COVID-19 FACTSHEET 2: DIGITAL INCLUSION

Help through Crisis (HtC) is a £33 million National Lottery funded programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. It supports 69 partnerships across England which help people who are experiencing or at risk of hardship crisis to overcome the difficulties they are facing to plan for their futures. The HtC learning, support and evaluation (LSE) team is a consortium of organisations commissioned by The National Lottery Community Fund (The Fund) to help build understanding and capture learning from the HtC programme.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the LSE team is developing a series of factsheets to support HtC projects as they respond to new ways of working in lockdown and beyond. This factsheet explores how organisations can support people to get online during the pandemic. The next factsheet will explore how to effectively engage with people online. If you would like to get in touch or have suggestions for other topics we could explore, please contact: HelpthroughCrisis@ipsos.com

Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to an increased reliance on the internet as physical premises shut and services and communication move online. This has significant implications for the one in five British adults who do not have the essential digital skills needed for day to day life (Lloyds Bank 2020), as well as those who do not have the experience or the technology to use the internet (ONS 2019). The pandemic has exacerbated the 'digital divide' between those able to use online platforms and services effectively and those who are either less comfortable doing so, or who have limited or no access to the internet (Milner 2020).

Most HtC partnerships have moved to remote models of working, providing crisis support to people over the phone and online. Accessing public services, including community health and benefits support, has also largely moved online. HtC partnerships are concerned about people who cannot use the internet and have previously relied on face-to-face contact to access support. They worry that certain groups may be left isolated and become difficult to reach.

Some people who need to access support from HtC partnerships face significant, structural barriers to getting online during the Covid-19 pandemic. Structural barriers include the availability of affordable internet and access to digital devices (ONS 2019). Addressing these barriers will require wider systems change (Slater 2020a; JRF 2020). In the short term, this means that some people will need to continue to be supported via offline communication channels such as telephone calls or socially distanced outreach where it is safe to do so.

Other people are not using the internet effectively in general because of individual barriers such as motivation, lack of confidence, or low digital or literacy skills. Older people, people with disabilities, and people with lower educational attainment and incomes are all significantly more likely to be digitally excluded (ONS 2019). People in these groups would often benefit most from being able to use the internet, as they may need to access online services for support (Ageing Better 2018). This is even more important when face to face alternatives are unavailable. For example, people facing crisis are currently unable to access support by attending a drop-in centre or advice organisation. Without access to online support, people may not receive the advice they need, and their crisis situation may worsen.

As such, there are particular challenges for HtC partnerships in providing holistic support to those who are digitally excluded during the Covid-19 pandemic. This factsheet focuses on resources partnerships

can use to help people they work with to overcome individual barriers, recognising the challenges of doing so in the current context.

Building motivation

There are various reasons people may not want to access support online. Some people, especially older people, feel the internet is 'just not for them' (French, Quin & Yates 2019). Others believe the internet is too complicated for them to use or are fearful of it and do not think it is safe (Fitzgerald 2020).

Before lockdown, support to help people get online and increase their confidence tended to be delivered face to face. This allowed people learning digital skills to use a device with someone providing support. As this is no longer possible, building confidence and motivating people online may be more challenging. It is likely to require using more familiar communication channels such as telephone conversations to support people to access digital platforms.

Organisations are still in the process of working out different ways of providing remote support and effective approaches are likely to differ depending on the individual. Although many of the following suggestions were developed based on providing support in-person, the principles are likely to be relevant for remote support:

- **Finding a motivating factor or 'hook'** can help encourage people to engage with the online world and access the support they need. Pointing out the personal benefits of being online, such as accessing a support service that is not available face to face, may help explain why it is important to learn digital skills (Government Digital Service 2014). This may be easier during lockdown when offline services are less available.
- Support should **focus on encouragement** rather than 'training.' Since the internet is an 'experience technology', trust grows with every positive experience (French, Quin & Yates 2020).
- Encouraging individuals to use the internet **in a familiar setting for a short amount of time each day** can help build positive routines and slowly develop trust and motivation online (French, Quin & Yates 2020).

