made up the largest proportion of internet non-users, and pattern of internet use by age is replicated when looking at digital skills ([ONS, 2019](#)). Many studies have shown that people with disabilities are less likely to use the internet or have access at home than people without. Also, those in rural areas face the double disadvantage of limited access to physical services as well as poor or no broadband and mobile infrastructure. What seems to run through most of those affected by digital exclusion is poverty. Digital inclusion is important for social equality, and to ensure equal access to the many benefits the internet offers.

Many factors contribute to digital exclusion. Motivation can be hard to address in terms of digital inclusion, but it may well be that the pandemic has meant that reluctant users have come to value what the technology can do for them. For others, evidence suggests some do not see the need or benefit to be online, don't have the right support either to get online or use the device and for others it is too complicated. It is not just lacking the basic digital skills, but also understanding how the internet works. Others also have concerns about safety and falling prey to online scams.

Challenges of digital inclusion

There are many factors that contribute to digital exclusion which make it challenging to put solutions into practice and requires a multi-faceted approach:

- The need to build confidence and motivation to do things online that matter to people and measure success in terms of outcomes such as well-being and not just numbers getting basic digital skills training.
- The need to hook people in through a relevant personal interest, providing peer support and embedding all of this in a service currently being accessed so an immediate practical application can be seen.
- Support needs to be local, tailored, one to one and open ended for those lacking confidence, facing multiple barriers and disadvantages. It requires informal, encouraging tutors/volunteers who can effectively and enthusiastically communicate the benefits of digital.
- Embedding digital inclusion across all types of social support programmes.
- Better and more affordable access to the internet and devices are required across the board for those at home and on low incomes and in supported accommodation.
- Technology companies and broadband providers should be responsible for addressing the cost barrier.

Adapting to digital working for VCS organisations in Northumberland

The following provides examples of voluntary and community groups experiences of digital working:

- The level of internet access has been variable and has meant that Zoom meetings have been difficult. Whilst all recording decent internet speeds we were not technically minded enough to know if the internet or our own wi-fi system was the problem. The frustration resulted in a need to get back to the office as soon as safe to enable face to face meetings (November Club)
- Lack of a mobile phone and if internet access is poor you are left unable to reliably access things like WhatsApp used as a tool to keep in touch informally and keep spirits up (November Club)
- As an organisation, we have managed fairly well working remotely, with an app that clones our desk phones and digitising our normal office procedures. We hold regular team meetings using Teams or Zoom and aside from posting out newsletters / managing incoming post we can work from home without any real issues. (Carers Northumberland)
- My organisation was already moving towards more digital engagement, but this has been speeded up due to the pandemic. However, I have found that in the Northumberland area of my patch, there has been a lack of confidence within the volunteers running groups to get involved with any online Zoom meetings. We provide online training but getting them online to do the training in the first place can be a major hurdle. Connectivity seems less of an issue but actual hardware for those who understandably don't prioritise laptops/smartphones etc within their budgets can be. I haven't found age to be a barrier as most of the volunteers I work with are 55+ and it is often the older people who are more keen to give things a try. (MS Society)
- Whilst it has been possible to maintain contact with some adult service users using various technological devices and platforms; this is more problematic for children and young people engaged in a therapeutic process. Also, it has not been possible to provide group work preventing participants receiving peer to peer support. A web chat facility has been implemented on our web site, initially available from 12.00 noon to 2.00pm. Questions and chats posted outside these times will be picked up by email and responded to accordingly. This facility will be reviewed, and times changed or extended as needed. (NDAS)
- Facebook proved to be a vital and invaluable resource for one organisation. Appealing for help i.e. volunteers, hearing aid batteries, plants, paracetamol, flour, eggs, birthday cakes, you name it we were asked for it and the community rose to the challenge. More importantly it played a massive part in spreading the word about the ways we were able to help/support those in need, shopping deliveries, food parcels, prescriptions, our Friendship Telephone Line and in numerous other ways. We actively encouraged users to pass on the information to those who didn't have access to the internet or social media, something that seemed

to work. As an organisation we also ramped up our presence on Twitter, to great effect. Numerous meetings took place internally on Zoom and we acted as a hub of information, where to find advice, keeping up with local services and offers of help available. (Bell View)

