

HEAR Equality and Human Rights Network

METRO GAD Digital inclusion project report

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METRO GAD – background

Greenwich Association of Disabled People (GAD) became METRO GAD in 2019 as it joined the METRO family as the Deaf and Disabled People-led body within the charity. METRO GAD has a distinct Management Committee and a ring-fenced position on METRO's Board of Trustees.

Founded in the mid-1970s, METRO GAD has a long and proud history of disabled rights activism and has been a key player in driving the UK's independent living movement and promoting a social model of disability.

METRO GAD currently has over 100 members and 500 people were supported through its work during 2019 to 2020. There are two officers delivering services: Alan Kerr, Equalities Officer (full time) and Janet Green, Welfare Officer (four days a week) who both advise members on welfare issues. Alan also supports disabled people who have experienced hate crime in Greenwich. METRO GAD's voluntary Management Committee represents Members' interests actively in the Royal Borough of Greenwich, in London and nationally through its voluntary work in Deaf and Disabled rights advocacy and campaigning.

Within METRO Charity's services more broadly, METRO GAD operates within the Community domain and is supported by Pauline O' Hare, Voice and Infrastructure Manager.

For further details about METRO Charity's full range of services in Sexual & Reproductive Health, Community, Mental Health & Wellbeing, Youth and HIV, please see: metrocharity.org.uk.

Context of COVID-19

The face-to-face services that METRO GAD provided prior to the pandemic were replaced wholly by phone or email/video call contact. This had an immediate impact on dealing with welfare issues effectively through not being able to look at paperwork in person.

Early in the pandemic officers were reporting high levels of anxiety for many service users, particularly those who require support from personal assistants. Service users were concerned about losing their staff at short notice due to COVID-19 self-isolation logistics and their health vulnerabilities, many of whom were shielding.

A key issue officers reported in April 2020 was concern about those who may not be able to email for support due to being digitally excluded and that many were vulnerable to social isolation, compounded also by people experiencing financial hardship because of increased food bills with the complexities of shopping during lockdown, for example.

In terms of pre-existing health inequalities for Greenwich's BAME population, the added impact of COVID-19 was also a cause for concern with a service user base that is over 30% BAME. Many of the issues and inequalities experienced by METRO GAD's service users after the first three months of the pandemic and which are deepening through its longer term impact are unfortunately consistent with the evidence presented by Inclusion London in its *Abandoned, Forgotten, Ignored*



interim report (June 2020), including inequitable healthcare; social isolation; mental health issues, and poor social care support.¹

London Community Response Fund – Wave 2 Crisis Response grants

At METRO GAD as part of the METRO family we are fully committed to finding innovative and accessible ways to alleviate the harsh and disproportionate impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic on Disabled People in our community in Greenwich. We were therefore delighted to be able to offer some of our most digitally excluded and isolated members of our organisation an opportunity to engage in the online world – so important at this time – through this project.

(Sue Elsegood, Co-Chair; METRO GAD)

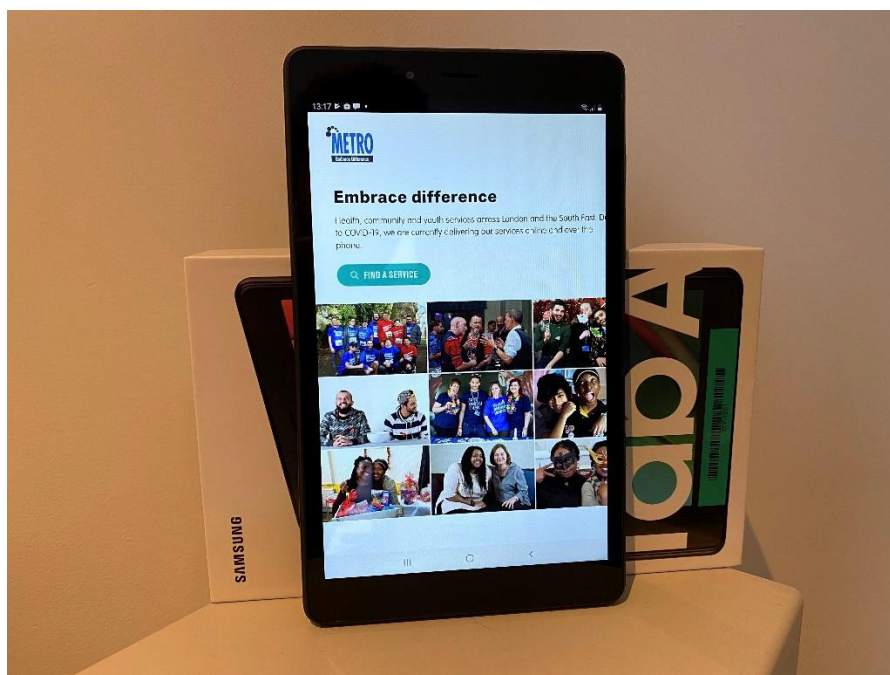
The London Community Response Fund (LCRF) presented an opportunity for METRO to apply for ‘crisis funding’ and we focused on the digital exclusion issues that had arisen early in the pandemic, prioritising METRO GAD service users’ needs alongside our other most affected service use groups: People Living With HIV - particularly migrants and refugees - and LGBTQ+ people with long-term mental health issues.

