

Written evidence submitted by the Good Things Foundation

DCMS Select Committee Written Evidence Inquiry: Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS Sectors 19.06.20

Introduction

Covid-19 has exposed and exacerbated digital exclusion in the UK. The introduction of social distancing measures and the closure of face-to-face services means that devices, connectivity and digital skills are now essential. Without them, people are completely excluded from essential services and from online access to support from family, friends and their communities. With 1.9 million households lacking access to the internet, and 11.7 million people lacking essential digital skills, we are facing a public emergency.¹

Digital inclusion is no longer a nice-to-have, but a need-to-have. People urgently need access (devices, connectivity), digital skills and support, and funding is critical. The Government has pledged £6.51bn to provide the country with gigabit-capable broadband, but people will not be able to use this infrastructure without digital skills. If just 2% of the infrastructure budget was allocated to digital inclusion, we would make significant progress towards a 100% digitally included nation.

Now is the time to invest, given that an immediate impact of Covid-19 has been a surge in demand for digital skills. We have identified two key audience groups: digitally excluded people (often vulnerable, shielding and/or accessing critical support) and people with some digital skills (often in work or furloughed, and motivated). For the former group, Covid-19 has created a reason for many people to embrace technology, such as communicating with family. Digital is now seen as relevant to their lives, breaking down the motivation barrier, but most people in this group find the internet unaffordable. The second group are digitally upskilling themselves for a number of reasons, including a fear about uncertain employment prospects in the coming year. We must meet the demand for internet access and digital skills for everyone.

We need commitment from Departments across Government for action to close the digital divide and ensure no one is left behind in a post-Covid-19 world.

About Good Things Foundation

Good Things Foundation is the UK's leading digital and social inclusion charity. We bring together a network of thousands of hyperlocal community partners across the country (the Online Centres Network), working together to reach those who need support, often some of the most vulnerable in society. Through our online learning platform, Learn My Way, we've supported more than 3 million people to gain digital skills since 2010.

Our Network partners are all independent of Good Things Foundation - they are small community centres, local charities supporting people with disabilities or unemployment, homeless shelters, job

¹ ONS, Internet access – households and individuals, Great Britain: 2019; ONS, Families and households in the UK: 2019; Lloyds Consumer Digital Index 2020

clubs, libraries, Age UK centres, et al. We call it a 'big club with a shared vision' - a vision of a world where everyone can benefit from digital, and a world where nationally coordinated but hyperlocal, holistic, informal support is available for all who need it. 124 new community partners have joined our Network since 1 April 2020, reflecting growing awareness of digital exclusion and a commitment to act.

This written evidence supplements the oral evidence session on Friday 15 May 2020 focusing on the needs of vulnerable people such as those advised to shield, the Government's role in promoting digital inclusion and what impact digital exclusion could have in the longer-term with the following witnesses:

- Helen Milner OBE, Chief Executive, Good Things Foundation
- Nicola Wallace Dean, Community Organiser, Starting Point
- Liz Williams MBE, Chief Executive, FutureDotNow

What has been the immediate impact of Covid-19 on the sector?

The spread of Covid-19 has forced thousands of community organisations to physically close their doors at a time when they are inundated with people looking for digital skills support and help using computing equipment. With 1.9 million households lacking access to the internet, and 11.7 million people lacking essential digital skills, we are facing a digital exclusion crisis in the UK.²

Our network of community partners (Online Centres) are a lynchpin for local community support providing holistic services to socially isolated groups. They are at the heart of the community, and they know the people locally who are vulnerable and need help. Whilst facing uncertainty themselves concerning their own financial stability, community organisations have risen to the challenge of finding new ways to support people with online access so they can continue their day to day lives.

Transitioning to remote delivery

Almost 700 of our community partners are working with us to deliver support in response to Covid-19, moving to remote delivery by phone and/or via video calling, including learning, support services, social contact and 'check-ins' for the most vulnerable. 44% of our [Learn My Way](#) learners say they have received support from partnered centres during this time.³

Alongside providing digital skills support, our community partners have been providing a number of different holistic services, including delivering food parcels, providing support to women at risk of domestic violence, helping people apply for Universal Credit, and providing digitally excluded people with personalised digital devices through the [DevicesDotNow campaign](#).

- 29% have delivered food and medicines to people self-isolating.
- 64% have made emotional support calls.
- 71% provided advice.

