



# Adapting in Adversity

Addressing multiple disadvantage with technology during Covid-19

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# 1. Introduction

# Introduction

## Aim of this content

This slide deck sets out learning and insights from Help through Crisis (HtC) and the Women and Girls Initiative (WGI). It brings together learning on digital inclusion and how to work with technology during the Covid-19 lockdown and beyond. It presents: barriers and challenges faced by partnerships and projects, and the people they support, working online during the pandemic; and some effective ways and resources for working remotely.

## Who this may be of interest to

As this output focuses on those experiencing multiple disadvantage, it is intended to be of interest to:

- HtC, WGI and Fulfilling Lives, partnerships and projects
- Evaluation and learning teams supporting the partnerships and projects
- The National Lottery Community Fund and other funders
- Service delivery organisations in sectors supporting those facing severe and multiple disadvantages.

# Background to this report

This is the second report from the Evaluation Team's cross cutting Covid-19 evidence activity providing an opportunity to bring together evidence, learning and insights from across three programmes: Fulfilling Lives, WGI, and HtC.

These programmes support people facing severe and multiple disadvantages who, due to pre-existing inequalities, are particularly at risk of experiencing the negative consequences, and wider implications, of Covid-19.

This output meets the aims of this work by providing learning and insight into how grantholders are responding to Covid-19, and the successes and challenges they face. It also provides ideas and practices to support communities to thrive during the pandemic and after.



# Content of report

The content for this slide deck has been mainly drawn from two publications:

- A factsheet from the HtC Learning, Support and Evaluation (LSE) team on digital inclusion that explores how partnerships can support people to get online during the pandemic.
- A blog produced by the WGI Learning and Impact team on challenges of working online and how projects have been supporting women and girls to access support online during the pandemic.

This slide deck:

- Sets out the digital inclusion context.
- Highlights the barriers and challenges that partnerships and projects, and the people they support, face when working online.
- Presents some effective ways of working remotely and provides some helpful resources for those accessing support online and organisations providing support services virtually.
- Concludes with some key messages and future areas to explore.

## 2. Context

Setting out the current situation

# Digital inclusion context

WGI projects and HtC partnerships have worked hard and at pace to move their activity and support online, focusing on maintaining relationships and responding flexibly. Working remotely during the pandemic has highlighted barriers and challenges faced both by staff delivering services and those using the services, particularly those with multiple and complex needs who have been hit hardest by the pandemic.

Moving online is a significant challenge for the one in five British adults who don't have the essential digital skills needed for day to day life (Lloyds Bank 2020) or for those who don't have the experience or the technology to use the internet (ONS 2019). More reliance on remote working during the pandemic has raised concerns that this has increased the 'digital divide' between those able to use online services effectively and those who are less comfortable in doing so or who have limited or no internet access (Milner 2020).

The most disadvantaged are those most likely to be affected. Age, disability and poverty are key factors but there is also a gendered dimension to digital exclusion. The WGI blog highlights that the women's sector is digitally 'under-powered', with many staff and volunteers, as well as service users, lacking training or confidence in technological skills (2020). In addition this is compounded by on-line violence against women and girls.

## Digital inclusion context cont.

Partnerships and projects are concerned that working remotely may mean they can't reach those who previously relied on face-to-face contact to access support or to effectively access and engage with new referrals. They worry that certain groups may be left isolated and become difficult to reach. Without being able to access support online, people may not receive the support they need and their situation may worsen.

There is a strong desire amongst partnerships and projects to return to face-to-face support. They feel that being in the same physical space is crucial to developing relationships building trust, having safe conversations, and enabling people to share their stories and challenges. However, there are some insights shared here about what can be done to make working online easier, more effective and safer to use until face-to-face activity can resume.

In addition, although there are many barriers and challenges, there have also been some creative solutions and opportunities emerging from this way of working, such as reaching new people or engaging with those that struggle with face-to-face activities.



# 3. Barriers and Challenges

# Barriers and challenges to working online

## Structural Barriers

These barriers relate to the unaffordability of internet access and access to digital devices.

## Individual Barriers

These include barriers such as motivation, lack of confidence, low digital or literacy skills.

## Challenges

- Online communication can lack the physical closeness that face-to-face support can provide. It can make it harder for responses to convey warmth and empathy such as a squeeze of a hand or a hug.
- Trying to build a rapport with new service users since lockdown can be much slower and establishing trust much more tentative.
- Finding a safe space to talk privately can be difficult, particularly for women and girls living in abusive situations.
- Working with people who have English as a second language, particularly as visual cues and body language are especially important, or working with people with disabilities or who need specific access requirements can be challenging.