Supporting digital inclusion of VCS beneficiaries in Northumberland

- Users of a service with learning difficulties were provided with tablets and instructed at their homes with interactions through the window which buttons to press to access a service. Some users do not have the resources to have computers/internet access. (Headway Arts)
- Older people who are part of a book group with other residents on a housing estate with some who are shielding were eventually assisted to use Skype using doorstep visits social distancing. Many of these people rely on their children/grandchildren to access digital and they were isolated from their families. Some of them are also of the mind-set that they have a computer/tablet that works perfectly adequately even if it is a little old. Often this equipment uses technology that is 10-15 years out of date. This can make some of the newer digital software inaccessible. It is also a concern that they are operating technology that is no longer supported by the service providers and may be subject to virus attacks. (Book Club)
- We heard numerous stories of older people having been bought tablet computers etc. by relatives, or buying their own during the period, afterwards unable to or lacking the skills/confidence to use them or not having access to an internet connection. Other issues arose when Zoom upgraded their security in an update, rendering some tablets no longer able to operate it. Although we have delivered a weekly Digital Inclusion project “Savvy Surfers” for quite a few years’ now, the crisis has highlighted numerous gaps and opportunities for new provision, especially across rural North Northumberland. (Bell View)
- Digital Inclusion is a very important part of our project. Last year we were able to increase delivery by having two volunteers teaching basic computing skills on a one-to-one basis. They mainly use ‘Learn my Way’ but tailor the sessions to suit the individual needs, especially those on Universal Credit. This year’s 8 learners’ ages ranged from 20 to 80, 3 have slight learning difficulties, 6 did not have laptops or tablets, 1 had no mobile phone and 2 did not know how to send and receive texts or use the internet or social media. We have been trying to work out how we can deliver some sort of support to our learners remotely but so far have not found a solution. Our feedback is showing that those residents without any digital skills are missing out on first-hand, up-to-date information and have to rely on friends, family and neighbours for the latest guidance on Covid -19 measures and who to contact for support. We know of some people on benefit who would have better access to information with a smart phone but can’t afford to either buy or increase their monthly contracts. We use social media to keep in contact with our clients on a regular basis but as this only reaches those who use it we are leafletting Hexham East with our phone number and other service providers’ numbers to show support is available. (No 28)

- We did lots of face to face work before Covid-19 and had to adapt our work to fit in with lockdown. As all of our carer groups were cancelled, we started to introduce virtual groups using Zoom. Take up has been fairly good, but we have had to support some carers to access zoom. This has sometimes been a challenge to support someone to install and run an app over the telephone. It has really proven how much easier it is to support someone to access digital services when you can be with them and physically show them what buttons to press. I have found myself having to google images of how the app looks on various devices so that I can explain where to press (button on the top right of the screen etc) In addition to this there are of course some service users who are not online and do not have the support or devices/connectivity to access online provision. We have been supporting carers over the telephone but in some cases, it will never be a complete replacement of face to face work. (Carers Northumberland)
- Service users have not had safe time and space, being locked in with abusers at home. Support for those with some health problems has not been possible by telephone or other technology. It has been difficult to start the conversation by telephone. Presentation, body language, facial cues etc. are invisible by phone. Victims of abuse aged 16 – 23 have preferred to wait for face to face contact, extremely reluctant to talk over the phone. Some households do not have the technology to engage. Telephone signal in Northumberland can be unreliable and patchy. (NDAS)
- NCVA already provided IT session for older people in community settings but during lockdown it highlighted how many older people don't use technology and only have a telephone to keep in touch with family and friends. By identifying this gap we have been successful in securing funding to pilot a Tablet Loan Scheme for over 55's. An individual will be able to loan a tablet for up to 6 months and have support from a volunteer to help them learn the device and how useful it can be in their day to day lives. The support will be provided over the telephone but if the person would like to meet in a Covid secure venue and we can socially distance safely we may be able to do that in the future. The tablets have apps preinstalled onto the device to make it easier to use when someone lacks confidence and knowledge. The main aim is to keep people connected with family and friends using apps including Zoom, WhatsApp and Messenger, and also provide a 'Cuppa and Natter' for a virtual befriending scheme where needed. During lockdown we found although the telephone is a great lifeline to many it wasn't the same as seeing people's faces. (Northumberland CVA)

Working towards Digital Inclusion

How do we ensure that everyone has the devices, access and support they need?