² ONS, Internet access – households and individuals, Great Britain: 2019; ONS, Families and households in the UK: 2019; Lloyds Consumer Digital Index 2020

³ Survey via Learn My Way Newsletter: 26-28 April 2020 (n=144)

- 72% delivered learning and technical support to help people get and remain online, including how to work remotely.⁴

Case studies

Cross Gates Good Neighbours, Leeds

“We are working to support people in two ways: we offer telephone support and the option to join virtual video coffee mornings via Zoom.

The barriers we have encountered via telephone include people not always answering the phone because they have so many scam calls they don't like to answer unknown numbers. Staff are ringing from their own phones and at times withholding their number when they ring. This means that certain telephone blockers won't accept the call. Staff then have to decide if they want to give out their personal number to allow the call to come through. This still doesn't always work because the person may not answer if they don't know the number because they are afraid of nuisance calls.

The barriers we faced included:

- Members were unfamiliar with Zoom and how to use it.
- A need for training people over the phone to use Zoom.
- Lack of confidence at first of seeing themselves on video call.
- Devices which weren't compatible e.g. no microphone or camera.
- Hearing difficulties on calls.
- Lack of skills and confidence in their own IT skills to access the call.

Challenges for running the coffee mornings via Zoom include:

- Managing the call to provide a positive experience.
- Designing sessions which allow for any number to join the call whilst still allowing time for people to speak.
- Zoom can be a noisy place if people don't understand that they can't all talk at once.
- Members' slow internet connection can cause problems for them on a call and they can freeze or their sound breaks up.
- Recent bad publicity around Zoom security has caused people to email me and question using Zoom.
- The age range of our members range from 70 – 95 on our video calls.
- Other barriers have been the concern around e-safety, we use Learn My Way with our members on Zoom to support them through the online safety section to ensure they feel safe and confident online.

We are looking at applying for further funding for some pay as you go phones for staff and volunteers so that they don't have to give out their numbers to members. Then making the members aware of these numbers so that they know it is a safe number to answer.

For our virtual coffee mornings, we first wrote some instructions with screenshots, but because people access via different devices and routes it was impossible to write everything down. We

⁴ Good Things Foundation, Network Coronavirus Response Survey, 23 March 2020 (n=173)

made the decision instead to speak to people one-to-one over the phone and train them to use Zoom and join a call with the Digital worker prior to joining a coffee morning. This gave them time to test their device and gave them the confidence to join a group call.

Our daily programme has been designed to manage the calls regardless of numbers to give people a positive experience. For example we use Zoom breakout rooms for our quiz teams and coffee mornings to break people up into smaller groups. We have speakers on a Tuesday and turn everyone's mic off so people can hear and then have 10 minutes at the end for chat and questions. Every person is welcomed at the start with a quick round robin to see how they are and at the end each person is asked what they are doing for the rest of the day so they all have a wellbeing check as well. We also decided that age wasn't a barrier - with a device, it was possible to train them on Zoom with gentle guidance and encouragement. Our oldest member is 95.

We decided that we wanted to offer some of our sessions online and to give people a way to see each other each day and chat to others. It is good to have a theme for each online session and a programme that you can email out with all of your Zoom links in. Speak to people in your area, because we have found local speakers who have done talks for us over Zoom using the screen share option to show old photos and videos and this has worked really well. Start off with a small group and get them on board and they can support newer members joining the call - digital champions. Keep any training simple, and reduce the number of steps to access the Zoom call to a minimum - don't over complicate it. If it is too complicated, you will lose them before they have even joined."

Being Woman, Northumberland

"The biggest challenge that we faced was getting in contact with people over the internet. Many of our service users do not have proper internet/WiFi facilities in their homes, and they therefore have to use expensive mobile data to communicate with us about classes and sessions. Language barriers are another hurdle for us to tackle as our asylum seeking families have different backgrounds and their own separate languages. Finding translators to be able to communicate with them was an enormous task.

Mental health being the most crucial aspect of our services became the most neglected as we were unable to conduct day to day sessions with our users. Not knowing how or when they needed help was compromising for their health as well as our services.

We had to recruit more staff and volunteers to handle each project separately while giving undivided attention to our users, causing financial constraints as we had to take their pay out of our funding and budgets.

We partnered with DeviceDotNow and provided free tablets to some of our regular service users. We handled the language barrier by hiring more part time employees, language interpreters and volunteers to give one-to-one sessions to our users who have difficulty speaking English.

We have introduced a helpline so that our users can contact us whenever the need may be. This

helpline not only serves as a platform for them to get mental health assistance, but we also see if they need any daily necessity items like grocery or hygiene products and get it delivered to them. We are working alongside Healthwatch Northumberland to make referrals for emergency health and care services.

