

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee

Oral evidence: The impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors: Digital inclusion, HC 291

Friday 15 May 2020

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Members present: Julian Knight (Chair); Kevin Brennan; Alex Davies-Jones; Clive Efford; Julie Elliott; Damian Green; Damian Hinds; John Nicolson; Jo Stevens; Giles Watling.

Questions 111 – 183

Witnesses

[I](#): Liz Williams MBE, Chief Executive, FutureDotNow.

[II](#): Helen Milner OBE, CEO, Good Things Foundation.

[III](#): Nicola Wallace Dean, Community Organiser, Starting Point.



Examination of witness

Witness: Liz Williams.

Q111 **Chair:** This is the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee and this is our inquiry into the impact of Covid-19 on the DCMS sectors. Today's topic is digital inclusion and we have three witnesses before the Committee: Liz Williams MBE, the chief executive of FutureDotNow; Helen Milner OBE, the chief executive of Good Things Foundation; and Nicola Wallace Dean, a community organiser for Starting Point.

Before I proceed with our first witness, Liz Williams, I will ask any members of the Committee whether they have any interests to declare.

Julie Elliott: I chair the All-Party Group on Digital Skills and work with all the witnesses, some on a very regular basis and some less so.

Chair: Thank you, Julie. No one else to declare any interests? Thank you, I will proceed. Our first witness is Liz Williams. Liz, good morning.

Liz Williams: Good morning.

Chair: Thank you for appearing before us today. I would like to get an overview from you of the current scale of digital exclusion in the UK and what it means for the fight against Covid-19 and the recovery of society and the economy from Covid-19.

Liz Williams: It is probably important to start with what it means to be digitally included or excluded. You need to be in a location that has connectivity, so access to the network; you need a device that is able to connect to that network; you need enough money to be able to buy data or you need to have access to wi-fi in your household or in the community; you need the right skills to be able to operate that device safely, legally, confidently and to go online to do the things that are important; and then you need the will and the motivation to go online in the first place.

It is interesting to note that during lockdown, and certainly in the run-up to lockdown, we started to see motivations change. We have examples of individuals. Nicola Wallace Dean will probably talk about a lady called Mabel in Stockport, who is 91. She is a very good example of somebody who previously would not have considered going online, but one of the devices that we have managed to supply to her, with support, has meant that she is now using it daily to connect with loved ones and to access essential services. One of the things that Covid-19 has done very quickly is it has changed people's personal motivations.

In terms of the scale of digital inclusion or exclusion in the UK, ONS data tells us that 1.9 million households are not connected to the internet. That is about 7% of the UK population. Six million people in the UK currently cannot turn on a device and do not have those foundation skills. There are about 11.9 million people across the UK who do not have the five essential skills defined by the Government as needed for day-to-day



life online in the UK. That essential digital skills framework, for those that may not know it, is owned by the Department for Education. It has been developed with support from industry and it is a progressive framework. It is about being able to operate safely, legally and confidently online. The five skills are the ability to communicate; the ability to handle information and content; to be able to buy and transact online; to be able to problem solve, go online and find the answers to the things that you might want to know; and then that final thing that runs across it is being safe, legal and confident.

It is important to recognise that, but those data points tell us that around one in five adults in the UK is without the ability to access online services and that means they are not able to order food online, they cannot access online healthcare and banking, and they cannot connect with friends and family. What that has meant during Covid-19 is that they have effectively been shut off in ways that those of us who are connected have not had to suffer.

Q112 Chair: Presumably for those who were asked to shield, if they do not have these skills or do not have the connectivity, this would affect their ability to shield effectively, wouldn't it?

Liz Williams: Absolutely. I am not sure how you can shield effectively if you do not have access online. That is something that is very concerning. The letters that went out instructing people to shield were peppered with references to websites. For example, it says in here that if you are in touch with friends, family or a support network in your community who can support you, follow their advice; and if you do not have contacts who can help you, go to the Government website. I am not sure what people would think if they were not already able to go online, having received that guidance.

Q113 Chair: Yes, it does seem quite strange because it seems to me that in our society the first point of call is online. In a life or death situation that method seems to fail. Presumably people have lost their life as a result of not being able to access the correct information, or have at least suffered quite serious mental or physical harm.

Liz Williams: It must be incredibly difficult to shield. When we first started speaking to DCMS about this issue and we managed to get some indicative data, we were talking about letters having gone to about 1 million people and the text messages not being able to go to about a quarter of those. That gave us a baseline of about 250,000 people. I have seen some new data points, particularly within the Government's shielding plan, and if you extrapolate the data in terms of the number of households that are not online and you use that to get a benchmark—because obviously we do not have direct access to all the data that may be available—the estimation is that there are between about 175,000 and 500,000 people who have been instructed to shield who are not online. For them that must be an incredibly frightening scenario.



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I heard from one retailer in the FutureDotNow network that they were being asked to prioritise delivery slots for the vulnerable, as you would expect, and what they were finding was that a significant percentage of the people they were being asked to support did not have any online access. As a result, they set up a completely new contact centre to be able to deal with the requirements of those people.

Q114 Chair: I am going to move on to our new member, Alex Davies-Jones, in one second, but one final question. If DCMS was aware of this data concerning lack of data awareness and digital inclusion, was this wilfulness? What do you think the thought process was here? What was DCMS saying to you as to why it was not effectively having a belt and braces attitude in terms of informing people properly about shielding and other things in relation to lockdown?

Liz Williams: The letters, for example, were not the responsibility of DCMS. I think DCMS is acutely aware of the digital inclusion aspects. The challenge is that it is trying to co-ordinate this across Government and get the importance—unfortunately, a lot of people believe we currently live in a 100% digitally connected UK, and we do not. That is one of the things that is very important for us to recognise, that we need to invest in building a 100% digitally included UK and what that would look like. The Department obviously has the responsibility, but there needs to be cross-Government understanding and priority.

Q115 Alex Davies-Jones: Thank you to all members of the Committee for the lovely welcome.

Given some of the challenges that you have outlined and given what we already know about digital exclusion, what do you think the main challenges are for Government meeting—

Chair: I am sorry, Alex, your microphone is fading in and out. Could you start again?

Alex Davies-Jones: Of course. Given the challenges that you have already outlined and what we already know about digital exclusion, what do you believe the challenges are to the Government—

Chair: I am sorry, Alex, we are going to repair your microphone, if that is okay. We will move on to someone else. It is just a small technical issue. We will get that sorted for you.

Q116 Julie Elliott: It is not like us to have technical issues on this Committee. Good morning, Liz. The DevicesDotNow campaign is supported and backed by DCMS. In fact, it was mentioned in the session we had recently with the Secretary of State and the Permanent Secretary. Can you tell us what funding the Government have put into the campaign to this point?

Liz Williams: To date, the Government have not funded the campaign. We have not had cash funding. They have supported us in terms of letters to industry and supportive statements in the media. I do not know



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whether, for others on the call, it is worth explaining a little bit about the DevicesDotNow campaign. Would that be helpful?

Chair: No, we need to do them separately. It is a consequence of Zoom.

Q117 **Julie Elliott:** The Government have not put any money into the campaign as yet. What funding is needed from Government to make this campaign a success?

Liz Williams: We have asked the Government consistently for three asks. The first is direct Government funding. We estimate that, to get to 10,000 of the most vulnerable, it is a minimum of £2 million. The Scottish Government have put in £5 million to support 9,000 people, so you could extrapolate that to get a view for the UK. Our view is to get to 100,000 people is a £20 million project. Our asks of Government have been, as I say, threefold. First is direct funding to match corporate donations. The second one is to give us help to access more private sector donations, and the Minister has written to industry to support on that.

Finally, we have asked for their support to access other funding routes. We are investing time to progress funding bids with organisations like the Big Night In, which has been run by Comic Relief and Children in Need, and also things like the Mutual Aid Foundation activity. Currently, the nature of what we are doing means that we have not been able to secure that support. We think DCMS could help us to get this area understood as being a priority for those organisations to fund us, as well as direct Government funding.

Q118 **Julie Elliott:** What you are saying there, I think, is that the Government needs to put in some significant money to get this project off the ground, but then support you in accessing other areas of funding. Is that right?

Liz Williams: Absolutely, that would be very welcome.

Q119 **Julie Elliott:** Industry is clearly going to play a big role in DevicesDotNow succeeding. Can you tell us what your call for devices from industry has elicited? What has been delivered and what more could the telecoms industry be doing to help people who are digitally excluded?

Liz Williams: It is important to say that the DevicesDotNow campaign has been stood up with support from industry. We have had significant pro bono support to get the campaign up and running, and the Good Things Foundation as a charity has been very significantly supportive. We have seen donations from a number of organisations: BT, Accenture and Lloyds Banking Group, in particular, have donated, and over 1,600 devices have gone out and are already being used in the community.

Q120 **Julie Elliott:** Have Government been helpful in prioritising the distribution of digital devices appropriately?

Liz Williams: We have not had any discussions with Government about that, but what I would say is that the devices we have received have been delivered to all four nations of the UK. I think we have had devices



go to every single county in the UK. The need is pretty evenly distributed. The main issue or the main reason why people need devices—the underlying need—is poverty, often people cannot afford it, but also it is people who are constrained in terms of their mental wellbeing, their employment outcomes, their health, loneliness and those kind of things. We are supporting people up and down the UK from that perspective.