# 4. Solutions and Resources

# Building confidence and motivation

Helping people to get online and increase their confidence is one way to overcome some of the individual barriers faced by service users.

Support in this way tends to be provided face-to-face but, as this is no longer possible, building confidence and motivation may be more challenging. It is likely that using more familiar ways to communicate, such as by phone, is required to effectively support people to get online.

Using different platforms may work better for some people. For example, [Blossom](#), a WGI project, has found that using Facebook and Messenger have worked well with those for whom contact needs to be 'light touch'. Support needs to be provided by phone as well, but sharing photos and names of staff online can put a face to a name for the person who is calling.

## Encouraging people to get online:

- Find a motivating factor or 'hook' can help encourage people to engage online and access the support they need. For example, [RISE](#), a WGI project, is trying out ways of building activities into group work by delivering sewing kits and then working on them together when they meet online.
- Support should focus on encouragement rather than 'training' as trust grows with every positive experience.
- Encouraging people to use the internet in a familiar setting and for a short time each day can help build positive routines and slowly develop trust and motivation.

# Developing digital skills

Developing people's digital skills is a key element in overcoming digital exclusion but developing these skills takes time and patience. The approaches set out below are useful for 1:1 tailored remote or face-to-face support (HtC LSE team, 2020).

## Ways to provide tailored support:

- Support should look to improve both **skills and understanding**, go at the pace of the learner and use a person-centred approach.
- **Avoiding technical jargon** - using simple language that relates to the task being completed rather than the technology being used.
- **Allowing space for repetition and reflection** - people should be given time to reflect on their learning, to recognise their progress, and grow in confidence.
- **Providing long-term support** - enable support to be on-going and structured so that learners can ask questions as they go.
- **Digital buddies** - volunteers who are on hand to answer questions and guide people can be an effective way of providing long-term support.

The HtC LSE team (2020) have also highlighted resources for both staff delivering services and service users to improve their online skills through independent learning. These are set out below.

## Resources to improve online skills:

- Learn my way has a range of courses about the internet including a 10 minute short course about how to make a video call.
- Reason Digital has worked with Mind to develop a set of resources for staff to help them support service users while using online platforms.

# Disabilities or specific requirements

There may be particular challenges faced when working with certain groups of people including, for example, those with disabilities or specific access requirements. The HtC LSE team have identified the following useful resources as set out in the boxes below.

## The Online Centres Network

delivers training to people to help get them online via local training centres. This initiative especially focuses on people who are socially excluded due to disabilities, unemployment or financial difficulties. You can find a centre which is offering training during lockdown and join the network to hear about further training.

The Centre for Ageing Better and The Good Things Foundation have produced a useful guide on helping older people to use the internet.

AbilityNet works to support people with a disability or impairment to use technology. They have a dedicated page on how to make adjustments to devices so they are more accessible. They also have a free helpline and a team of IT volunteers who provide free advice.



# Staying safe

Many of the people that WGI and HtC support will have concerns about staying safe while using the internet. For women and girls living in abusive situations or at risk of abuse, there is the additional concern about having a safe space to access support online.

It is important to directly address concerns about using other communication channels. This involves working with individuals' circumstances, providing support by other safer means if needed, and continually emphasising safety while explaining other aspects of the internet.

The HtC LSE team have identified a number of resources about online safety for both staff and service users (HtC LSE 2020). This includes online safeguarding and privacy. Staff should be mindful they have a duty of care to ensure confidentiality, safeguarding and data protection.

## Online Safety Resources:

- 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.

# Impact on staff wellbeing

While some staff find themselves suited to remote digital working, others find it challenging and it can negatively impact upon staff wellbeing. Partnerships and projects have identified areas of concern and are taking steps where possible to maintain staff wellbeing.

**Crossing boundaries:** Projects working with young women find themselves constantly messaging, rather than having fixed appointments and time-limited sessions, and staff having to address challenges issues in their 'safe space', can make maintaining boundaries more difficult.

**Concerns for staff privacy while using video conferencing technology:** One HtC partnership are advising staff to keep their home private by being careful about what and who they show on video, including family members in the background.

**Emotional effects of working in isolation from home:** Staff are feeling the emotional strain of supporting very vulnerable people in precarious situations while staff themselves have increased stressors in their lives and less daily support from colleagues.

