



## ***Can the use of technology help to reduce social isolation and loneliness?***

An in-depth study of digital inclusion projects for older people living with, or at risk, of social isolation and loneliness before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

### **SUMMARY REPORT**

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(April 2021)

# Summary

## Background

'Connect Hackney', based in the East London borough of Hackney, is one of 14 'Ageing Better' programmes located across England which aim to tackle social isolation and loneliness amongst people aged 50 and over. The Ageing Better programme runs from 2015 – 2022 and is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund.

Like other Ageing Better sites, Connect Hackney commissioned several projects to support older people to develop digital skills. There has been growing interest in the potential for technology to facilitate older people's social contact and participation and reduce the digital divide between older people and those who have grown up with online and digital technology in their daily lives. Research to date reveals limited evidence on the effectiveness of interventions in this area. This report shares learning from an in-depth study of two Connect Hackney digital inclusion (DI) projects – *@online club* and *Silver Connections* – which were delivered by local community organisations. *@online clubs* were 8-week group sessions which aimed to build older people's skills in using a tablet device while *Silver Connections* groups were 6-week group sessions in using a smartphone. Both projects aimed to develop participants' confidence and skills in using applications ('Apps') and the internet.

## Aims and methods

The research described in this report is part of a broader local evaluation of the Connect Hackney programme which is guided by a set of eight "test and learn" questions. This report addresses whether the use of technology can help to reduce social isolation and loneliness. The report aims to inform commissioners, policy makers and practitioners responsible for increasing digital inclusion as part of a strategy to improve the social connectedness of older people. The research explored project implementation and adaptation; project reach, engagement and retention of participants; perceived impact on confidence and skills in using digital devices, use of digital devices to support social participation and, ultimately, social isolation and loneliness. It updates and extends an earlier report<sup>1</sup> using additional data collected during the COVID-19 pandemic. The final study was able to explore the digital inclusion projects and their impact *before and during* the pandemic. Multiple methods were employed in the study design: observations of four digital inclusion project sessions with 25 participants; in-depth interviews with nine project participants and six project providers; and analysis of surveys completed by 84 participants at project entry<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Herlitz, L., Lombardo, C., Harden, A. (2020). An in-depth study of digital inclusion projects for older people living with or at risk of social isolation and loneliness, interim report. London: HCVS.

<sup>2</sup> The study was undertaken at two time points: Sep – Dec 2019 prior to the pandemic (T1) and Jul – Sep 2020 during the pandemic (T2). Observation sessions were undertaken at T1. Participant numbers at each session ranged from two to 11 with 25 participants taking part in observed project sessions overall. Six participants were interviewed at T1 and three of these took part in a follow-up interview at T2. Three further participants were interviewed at T2. Four providers were interviewed at T1 and one of these took part in a follow-up interview. Two further providers were interviewed at T2. Survey data were collected at T1 only.

## Findings

### Establishing and developing the digital inclusion projects in the first year

- **Informational materials and outreach work at local events and places were needed to promote the projects.** @online club used a broad range of methods to recruit participants, including taster sessions, mail-outs and leafleting, and attendance at local events/meetings. Silver Connections successfully promoted the project at a local leisure centre and through other in-house projects.
- **In addition to recruitment and promotional efforts, project location could influence the diversity of participants attending projects.** The age and ethnicity profiles differed by project. Some groups of participants were less well represented in projects and are likely to need targeted outreach to engage them, for example, men and older residents from Asian and Chinese communities.
- **Both projects employed a flexible and social approach to learning, building on participants' individual interests. The degree of structure within each project differed.** @online clubs offered more structured sessions with smaller groups where the class followed the same steps together using the same device. Silver Connections sessions had larger groups and participants used different devices. Consequently, there was more unstructured time when participants were waiting to receive assistance or were figuring out what to do by themselves or with the support of a peer.
- **Silver Connections had an additional component of a group outing to a place of local interest. This element was helpful in giving participants unstructured social time to get to know one another and apply their smartphone skills outside of the classroom.**

