Over-coming digital exclusion needs more than just devices (but this is a good start)

Superhighways is a registered Online Centre and we promote digital inclusion at every opportunity. The current pandemic has brutally exposed just how vulnerable people, who don't have access to technology or digital skills know-how can become.

While In a relatively short period of time the rest of the world has moved online, making full use of every internet enabled device from smartphones, through tablets, laptops and home PCs, not forgetting the smart TV 'Big bundles' that come as an add when choosing your broadband provider services, has never seemed more important.

Here in Kingston-upon-Thames as in many boroughs and counties across the UK, we have seen hundreds of residents with no access to food or practical and emotional support from family and friends under lockdown. And of course, one of the strands that runs through this story is digital.

Equipment - people need devices to connect into digital services

With the onset of lockdown, when we saw the opportunity to apply for the DevicesDotNow offer organised through The Good Things Foundation's Online Centre Network, we jumped at it.

DevicesDotNow is a project aiming to connect the unconnected. It is led by FutureDotNow and supported by the UK Government's Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. The Good Things Foundation, who manage the Online Centre Network is one of the national partners. The aim is to support offline households in the UK by supplying devices and connectivity during the COVID-19 crisis.

Meeting the funders criteria to apply for devices

As a UK Online Centre and a charity that supports local voluntary and community organisations to do things better using technology, we had over 200 organisations we could work with in Kingston who support residents across both criteria:

- Older, frail adults or those with an underlying health condition who had been asked to shield due to the higher risk from the Coronavirus
- And /or socially isolated with no access to either the internet or a device

Defining criteria for the best possible outcome, from this project we decided we wanted to make sure that the tablets were delivered to our additional criteria:

- Each tablet needed to be fully customised to an individual user's needs including personalised apps to support the learner to become better connected
- Any follow-on training and one-to-one support could be delivered by a member of the charity's staff team alongside ourselves
- The charity / community groups we selected had to have a reach into the communities where there are higher numbers of people with few or no digital skills – older people, ethnic minority groups and disability groups
- The devices would continue to be used as part of the charities services and activities going forward
- And finally, those charities where we had already established a working relationship through our inclusion training partnerships over the last few years.

So, on this basis, and out of the blue we sent email invites to the following groups. Without their immediate enthusiasm and support, we would not have been able to get this project off the ground under these conditions.

- Staywell – one of Kingston's lead charities supporting older people in the borough. Our team had just completed training in their centres on the Kingston Digital Health Hub project. Staywell referred one member and we also had a referral via their Community Connector service on the Connected Kingston health and wellbeing portal.
- Kingston Churches Action on Homelessness - where we were delivering on the Pathway Project at the time of lockdown
- Kingston Eco–op - who provide skills and activities for adults with either a learning disability or mental health issue
- Milaap – a multicultural day centre working with the elderly BAME community

Why being digitally included matters

Here is a selection of some of the reasons our organisations felt each individual would benefit from their tablet and the support package.

"I know it will be life-changing for him – he has family in India that he will be able to communicate with!"

"She is very isolated, with mental health and physical problems that leave her housebound. She loves gadgets and really took to the IT course we arranged with local college. But with lockdown she will be really frustrated being trapped in her accommodation. She will be so thrilled

with the tablet and the fact she can watch her favorite band One Direction."

"She is 91 years old and will benefit from an English Translation App apart from the other preloaded apps that you would be providing. Since she is not very fluent in English, could you please ask to speak with her son when you phone her to help turn it on."

"He lives alone and has limited contact with anyone having recently been ill and unable to work. His family don't live in London and now even them visiting is impossible."

"Having faced a long battle with cancer, and a recent tracheotomy, life has been very tough. Having the device is going to make such a difference because she can no longer talk to people and everything has to be done by email. But with no device or access to the internet at home, she is left unable to communicate."

The logistics are tricky!

Each donated Alcatel 3T tablet arrived at our office with one free month's worth of data – provided by the other sponsors BT OpenWorld and EE.

For us at Superhighways, it was a bit of a logistical nightmare, as we had to collect the packages from Kingston, drive them to south London homes to set them up over the weekend. All needed to be fully charged, additional apps loaded on, mobile data tested; thoroughly sterilized; packaged away; and driven back to Kingston. Oh, and we put together some set up help resources for the residents and charities to refer to.

Thanks also to our CEO who provided us with letters confirming essential care support status in case we were stopped (this was at the height of lockdown after all!); and oversaw the social distancing pick up by the charities from our offices in the following week.

Next Steps ….