Awarded by the City Bridge Trust, a grant for just under £10,000 enabled METRO to purchase 30 computer tablets, provide 4G connection and remote IT support for three months. Of those 30 tablets, 10 were allocated for METRO GAD’s service users.

Alongside the tablets, a three-month emergency package of 4G connection and support from METRO’s IT provider was included for recipients. Tablets were configured in advance of their distribution to individuals to ensure ease of access to software and usability. Service users received tablets during August/September 2020 and had to sign a ‘lease’ agreement.

This report documents some of the changes that this digital inclusion pilot made and considers the impact for METRO GAD and lessons learned for ongoing adaptation to the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of digital inclusion and associated issues.

¹ Inclusion London. *Abandoned, Forgotten, Ignored – the impact of COVID-19 on disabled people*. Interim report. (London, June 2020) <https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/disability-in-london/coronavirus-updates-and-information/campaigns-news-during-coronavirus-crisis/abandoned-forgotten-and-ignored-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-disabled-people/> (accessed 26 June 2020)



Service users' experiences and feedback

We wanted to break isolation and open new pathways up for our service users.
(Alan Kerr, Equalities Officer, METRO GAD)

Ten service users were identified as beneficiaries most in need of digital inclusion support. Here we present snapshots of five METRO GAD service users who received a tablet from the London Community Response Funding (identities anonymised in some cases).

Marcus

Living with depression and agoraphobia, Marcus has been supported by METRO GAD's Equalities Officer as a victim of hate crime. During COVID-19 he lost his regular in-person contact with a family member who had to shield. On a low income, the funding to provide a tablet and 4G connection enabled him to access a resource that he could not afford to purchase independently.

Access to digital books via the tablet have helped relieve some of the impact of Marcus's social isolation as an avid reader of science fiction and thrillers. Limited to reading e-books on his phone screen previously, the size of the tablet screen has enabled him to enjoy reading via the free resources available via Google books and/or to purchase the e-books that he can afford within his budget. He also accesses games and quizzes via the tablet for entertainment and mental stimulation.

Using Skype on the tablet has also assisted Marcus to contact METRO GAD via video calls.



Debbie

When I was asked to nominate clients, I thought of Debbie due to the communication barriers she has confronted ... I thought that the tablet would improve her confidence and independence.

(Janet Green, Welfare Rights Advisor, METRO GAD)



A partially Deaf woman who has had a stroke, Debbie has experienced ongoing communication challenges which have led to her becoming socially isolated prior to the COVID-19 and have intensified because of the pandemic.

Prior to the tablet, Debbie had a smartphone but found the screen size very limiting to enable activities that she uses for entertainment as part of her daily routine such as games, and also access to social networking such as Facebook which is enhanced by the larger piece of hardware.

Family support from her children and other relatives has helped with using the new technology and enabled some confidence building with navigating the software and internet resources she requires.

Leila

I have literally used the tablet every day since I received it about 2 weeks ago! I thought I would receive a refurbished tablet but this is brand new! To add to the excitement, it also came with an EE sim card which gives me unlimited minutes and 2gb of data ... I [regularly] use YouTube for my meditation and the tablet is so much better than using a phone. Speakers, camera, and screen size are great. It also came with a lovely cover! I'm slowly personalising it.

Disabled due to a stroke in 2014, Leila's speech and mental health have been adversely affected as a result and she has been unable to continue her career in Information and Computer Technology. The pandemic has increased her social isolation as she lives alone,



however she has reported positive wellbeing benefits through practising meditation using an app on the tablet.

David



A person with a learning disability, David has had support from METRO GAD since 2016 to advocate for his needs in accessing services and skills' development to empower him.

