Staying Connected

Assessing digital inclusion during the coronavirus pandemic

includem

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Staying Connected: Assessing Digital inclusion during the coronavirus pandemic

We are includem

Our mission: To provide the support young people need to make positive changes in their lives, and inspire a more hopeful future for young people, their families and communities.

Our vision: A world where every young person is respected, valued, and has the opportunity to actively participate in all aspects of life and society.

We work closely with children, young people, and their families, who are facing difficult challenges in their lives. Our trust-based, inclusive model of support is centred on the needs of each young person. We help young people make positive life choices and empower them to transform their lives; creating better outcomes for young people and their communities.

Background

The coronavirus pandemic and the mitigations introduced to limit its spread have had a profound effect on all of us. However, it is already painfully clear that the social and economic fallout from this crisis is going to hit hardest those who were already marginalised and struggling. Most of the young people and families we support are living in the most deprived areas of Scotland and experiencing poverty. Improvement Service research has acknowledged that young people, women and those on low incomes are going to be hit the worst by this crisis, and are unlikely to have any savings to help cover additional unplanned costs or gaps in income.[1]

With lockdown and social distancing measures in place, many services and organisations are trying to continue to deliver services and support young people and families remotely. Schools, social work teams and third sector organisations, such as includem, are rapidly developing and adapting their delivery of support to include online and telephone models of contact.[2] Similarly, people are now having to apply for and access benefits remotely. This requires families to have access to data, devices and digital knowledge. For those experiencing digital exclusion, therefore, this change in the accessibility and delivery of

services can lead to even greater disadvantage. Despite this fact, there is little hard data about the extent of digital exclusion for children, young people and families across Scotland.[3]

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[1] https://www.improvementservice.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/17512/COVID-19-Research_20200506.pdf
[2] https://www.gov.scot/publications/supporting-vulnerable-children-young-people-data-intelligence-report/
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ncludem recognises the need to ensure we had the fullest picture possible of the levels of digital exclusion that the children, young people and families we support might be facing, not only so we can continue to engage with those we support, but also to make sure they have the means to continue to access services and participate in society as fully as possible.

We surveyed 150 families via phone call, to understand their current access to digital devices and services, the barriers they might be facing and any concerns they may have.

Key findings

1. **20% of those surveyed do not have access to all the devices that they need**

   For those young people and families who reported not having the devices they need, there were a number of reasons identified. Families are having to share mobile phones either because they can't afford to replace breakages or the household simply could not afford multiple mobile phones. Access to laptops and/or tablets is varied – some young people have been provided with devices by their school while others are without or on a waiting list. For some that do have access to laptops/tablets, these are often shared with parents or siblings, or the devices are too old and slow to allow young people to do their school work.

   "Could do with another phone but can't afford the bill."

   "We only have one mobile phone."

   Even if families have access to devices, not everyone has the confidence or knowledge to use them. This was identified as an issue for 14 families surveyed, with parents and carers identified as struggling to use the technology. This was either due to inexperience or, in some cases, learning difficulties.

   "Myself and my sister can but my Dad can't. Dad has issues with reading and writing and so would struggle to use technology."

2. **A third (33%) of the young people and families surveyed did not feel they would be able to afford ongoing costs.**

   Ongoing costs could include paying for access to the internet, maintenance of devices, replacing breakages if they occur, pay for enough data, games etc. without coming into financial difficulty. Breakages were identified as the biggest worry for families, as many would not be able to afford an immediate replacement.

   "I have Internet access but I would have to try and save up if it broke to repair as on benefits."

   "I would not be able to afford to replace my mobile if it broke."

"Having 5 children with various devices, this can be very difficult."

Our workers have told us that *"often phones are broken, no tablets or laptops"*, *"families only have phones which are often broken"* and *"they are a low income family who rely on food packages"*. It is clear that, even if families have access to devices at the moment, this could very easily change if they cannot afford to be replaced should they break.

3. **16% of those surveyed access the internet via their mobile data**

Most young people and families have a broadband wifi connection for accessing the internet. However, 16% of those surveyed have to use mobile data instead. For some young people living in residential units, access to wifi is limited, either because it is not provided 24/7 or because they have to pay to access it. In some cases, it was reported there was no wifi provision at all.

For some families, they simply cannot afford a broadband connection. Even for those families that do have wifi, their connections are becoming increasingly unreliable during lockdown, most likely due to increased regional pressures on the network as more people work from home.

