

NOT-EQUAL

COVID-19 Call to Action Report 2nd June 2020

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has forced many to use digital technology to deliver their services or to stay connected. The crisis also mobilised community solidarity and organising everywhere, some of which was enabled by digital technology. The switch to using digital technology to support communities was not a smooth transition for all.

In this context, between 21 April and 19 May 2020 Not-Equal engaged with 21 representatives of Not-Equal non-academic members organisations – mainly community and voluntary groups – to find out how they were using technology to work with their constituencies and what issues they were facing as they tried to continue to work with the communities they support during lockdown. Conversations were carried out via Zoom or email exchanges, although in some cases respondents used a Google form set up for this purpose.

1. Focus of conversations

Our conversations focused on the following questions:

1. How are you supporting your community using the internet/digital technology; what is the best way you have found to do so?
2. What is the biggest challenge you are currently experiencing when using technology to support your community (and why is it the biggest challenge)?
3. What is the one change in technology use that would make your job of supporting vulnerable groups in the current crisis easier?
4. What is your biggest concern and hope in relation to technology use to support your communities post-Covid-19?

2. Participating organisations

The following lists the organisations that responded to our call, and their client groups (those they support or work with):

- **Action Foundation:** asylum-seekers and refugees
- **Altitude Foundation:** supports disadvantaged young people in the north-east to access STEM careers
- **Digital Catapult:** tech & digital start-ups
- **Elders Council Newcastle:** people over 50
- **Fulfilling Lives:** people with multiple and complex needs (MCN)
- **Groundwork UK:** federation that manages programmes and relationships in disadvantaged communities
- **Helix Arts:** provides artistic opportunities for children and young people at risk, low-income adults, people with special educational needs, people with poor health, older people
- **Hull Carers Group:** people caring for someone who has a mental illness
- **Hull Live at Home Scheme:** supporting older people to maintain their independence
- **Humbercare Ltd:** people with MCN especially experiencing homelessness, ex-offenders



Engineering and
Physical Sciences
Research Council

Open Lab
at Newcastle
University

US
UNIVERSITY
OF SUSSEX



Prifysgol
Abertawe
Swansea
University

NOT-EQUAL

- **JustFair:** monitors and advocates economic and social rights in the UK through research, campaigns, training and events
- **Matthew's Hub:** people with autism without a learning disability
- **Meadow Well Connected:** community hub in Meadowell
- **New Roots:** asylum-seekers and refugees
- **Newcastle City of Sanctuary:** asylum-seekers and refugees
- **Penparcau Community Forum:** supports grassroots activity in deprived Welsh (speaking) community
- **Recovery College Collective (ReCoCo):** people who have experienced mental health problems
- **Success4All:** children and young people in West End of Newcastle
- **Tyne & Wear Citizens:** community organising
- **VONNE:** supports charities, voluntary and community groups, and social enterprises in the North East
- **3rd Cleethorpes Scout Group:** children and young people

3. Summary

Some respondents highlighted that the provision of their services via digital technology enabled engagement and inclusion of new service users. This was countered by the disappearance of other long-standing service users. Here issues of digital inequities and exclusion (access to hardware, wifi, data as well as skills and language barriers) were raised as the principal reasons for the disappearance of some beneficiaries.

Other respondents highlighted that some services demanded their redesign in order to accommodate a digital offer and lacking capacity and knowledge delivery halted.

The use of digital technology in some cases translated in a smoother and more effective service provision for some beneficiaries. It also sparked additional concerns in relation to digital wellbeing and safety. The challenges of meeting expectations and maintaining a digital offer post-Covid-19.

4. Common challenges

Some common themes arose from these conversations. These are: digital exclusion (access, skills and attitudes, physical and language barriers); wellbeing; increasing divides and the erosion of democracy; culture change and a change in the types of interactions with clients / programme participants. While some of these concerns are not new in the area of digital exclusion, their particularities and significance are brought to the forefront by living conditions and ways people had to adapt during the pandemic.

4.1. Digital inequities and exclusion

This was by far the most common challenge groups faced when trying to shift their work online during the pandemic. The principle reasons given for people experiencing digital exclusion were: access; skills and attitudes; physical and language barriers.

Access



Engineering and
Physical Sciences
Research Council



NOT-EQUAL

- Economic reasons, i.e. inability to pay for hardware / data / broadband
- No internet coverage or patchy connections

The following groups expressed particular concerns in this area: *Action Foundation, Altitude Foundation, Fulfilling Lives, Groundwork UK, Helix Arts, Hull Carers, Just Fair, Matthew's Hub, MeadowWell Connected, Newcastle City of Sanctuary, Pemparcaw Community Forum, ReCoCo, Success4All, Tyne & Wear Citizens, VONNE, 3rd Cleethorpes Scouts.*

Skills and attitudes

- Lack of skills / digital literacy
- Aversion
- Fear of technology / lack of trust