Q121 Julie Elliott: Have any groups in particular been left behind in the work that the Government are doing on digital inclusion? If they are, what specific support do you think the Government could give to help them?

Liz Williams: The first thing is those who are currently shielding as a result of this crisis have a propensity to be older. That is related to health. People will often assume that digital inclusion is an older person's issue, but it is not. It is an all-age issue. There are people at all life stages. We have supported older people like Tony in Belfast, who was in sheltered accommodation. Before he came to collect his device at his door—and it was a secure handover—he had not had any engagement with the outside world for five weeks. We have had families with school-aged children, we have young employment seekers and we have older striving workers, so very clearly within that.

In terms of what more could be done, basically it goes back to funding because we have the processes in place, we have the ability to get devices out very quickly. In the last round some of those were mobilised within 48 hours, so everything is there ready to be able to do this, but what we need is more people to deliver funding.

Q122 Alex Davies-Jones: Hopefully things will be better this time. Liz, you mentioned some of the challenges that we are facing due to digital exclusion, but what do you see as the main issues the Government will face with with the rollout of a smartphone app for the contact tracing?

Liz Williams: Undoubtedly the contact tracing app will be a big part of how we get out of lockdown, but it does rely on having a smartphone and access to data. One in five do not have that. The access to data point is very important to realise. We have seen a lot of data poverty coming through as a very new issue, because people on low incomes are often on pay-as-you-go packages. They therefore do not have large data volumes, and the places they have been able to go to to get data, such as the coffee shop, have been locked down. So data poverty is an important thing to understand.

Going back to the question, the contact tracing app relies on having a smartphone. What I have seen in the media suggests that the current app that is being tested also relies on having a relatively new operating system. That means, for example, we have been talking about whether we could do work to refurbish devices and get older devices out into the community. If we were to do that, what I am currently seeing around the contact tracing app suggests that that still would not help those people.



My concern with the contact tracing app strategy is that it has the potential to add to social divides and employment outcomes because it would be easy to imagine a scenario where employers might make it a prerequisite to have that. If people were financially compromised and were not able to have it, that would be quite difficult. What it underlines is why it is so important that we invest in having a 100% digitally included nation as something that is important for us from an individual perspective, from a community perspective, but also from a UK economic perspective.

Q123 Alex Davies-Jones: Knowing my own mother-in-law, I probably know the answer to this, but it would be good to get your interpretation. Are people who lack confidence using technology more or less likely to download and use an app that they are not familiar with?

Liz Williams: It depends on the support infrastructure. What we have seen with DevicesDotNow is that it is important to have a trusted third party that is helping you get through. We know that for a lot of people, one of the reasons why they may not want to go online is because they have concerns about security or privacy, all those things, but where they have a trusted third party to which they can ask those questions, from which they can get answers that they rely on, people are willing to do things. We have seen that as the motives have changed during the lockdown, where people who would not previously have considered going online, suddenly the thought of being able to connect with their loved ones or being able to do a bit of shopping has been the thing that has got them over that barrier. I think people will be willing to use it, but it does need a support infrastructure around it to help reassure people on how to use that confidently and securely.

Q124 Alex Davies-Jones: Given the support infrastructure you have mentioned, is there anything specific you can recommend that the Government need to do in order to make the contact tracing app and all the comms around Covid-19 more appropriate to those people who feel digitally excluded?

Liz Williams: The first thing is that the real problem with the contact tracing app is the one in five people that will not be able to use it. Therefore, if I think about that, we should also be thinking about what it means to live in a nation that is not digitally included, because what we have at the moment, in my assessment, is lots of people who assume that everybody is able to do the things that they can do. If you took an inclusive design approach to some of the issues we are seeing, your starting point would be, "Let's start from the position of the people who cannot use this. What would you need to do to make that different?" That might also change some of the investment decisions around things like digital inclusion.

My first point would be understanding what the whole UK really looks like in terms of its digital capability. Then having support infrastructures, and I am sure Helen Milner will want to talk about the work that the Good



Things Foundation do to support people to get confident. Good Things are doing a huge amount to help people get online, and they do that regularly. Go to the people who know and understand these problems, and use that expertise to be able to make the right answers and the right solutions.

Q125 Alex Davies-Jones: Just one final question from me. You have already mentioned that you are trying to obtain these refurbished devices to try to get them out to people who do not have access to a device. What has your level of demand been at present, and are there any particular groups who are demonstrating a greater need for these devices?

Liz Williams: The first thing is we absolutely have not gone out and done any demand stimulation, because our fear is that we are going to be overwhelmed. We have over 8,000 people on a waiting list that is related to the Good Things Foundation online centre's network, and our inbox is jam-packed with other organisations who have heard about the programme and want support. I am confident we could get to 10,000 people in a matter of days. I think we have line of sight to 100,000 people relatively quickly, and we have all the processes there ready to go. I do not think demand is in any way an issue. The issue, as I said at the outset, is funding to be able to get the devices.

Q126 John Nicolson: I am very conscious of what you are saying about how many people are excluded at the moment. I think a lot of us sometimes forget that. My mum has been in hospital recently, and one of the things the nurses were saying is, because people are not able to go and visit their relatives because of lockdown, a lot of especially older people feel very cut off because they do not have tablets or devices that allow them to speak to and see their relatives. In my own constituency we did a crowd funder so that we could buy lots of tablets and give them to the local hospitals so that people were not cut off and did have access to tablets to speak to their relatives. It seemed to go down very well. I am very interested in the way in which you are highlighting security and privacy as an issue. How much of a role do you think the perception of trust, security and privacy of data plays in people's decisions whether or not to download an app?

Liz Williams: Research shows that people do have concerns about online safety and security. That is why it is important to have third parties that can support them. Also making sure they have advice and guidance that they can understand, so being clear, not assuming that everybody is a techie and can interpret what the guidance is saying. What we have seen throughout lockdown is that people have new motives. I have heard from a number of financial organisations, the banks, which have said they have seen unprecedented levels of interest in going online for the first time to be able to do banking. I think it is because the ways that people have traditionally done things are no longer available to them, so they are willing to look at new ways. They have new motives, but what they need is support to be able to confidently explore those new motives.



If that means going online and doing a banking app transaction for the first time, knowing that there is somebody from their bank—and organisations like Lloyds Banking Group have done fantastic work on digital inclusion over many years—who can handhold them through that is very important. That will be an important part of the contact tracing strategy, making sure that there are third parties who are able to provide that support to sit alongside that.

Q127 John Nicolson: Privacy is a very real concern. People are right to be concerned about privacy, aren't they?

Liz Williams: Privacy is an important point, but what we should realise is we all give a huge amount of data on a daily basis to many organisations and people make a decision about what they are willing to trade for what reason. I would argue that the Government is the safest place to share your data, but I think we also need to have the reassurance to understand how that data is going to be used, so it is just about transparency.

Q128 John Nicolson: In the light of that, and you say the Government is the safest place to share data, how do you feel about the former chief executive officer of TalkTalk? She has been appointed by the UK Government as the head of the Covid-19 test, track and trace programme. Lady Harding was the very person who stepped down from TalkTalk after presiding over a breach of security in which two teenage boys were able to release the financial data of over 150,000 customers. She is the person the Government have put in charge of this, telling us all that we should feel relaxed and comfortable with her overseeing the programme.

Liz Williams: Baroness Harding is somebody I have worked with over the years from a digital inclusion perspective. She absolutely understands the issues from the perspective of the vulnerable. She has many years of support for that. Perhaps because of the issues she has seen at TalkTalk she will be even more aware of those issues and, therefore, that makes her better qualified, but who knows?

Q129 John Nicolson: Perhaps. It has to be bizarre though, when you have the whole country to choose from, that you choose somebody who has presided over this disastrous data leak and was forced to resign from her company as a result—150,000 breaches. She appeared before a predecessor Committee of ours, one that I sat on, the DCMS Select Committee, and I watched her evidence last night in preparation for this—and I recommend that people have a look at it. She appeared before our Committee and she refused to apologise for this disastrous data breach. You say she might have learned her lesson and might therefore be ideal, having presided over this disastrous breach, but I would have thought that the very thing you do when you preside over such a breach is to apologise. As a Committee, we gave her multiple opportunities to apologise and she refused to do so.



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Liz Williams: That is probably something to discuss with Baroness Harding and others. I do not think I am qualified to offer any further views on that point.

Q130 **John Nicolson:** Okay, but you could understand if people looked at her track record and thought, “Strange choice, does not inspire confidence”?

Liz Williams: Based on what I have seen in terms of her support for the vulnerable and digital inclusion, I would say that she is certainly able to bring that part of the equation to that work.

John Nicolson: I think it is important that somebody in that role should bring all parts to the equation, not just one part, but thank you for your evidence.

Q131 **Clive Efford:** Ms Williams, can you say whether the coronavirus epidemic has generated attention for your organisation and, therefore, increased the interest from people in the industry or the donations that are coming in?

Liz Williams: It is interesting because it is very difficult to think of any positive outcomes that come from this situation, but what I was very optimistic about is that it would shine a light on our digitally divided society. I do not think it has quite done that. What I would reflect is that perhaps those who are most disadvantaged because of their current levels of digital skill or their being on the wrong side of the digital divide, their voice has become even weaker as new ways of working have emerged and others have turned to digital. On the one hand, industry has been very supportive, but I do not think it has shone a light on the digital inclusion of our nation in the way that I would have hoped for.