Once collected at least half of the tablets were then unpacked again by each charity and more apps were added to personalise the tablets with specific apps they knew would be appreciated. One of the Eco-op devices had a huge number of shortcuts to cat videos on You Tube. "Meow's the Word", her identity will remain a secret. And then the tablets were distributed to the nominated residents:

We have continued to support our local groups by sharing information and resources, plus tech support with a couple of the tablets that are not connecting well to the network. We see this as key to the success of the scheme and would have been difficult for us to have taken on fully ourselves with stretched capacity.

Project Impact and a couple of final thoughts

Digital addressing social isolation

Milaap sees the project as a great success for their members helping diminish many of the feelings of isolation and fear. Being able to experience chatting virtually and keep up with their friends online is part of the new normal. And after lockdown they will have the new skills as well as the device to start to explore the online world further – shopping, saving money and researching services who knows where the journey will end.

> "The current uncertainty is making her increasingly anxious. She is starting to lose her self-confidence and has been feeling very lonely. Having this tablet has helped her connect with family and friends as she is able to see them. She interacts more often and take part in various on new online activities we have set up including Milaap's new online clubs for BINGO and yoga."

Making the unfamiliar, familiar

Our colleague Chris Williamson from Eco-op told us.

> "Eco-op clients have either learning disabilities or mental health problem. Regular contact and routine are part of their individual care plans. Not been able to attend the club and take part in events and activities has been very hard for people to take on board. For us having these tablets has enabled us to keep in touch and check in on them so they don't' feel so isolated. And this will help them through this period until we get back to something more familiar. I know that one of the clients is really enjoying her tablet and won't part with it!"

> Feedback from her is:

> "I know how to do the tablet now. I didn't know before, but I know now. I drew some flowers today and play games. I want to use the tablet to call my sister. I really like my tablet and am very happy. Thank you very much"

Data and connectivity

One area that has caused a problem with the project has been data. It was great that there was pre-loaded data - but in practice there are still some challenges.

1. Firstly, there are some poor areas of coverage in Kingston which have caused issues with connectivity. And asking a 92 year old to take the tablet to the nearest park where the data map suggests better coverage is not currently an appropriate solution

2. And, there is the fact that the data is only for one month. We anticipate further support will be needed once the data starts to run out and people who have mobility problems or are shielding can't get out to top up. We will also need to investigate the simplest way to provide data without intermediaries needing to sign up for contracts on their behalf

Evidencing need to funders

Two of our charities, Milaap and Eco-op, have already submitted funding bids for more tablets as a result of the project. And we recommended they included annual data contracts for each tablet. Both organisations are waiting to hear back whether they have been successful.

Thank you, Good Things Foundation

Without the support we received from the UK Online Centres Network, none of this would have happened. Their own programme of delivery, sourcing the devices with data, plus ongoing support to the network via a Slack channel was outstanding.

Digital Inclusion Really Matters

Superhighways is supporting the HEAR network Digital Inclusion campaign as we believe strongly that digital exclusion doubly disadvantages those in our community who are more vulnerable and need support particularly at this time.

HEAR has been working with its members to increase understanding of the intersectional and complex nature of Digital Exclusion as part of its policy and campaigns work funded by Trust for London. If you have a case study, you can share it with the network here.

Our recommendations are

1. Provide at least 3 months free mobile data with every device.

Not everyone has the luxury of connecting their new tablet to their home broadband. Providing a tablet without mobile data, is like giving someone a car without a set of keys. Public WIFI can present a risk to internet newbies from being hacked where you sit, and good practice guidelines should be made available in every facility that offers it.

Include a minimum of 3 months' free data with every tablet. This is a realistic amount of time to allow a new learner to become familiar with their device and learn those new skills at their own pace.

2. Kooky cat videos

The web isn't just about finding support services, health information and searching for employment. It's also about making life easier (and often cheaper) to get things done - buying clothes, booking

holidays, ordering the weekly shop, staying in close touch with friends and let's not forget the Kooky Cat Videos on You Tube. It's the everyday that powers the net and as a trainer your role is to work out 'a buy in point'. What is it that is going to motivate your client to learn? And furthermore, for them to derive enough use (and enjoyment) from it, that they will find a way to pay for a data contract going forward.

3. Buy in from senior management team

Devicesdotnow presented a fantastic infrastructure project for charities and community groups to start connecting vulnerable people with services and support at a time of crisis. It is now time for senior management teams to take on the learning from projects like this. There are still vulnerable and hard to reach members of our community, who can be better connected through provision of equipment and access to the web. But the key to success is personalised learning and creating shared activities that people can access if they find it hard to leave their home.

Online meetings/events do not replace face to face activities, but they could they run alongside them as another way of connecting?

Organisations should build in human connection to their ongoing digital services to make these as effective and meaningful as possible, and not just a 2nd class offer.