"My dad pays for my data, no wifi in the unit"

"Mum doesn't have wifi. I use my own 4G or hotspot of my mums when I have none left. I have a broadband dongle which includem prepaid through the Young Person's Fund with 28GB on it but I've used that. I can top the dongle up at grans - Gran has wifi."

4. **11% do not have devices with video call functionality, with 1 in 4 saying using video calling would put pressure on their data allowances.**

Video calling and teleconferencing is being widely adopted by many statutory services and third sector organisations. At includem we are also using video calls to provide the emotional support families need and in high risk situations. Whilst most young people and families can use video calls on their devices without great concern about the impact on their bills, the fact that there is a number that can't is a potential barrier to engaging with services, and could lead to greater social isolation.

How is includem helping to combat this

includem has always sought to provide young people with the tools they need to work towards a better life and participate fully in society, be they emotional, social or material. The latter is typically provided through our Young Person's Fund.

"I currently have a mobile phone which includem purchased for me to communicate with my workers. I should also be receiving a laptop today or tomorrow (worker applied through YPF) and I will be able to do everything that I need to do - apply for college and online learning."

Since the beginning of lockdown in Scotland, includem has used over £17,000 of this fund to provide young people and their families with the financial and material support they need to get through this Covid-19 emergency. This has included providing 33 young people and families with the equipment they need to become digitally included: mobile phones, top-up cards, data allowances, laptops, tablets and chargers. This has been supported by generous donations from the Corra Foundation and Foundation Scotland's Community Response, Recovery, Resilience Fund.

Through includem's ongoing relationship workers can and will provide guidance and support for children, young people and families to develop the skills to use this technology safely and appropriately.

Conclusion

Covid-19 will impact how services are delivered for many months to come. Many of the statutory services, including social work and the Scottish Children's Reporters Administration are now holding meetings remotely and are encouraging participation from young people and families through video and tele conferencing. To exert and protect their rights it is imperative that children, young people and families are able to participate in decisions that affect them and their families. Families tell us that they already feel disempowered and their voices are often not heard in formal meetings and decision-making forums. This will only increase if they do not have access to devices and data that supports their participation.

Similarly, it is likely that young people will be accessing most of their education remotely for some time. The young people we support are already adversely affected by the poverty related attainment gap which will only widen without consistent and financially secure access to devices and data which supports their remote learning.

Social isolation and distancing has been linked to increased anxiety, depression, stress and other negative feelings which can have a detrimental effect on health and wellbeing. These risk factors are also associated with poverty, which in itself increases the likelihood of social isolation.[4]

This is why the findings of our digital inclusion survey are concerning. Whilst some of the reported numbers might seem relatively small, they are not insignificant. Because they are not just numbers, they are people. People who were already experiencing poverty and

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[4] https://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/esss-outlines/covid-19-social-isolation-and-loneliness

marginalisation, whose needs are not being met, and whose rights are at risk of being eroded.

Our vision is a world where every young person is respected, valued, and has the opportunity to actively participate in all aspects of life and society. Ensuring digital inclusion for all is one of the ways that we can achieve that vision.

Recommendations

We welcome recent Scottish Government commitments to tackle digital exclusion, including the Connecting Scotland programme and the £30m investment to provide disadvantaged children and young people with laptops to support home learning, recently announced by the First Minister. We would recommend that, just as the Connecting Scotland programme will see the third sector act as one of the leads in identifying people to receive devices, distributing them and providing training and support[5], this should also be the case for providing disadvantaged children and young people with laptops.

We know from experience that many of the young people who are currently socially isolated and digitally excluded were disengaged from education prior to lockdown and school closures. It is important that these young people are prioritised for equipment and support. However, they are unlikely to accept it through the formal education system and there is a risk that they won't receive what they need due to low attendance rates. It is imperative that they are supported by third sector agencies to access technology, learning and to reengage with education.

Digital exclusion is the result, in the most part, of entrenched poverty. While includem welcomes the investment by Scottish Government in equipment we would call for broadband to be economically accessible for all.

Fundamentally it is not enough to provide equipment. We have to address the underlying causes of poverty. Scottish children and families need jobs, wages and benefits that lift people out of poverty and allows them the dignity to maintain their own social and digital inclusion.

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[5] https://www.gov.scot/news/getting-people-online/

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