As far as the financial constraints are concerned, we are still working to improve our situation, but so far we have managed as the trustees of the company have put in their own money to keep the organization up and going - though we are having to look for other funding to operate through this crisis.

A little something that we have learned in this time of crisis is that an organization that was solely made to help people cannot take no for an answer. A few techniques that have helped us survive are:

- Partnering with local small organizations.
- Keeping the spirits of the staff and volunteers high by conducting daily training sessions.
- Being flexible in changing our operations to digital.
- Welcoming and executing any new ideas that our team may have. Experiments never hurt!

As much as we all love positivity, we do know that not everything comes with a solution. We are trying our best to assist those who are experiencing any sort of mental stress, but again, as we are not physically present, assessing their situation is becoming very difficult.”

DevicesDotNow

Remote support can only be accessed by vulnerable people if they have digital devices and connectivity. 1.9 million households don't have access to the internet and are digitally excluded as we face a socially distanced world gripped by Covid-19.⁵ Frontline organisations are in desperate need of digital devices to be able to continue to provide these crucial services.

In partnership with FutureDotNow and backed - but not yet funded - by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Good Things Foundation has been addressing the devices and connectivity gap through the DevicesDotNow campaign. To date, 2023 devices have been distributed to people, supported by donations from numerous companies, organisations and individuals who have provided financial assistance or digital devices to the project.

174 of our Network partners have been involved in distributing these devices and providing support. 54% of community partners who have been offered devices to distribute to local people are located in the 20% most deprived areas (LSOAs) in the UK. 51% of partners are located in the 20% of areas with the largest populations of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) residents.

DevicesDotNow has also been supported by a crowdfunder campaign to help vulnerable adults stay connected during Covid-19 which has seen almost £5000 raised to date, with 50% of this going directly to the purchasing of devices, dongles, SIM cards and mobile hotspots and the other

⁵ ONS, Internet access – households and individuals, Great Britain: 2019; ONS, Families and households in the UK: 2019

50% going towards supporting local community organisations in getting these devices with connectivity out to people.

Insights from our research indicates 79% of people receiving devices through DevicesDotNow report feeling more confident with their digital skills as a result. 90% of people receiving devices say it has had a positive impact on their life in lockdown.

However, with more than 8,000 people on the waiting list, it is clear that demand far exceeds the supply for devices and connectivity. The first [interim impact report](#) was published in May 2020, outlining this issue, and the next interim report is due 29 June 2020.

Financial pressures

As funding sources have been cut off for many community organisations, financial pressures have increased dramatically. Some grants awarded prior to the outbreak of Covid-19 have been withdrawn, and at the same time, organisations are unable to provide paid services. This has resulted in cash flow issues that have placed many of our community partners under insurmountable financial strain, with no income or savings to service operational costs, which include business rates, rent, utilities bills, telephone lines, insurance, software licences and broadband.

Good Things Foundation launched the Response and Resilience Fund in April with £375,000 from our reserves as an immediate response to support the organisations at risk of closure due to income and cash flow issues. The fund aimed to enable our community partners to continue to support local communities and to be financially sustainable, in order to be in a position to reopen once the current challenges subside.

Applications closed with almost 300 applications for 100 grants; this shows a huge need for funding for communities. Network partners noted the fund gave them breathing space for addressing immediate needs as well as giving them support for the growing demands on them from local communities.

Increased demand for digital skills

One immediate impact has been the increased interest in learning digital skills. In a survey of people who have registered to use our online learning platform, Learn My Way, 76% answered they have become more interested in developing new digital skills since the outbreak of Covid-19.⁶ At the same time, 44% answered that accessing and using computers/the internet has become more challenging.

Online courses are the preferred way to learn new digital skills during Covid-19. People state that they prefer self-led learning methods, with group and one-on-one virtual learning appearing to be less popular. The top three preferred methods for learning new digital skills are: 41% online courses; 15% instructions sent via email; 11% online instructional videos.⁷

⁶ Learn My Way Survey, 14 April 2020 (n=253 people)

⁷ Learn My Way Survey, 14 April 2020 (n=253 people)

The “trending” courses on Learn My Way, which have increased in popularity over recent months, are the basics (using a keyboard, mouse, email etc), video calling, and the Office programs courses (documents, spreadsheets etc).