There are three things I would say. We should look at how we consider digital, and not just think about the infrastructure that it requires but the skill and the wider requirements. If you were to invest 1% of the infrastructure budget to focus on digital inclusion and delivering a digitally included UK, a 100% digitally included UK, I think that would be a very good use of funding. In the very immediate term we need funding for the DevicesDotNow campaign to get those devices to those people who really need them. Obviously, the work of the Scottish Government is very welcome up there, but we need support for the rest of the UK.

Then there is this very real issue we have seen come through around data poverty. This is where people with low incomes, even if they are limited users of the internet—they may have the skill to be able to use it—have seen very significant issues in being able to access sites and data. Those three things are incredibly important as we go forward.

Q132 **Clive Efford:** Thinking about the response to the coronavirus, particularly from the Government, which has placed a lot of emphasis on people being able to contact the Government and services through the internet, through websites and the app on smartphones, you have said that you require a fairly modern smartphone to be able to effectively use



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that app. Would you not have said that tackling this problem of exclusion, limited access to the internet for certain sections of our communities, should have been part of the Government's response and that they should have put more urgency into tackling the problem during this crisis?

Liz Williams: Yes, I would agree with that. Absolutely, I would.

Q133 **Clive Efford:** I assume you would agree as well, but I will ask you anyway: how important do you think tackling social exclusion is to equality of access to the internet?

Liz Williams: I should say that I am also a social mobility commissioner for the Government, and I feel this issue very acutely. I have been talking about the digital divide being the new social divide, and I do not think "divide" is a strong enough term to use anymore; I have been talking about the digital chasm. What has also happened is that as all of us—including me, my parents, my social circle—have uplifted our digital skills as we have moved through this crisis, others are being left further and further behind. I just do not think that is acceptable.

Q134 **Clive Efford:** We are dealing with some multi-billion pound internet companies here that make absolute fortunes from people buying the latest devices, buying access to broadband and so on. Do you think it is shaming that they have not put more into organisations like yours?

Liz Williams: I do not think it is just an issue for the tech industry. I think the tech industry has done a significant amount in response to the Covid situation. One of the pieces of feedback we have had from the industry, particularly from the tech industry, is that it has been overwhelmed with requests for support, and knowing where to prioritise that attention is something it has struggled with. What we should be clear on is that this is a whole-industry issue. Digital is how we live, how we work, how we engage now. Therefore every part of industry should be part of that, but it is also a Government issue, as we have discussed.

Q135 **Clive Efford:** We are talking about these big tech companies. Would you say that what they put in and what they take out is proportionate in terms of tackling inequality?

Liz Williams: Organisations like BT, for example, have a massive digital inclusion programme. It has been doing some interesting work over the last few months where, in response to the Covid thing, it did a partnership with ITV and has been doing tech tips on the television. Those are very significant interventions because they get to a mass market.

Some of the other tech companies, I am sure there may be more they could do, but also, as I said at the outset, I do not think we should just see this as an issue for the tech industry. Where I stand at the moment, frankly, is that what I need to be able to help people with devices is



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money—we need funding. We need more organisations to help us with that, as well as Government.

Q136 **Clive Efford:** I was going to come to the Government. Have the Government said no to giving you any cash funding, or are you still waiting for an answer?

Liz Williams: We have had some answers. There was a bid made by DCMS to Treasury recently, which I understand was not made successfully. I met the Minister, the Minister for Digital and officials yesterday. I know that DCMS is still trying to find us some funding from within its budgets, but we also need to recognise that DCMS is not a large budget holding Department, therefore its ability to lean into this is significantly hampered.

Q137 **Clive Efford:** I have been on your website, and DCMS is front and centre on the first page as one of your sponsors. Are you just window-dressing for the Government? Are they not taking you seriously?

Liz Williams: From the outset we stood up the campaign, working with them, and they have been supportive. They have helped write out to industry, for example, in standing up. Has that translated into actual funding? I have to be honest and say it has not. It has not translated into actual funding.

Clive Efford: I think that is a yes.

Q138 **Kevin Brennan:** Just to follow up on what Clive was asking, not a penny has been forthcoming from the Government so far? Is that correct?

Liz Williams: Yes.

Q139 **Kevin Brennan:** Does that make you angry?

Liz Williams: It is challenging. I think it is, in the current scenario—

Q140 **Kevin Brennan:** You do not want to say it makes you angry—that is what I sense—but you are angry about it, aren't you?

Liz Williams: I am frustrated. What I would say is that it is a very important issue, and it is a cross-cutting policy issue. It is one that plays into lots of areas that the Government say are important, from loneliness to mental health to productivity. I therefore struggle to understand, if I am being very honest, why it is not a priority at the moment, and I hope—

Q141 **Kevin Brennan:** You said a minute ago that you feel the voices of those people who are digitally excluded have become weaker at this time, at a time when it is most needed. When you said that, it made me feel a bit angry with the situation.

You mentioned this bid to the Treasury. Did DCMS give any explanation as to why the Treasury turned down its bid for funding for this?



Liz Williams: We have not had anything formal on that, no, but I think the funding was very contested and it was not deemed to be a priority compared with some other things. I do not have any more information than that.

Q142 **Kevin Brennan:** Do you think that Government funding is quite important for triggering some of that industry funding you are looking for in a matched form? Would it have an exponential impact if you got a bit of Government funding and it might trigger some significant funding from the private sector?

Liz Williams: That is absolutely right. Organisations are looking for signals and they ask us, for example, "Are Government match-funding?" and that is something that I think would be incredibly powerful. Yes, it would be a trigger.

Q143 **Giles Watling:** I wanted to touch on something. You said you want to see a 100% digitally included UK, and I think that is an utterly brilliant aim. I come from a constituency where we have a fairly elderly population, and I include myself in that demographic. A lot of people around here write to me by snail mail, and we deal with things in what could only be described as the old-fashioned way. I understand there are 4 million adults who have never used the internet, probably most of them around here, and 61% of those do not see the internet as a need.

I appreciate that all three witnesses here today are focused on getting the internet out to people, as we regard it today as an essential tool and we are using it now, and people feel excluded without it. These people do not feel excluded without it. Are you contacting other agencies such as social services or what could be described as analogue providers so that these people do not feel excluded, and yet their right not to want the internet is still valid?

Liz Williams: It is an interesting point. I would go back to what I said at the outset about motives. What we have seen are very different motives from people. You only have to think about what has happened with things like church services, for example, where suddenly people are having to go on platforms like Zoom to be able to connect with things that are important to them, or they are not able to connect. If you are shielding, you do not have any choice. The only way you are going to be able to do some of those things safely and securely is through the internet. Therefore that is the thing we have seen, those motives, and that people are interested in being able to explore it in a way they never were before.

Going back to that point about a 100% digitally included UK, I now believe that is a very real prospect because I think people can see new reasons. Frankly, the old ways of doing things, the ways they had relied on, have no longer been generally available to them in the same way.

Q144 **Giles Watling:** I am just worrying that we are beginning to push people in a direction they do not want to go because of our enthusiasm for all things digital. That is my only concern.



Liz Williams: As I said before, if you start from the perspective of understanding some of the issues and the barriers those people have, and if you have a trusted third party that can help them understand how to get online and how it helps them do the things that matter to them, whether that is being able to speak to their grandchildren or doing things differently, there are ways to get everybody to want to be part of that digitally included nation. Of course there will always be a small percentage who think it is not for them, but I do think that number has dramatically changed off the back of Covid-19.

Chair: Thank you, Liz Williams, for your evidence today.

Examination of witness

Witness: Helen Milner.

Chair: Our second witness is Helen Milner, the chief executive of the Good Things Foundation. Good morning, Helen. Thank you very much for appearing before us today.

Q145 **Julie Elliott:** Good morning, Helen. Thank you for being here today. I want to ask you, drawing on your experience of working in this arena of digital exclusion with the Good Things Foundation, which groups do you think are particularly at risk during this Covid-19 outbreak?

Helen Milner: Good morning, Julie. The thing to remember—and Liz touched on it as well—is there is a huge overlap in the UK between digital exclusion and social exclusion. If we think about those people who are affected by social exclusion, for example, almost half of everybody who has an income below £11,500 lacks those essential digital skills, so they are part of the almost 12 million people in the country who lack essential digital skills. That compares with only 11% of people with a household income of more than £25,000.

Older people, as Liz has said, are much more likely to be shielding. They are definitely people we need to focus on during this time, but it is not just older people. Of the 4 million people who have never used the internet, only 64% of them are over 65, so that means 36% are under 65. Of the limited users, around 7 million people, who have used the internet but have very basic skills—for example, there are 7 million people in the UK who cannot open an app—well over half, 63% of them, are under the age of 65.

Educational attainment, again, completely overlaps with social exclusion. People with a disability are more than twice as likely to be digitally excluded as those without one. The other groups that we are particularly worried about at the moment are non-native English speakers and refugees. Obviously, we also know that black, Asian and minority ethnic people seem to be disproportionately affected by Covid-19. We also know that those groups are very difficult from a communications point of view.



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Non-native English speakers, black, Asian and minority ethnic people who lack digital skills are, I think, particularly at risk at this moment.

Q146 Julie Elliott: It is quite a scary picture you have painted. The Government have seen digital inclusion as a priority for some time now. Could you outline to us how progress has been made on this issue up to the outbreak of this awful virus and how things have changed during the virus, particularly in light of the very vulnerable groups you have mentioned?