Already committed to developing his literacy and numeracy, David pursued a literacy course using the tablet he was allocated, recently receiving a qualification from an accredited provider via Greenwich Community College. He reported that the touch screen technology vastly improved his ability to navigate the coursework and with the bigger screen, all the accessibility settings enabled when the tablet was configured made the device usable and improved his independence digitally.

METRO GAD's Equalities Officer also reported ease of contact and better quality of engagement with the David since he received the tablet, through technology that was intuitive for him to use. He felt that this had improved David's overall confidence and general wellbeing in terms of being able to pursue his educational goals and his passion for football coaching as a career path.

Bella

I just wanted more freedom to do things.

A person who lives with chronic pain, Bella has also experienced significant mental health issues. She has been a METRO GAD service user for several years and had no computer access prior to receiving the tablet.

Early in the lockdown, she was concerned about not being able to book her regular medical appointments and felt very excluded from a system so focused on online bookings. Accessing her GP's website has been essential for making these appointments and she has also used video calls to stay in touch with her pain clinic before she was able to return to that service in person. She has also used the internet access to find mental health resources and associated wellbeing services that she has benefitted from during the pandemic.



Bella has also used the tablet to order groceries and have her food delivered which had been a significant issue for her during the early lockdown.

DHTS – 24/7 remote IT support

I called DHTS for support with using loop on YouTube. The softly spoken gentleman was so patient and talked me through resolving the issue. 30 minutes later we did it!
(METRO GAD service user, anonymous)

METRO Charity's IT sub-contractor, DHTS, was embedded in this project to improve and enable digital inclusion. Costed into the project was support for general queries from Monday to Friday 8.30-5.30 and emergency support on a 24-hour basis.

Advising on the hardware during our application to the LCRF, DHTS received the tablets prior to their distribution and configured each unit with Google Chrome, Outlook, Zoom, and Teams They also turned on all the accessibility settings to provide a baseline of usability for varying needs and computer literacy, to be adjusted as applicable and in consultation with users. The tablets were dispatched via courier to each recipient with a DHTS 'welcome letter' (see appendix).

DHTS's installation of Team Viewer Quick Support also provided a platform via which technicians could access each device remotely to assist each service user during initial set up and at any point when individuals had queries or challenges with using their tablets.

Conclusions

- As METRO GAD was not providing group support online, the use of the tablets was focused on personal use for entertainment, intellectual engagement and/or training resources, as well as for serving practical needs such as online grocery shopping.
- We anticipated that the hardware, software, and internet connectivity alone would not enable every service user to become automatically included and that the support from DHTS was reported as a positive and reassuring resource by service users.
- The temporary lease arrangement was a barrier for some people and a cause of anxiety about being loaned the tablets and being liable for damage to the items.
- Service users wanted reassurance about being able to keep the tablets permanently.
- METRO GAD's service users represent a group who are predominantly on low incomes and could not afford to purchase a tablet themselves.

Recommendations


- The 4G data package of 2GB per month that this grant provided was insufficient for service users who may have wanted to use video platforms such as Zoom on a regular basis, therefore reducing either 4G or Wi-Fi inequities has to go hand-in-hand with providing both hardware and software. METRO should have a process for establishing internet access support needs as this may differ for service users and budget could be allocated proportionately for covering those who are more excluded by lack of Wi-Fi access in their homes.



- The lease agreement's complexities about ownership of the tablets on a long-term basis is potentially not an accessible concept to service users with a learning disability.
- Funding to support sustaining and improving digital inclusion for METRO GAD's service users could include sessions on accessing library services remotely among other public and VCS resources.
- Volunteer support could sustain and improve inclusion with a coordinated and funded initiative within METRO.

Appendix

DHTS welcome letter for tablet recipients.



METRO Tablet Support Quick Start

Hello,

Thank you for joining the METRO tablet pilot project, we hope you find it very useful, entertaining and also enriching.


During this pilot project, DHTS will be providing you with all the technical support you may need in getting the most out of the tablet. Please find below our contact details for our Service Desk where you can get help using the device and the apps.

The tablet has been pre-setup with a generic Google account. Please feel free to add your own, if you don't have one or require assistance in adding one, please contact us below and we can help you get setup.

A necessary access/lock pin of 1234 is setup on the tablet, to change please go to settings, lock screen, screen lock type, enter the pin and then choose an option to change.

DHTS Service Desk
Telephone: 020 8183 0020 (between 09:00 to 5:30pm Monday to Friday)
E-mail: [servicedesk@dhts.co.uk](mailto: servicedesk@dhts.co.uk)
Online: www.dhts.co.uk

Thank you, and we are looking forward to supporting you.



Daniel Huntley
Founder & CEO

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