The Department for Education (DfE) launched [The Skills Toolkit](#) on 28 April, providing links to free online courses, tools and resources to help people improve their digital and numeracy skills. Good Things Foundation is proud to be offering introductory digital skills courses as part of The Skills Toolkit through our online learning platforms [Learn My Way](#) and [Make it Click](#). Over 37,000 course starts have been made on Learn My Way and 12,000 on Make It Click, in the period following the launch.

Who is demanding digital skills?

We have identified two distinct audience groups in need of digital skills following the impact of Covid-19:

- Group 1: digitally excluded/vulnerable/shielding/accessing critical support
- Group 2: people with some digital skills/in work/furloughed/motivated/educated

Audience Group 1: digitally excluded/vulnerable/shielding/accessing critical support

The first group demanding digital skills are those who are digitally excluded (defined as lacking essential digital skills and/or access to a device with connectivity), vulnerable, shielding and/or accessing critical support. Insight for this group comes from the DevicesDotNow beneficiary registration survey.⁸

With community organisations closing, many people lost spaces where they have built up trusting relationships with staff and volunteers. They are without access to the digital infrastructures that have helped them maintain connections with friends and family around the world.

Many attendees of these trusted spaces often face numerous challenges such as lacking digital skills, unemployment, poor mental health and caring responsibilities. The survey responses indicated that now that people are unable to attend physically, and experience the personal connection this entails, these challenges were scaling up in their severity and the intersectionality of these challenges becoming increasingly apparent.

In the responses however, community partners identified that if the beneficiaries were to receive one of the digital devices with internet connectivity through DevicesDotNow, these devices would act as a ‘circuit breakers’ in the cycles of challenges people were facing. By giving people these valuable tools for connection, partners believed it would allow many vulnerable people to get to grips with one challenge, thereby making them better equipped to deal with the next, and so on. For example, a device enabling contact with family leads to reduced social isolation and loneliness, in turn improving mental health and a desire to develop more basic digital skills.

One key positive to note is that for some members of this audience group, Covid-19 has tackled the motivation barrier. Previously, many digitally excluded people failed to see how the internet was relevant to them; however, with the suspension of face-to-face services, the internet has become essential, for example shopping for non-essential items.

⁸ DevicesDotNow beneficiary registration survey, April 2020 (n=858 people)

Case studies

Lucy is a Universal Credit claimant who is keen to learn digital skills but cannot do so from home as she relied on the Job Centre for this before lockdown. In addition, she suffers from arthritis and has been advised to self-isolate. This all means she is really struggling and is in pain when she has to go shopping. A device would help her with online ordering and allow her to keep in touch with a number of health professionals and video conferencing with her GP to help her to manage her condition. She also has children and wants to help them with schooling. (Female 25-44)

Amin is an asylum seeker who suffers from mental health problems, very low mood, is at high risk of suicide and self harm and is on various medication. He is on a low income and cannot afford a device or internet. The device will let him talk to his friends at the centre, allow him to continue with his learning and keep him entertained. (Male 25-44)

Lucy has two children, and her older daughter cannot access the home schooling app due to not enough memory on Lucy's phone. This is becoming a daily struggle and is having an effect on her well-being. Many areas of Lucy's life are out of control and her current need to homeschool and support for the children is a major stress as she does not have a laptop or tablet. (Female 25-44)

Audience Group 2: people with some digital skills/in work/furloughed/motivated/educated

The second group demanding digital skills consists of people with some digital skills, often either in employment or furloughed, motivated to learn and educated. Our insight about this audience group is drawn from Learn My Way data.⁹

Since lockdown, we've seen an increase in the proportion of employed people registering for Learn My Way. After the Department for Education's Skills Toolkit launched on 28 April, the majority of new registrations were people in employment: 1/3 were looking for work, but 2/3 were not.

The vast majority of new registrations have some existing internet ability, with 3/4 saying they can already use social networking and make online purchases. Most new registrations are of working age, presumably driven by The Skills Toolkit traffic. Roughly 2/3 are aged 45-64 and 1/4 are aged 25-44.

There has been a significant increase in the proportion of people accessing Learn My Way independently from home while on furlough or home working. These learners are more likely to be women of older working age (45-64), with some existing digital skills, and currently in employment in clerical, administrative, and sales and services roles.

These learners are not intimidated by digital technology: they think it's relevant to their lives, and that they can learn new skills if they need to, although free-text responses reveal some anxiety related to the impact of Covid-19 on current and future work.

⁹ Learn My Way Survey, April 2020 (*n*=393 people)

The furlough scheme and homeworking are creating both the need and the opportunity for digital skills learning, although workers do not necessarily know how to approach learning digital skills in a structured way.

