October 2020

Help through Crisis
Digital inclusion

Learning, Support & Evaluation webinar Summary report

About the Help through Crisis programme

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 partnerships receiving National Lottery funding through the HtC programme bring together small voluntary groups and established charities to work together locally. Working together, they offer people advice, advocacy and support which matches their personal circumstances. The aim is to look at the issues people face, and the underlying causes, from their basic needs, to their physical and mental health, to skills and employment. People are supported to draw on their personal experiences to build on their skills and strengths, so they are ready to seize the opportunities and challenges ahead.

About the Learning, Support & Evaluation webinars

In April 2020, the Learning, Support and Evaluation (LSE) team interviewed HtC partnerships to understand how we can help you during the Covid-19 crisis. These conversations highlighted several specific areas you would like further support with as you adapt to a very different context. Partnerships said that *digital inclusion* during the pandemic was an important issue, and this was the focus for our third webinar.

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1. Purpose of the digital inclusion webinar

HtC digital inclusion webinars took place on 15 and 17 September 2020 involving 19 HtC partnerships. Each session lasted an hour, and started with a 30 minute presentation by Aaron Slater, Digital Participation Manager from the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO). He shared learning from [Connecting Scotland](#) and the [Get Digital Scotland: get connected pilot](#). The final section of this summary report provides links to all the sources mentioned by Aaron in his presentation. The webinar had four aims – to:

- Share learning from a digital inclusion expert

- Apply learning about digital inclusion to a HtC context

- Give partnerships an opportunity to reflect on successes and challenges during the pandemic and how they might support people to get online in the future

- Capture learning from the webinar for wider dissemination

The presentation was followed by a facilitated discussion giving partnerships an opportunity to reflect on successes and challenges during the pandemic and how they might better embed digital inclusion practices in their future programmes.

This summary highlights key themes, ideas and solutions for supporting digital inclusion that partnerships raised during the two discussions.

2. Key themes

2.1 Connectivity

'We operate from a very rural, quite large area and people have to travel long distances to get connectivity, it can be very sparse. How can you help people if they have no way of getting connected?'
Lead partner staff

Connectivity challenges were highlighted by partnerships as a significant barrier to digital inclusion, particularly in rural areas. This is exacerbated for beneficiaries as they are not able to physically come to community centres to access the Wi-Fi network as they did pre-Covid-19. Partnerships also spoke of the cost of data being a huge barrier for beneficiaries. Some have been able to access Covid-19 emergency funds to secure devices to deliver digital inclusion programmes. However, this doesn't solve the problem in an area where connectivity is poor or when the issue is the high cost of data.

2.2 Staff confidence and buy-in

'I had to Google what Zoom was, I didn't know what Zoom was. I'm not even joking; I did not know what it was.'
Lead partner staff

One of the challenges raised by partnerships during the webinar was trying to improve the confidence of staff in using digital tools such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and other platforms. Staff first had to learn to engage with each other online, before being able to support beneficiaries digitally. Partnerships described some staff members and volunteers as having little knowledge of how to work in a digital environment.

Staff buy-in has been equally challenging for some HtC partnerships. They noted that front-line staff feel that their main role is best served when delivering face-to-face activity, and that they are therefore eager to return to what they view as their 'official' way of working (rather than using what they see as temporary digital communications in response to Covid-19).

Barriers relating to staff confidence and buy-in, such as concerns that face-to-face delivery is the only way to deliver support, and a fear of 'getting something wrong' when using Zoom, Teams or other digital platforms, initially created a challenge to working in digitally inclusive ways with beneficiaries. Despite these obstacles, some partnerships said that lockdown had given them the push that was needed to

place greater priority on digital inclusion, tackling both staff confidence and willingness to support beneficiaries digitally.

2.3 Beneficiary motivation

'There's an awful lot of fear for HtC clients. For them, digital inclusion is so frightening, because they think anything that happens over the internet is potentially visible to everybody.'
Lead partner staff

Overall, the lack of face-to-face contact during the pandemic has meant that beneficiaries who would normally be visible to partnerships are more difficult to reach. For example, drop-in services are not possible whilst Covid-19 prevention measures are in place. Equally, because partnerships can't be present whilst other support service provision is being delivered (such as foodbanks) partnerships are not identifying those who would benefit from HtC support through these routes as they were before the pandemic. Partnerships also stated that potential beneficiaries can lack understanding of what support is available, as well as the motivation, skills and equipment to search digitally for the support they might need from an HtC partnership. As a result, HtC partnerships are not always able to reach all those who may need support in these challenging times.

In his presentation, Aaron Slater spoke about motivating beneficiaries to use digital tools. He stressed that the impetus and drivers to engage with support online had to come from beneficiaries themselves to be meaningful in their route through crisis. Partnerships generally agreed, although saw this as a challenge for some beneficiaries. They highlighted a mistrust of technology among certain groups of people, for example those who are trying to remain hidden from a domestic abuse situation, or those from certain cultures, including some migrant communities, where mistrust of technology is high. Making the benefits of digital engagement tangible to beneficiaries - being able to get help to apply for financial support, guidance with rent arrears, or access to their support worker, for example - are important factors.