**Partnerships and projects are supporting staff wellbeing by:**

- prioritising self-care by encouraging staff to reflect on how they are feeling and know they can seek support
- regular casual remote support for staff
- providing opportunities for peer support
- encouraging a culture of reflective practice
- maintaining and increasing formal supervision.

# Opportunities of online working

WGI projects have highlighted opportunities that have risen from online working.

Examples include:

- Reaching women and girls who have struggled to access support in person. Those who find it difficult to attend activities in person due to anxiety or social phobia can sometimes engage more easily through virtual means.

[Rape Crisis England and Wales](#) who deliver the WGI project Weaving the Web have found that during lockdown the use of their online counselling rooms facility has increased. They have found it can be a very effective way of providing support especially to women who struggle to access support in person - including women with disabilities and rural women.

- Not having to travel may also be a benefit in the current crisis - being able to save time and money by not having to take public transport or pay for taxis.
- Project staff point out how they have benefited from more flexible working and hope this is something that can continue after lockdown. [RISE](#) have found that virtual working has increased capacity for engagement with other agencies and professionals. They have been running Zoom drop-ins for hostel workers where previously they would have been visiting the hostels one by one.

# 5. Recommendations

# Key messages and future areas to explore

## 1. Addressing digital inclusion

To enable service users to have the equipment, skills, motivation and confidence to effectively engage with and access support and activities online.

## 2. Enabling staff to provide effective support and activities online

This includes: 1) having the resources to provide the appropriate equipment; and 2) considering what is needed for staff to build on their existing skills in, for example, building trust-based relationships and working with person-centred approaches so they can adapt these skills to online working.

## 3. Ensuring working online is safe

This includes both having a safe space to access support and using the internet safely once online; this is particularly relevant for protecting vulnerable people against online abuse. Ensuring that wider online safeguarding and privacy is addressed as staff have a duty of care to ensure confidentiality, safeguarding and data protection.

## 4. Addressing the gender imbalance in digital skills

There is a need for women's organisations to claim an online space for women and girls while at the same time considering how to support them to develop on-line skills and confidence in themselves.

# Key messages and future areas to explore

## 5. Supporting staff wellbeing

To continue to identify effective ways to support staff wellbeing while working remotely.

## 6. Offering a range of options for providing support in the future

Working remotely provides opportunities for some to engage better and to reach groups where accessing face-to-face support is challenging. Offering a range of options that can meet the needs and circumstances of individuals, such as providing support online, as well as face-to-face, should become part of the menu for future support.

## 7. Recognising that there are some groups for whom working through digital means is not an option.

Where this is the case, opportunities for safe socially distanced face-to-face work should be explored.

## 8. Seeking opportunities to gather further learning and evidence.

There is an opportunity to gather further learning and insight into what online support has been particularly effective and in what circumstances does providing support online work well.



# 6. Programme Information

# Programme Information

## Women and Girls Initiative

The [Women and Girls Initiative](#) is £44.7 million investment supporting 62 projects across England to help and empower women and girls facing a wide range of issues such as violence, abuse, exploitation, and multiple and complex needs. The programme also aims to support development of a stronger sector.

The Fund has commissioned the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations and partners, DMSS Research and the Child and Women Abuse Studies Unit as a [Learning and Impact Service Provider](#) to support the women and girls investment to:

- Enable and empower local projects to evaluate their work and then use their learning in meaningful ways
- Identify cross-cutting findings and share these with WGI projects and across the sector so they are relevant and timely for use by different stakeholders.

## Help through Crisis

[Help through Crisis](#) is a £33 million programme supporting 69 partnerships across England. These partnerships help people who are experiencing or at risk of hardship crisis to overcome the difficulties they are facing and to plan for their futures. People are supported to draw on personal experiences to build their skills and strengths, enabling them to make the most of future opportunities and challenges.

HtC is supported by a [learning, support and evaluation contract](#) delivered by a consortium formed by Ipsos MORI (lead contractor), Revolving Doors Agency and Hopkins Van Mill to:

- Empowering partnerships to evaluate and measure their impact, and capture learning about what works in tackling hardship crisis
- Supporting partnerships' co-production activities, ensuring the people they support have a voice in shaping local services
- Identifying good practice and disseminating learning to build the evidence base and help partnerships to replicate or scale up approaches from elsewhere.

# 7. Further Information

The publications that this report is based on include:

- Help through Crisis: Covid-19 Factsheet 2: Digital Inclusion
- Women and Girls Initiative: A woman's place is in the (on-line) world?

The first report that combines evidence from our funding programmes that support people experiencing multiple disadvantage:

- Adapting in Adversity Report