Helen Milner: Liz mentioned the essential digital skills framework, and we should welcome that. It was brought together by industry working with charities, such as Good Things Foundation, and is now owned and led by DfE. That means there is going to be an essential digital skills entitlement that comes in in the summer. That puts digital skills on the same basis as maths and English. If you are an adult and you do not have essential digital skills, you can go to a college and get free training. That is coming in this summer, which is to be welcomed. At Good Things Foundation we are working in the community, so we find a lot of those people that I have described as the groups that are least likely to be digitally included are much more likely to come to a much less formal environment than a college.

On the other things that the Government have done, Good Things Foundation has worked with the Department for Education on a programme called Future Digital Inclusion and has worked with the NHS on widening digital participation. I would say that from Good Things Foundation's point of view, we have had a very positive experience of working with the Government and with a number of different Government Departments.

Going on to how Covid has changed the situation, someone told me the other day that they have implemented a three-year digital transformation plan in three weeks. What we are finding is that businesses, industry and employers are changing the way they are operating, not just for Covid but for the future. What we know is that digital exclusion was a big problem, with almost 12 million people in the UK lacking the essential digital skills they need, but now the world has changed. The world has become more digital. Of course the people who lack the skills, and obviously the almost 2 million households that do not have any internet access at all, is a huge amount. Looking at the research, it is almost entirely to do with affordability. Those people are vulnerable. Connection is the main thing that we are hearing; they do not have connection. They cannot access Government services, but society is changing even more around it.

Good Things Foundation does work with the Government. We have a number of different contracts with the Government, and I just want to say that we welcome their support at this time. One thing that those other Government Departments did—the Department for Education, HMRC, Courts and Tribunals, and we are working with ONS on the online



census—is they removed constraints very quickly. What that meant was that we could take stock. We work with thousands of community partners up and down the country, so we could take stock. They recognised that there was no face-to-face support and training going on during this time, but of course they have very specific programmes. We are still having to deliver those specific programmes; we just can wait a little bit.

It was very good to have their understanding, but with the huge demand that we now have from people who either lacked the skills before and now realise that they need them or who absolutely do not have a device or connectivity but need them, we were not able to divert any of that money to the needs we are seeing right now.

Q147 **Julie Elliott:** You have mentioned quite a lot of different Government Departments, and clearly this crisis, particularly in relation to these very vulnerable groups, is affecting all Departments in Government. How well do you think, from your foundation's perspective, Government are co-ordinating efforts between them, or are they operating in silos? Probably more importantly, what further could they do to support digital inclusion?

Helen Milner: It will not be a surprise to hear that I think the Government work in silos. I do not think that was ever not the case before Covid-19.

Julie Elliott: To be fair, I think every Government has; it is not just this Government.

Helen Milner: Exactly. I do think that the emergency has made it worse because Departments are obviously wanting to act rapidly in response, which makes them more tunnel-visioned and more focused on what they do. It is a shame because DCMS has the policy lead for digital inclusion but has no money. What we have at the moment is a number of Departments that recognise that there are digitally excluded people in the country who need specific support, aligned with their own policy areas, but DCMS is not able to co-ordinate and bring them together, playing that powerful convening role at a time when we are seeing digital exclusion having such a huge effect on the poorest and the most socially excluded people in our society.

You asked me what Government should do. Good Things Foundation works with community organisations, and I have also worked in digital inclusion for over 20 years. When Covid-19 struck, and particularly when we went into lockdown, I had two big priorities. One was those community organisations. Are they going to survive? Do they have the funding they need? Do they have the support they need to reach out and help the people in their communities in the way they need, and to do that remotely? Predominantly, before Covid, this was a very face-to-face based support. The second thing was for those digitally excluded people, those 12 million people, how are they going to get the support they need to be able to do the things that perhaps, before Covid, might have felt nice to have and are now absolutely need to have?



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That is where, working closely with Liz and DevicesDotNow, it became so apparent, the people I have been so shocked were invisible to me. I knew they were there, I knew that people in the country could not afford the internet, but I was so shocked at the urgent need that was coming from our community partners and also coming from lots and lots of other charities, other social services, councils, combined authorities, all coming to Good Things Foundation saying, “You are the digital inclusion people. Please help us. We cannot do anything for these people because they are shielding, they are isolating and they do not have a device.”

That is where we combined forces with Liz on DevicesDotNow, just because it was immediate that these people came to the fore. Immediately people started writing and e-mailing us to say, “We are worried for people’s mental health. We are worried that there are people who need food in our communities and we do not know who they are. We are worried for women who are victims of domestic violence and do not have a way of privately getting in touch and asking for help. We are worried that people need medicines. We are worried that people are carers. We are worried that people are lonely.” Some of the people who have received devices from us have told us that they would not be here without it. Their level of depression was so high and so extreme without that connection to the outside world and without knowing that there were people out there who could help them, without being able to order a food parcel, that they feel they may not otherwise still be with us.

Julie Elliott: Gosh, that is very stark evidence. Thank you, Helen.

Q148 **Damian Hinds:** Good morning, Helen. There are a number of free digital inclusion courses out there, some of which—slightly bizarrely—are online only for beginners. Some are blended between online and offline. Microsoft has one, and OpenLearn has one. Google has a programme, and I think you worked with them on that. What do we know about the reach of those kinds of programmes and how it could be improved?

Helen Milner: One thing that we have also seen a huge demand for is online courses. If you remember the 12 million people, there are 7 million who do have some basic digital skills and who therefore are online and can access the online courses. The DfE has launched a collection of free digital and numeracy online training resources called the Skills Toolkit, and Good Things Foundation has two of our online learning platforms, Learn My Way and Make It Click, on that website.

We have seen a huge increase. At the moment we have about twice as many course views, people taking courses, on our websites as we would have had pre-Covid. We have about 3,000 courses being done a day, as opposed to 1,600 previously. We know, because we have been doing some survey work with them, that they are predominantly people who are employed, who are furloughed or who are being asked by their employer to do things like work from home and do not have the capacity and the skills to do it. For those people who have just enough digital skills to be able to go online and to find the courses, or some of them are being



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directed to them by their employer, online learning is proving to be very successful.

Before Covid, within Good Things Foundation we did have that blended offer, so the community organisations would provide people with the support—that trusted, informal support in a trusted local place—and then they would use these online learning platforms, particularly Learn My Way.

Q149 Damian Hinds: For that very basic introductory training—and you mentioned the right to digital skills training from this summer, so it has been some time in development—what is happening now, not just right now during Covid, but this year, last year, particularly for people who are in a period of unemployment or who have perhaps been outside of the workforce for an extended period but are close to being able to come back in terms of accessing that kind of basic digital training?

Helen Milner: Pre-Covid, so before lockdown, Good Things Foundation worked with thousands of community organisations, community centres and small local charities. Some of them would be job clubs and local charities—

Q150 Damian Hinds: Sorry to interrupt you, Helen, but I am thinking more of the proportion of people who are unemployed rather than from the point of view of the number of courses that are put on. Do we know what proportion of people who have no or very tiny amounts of digital skills, who are out of work, are being directed towards one of these types of opportunities?

Helen Milner: A fair proportion are. Let me just tell you about Good Things Foundation, because obviously that is the thing I know most about. We support about a quarter of a million people a year. I am aware that jobcentres also provide courses and, as you have said, there are a number of online learning platforms. Learn My Way is for those very basics.

Without a doubt, people will be falling through the net. It is a classic postcode lottery. It would depend on the quality of support you have on the ground from your jobcentre or from your work coach. It will also be to do with the availability of community organisations and job clubs that are supporting you to do this. On the whole, community organisations are very good at joining up. If someone is coming with a need to look for work, they will also support them with their digital skills, but that does not always happen. It could be much more embedded into provision, but it also could be more embedded into social policy.

I think that DWP could do a lot more to ensure that everybody who is on universal credit, for example, has essential digital skills. At the moment it is more happenstance. It is part of a menu. It is something that they can direct people to, but it is not something that they are absolutely making sure of. If we do want a 100% digitally included nation, we want digital



inclusion embedded into all social policy and making sure that people are given the opportunity for a good assessment, but also being put on the courses that are relevant to them. I do not mean in a sheep dip kind of way. I am not a big fan of saying, "Everybody has to do exactly the same." They should be doing what they need for their own lives but also to help them get the best jobs and then be successful at those jobs.

Q151 Damian Green: Good morning, Helen. You have given us quite big numbers of people who either do not have internet access at all or who have very basic skills. Is there any sign that the Covid crisis is changing their minds? Are they feeling that they need to develop digital skills or, just in the most basic way, access the internet in this current crisis?

Helen Milner: We have definitely seen increasing demand. We know that motivation was a barrier for some people who did not have digital skills, who had not used the internet before, and now, because of Covid, they understand that there is a need for them to do it. They understand some of the very basic things that they would now be able to do, particularly around connecting with loved ones, I must say, as well as accessing accurate health information. For the very basics, linked to a device, they need a device, they need connectivity, but they also need that support. There is much more demand. There are people who are saying, "Before I did not think I needed it; now I know I do need it."

There are also people who have received a device from the DevicesDotNow programme who are saying, "I never thought I could afford this. I never thought I would be able to do it. I did not think people like me did this kind of thing." Then, on the other side, we also have an increased demand from people who are in work, who are being furloughed, who are being directed by their employers to improve their digital skills or who are working from home and feel like they do not have the skills they need.