Many of the people HtC partnerships work with will have concerns about staying safe while using the internet. It is important to **address these concerns directly** using other communication channels. This involves continually emphasising safety while explaining other aspects of the internet (Fitzgerald 2020). The following resources about online safety can be read by staff and shared directly with service users as appropriate:

- Learn My Way (2020a) provides a [free course](#) on internet safety. This may be helpful to people who are digitally literate but worried about how they can stay safe while using the internet.
- Digital Unite (2019) has produced [a guide](#) on how to stay safe online.
- [A blog](#) (Fitzgerald 2020) by the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) explains how voluntary organisations can navigate online safeguarding and privacy. It includes links to further resources for those working with children and young people, their parents and young people themselves. Staff should be mindful they have a duty of care to ensure confidentiality, safeguarding and data protection.

Developing digital skills

Developing digital skills takes time and patience (Centre for Ageing Better 2018). Many people have never received training or guidance on how to use digital devices or access the internet – skills many take for granted. People with low levels of literacy or physical and learning disabilities also face barriers such as the inaccessibility of the internet and digital equipment (Redmond 2014).

As lockdown eases, organisations may want to consider how to encourage people to develop digital skills through face to face support. However, support may need to continue remotely, for example if social distancing remains in place or if someone is shielding and is not comfortable meeting with people outside of their household. The following suggestions may be helpful to consider as ways of providing 1:1 tailored support – either over the phone or in person:

- Support should aim to improve both **skills *and* understanding** of devices and the internet. It should go at the pace of the learner, **using a person-centred approach** (French, Quin & Yates 2019).
- **Avoiding technical jargon.** Using language which is unfamiliar can confuse people and reduce motivation, particularly for those with low literacy levels. Instead, try to use simple language which relates to the task being completed, rather than the technology being used (Ageing Better 2018).
- **Allowing space for repetition and reflection**. People should be given time to consolidate learning. Reflecting on what people have learned so far allows people to recognise their progress and grow in confidence (Ageing Better 2018).
- **Providing long-term support.** As with most crisis interventions, support needs to be ongoing. It should be structured in a way that learners can ask questions when they arise as they start to use the internet on a regular basis (Slater 2020b). Having the same support worker who has previously been working with someone face to face may increase trust in the process of getting online.
- **Digital buddies**, volunteers who are on hand to answer questions and guide people through the process of getting online, can be an effective way of providing long-term support (Slater 2020b). For example, the Digital Champions Network trains volunteers to improve their digital skills so they can help other people (Digital Champions Network 2020).

There are a wide range of resources available online which can help people to develop digital skills independently. Digital inclusion charities recognise that staff in organisations may themselves find it difficult to use the internet. These resources may be useful to people (including staff) who would like to improve their online skills through independent learning where this is appropriate. They will be particularly helpful for people who already have access to the internet and some basic skills:

- Learn My Way (2020b) has a range of courses about the internet including a 10 minute short course which explains how to make a video call.
- Reason Digital (2020) has worked with Mind to develop a set of resources for staff to help them support service users while using online platforms. These include a guide on how to join a Zoom call and tips for a successful video meeting which can be shared with people wanting to access services.

Resources are also available to support those with disabilities or specific access requirements to get online, including the following:

- The Online Centres Network (2020a) delivers training to people to help get them online via local training centres. The initiative aims to support those who are harder to reach, focusing

especially on people who are socially excluded due to disabilities, unemployment or financial difficulties. On their website, you can find a centre (2020b) which is offering training during the lockdown and join the Network (2020c) to hear about further training opportunities, get involved in social and digital inclusion campaigns and networking events.

- The Centre for Ageing Better and The Good Things Foundation have produced a useful guide (2018) on helping older people to use the internet.
- AbilityNet works to support people with a disability or impairment to use technology. They have a wide range of free resources (2020a) on how to make technology more accessible including a dedicated page (2020b) on how to make adjustments to devices so that they are more accessible to people with visual, audio, motor or cognitive impairments. AbilityNet also has a free helpline and a team of IT volunteers who provide free advice (2020c). This support is running remotely during the lockdown.

Offering alternative approaches

It is important to recognise that not everyone will be able to get online and receive support in this way. HtC partnerships may need to tailor their approach to individual support needs and adapt to the current circumstances. Friends and family networks and peer support offer potential useful resources to draw on during the lockdown and as restrictions ease. Socially distanced person-to-person support may also be necessary in some cases. Organisations may need to be creative (Slater 2020c) and consider different scenarios over the coming months to make the most of opportunities to support people, whether online or face to face.

HelpthroughCrisis@ipsos.com

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