The following groups expressed particular concerns in this area: *Action Foundation, Altitude Foundation, Elders Council, Fulfilling Lives, Groundwork UK, Helix Arts, Hull Carers, Hull Live at Home Scheme, Meadow Well Connected, New Roots, Newcastle City of Sanctuary, ReCoCo, Success4All, VONNE.*

Physical/language barriers

- Physical difficulties (e.g. a lack of information in British Sign Language, older people with manual dexterity problems, disability such as blindness where other people don't know how to use the adapted software.)
- Language barriers

The following groups expressed particular concerns in this area: *Action Foundation, Elders Council, Fulfilling Lives, Groundwork UK, Helix Arts, Hull Carers, Hull Live at Home Scheme, Meadow Well Connected, New Roots, Newcastle City of Sanctuary, ReCoCo, Success4All, VONNE.*

"Poverty is the biggest factor in this as well as lack of tech knowledge"

"Clients are reluctant to download/install software onto their own devices, out of a pervasive perception that any form of download is unsafe."

"It doesn't matter how good our digital services are if the people who need them most are unable to access them."

"The nature of our communities is that they are vulnerable and excluded; this means that they don't necessarily have access to tech."

4.2. Wellbeing

A different way of working throws up its own challenges, some of which are articulated around the wellbeing of already vulnerable groups. Broadly these challenges were perceived as:



Engineering and
Physical Sciences
Research Council

Open Lab
at Newcastle
University

US
UNIVERSITY
OF SUSSEX



Prifysgol
Abertawe
Swansea
University

NOT-EQUAL

- safeguarding e.g. young people using chat functions with no moderation, or unearthing feelings online, leaving people alone with their grief or other difficult feelings
- mental health problems are exacerbated
- loss of intimacy; some issues are sensitive and difficult to 'broadcast' onto a screen, or when the internet can cut off in the middle of a challenging or emotional subject
- wariness of how to interact or engage as people are aware of online security issues but perhaps don't know how to protect themselves
- aversion to seeing own face / being seen on screen
- invasion of privacy, such as people being able to see who is in your home
- Screen fatigue and exhaustion from learning to use multiple platforms / trying to find out what tech is out there & what are its functionalities

The following groups expressed particular concerns in this area: *Action Foundation, Digital Catapult, Fulfilling Lives, Helix Arts, Matthew's Hub, Newcastle City of Sanctuary, ReCoCo, Tyne & Wear Citizens*

Digital exclusion "can have a knock-on effect on mental health as people who already have mental health problems start to suffer from increased isolation and lack of ability to contact friends and family, e.g. in Iran which has been hard hit by the crisis."

"Via digital you are not able to pick up on visual clues. Sometimes there is a risk of misinterpretation".

"People who are shielding, or not meant to be going out at all, e.g. the immunocompromised, have anxiety heightened by their now increasingly limited socialisation."

"Human interaction is vital in many kinds of community/social/health work ..."

4.3. Increasing divides and the erosion of democracy

As activities such as education and educational support moved online, service-providers were aware that children and young people from less advantaged backgrounds were being further disadvantaged, either because of digital exclusion and/or because of lack of self-motivation and/or parental motivation, or parental language skills and access.

Another concern is that some already socially-isolated people may be reluctant to leave their homes and re-engage in person because they have come to rely on tech, thus exacerbating social isolation, a sedentary lifestyle etc.

Finally, it was thought that an erosion of democracy was possible if there was not the physical space for groups and communities to act together and to feel the power of alliance together.

NOT-EQUAL

The following groups expressed concerns in this area: *Action Foundation, Altitude Foundation, Newcastle City of Sanctuary, Penparcau Community Forum, Tyne & Wear Citizens*

“We don’t know how many of them are not engaging because of technological or practical constraints and how many of them are not engaging because of a lack of motivation.”

“We have a Facebook Page, which I add some things to - but again it isn't used much by the students who really need the most help.”

4.4. Sustainability

Two organisations – Success4All and Digital Catapult – expressed concern about financial sustainability: either their own sustainability or that of the entities and groups they were supporting. Another group, Helix Arts, expressed concerns about the sustainability of their digital offer: *“We are increasing digital participation and therefore increasing expectations and how do we sustain that afterwards? Post-pandemic, we will be returning resources to the physical but people might still expect us to maintain the digital services.”*

4.5. Culture change and ways of interacting with clients/participants

A different way of working throws up its own challenges. Some of these are outlined in the wellbeing section, and others are similar to challenges faced by other sectors moving their activities online where some activities have simply had to be dropped as they could not be done digitally. Other challenges included the loss of impact of social interactions (e.g. how can you demonstrate ‘people power’ over Zoom); culture change – adapting to a new way of working: e.g. exploring etiquette of videoconferencing; using digital solutions is time-consuming for the uninitiated.

The following groups expressed concerns in this area: *Altitude Foundation, Elders Council, Fulfilling Lives, Helix Arts, Hull Carers, Matthew’s Hub, Penparcau Community Forum, ReCoCo, Success4All, Tyne & Wear Citizens.*

“We need to be able to communicate with a large number of people instantaneously whilst also maintaining personal contact”

“We are leading more than we usually do and so there is less fluidity and more caution about how people are interacting.”