Q152 Damian Green: Absolutely. Upskilling is going on throughout the population, as witnessed by this hearing and Parliament being able to operate virtually as well. We are all getting better at some things.

I am particularly concerned about the disadvantaged. You drew that distinction between people who maybe thought they did not need it and people who just could not afford it. Can you divide those groups? How does that map across to the two broad generalisations of it tending to be older people or poorer people who do not have full digital access now? How does that map across to those who now think they want to and a different group of people who discover they can afford to?

Helen Milner: On the former group, we know that of the people who have come and who have been supported, either through DevicesDotNow or by online centres that are providing remote support—so virtual support by telephone, but there is also support going on on the doorstep, standing at two metres—76% have said they are now more interested in developing new digital skills since the outbreak of Covid-19. That is a



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survey we have just done recently with some of the people we have been supporting. We definitely know that there is an upsurge in people requiring support.

On the one about people now knowing that they can afford it, I have not come across those people. I absolutely believe that they are there. When we first started with DevicesDotNow, we were very concerned about the supply side because a lot of the manufacturers and retailers were saying that lots of people were buying devices, particularly for loved ones. They can go online and they can use Learn My Way to help them to learn how to use it. If they are lucky, they may have a family member who will also help them to do it. I am much more concerned about those people who cannot afford it, those people who are being left behind because they cannot afford it.

Q153 Damian Green: You said 11 million people, if you include people who cannot download an app. Of that 11 million, how many people simply cannot afford it?

Helen Milner: I think it is 2 million people. Looking at a range of different data, ONS data says 1.9 million households have no internet access whatsoever, but looking at previous research where they asked people why they cannot go online, looking at the numbers who say it is because they cannot afford it, it is around 2 million people.

Q154 Damian Green: Do we know where that group put it in the hierarchy of things they would like to have if they had a bit more money? Clearly food and shelter comes first, but is digital inclusion as important as access to a car, say? In that hierarchy of wants that people have, do you know where it comes?

Helen Milner: To your question about a car, no, I do not think that research exists, but we do know that right now people are having to make a choice between data and food. Liz mentioned data poverty. There are people who have a smartphone and can sometimes afford data but not always, who pre-Covid would usually go to the library or to a free wi-fi spot and now do not have any data, so they do not have any connectivity. We also have heard about parents, a single mother on universal credit, who is saying to the children that they can only eat twice a day now because she has to spend more on data so that the children can do some home schooling. We do know that at the moment people are making real choices between food or data.

Q155 Damian Green: Is there an opportunity now? Obviously we are conscious that the necessity has been raised, as you say. People want to talk to and look at their loved ones by distance. What should the Government be doing to take advantage of this sudden awareness to improve access for people?

Helen Milner: I always feel that I should not come to the Select Committee and say it is about money, but I think that right now there is such an urgent need. If we are thinking about right now within the Covid



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emergency, we have stood up, working with FutureDotNow and DevicesDotNow, and established, piloted and scaled a process to get devices to the people who need them. As Liz said, with no demand promotion whatsoever, we have a huge number of people on our waiting list. If tomorrow the Government or industry, or both together, could provide £2 million, we could help 10,000 people within two weeks. After that, we could help a minimum of 5,000 people every single week, so for £5 million that is 20 million people who we could help in a month.

I think it is about prioritisation and where that funding comes from. We know that the Prime Minister pledged £5 billion to come through DCMS for the rollout of gigabit-capable broadband across the country, but there has been no investment whatsoever of that kind of scale. Just 1% of £5 billion is £50 million. With £50 million we could help 200,000 people. What we are saying is that we are putting a cost on people having this access, having the support, having the skills that they need. It is only £250 per person. It is very, very inexpensive. A personal device and internet access is not a nice to have; it absolutely is a need to have.

Beyond that, I would say that we need to understand how we can embed digital inclusion within social policy and what DCMS's role is in doing that. How can we ensure that DCMS has the convening power, the leverage and the leadership? I would say DCMS needs a budget for digital inclusion, a proper budget, and maybe with that budget you could say that it has an obligation to work with the other Departments. I was asked about people who are unemployed. You could say a digital inclusion budget, but with an obligation that they need to work with the other Departments to make sure that digital inclusion is properly embedded and properly rolled out.

I just think that the scale of the problem and the scale of the issue we have seen in a very urgent way during Covid-19 means that we need to be a lot more serious about digital inclusion policy and about the funding that goes with it.

Damian Green: That is very interesting, thank you.

Q156 **Alex Davies-Jones:** I want to go back to the issue of data poverty and affordability as a barrier, which you just mentioned to my colleague. Do you think that enough has been done by industry to support pay-as-you-go customers in obtaining data?

Helen Milner: Working with DevicesDotNow and looking at data poverty, we are aware that we are providing people with a tablet that has a SIM card in it and that that SIM is going to run out. The legacy and sustainability of that has worried me because I understand that these people will not be able to afford it. We have more than 25 million pay-as-you-go customers in the UK. I was also very surprised about that.

There are a couple of ideas that I would like DCMS to discuss with the telecoms companies. One is data gifting. At Good Things Foundation we



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also work in Australia. In Australia a number of the mobile operators allow people to donate their data to charities. Optus is one example. Optus is a mobile phone company in Australia, and since December Optus customers have donated over 8 million gigabytes of data.

Alex Davies-Jones: Wow.

Helen Milner: Basically, they could work with Good Things Foundation and other charities. Customers could donate unused data, and then that data could be gifted, through a charity like ourselves and other charities, to the customers who have data poverty.

Another issue that I find frustrating is about sharing wi-fi. It is unclear whether it is legal for me to share my wi-fi with my neighbour. I am not sure how I would do it safely. Particularly during a crisis such as Covid-19, it would be wonderful if the telecoms companies could, first, tell me I am allowed to do it and, secondly, help me to do that.

I feel that they should be simple things. I would like DCMS to talk to the telecoms companies about doing that. As Liz said, BT gave a very generous offer of 1,000 tablets and SIM cards to DevicesDotNow, so I am sure it would be sympathetic, but it would be nice for DCMS in its leadership role to be able to provide that convening and leadership to say that this is an issue that we should be tackling.

Q157 **Alex Davies-Jones:** Given that nearly 12 million people have limited or no access to the internet, how significant do you think the risk is of people not knowing where to go for reliable and authoritative information about the coronavirus, and what do you think can be done about this?

Helen Milner: It is very worrying. I do not know where you would go. Obviously people will watch the television and listen to the radio, but we also know that some of these socially excluded groups do not watch mainstream television or listen to mainstream radio. We know there has been a huge increase in Covid scams and a lot of very dangerous myths were propagated. I think it is very hard.

I do not think we should forget how amazing our communities are. Community organisations have absolutely pulled together. Where they can, that ecosystem is working well and linking with social services, with the foodbank, with the councils, but also—very, very importantly—with community organisations, who are doing all of this for absolutely no money and many are on their knees with very little funding. I am hoping that these amazing communities will be picking people up. I am sure they are, but without the internet I think it is very hard to get accurate information about Covid-19.

Q158 **Alex Davies-Jones:** Just to second that, we do have some incredible community groups. I have them in my own constituency—I know we all have—helping those people who are struggling. They are a lifeline to those who are finding this tough at the moment.



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You mentioned the scamming. Do you think a lack of trust will prevent people from installing the new Government tracking app? How much do we see that as a barrier to being able to work effectively with the new app?

Helen Milner: We do know that people who have never used the internet or have not used it a lot say that trust is one of the big issues. They are fearful of what will happen if they are on the internet. It is important, though, that we think about how we can help people to understand what informed consent means around data and privacy, and not just for the Government track and tracing app. Informed consent has to be part of a digital inclusion education programme. Obviously we are talking about the four fifths who have technology, but Liz has already mentioned that a fifth of the population will not be able to take part because they do not have the technology at all.

We must see digital inclusion as part of the solution. We should support people to have education, to get support over the telephone and by video calling, with organisations like Good Things Foundation and our partners, to provide them with the education, support and information they need to make that informed choice.

Anything that makes the app seem mandatory would not help the situation. It is important that we make sure that people see this as a choice, but obviously also to highlight the benefit to public health, to reduce the risk and to enable the country to get back to work and get us moving around again. It is about making sure that we explain that, but also making sure that people understand that they have a choice.

Q159 **John Nicolson:** Following on from what my colleague has just been asking, while we have been in session I have been sent an article from Reuters, which reveals that the UK Government accidentally let out some of their future plans for the Covid-19 contact tracing app by leaving them on a publicly accessible Google Drive. This was spotted by *Wired UK*. Ironically, one of the documents was headlined "Official - sensitive". None the less, a link to the open drive was included in a batch of documents. *Wired UK* approached the Department of Health, which has removed this sensitive document and link. I will post the article on my Twitter feed and copy in the Committee, but isn't it ironic, just as we are talking about trust, that that should pop up on my screen from Reuters? It hardly induces confidence, does it, in the Government's dedication to security and trust on this issue?

Like many members of the Committee, I have had lots of constituents writing to me saying how worried they are about scams. Sadly, several have fallen victim to scams, and they are sometimes people who are using technology for the first time. How important do you think cyber-security awareness is in the work that you do?

Helen Milner: It is very important indeed. Earlier I talked about the essential digital skills framework, which is the Department for Education's



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official framework for the skills that people need, and that is underpinned by online safety.