Some partnerships saw gender differences in the extent to which beneficiaries are motivated to connect with HtC digitally. They noted that women can be more open to receiving digital support once the benefits to them and, if relevant, their children were explained. For example, one partnership described their success in engaging women digitally by explaining how online banking could help them manage their own money, independently from their husbands or partners, and that this was proving to be a strong motivational tool.

Some partnerships found that digital inclusion was easier to achieve in lockdown than before lockdown. They said that, for a number of beneficiaries, the necessity of engaging digitally to access support had overcome barriers. Some have found that beneficiaries now prefer contact via digital channels. The challenge will be to maintain digital support as a delivery mode for the long-term, beyond the current pandemic crisis.

3. Digital inclusion solutions and ideas

In sharing their approaches to digital inclusion in a time of pandemic, partnerships emphasised the importance of being adaptable to facilitate the engagement of people in different situations. This includes those with no access to technology, those who are resistant and mistrustful of digital tools, and those who find it challenging to use them for the support areas they would previously have received with HtC partnership staff face-to-face, such as benefit claims and rent arrears support. In his presentation Aaron Slater mentioned the importance of prioritising online safety, and this may be useful to help offer reassurances to those more suspicious of technology.

3.1 Tailored approaches to support access and learning

As in other webinars, HtC partnerships stressed that tailored approaches are needed to ensure that digital inclusion forms a central part of their engagement strategies with beneficiaries. They spoke of using the right tool for the right task. Some partnerships were exploring Google Hangouts and Attend Anywhere, the NHS England solution for medical appointments. However, most found that tools beneficiaries were already using (such as WhatsApp for individual appointments and Zoom for group work) were more effective.

Specific solutions being scoped and delivered by HtC partnerships include:

- Using a strengths-based approach to build staff and beneficiary confidence in using digital tools; for example, asking younger staff members and volunteers to support older team members, and encouraging younger beneficiaries to help older family members.

- Enabling cross-working between beneficiaries accessing different services to support mutual learning; for example, adult services working with youth services to deliver joint projects based on using digital tools to support beneficiaries to learn from each other.

- Ensuring that consideration is given to '*finding the right carrot to motivate*'. For example, for older clients in care homes, the carrot at this time is using Zoom to keep in touch with family members. As such, motivating beneficiaries to use the digital tools on offer to support their route through crisis can be very effective. Partnerships propose working with beneficiaries to find out what will be critical to them in dealing with their crisis. Once this critical factor is identified, whether navigating Universal Credit, tackling rent arrears, using online banking, or reconnecting with friends and family to reduce isolation, partnerships can show users how digital tools can help them to achieve what they are already motivated to do.

- Ensuring appropriate time is taken and language used to support and train beneficiaries in working digitally. Partnerships described changing how they frame training, for example, from *telling* clients what they *should* be able to see on screen, to *asking* them what they *can* see on the screen. This minimises the frustration felt by staff and beneficiaries when learning completely new skills.

- Using techniques to develop beneficiary skills which are less focused on 'training sessions' and more focused on informal bite-sized learning or tips on digital skills, avoiding overtly describing it as 'learning'. For example, one partnership issued hard copy activity packs for children in lockdown and asked the parent to take pictures of the completed activities and email the photos back to the partnership, teaching parents new digital skills through an activity framed around their child.

3.2 Patience and people skills rather than technology specialists

Linked to the solutions suggested above, partnerships appreciated hearing Aaron Slater's reassurances that the best peer supporters, volunteers and staff members to help clients to engage digitally are those who are patient and have great people skills, rather than digital technology specialists. Partnerships recognised that staff and volunteers who can put themselves in the mindset of the client, showing empathy with the fact that basic digital tasks can prove very challenging for someone who has never completed the task before, were more effective.

3.3 Partnerships with technology companies

'You can have sorted everything else out, but the real initial difficulty lies in trying to find more affordable connectivity and devices.'
Lead partner staff

There was also discussion about the value of local and national partnerships with technology companies and digital inclusion charities to tackle issues of connectivity and access to digital tools. Some HtC partnerships are exploring the potential for working with others to:

- Make lower cost internet access available for vulnerable and low income families

- Encourage mobile phone companies to provide access to recycled old phones at an affordable price to distribute them to those who need them to access HtC support. These could then be used within an HtC managed device library service for clients so that useable devices can be distributed, returned, disinfected and redistributed.

3.4 Sources of information

Partnerships were inspired by Aaron Slater's presentation and found his thoughts on motivation, devices, connectivity, and skills and confidence helpful in thinking through their digital inclusion strategies. Aaron stressed the importance of not reinventing the wheel in developing and implementing digital inclusion

strategies. Sources of further information and guidance were provided in the course of the presentation. These are listed below:

- Digital inclusion Scotland: www.digitalparticipation.scot
- SCVO Blog on safeguarding
- Get Connected Blog: Simon Community project
- Good Things Foundation: digital inclusion
- DCMS: Essential Digital Skills framework
- Help through Crisis Digital Inclusion Factsheet

For more information

Website: https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/insights/documents?q=&programme=help-through-crisis&portfolio=

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