- Funding and commitment from organisations to tackle digital inclusion is needed – private, statutory and voluntary sector and training digital champions.
- Coordination required across the NHS, local authority and voluntary sector to identify people in need.
- Devices with a mobile internet data package are needed to be made available.

- Broadband or mobile internet access free for 6 months.
- Digital champion volunteers to get people started using a device and to get online providing phone and online support for six months, providing human reassurance and individual attention. Patience, empathy and the ability to be a good listener are the essential qualities of a digital champion. Technology and technical skills do not have to be high.
- Training to support digital champions
- Providing an ongoing support service to cope with issues with devices and ongoing training needs.
- Proactive approaches to outreach, such as embedding digital inclusion support within different local services, and support that can respond in a more timely and personalised ways.
- Superfast broadband coverage is fundamental to reducing the rural inequality of access to high speed internet connections.
- Perhaps following the lead of larger charities, developing bespoke “apps” to engage with the sector/beneficiaries.

Working towards Digital Inclusion in Northumberland

What can we do to support digital inclusion?

- Understand and share what is currently in place to support digital inclusion across the public, private and voluntary sector and work collaboratively to support inclusion. Identify where the gaps exist and put measures in place to support needs. Be clear about what each other can offer, that the needs of partners are understood and met and work together to resource provision.
- In areas of poor internet connectivity develop a network of ‘pods’ based in community hubs to get online, network with peers and receive support from digital champions.
- To help combat loneliness, set up Zoom social groups, provide community magazines online, support community groups to meet online for example.
- Ensure internet access is available in a network of community buildings e.g. libraries, community centres and businesses e.g. cafes to ensure free public digital services across the county. There is a need to prioritise the opening up of these spaces safely.
- Intergenerational befriending where young people support older people with digital technology.
- Meet the demand for support/new learning as older people have been given or have bought tablets /laptops themselves.
- Establish a “Tech Bank” of equipment which could be lent out or used in other one to one and group settings.
- Run Digital Events and Fundraising Campaigns/initiatives

Helpful Support for Digital Inclusion nationally

What support is there for digital inclusion nationally?

- Zero rate access to key sites during the pandemic.
- Major internet providers have agreed to remove data caps on fixed-line broadband as well as provide mobile and landline packages to help vulnerable consumers stay connected.
- The Department for Education has provided a £37 million home education fund for low income families and children with special needs.
- The Government has pledged billions of pounds to provide the country with gigabit-capable broadband, but people will not be able to use this infrastructure without digital skills or personal devices. By investing just 2% of the broadband infrastructure budget on digital inclusion would make significant progress towards a 100% digitally included nation.
- BT offer 6 months of free Wi-Fi hotspot access to the most in-need children in the UK to support their schooling.
- Companies are increasingly expected to deliver for shareholders and for society and are aware of the responsibility and the opportunity to create a connected country that leaves no-one behind.

Conclusion

This discussion report draws attention to the importance of digital inclusion for all, the voluntary and community sector, beneficiaries, communities and individuals and the impact it has had on the sector and beneficiaries in a number of organisations during the pandemic. The VCS has worked hard to adapt their services during COVID-19 to continue to provide services making use of digital platforms. However, there are organisations, beneficiaries and individuals who are unable to make use of technology for a range of reasons and it is extremely important that we address these issues so that no one is left behind. Suggestions for ways forward are provided recognising that this is not the responsibility of one sector but requires everyone to work together to ensure that as a county we are connected and make digital inclusion a reality.

References

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