Within DCMS, you obviously have a team leading on developing a national media literacy strategy that will help to tackle media illiteracy, particularly around misinformation. One thing that could be improved within that national media literacy strategy is ensuring that digital inclusion, digital literacy, scams, fraud and financial fraud are all embedded into one. If I am a citizen, I do not worry whether an online harm is coming from grooming or from being scammed for my money, so I think that the national media literacy strategy, which I understand is going to be published this summer by DCMS, should absolutely incorporate all aspects of scams and fraud.

Again, my understanding is that that media literacy strategy may come under the remit of Ofcom. I would very much urge the Select Committee, if that is the case, that Ofcom is given a budget. What we are talking about is so important, that people have the information, the education and the support to learn how to keep themselves safe, but that will come at a cost. It is one thing having a strategy, but you need a fully and properly costed plan to go with that strategy.

Q160 John Nicolson: Do you think that the Government are doing enough to highlight and shine a light on coronavirus-related scams?

Helen Milner: There are two different things there. One is that I am a big believer in preparing people for the future when you do not know what the future holds. In all of the work that we have done at Good Things Foundation, we have supported more than a quarter of a million people in the last year to learn how to keep themselves safe online. When we did that, we taught them the context of bringing their real world savviness into the online space. You can provide information about scams, and there is plenty of information available on Covid-19 scams, but I think it is better to educate people to prepare them to be able to keep themselves safe on the internet no matter what it throws at you. You are probably going to come across a scam that nobody has ever heard of before, so make sure that people are resilient in the face of people who want to cause trouble, who are criminals on the internet, and make sure that people are not fearful of that but are ready, prepared and have the skills and resilience to cope with it.

Q161 John Nicolson: In a nutshell, because politicians are keen on getting out messages and keeping them clear and simple, if you were to write a single headline that would give people the advice they need on protecting themselves from scams, what would it be?

Helen Milner: I would say, "Bring all of the savviness that you have when you are in the real world, walking in the street, travelling on public transport, transacting in a shop, into the internet world. If you are okay in the real world, if you use your nous, then you will be okay in the internet world."



Chair: Thank you, Helen. Your evidence has been really interesting. I just want to draw on a couple of points that you have made and maybe expand on them. You have talked about the lack of money in the sector. Is it, frankly, a bit of a farce that we have DCMS, which has accountability for digital inclusion but without any money in the space, yet we have different Departments going off doing their own thing with no real joined-up thinking? Are we getting this completely wrong?

Helen Milner: No. I am an optimist and I believe that Government can be joined up—even though for decades, if not longer, we have all talked about silos—and can have a central Department that has all the knowledge and expertise, that leads on the research and the policy, but links up with other Departments. I believe that the employment policy should be within DWP; the adult skills policy should be within the Department for Education; the policy to roll out our first online census should be with the Office for National Statistics. I think it is more about making sure that that central Department and that central responsibility is properly funded and properly resourced. Rather than it being a small Department with a small remit, I think it should be a much bigger Department with a bigger remit and more money, and therefore has the resource to be able to work with other Departments.

I am an optimist. I think that you can have joined-up Government and I do not think it is about a machinery of government change. I do not think that taking it away from DCMS and giving it to another Department would fix this. I think it is more about what mechanisms DCMS needs to make sure that digital inclusion is taken seriously by the whole Government and then works across the different Departments.

I did not mention health, and obviously I want to say health as well. We have worked very closely with the NHS over the past six years, and health is obviously incredibly relevant to digital inclusion as well.

Q162 **Chair:** Yes, but frankly, 0.5% of Government spending, yet a huge amount of accountability, not just in this space but many others. It reminds me of once taking a car into the garage and the engineer shaking his head and saying, “Big car, small engine.” In that respect, there is that problem with DCMS. Despite the fact that it is hugely important, it is 25% of the economy, within Whitehall it can be a bit of a Cinderella.

Helen Milner: Obviously as a Select Committee you are well placed to make those comments. I think that, particularly with digital inclusion, the coronavirus crisis has shown the urgency with which we need to act as a country and that DCMS, with more money, more resource and more responsibility around digital inclusion, would have helped us enormously at this time. That is not to say that what they have achieved with a small resource is not okay. It is more to say if we are going to take digital inclusion seriously, if we see this as a cross-Government issue, DCMS is the right place to have the responsibility but it does need more money and more resource.



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Q163 **Chair:** You referenced Ofcom before. Is there frustration there in terms of any indecision in reference to the future role of Ofcom and what its responsibilities will be across the whole digital space?

Helen Milner: I am the chief executive of a charity that works dynamically, as quickly as possible, so I am often frustrated about how slowly things go through Government. I do not think we should pick on any one particular decision. I think that Ofcom has had a responsibility for media literacy for a while. Again, I think it is about prioritisation and about funding.

Q164 **Chair:** We are hoping later this year, if we ever get around to it, to have an inquiry into broadband, digital infrastructure and the road to 5G. I just want to touch on one or two very small points there in relation to digital inclusion. We have many areas in the UK that feel they are very much left behind by the telecoms companies. Are they the same areas that you would say see high levels of digital exclusion?

Helen Milner: Not really. When we look at deprivation, it is important I am clear that I know that poverty exists right across the country, in cities and in rural areas. For the most part, high densities of low-income populations, of socially excluded populations, are typically in cities, so this is high-density population where broadband infrastructure is typically good. It is much more about people not being able to afford that device and that connectivity to connect with broadband infrastructure that is already there than it is about needing to roll it out. That is not to say that the whole country does not deserve good quality internet access and broadband infrastructure, but we have very good broadband infrastructure running past the homes today of people who are not connected, who want to be connected and who just do not have the device.

Q165 **Chair:** What needs to be done to ensure that digitally excluded groups are not left behind during the rollout of gigabyte-capable networks?

Helen Milner: I personally would like there to be a trade-off. I have said 1%. Clearly I would like more than 1%. For every £1 billion that the Government invest in broadband infrastructure, I think there should be some investment in digital inclusion, digital skills and digital equality. Obviously I would like each £1 billion to be matched in digital inclusion, but at the moment I am only asking for 1% equivalent of that broadband investment.

Q166 **Chair:** Is there anything to do in the structure of the marketplace that could help in the fight to try to ensure better digital inclusion?

Helen Milner: I think there could be, but I am not an expert in that. Potentially there could be a way of constructing contracts so that there is an investment in digital inclusion. I know in the past there was an attempt to do this with something called demand stimulation, but what the companies wanted to do was to stimulate demand for people to buy



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their broadband, which is completely different from the way I understand digital inclusion.

We have also talked about data poverty, so ideas around data gifting, neighbourhood wi-fi sharing, but also zero rating. We know there has been zero rating for the NHS. Telecoms companies could also zero rate the DfE's Skills Toolkit. That would include Learn My Way and Make It Click, two of the online learning platforms that we have. There could be some relatively easy things for the telecoms companies perhaps to bring alongside that broadband investment, but I am not best placed to answer questions around legislation or contracts, I am afraid.

Chair: Thank you, I appreciate your answer.

Q167 **Kevin Brennan:** One thing that I do not think we have touched on very much is in relation to people who are now being required to work from home. They are in work, but they are being required to work from home and may not have the equipment and the appropriate broadband, and so on, at home. I have seen some evidence in my own casework of employers requiring the workers effectively to pay for additional equipment, additional data and broadband, and so on, simply to be able to carry out their job. Have you seen any evidence of that? If this crisis is going to lead to more people being expected to work from home, is there a public policy issue there that we need to address?

Helen Milner: Yes, I have seen evidence of that. Indeed, someone who has received a device and connectivity through DevicesDotNow told us that he would have lost his job if he had not been given that device and that connectivity because his employer said, "You should work from home and if you cannot do it, then you will lose your job and we will get somebody else who can." As I have already said, we have seen a big upswing in people coming to Learn My Way and Make It Click, our online learning sites, wanting to develop the skills they need.

From a public policy point of view, I am not clear what that would be. I know in the past there have been tax incentives—pre the taxes being taken from their salary—for people to be able to purchase a computer and connectivity, so salary sacrifice-type schemes. That is potentially something that could happen. I think it is important, and your question is very appropriate, because there are people in low-paid jobs who are being asked to work from home and who cannot afford a device and that connectivity.

Q168 **Kevin Brennan:** It is the equivalent of the old ads you used to see in the 1990s, before the minimum wage, of, "Security guard required, £2 an hour. Must provide your own dog." I think we need to make sure that we are on top of this issue because I think it is going to grow in importance.

Helen Milner: I think that is right. Something that I think we have all been raising today is that digital exclusion and the sheer volume, the huge numbers of people who are affected by digital exclusion, does remain quite invisible. I do not think it is very apparent. I think your



question is a very good question because most people would think that someone who has a job would be able to afford to buy a device and connectivity, but if they are in a very low-paid job and they have a number of other complex needs, then they will not be able to afford it. One thing that we absolutely have to highlight is the scale of poverty, and that includes in-work poverty as well. Often that excludes people from essentials like a device and connectivity. We have these amazing community organisations there to provide the support, but people do have that poverty, including people in work.

Chair: Thank you, Helen Milner, for your evidence today. It has been very interesting.

Examination of witness

Witness: Nicola Wallace Dean.