“We had been hoping to build up to work experience for some of the older kids, but this is just not going to happen.”

“The infrastructure of care is missing: We are reduced to an instrumental conversation when what it's really supposed to be is giving and receiving – for mothers to be able to have a cup of tea & biscuits while the children are looked after by volunteers. That stuff really matters.”



Engineering and
Physical Sciences
Research Council



at Newcastle
University



Prifysgol
Abertawe
Swansea
University

NOT-EQUAL

5. Positive aspects

Some positive aspects also arose, or could arise, from the situation, however.

5.1. Moving digital inclusion for all up the political agenda

The sudden digitalisation of many services (or at least attempts to digitalise services) alongside the closure of centres and service-providers showed how critical digital access has become. Some referred to it as something that should be regarded as an essential right (like water).

The following groups expressed hopes that as a result of the pandemic experience, digital inclusion could be reconsidered as high priority on the agenda: *Action Foundation, Altitude Foundation, Fulfilling Lives, Helix Arts, JustFair, ReCoCo, Success4All, Tyne & Wear Citizens.*

5.2. Digital provision of service ability to increase inclusion and engagement of some citizens

Despite some service users having ‘disappeared’ during the pandemic, others – who were previously not engaged – were able to benefit from the digitalisation of some services and partake in activities via digital means. The following groups expressed positive experiences in this regard: *Elders Council, Fulfilling Lives, Matthew’s Hub*: “Remote support seems to fit some members more”

5.3. Simplified or improved procedures

Fulfilling Lives and *Newcastle City of Sanctuary (NCoS)* expressed hopes and positive experiences in the way the use of digital technology to deliver some of their services appeared to simplify some of their procedures. *Fulfilling Lives* described how their beneficiaries were able to access particular medicines “whereas it before there would have been a lot of hoops to jump through” i.e. the process of obtaining the particular medicine was simplified by the NHS.

5.4. Sharing of experiences between organisation

The following groups expressed hopes that as a result of the current situation there would be more dialogue and cooperation between organisations in their efforts to support their communities through digital technology and in times of social distancing: *Action Foundation, Fulfilling Lives, ReCoCo.*

6. The one thing that could make a difference

6.1. Free universal access to the internet for all people (e.g. free city-wide wifi)

The following groups made this suggestion: *Action Foundation, Altitude Foundation, Digital Catapult, Fulfilling Lives, Helix Arts, Hull Carers, JustFair, Newcastle City of Sanctuary, Penparcau Community Forum, ReCoCo, Success4All, VONNE, 3rd Cleethorpes Scouts*

NOT-EQUAL

6.2. Getting **hardware** to people how needs it

The following groups made this suggestion: *Hull Live at Home Scheme, ReCoCo, VONNE, 3rd Cleethorpes Scouts*

6.3. **Training and education** on use of tech

The following groups made this suggestion: *JustFair, ReCoCo, Success4All*

6.4. **Accessible/ user-friendly** technology: at the moment terminology is opaque, all apps are different, difficult to use for some individuals (eg physical disability)

The following groups made this suggestion: *Altitude Foundation, Digital Catapult, Elders Council, New Roots, Succes4All*

6.5. **Wellbeing pack** with resources and guidance about how you keep yourself safe online which could include things like changing your background so your privacy is not invaded; how to organise breakout spaces and more broadly how the switch to service provision online could be supported from a wellbeing perspective, including ethics.

The following groups made this suggestion: *Fulfilling Lives, Vonne, Action Foundation, Digital Catapult, Helix Arts, Matthew's Hub, Newcastle City of Sanctuary, ReCoCo, Tyne & Wear Citizens.*

6.6. More **agile digital solutions** than being tethered to a computer or internet

The following groups made this suggestion: *Penparcau Community Forum, Tyne&Wear Citizens*

7. Next Steps and Future actions

Based on these conversations, Not-Equal is proposing the following responses, that might be useful and supportive to the ongoing work, challenges and opportunities outlined above.

- **Digital Wellbeing pack**
A pack offering guidance & resources to support wellbeing when using digital technology. This pack will comprise of existing resources, which we will collate, including guidance on e-safety and existing digital tools to support digital wellbeing.
- **A participatory review of Digital Skills and Training Programmes**
A series of workshops designed to foster a participatory evaluation of past and current training programmes in IT in order to support sharing of best and worst practices; the shared insights from these workshops aims to support the development of present and future IT skills training.
- **Diving into the Digital delivery of Services**
Workshops to support a participatory exploration of the concrete challenges and ethical dilemmas that the sudden digitalisation of services brought about.

If any of the above would be of interest to you, get in touch: notequal@ncl.ac.uk or Clara.crivellaro@ncl.ac.uk



Engineering and
Physical Sciences
Research Council

Open Lab
at  Newcastle
University

US
UNIVERSITY
OF SUSSEX



Prifysgol
Abertawe
Swansea
University