Case studies

“We're in the middle of the Coronavirus and I'm working from home. Unfortunately, my role doesn't easily move from the office to the home environment. We've been asked to undertake training from home and Learn My Way was one of the offers. It's enabling me to revisit what I know and how I can add to it.” - Clerical worker (Female, 55-64)

“I'm currently on furlough and worried about my job as I'm only self taught on a computer. Would like more skills in case I need to find new employment after furlough.”
- Clerical worker (Female, 45-54)

“I am not very confident with a lot of the features, apps and tools available. I know I need to improve and learn a lot more. I am facing many challenges at the moment because I am working remotely and it has been very, very frustrating not being able to deal with some tasks.” - Professional or higher technical worker (Female, 45-54)

How effectively has the support provided by DCMS, other Government departments and arms-length bodies addressed the sector's needs?

Though welcome, the support provided by DCMS and other Government departments has been insufficient to meet the scale of the digital exclusion crisis we are experiencing in the UK.

The Department for Education announced that disadvantaged children across England are set to receive laptops and tablets as part of a push to make remote education accessible for pupils staying at home during the coronavirus outbreak. The Government is also providing 4G routers to make sure disadvantaged secondary school pupils and care leavers can access the internet where those families do not already have mobile or broadband internet in the household.

However, there is still a gap in provision for disadvantaged adults and their families. DevicesDotNow aims to tackle this gap in provision, and has been backed, but not yet funded, by DCMS. The Minister of State for Digital and Culture, Caroline Dinenage MP, has written to industry leaders to support the DevicesDotNow campaign.

However, this is not enough. The infrastructure is in place to reach the people who are in need of devices and digital skills support, and with a waiting list of more than 8,000 people (with no real promotion), there is significant unmet demand for devices, connectivity and digital skills support. The Scottish Government has committed £5m to the [Connecting Scotland scheme](#), but England has seen no equivalent investment.

Funding is essential to ensure vulnerable people can get online - many of whom are shielding, and without devices or connectivity are unable to act on Government advice to stay at home.

DCMS is the policy lead for digital inclusion, and yet is without sufficient funding to effectively implement it. This means that important policy is falling down the gaps, and digitally excluded people, who are often socially excluded as well, are going to be left further behind.

Zero-rating - removing data usage fees so they do not count towards any data cap in place on the internet service - should be extended to include online digital skills resources to tackle the digital skills gap. This is a realistic ambition - as part of the Department for Education's response to digital exclusion, the Government has been working with telecommunications providers to make it easier for families to access selected educational resources by temporarily exempting these sites from data charges.

Data poverty continues to be a key issue, with many vulnerable people facing a choice between food and data. A root cause of data poverty is unaffordable monthly broadband and data bills. One option for DCMS to explore with telcos is data gifting - the practice of pooling any unused bandwidth to provide connectivity options to those who cannot afford it. [Optus Australia](#), for example, allows individuals to donate to other Australians; every month, data donations are pooled and then distributed as an added data boost to help young Australians realise their full potential, with over 10,520,969 GB of data donated since December 2019.

What will the likely long-term impacts of Covid-19 be on the sector, and what support is needed to deal with those?

The increased importance of devices, connectivity and digital skills is a long-term impact of Covid-19. Internet access is now an essential utility, and should be treated as such.

The impact of Covid-19 has exacerbated the problems that were already present before the current crisis. The vulnerable groups who need support now are the same people who needed support before. The issues of digital and social exclusion have been exposed and exacerbated, and the Government must make digital and social inclusion a priority now and in the long-term.

This means committing more funding towards digital inclusion. The Government has pledged £6.51bn to provide the country with gigabit-capable broadband, but people will not be able to use this infrastructure without digital skills. If just 2% of the infrastructure budget was allocated to digital skills, we would make significant progress tackling digital exclusion. We need significant investment in people to ensure everyone can access the benefits of digital.

The Government must acknowledge the importance of the community sector in reaching and supporting socially isolated and vulnerable groups, and their crucial role in offering holistic support before, during and after the current crisis. Long-term investment in grassroots organisations is vital to ensure we are able to continue to support the most vulnerable people in our society.

Digital inclusion is no longer a nice-to-have, but a need-to-have. Digital inclusion must therefore be embedded into all social policy, and must be a key consideration in the policy-making process across all departments. We need commitment from across Government to address the digital divide and ensure no one is left behind in a post-Covid-19 world.