Q169 **Chair:** Our third witness is Nicola Wallace Dean, a community organiser at Starting Point. Thank you for waiting patiently and listening to the evidence this morning. Can you talk us through your typical day on the ground, so to speak? How are you going about distributing digital services in your community while observing social distancing?

Nicola Wallace Dean: As an organisation, we are a social enterprise based in Stockport just outside Manchester. We have been going for 10 years and we have always focused on digital inclusion. Eight weeks ago that did not stop; it just ramped up. As an organisation we are part of Helen's online centres network, and organisations like us are probably best placed to deal with what is happening right now because we are small, agile and able to move quite quickly.

There are a number of factors within the community. We have had people we were potentially supporting on a face-to-face basis in the past, and there is no way we have been able to support them to transact online. They are quite happy communicating with families and friends, but they did not see the need to bank online or shop online. That changed quite considerably two months ago, didn't it? When Liz talks about the motivation, we have seen a huge increase in demand from people who are online and have basic skills that we supported previously and who now need to build on those skills.

In addition, Liz mentioned one of our neighbours called Mabel, who is 91, and we have a number of Mabels in our community. Previously she did not feel the need to be online; it did not impact her life in any way. At 91 she was still extremely independent and did not feel that she wanted to benefit from the advantages that I feel being online holds, but she did have family in Australia, which although she phoned, she had not seen them face-to-face for 25 years. As a result of Covid, and a potential advantage to the horrendous situation that a number of members of our community currently face, she was matched up through our organisation with somebody to do her shopping and she has built up this friendship—



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at social distance, but a friendship none the less—and she has supported her with a tablet from DevicesDotNow to Skype with her family in Australia for the first time.

When we first heard that, she was filmed and that story has spread. People think it is a great, positive social inclusion piece, but what we know as well is there has been a massive reduction in demand from her GP. She was a patient who would go and see her GP for a number of concerns, and sometimes that had to do with isolation. Because of the tablet, her GP is now reporting that that has been reduced, so as well as the stuff that we think is fantastic for Mabel and has really improved her wellbeing during a situation where she is shielded and will be for a significant period of time, it is reducing services.

The other thing that we see on a regular basis, and it has been touched upon, are the unfortunate issues around data. A number of people in our community are in a situation now where there is a poverty premium because of pay-as-you-go. I equate it to the cashpoint situation, where in the most deprived communities in our area people have to pay £2 to withdraw cash, yet in the more affluent ones, where the banks are still visible on the high street, it is free to withdraw cash. I feel that where we sit at the moment in our community with pay-as-you-go, we have a family who are on benefits and the mother is paying £50 a week for data. When we talk about people making decisions over food and data, that is something that we are seeing on a daily basis, and we understand that parents are the primary educators of our children but, more so now than ever, it is extremely difficult to get support from school and from other people without the access they require, because they just do not have that.

Q170 **Chair:** What is the key way in which the support that you offer has changed since the advent of Covid-19?

Nicola Wallace Dean: As a social enterprise, we initially set up a Facebook group, ironically, so that people who were online could do shopping, prescriptions and all the things to support people to stay safe and stay at home. We are only a small community, but quite quickly it amassed to about 1,000 people, of which 10% were willing to go out and support their community. What that has done is build a strength within the ecosystem of our community. I am a community organiser and inevitably our whole organisation, I would say we are all community organisers. I head up the organisation, but we knock on doors, we build relationships with people and hopefully we build trust with people.

What we have found is that there is a way of being able to do that. We have always said that we go to where people are and right now, whether we like it or not, people are on Facebook. I think we have an element of people who are on Facebook but are not online, so they have a basic access. They have a phone that is technically a smartphone, but I do not think any of us would refer to it as a smartphone. They are quite cumbersome but they still access the internet. The phones are that old,



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they charge them overnight, but they only have 10% on the batteries and all these barriers of equipment that just is not fit for purpose, but they are on Facebook, so we are targeting people through that.

We are also still walking the estates, but in a socially distanced way, because what we are finding is even though we have levels of digital inclusion within our community, of those that have a real basic level that we can work on and build on, we are still in the situation where we have people who cannot afford to put credit on their phone, who have COPD and quite serious conditions that mean they have to stay home. The only way they can currently communicate in our community is by putting a piece of paper in their window asking for one of the community organisers to contact them.

One of those people has just had a hip replacement and is absolutely terrified of getting any support through social services and district nurses because she does not want to get coronavirus. She is in a situation where she is dragging herself across the floor to put a note on a piece of paper in her window to ask somebody to contact her because her phone line is down. I know right at the beginning we spoke about people not having a voice. I believe that some people in our community are silent now, that nobody is listening to them unless you are able to read that piece of paper because you have walked past their house.

Q171 **Chair:** Is it mostly the elderly and those with medical conditions, or is it much more widespread?

Nicola Wallace Dean: It is people who are shielding, so primarily elderly, but also digital inclusion, social inclusion—we touched on that—and health inequalities are all linked, so we have a number of people who are not elderly but who have serious health conditions that result in them having to shield. If you were going to say one particular group, it is shielded people, but not with an assumption that they are people over 70.

Q172 **Chair:** We have heard on this Committee in very stark terms about the acute funding crisis in the charitable sector and in the social enterprise sector. How are you funding yourselves at the moment in order to meet this increased demand?

Nicola Wallace Dean: Quite frankly, we are not. We have always been extremely proud to be a social enterprise. Stockport is quite an economically diverse community. We know there are significant amounts of people within Stockport who can afford some of these services, and we have always felt that this was a good model of reinvesting profit. Our front end of the organisation is a coffee shop. Obviously that closed on 23 March, which means that we have a massive loss with regards to rent, rates and all that sort of thing, but it also means that we cannot charge organisations for some of our services anymore because we are not doing face-to-face delivery. There is a significant impact.



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One of the shining lights for us, and Helen touched on this before, is that we receive money from Good Things Foundation and the Government removed the constraints on that. We still have money coming in for digital inclusion, but without those constraints it allowed us to really look at who needed that support the most, and that has shifted somewhat. These are families that do not have devices at home, so have no way of being able to home school their children, or if they do have a device, they do not necessarily have broadband. It allowed us to be brave, to innovate a little bit and to think about how we deliver and about what is best for our community.

It has also allowed us to reach people who we potentially would not reach, so maybe we need to look at this as an opportunity to look at where we go forward as a social enterprise. There has been a lot of support, so we are now doing a lot more peer learning, where champions are supporting their neighbours. We do not want to talk about it as volunteering, because these are neighbours transferring skills to other neighbours and hopefully that will be a legacy piece and long term, but it still needs co-ordinating. The removal of the constraints on our existing funding has been fantastic, but obviously we are really struggling with a significant loss on the enterprise side.

Q173 Giles Watling: Thank you, Nicola, for giving such great evidence today. It was interesting that you mentioned an issue that is dear to my heart, which is loneliness and mental health issues, which of course have been exacerbated by this Covid-19 outbreak. In fact, in my own family we have our very own Mabel in my 94-year-old mother-in-law, who has now learned how to FaceTime. We did spend some time looking at her ear but she has now cracked it, and it does take a while to get these things through. She is lucky, she has her family around her, and people around you are lucky because they have you.

I want to talk about the silver lining to all of this. You are reaching out now to people all over the place who are coming online, who have never been online before. Last year there was an issue that you might recall about domestic violence in rural areas, which was going undetected because of the very nature of the isolation, and now reaching out to those. How in the future, when this Covid-19 crisis is behind us, do we hang on to that legacy? How do we not drop the ball and keep that digital outreach going into those rural communities?

Nicola Wallace Dean: I think we keep it really small. The larger we scale it, the more it feels removed from communities. I think the answer is within neighbours and communities, and within network organisation like Good Things, and community organisers in all these different organisations who link small groups together. That is where the sustainability piece comes in because it feels more real. Potentially, because of digital, I could now technically support somebody remotely anywhere in the country, but my motivation would wane after a while because I am not seeing the direct benefit to my community. I think the



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answer is micro-local communities. For me, it is starting a neighbourhood level of neighbours helping neighbours and streets helping streets.

That is not just digital, I think that is the whole social piece, the whole movement we have seen of mutual aid and people supporting those most vulnerable in our community. When we see the benefit to our own community and our own lives, that is how we will keep this energy going.

Q174 Giles Watling: That is good to hear, and of course continuing to push for superfast broadband in every corner of the country, that is absolutely vital.

Moving on to another issue that was touched upon earlier by Liz Williams, digital exclusion applies across the board, clearly, from the elderly to youngsters. Have enough children been covered by the Department for Education's efforts to make those devices available, and what are the digital needs of these people?

Nicola Wallace Dean: I can only talk about the communities we work in, but I know that one of our local schools asked for 120 devices and received 40. It is a huge piece of work, and I think it is a multi-agency piece of work. We are lucky in Stockport because, even though we are an extremely small organisation, we have a huge reach, with 42,000 people with digital skills last year in our borough, but we were only able to do that because we had a council that could understand the benefits of a small organisation. We also had a network called DigiKnow, but it contains representation from housing associations, the libraries and everybody who has a vested interest in digital inclusion.

It is difficult to say that this is something that just one organisation or one school can achieve. I think it is a full community—if not borough-wide—issue. Bringing a number of organisations, so housing associations, which will see the benefit of children having equipment and families being connected, and other organisations, private sector organisations, potentially for us is the way forward. To answer your question, right at the moment we need more kit for children.

Q175 Giles Watling: What about the cost of data, which again Helen Milner covered quite broadly earlier? Do you, when you are engaging with people, teach people about data efficiency? As a father, I know that my kids could rush through data in no time on nothing and not the important stuff. It would be super if everybody had unlimited data, but in truth we live in the real world and we do not. Do you teach data efficiency?

Nicola Wallace Dean: We do, but we also understand that the people we work with have complex issues with a number of background factors, and sometimes the hook in is the stuff that potentially you and I would think is not the thing that we should encourage people to do. If we can encourage children to use a tablet that we are providing by potentially playing a game or doing things like that, we can then move them on to using DfE resources and the BBC "Bitesize" programmes that we are



trying to push for them to be able to increase their ability to do home schooling right now.

I feel that because we have built up trust and relationships with a lot of the families that we work with, we understand their motivations. I think it would be wrong for us to say what is and what is not appropriate when it comes to using our data. We have to do it in a kind way to be able to encourage people to see the benefit of being online and then move them into what could benefit them in the future.

Q176 Alex Davies-Jones: I would like to discuss concerns that people have regarding cyber-security, online scams and misinformation. It is something we touched upon earlier with Helen, particularly because in the first week of the lockdown or so we saw so many people rushing to download these videoing apps such as Zoom, Houseparty and other ones, with a carefree attitude towards what would potentially happen to their data. Have you seen any analysis in terms of how people were aloof to downloading these apps and now any pushback on this?

Nicola Wallace Dean: Yes, and I think the way you have asked the question uses absolutely the right term. We are finding in our community that previously—and it is still there—we had a number of people who are fearful of giving away their data, but one of the significant things that concerns us is people who have no fear and do not understand or do not consciously make the decision of what they should or should not give away. As Helen said about being savvy when walking down the street and what you would do in the real world, that is one of our biggest education pieces as it stands at the moment, saying to people, “If you were walking down the street and people asked you for this information, would you give it to them? Because that is what you are doing right now online.” It is a huge piece that we are doing. I would say that safety and security, and then help in accessing the right information, are the two main priorities for us right now.

Q177 Alex Davies-Jones: Yes, it seems like we have these two camps, the people who are willing to give all their data, unaware of the dangers, and then those people who are quite standoffish about accepting it and who are worried about cyber-security. These are big challenges for the Government, especially with the rollout of the new app, but also in terms of getting people to access help and information. Do you have any advice on what more can be done to help both camps and on how we can tackle some of these challenges?

Nicola Wallace Dean: Yes. Again, it is absolutely about building relationships. Organisations like ours and the thousands within the online centres network, part of the Good Things Foundation, and I would hope that people trust us. As an organisation we need to be aware of how much power we have, because people do trust us, and we need to hold ourselves to account. I would like to think we do that quite well, but I genuinely think it is understanding what people’s fears are or their potential flippancy around this. Because they know us, because we are an



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organisation where we have grown up with the people that we work with, we hope that those sensitive and non-patronising messages that we have work.

We see it through our mutual aid organisation. We have had somebody specifically there from day one to use websites like Snopes and things like that. If a post comes on and we sit there and go, "It feels a bit too good to be true. Should that be removed?" and what we have noticed is there has been a bit of a shift and there is now very little need for us to monitor that, because people are not sharing things as much as they were right at the beginning. People are potentially interrogating some of those messages they are seeing. If that is the case, that can only be a positive, but it is definitely something we need to keep building on.

Q178 Kevin Brennan: Thank you for all the work you are doing, as well as for giving us evidence today. I know there will be many similar Nicolas around the country in lots of communities doing the kind of work you are doing, and we really rely on you.

I was interested in what you said about pay-as-you-go. Do you think it is about time we started regarding data like an essential utility, such as gas, electricity and water, and that basically people should not be able to be cut off?

Nicola Wallace Dean: Personally, yes. I have been talking about this for a very long time. I think it is a utility just like any other, and now more than ever. The understanding of the situation is not necessarily there, and what that has done is reinforce our gaps in society. We have a number of people, not necessarily people that we need to support because they have those networks, families and friends, and we should not assume that everybody does have that, but those people tend to be on £9 a month contracts because they do not use their phone very much and now they have had their data uncapped. They are unlikely to understand the situation where people are spending £50 on data.

Q179 Kevin Brennan: Do you think there is something fundamentally wrong with any economic system that means the poorest pay the most for an essential utility?

Nicola Wallace Dean: For me, absolutely.

Q180 Kevin Brennan: If you were in our shoes, what would you recommend to the Government that they should do about that?

Nicola Wallace Dean: There are a number of things. How difficult it is to get a contract phone could be explored and looked at, to encourage organisations to maybe remove some of those restrictions on credit. We cannot assume that the people that need that information even have bank accounts. We talk about online banking. Well, a number of people we work with do not have debit and credit cards, so they cannot do online shopping. I think looking at why people are on pay-as-you-go, looking at the real root cause of that in the first place would be a



significant piece of work for me, and then to raise awareness and to avoid the assumption that there is not a thing called data poverty. There absolutely is, but I do not think many people fully appreciate it and fully understand it. When it is getting to a point that it is affecting people's choice to buy food, we need to do something about it.

Q181 Kevin Brennan: I watched your video of Mabel, who was using her tablet to communicate with her relatives, and I noted the point you made about visits to the GP. Certainly in some work I did when I was a Government Minister for the third sector, we found where you gave creative lessons to people in care homes, for example, the bottom line in terms of the price of medicines and basic things, even things like sanitary pads in care homes, became much lower as a result. There was a bottom line impact. Do you have any financial evidence of your wellbeing being improved by access to the digital world that we could use to persuade the Department and the Treasury that this should be invested in?

Nicola Wallace Dean: Personally, and as an organisation the size of ours, no, but I do know that Helen and Good Things do have that information. We have the anecdotal information. We also know that there are hundreds of Mabels in Stockport. That is the person they chose to video, but also she is a social housing tenant. We are not there yet—we will be, I am absolutely adamant that we will be—but her ability to report repairs online, that is a cost-saving benefit for the housing association. Yes, I know that the Good Things Foundation have that information, but I think for us as an organisation, our role is to feed those people into larger networks.

Q182 Kevin Brennan: I am sure they can supply us with that in writing perhaps—I see they are nodding—after the session today. It resonated with me. My own mother, Beryl, is 90 and is living at home, shielding. She has carers come in, but in practical terms how do you, in a period of Covid, get somebody who has never used a digital device before trained up in how to use it and provided with one safely? Is that possible at this time for people like that?

Nicola Wallace Dean: If anybody had asked me two months ago I would potentially have said no, but we are on a huge learning curve, a very steep learning curve, aren't we? What we have realised is you can teach people online skills when they have no online skills, and you can do that online. We have had a lot of support from healthcare providers and the Good Things Foundation on how to be able to supply the device safely, but what we are doing is a three-step process. They need to switch it on, they need to press a button and they need to accept our call. From that point we can support them.

Basically what we are doing is we are getting them to switch the device on and to link to Zoom, and from that point we are able to share our screens and we can do that. The shift for us now is that this is not group sessions. This is one-to-one support, so the need for digital champions is more now than it has ever been, but it is working and we are able to do



it. As I said, if somebody had asked me that question a number of months ago, I would have probably said no. We and hundreds of online centres are testament that we can do that and we can do it safely.

Q183 Kevin Brennan: We know the upsides and the benefits of technology, and you mentioned how lots of people do connect via Facebook on the internet. Are there any downsides to that within a community, in relation to how people communicate on Facebook, in the way that perhaps rumours can spread and all sorts of things can happen? Is there any work being done to try to improve people's knowledge and understanding of fake news not just on a macro level but perhaps on a micro level, at community level, that can be counted for community safety and cohesion?

Nicola Wallace Dean: Yes. For me, Facebook was always a worry. To bring a group of 1,000 individuals together on an open forum is something that we do not want to police, but it does need managing at some point. It was, and it was done not in a way that was particularly obvious. Hopefully it was done in a respectful way. Some posts have been removed but, the more we go on, people are beginning to understand what the norms are and what the rules are, as they would in a face-to-face situation. We are finding—maybe we have been lucky as an organisation—that that is less of an issue than we first anticipated, and we are seeing it as quite a positive place that people want to be at the moment. However, I am a member of other Facebook groups where it is not as positive, so I think that we cannot broad-brush it, but there absolutely needs to be some form of role for people to co-ordinate and potentially manage those groups.

What we are seeing as well, as I said before, we have always been quite adamant that the reason we used to go out and door knock and walk the estates is because we go to where people are. We are based in a coffee shop where people come for coffee, but that does not happen anymore. People are on Facebook, so if we can engage with them there, we can move them on to an area so that we have regular Zoom calls for smaller groups of people that are interested in particular things. We have WhatsApp groups and all that sort of thing, we are engaging on Facebook, we are keeping in contact with people on Facebook, but we are moving them to other forums, just as we would do in the real world.

Kevin Brennan: Thank you, Nicola. It can be very positive. I will be performing on the Canton Community Facebook this evening in our community singalong, so you are welcome to log into that.

Nicola Wallace Dean: Lucky them.

Chair: Thank you for that shameless plug, Kevin. I want to thank you, Nicola, for your evidence today. I also wish to thank Liz Williams and Helen Milner. It has been a really illuminating session. Thank you, all three of you, for staying online as well and listening to each other's evidence. All it calls for now is to end this session.



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