### The engagement and retention of participants

- **Learning new digital skills was a key motivator for older people to take part in the digital inclusion projects.** Interviewees were aware that learning digital skills could make their lives easier in a range of ways from keeping in touch with family and friends to accessing services and activities online.
- **There were many barriers to overcome when engaging participants in face-to-face or remote digital inclusion projects.** These barriers are consistent with those identified in previous research:
  - i. Language and communication challenges, for example, understanding terminology;
  - ii. Cognitive and physical skills, for example, being able to manipulate screens and remember sequences of steps;
  - iii. Dealing with error and subsequent frustration, and;
  - iv. Practical challenges such as cost/availability of devices, data and WiFi at home.
- **The importance of creating a supportive and friendly learning environment was crucial for engaging older people in learning new digital skills.** Kind, patient and socially skilled facilitators, use of humour, tea and coffee, a warm welcome, including unstructured as well as structured time for participants to interact and get to know each other, were all key components. These findings resonate with both anecdotal evidence and learning from digital inclusion projects in other Ageing Better areas as well as previous research from the Connect Hackney programme.

- ***Personalising the content of the sessions was considered important for building on participants' individual motivations and learning needs***, though greater personalisation required more intensive one-to-one support, which placed demands on the capacity of the delivery team.

#### **The perceived impact of the digital inclusion projects**

- ***An eight-week course was enough to provide some foundational learning only; a six-week course was akin to an extensive taster course in digital technology.*** Nearly all participant interviewees had taken away at least one key learning point from the projects, and a number of participants had learnt much more. However, consistent with previous research, using a digital device and internet beyond project sessions appeared to be dependent on: having a device and an internet connection at home in order to practice the skills learnt in the sessions; the motivation to use online modes of communication; and a basic understanding of how devices and the internet work.
- ***The use of technology outside of project sessions was further enhanced by having family, friends or neighbours available that could assist with ongoing technical difficulties.*** Providers and participants had identified the need for follow-on sessions, highlighting the importance of developing or signposting to further opportunities for learning.
- ***There are limited data on retention of digital skills after courses had ended. Follow-up interviews with three participants indicated that participants had retained the confidence and knowledge that they had gained on the course*** and that the COVID-19 lockdown had increased their motivation to expand their online activities.
- ***The primary way the projects appeared to improve social connectedness before COVID-19 was the experience of attending the group itself.*** All participants had ways of staying in touch with family and friends; the key mode for doing this was by telephone, through face-to-face visits, or through attendance at weekly community or religious groups. Technology provided another way of staying in touch with people – a new tool for communication – but it did not replace any of the ways that participants usually communicated.

#### **The impact of COVID-19 on the digital inclusion projects and its participants**

- ***The social restrictions implemented to tackle COVID-19 prevented digital inclusion projects from engaging those without a home internet connection and/or a digital device.*** @online club changed their service offer significantly by offering one-to-one remote support through a telephone helpline for all older Hackney residents promoted through the Council. Silver Connections sessions were adapted to a group online format using Zoom video conferencing.
- ***Restrictions made it difficult for providers to recruit new participants who were ordinarily reached through off-line promotional efforts.*** Both providers recognised that outreach work and relationship building with other organisations was time intensive, particularly given the continual changes that other organisations were going through during social restrictions, and they lacked capacity for it within their existing service delivery models.

- ***The social restrictions associated with COVID-19 helped motivate participants to go online to become socially connected***, for example, participant interviewees joined religious services and other groups remotely. Participants in the remote Silver Connection course had used their new found knowledge of Zoom to join other social activities online.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Based on the qualitative evidence generated across two digital inclusion projects, this study has found that group-based projects can help older people learn new digital skills and to feel more socially connected. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the evidence suggested that the groups' impact was mainly through learning about technology together in a social setting rather than the technology itself. The pandemic further exposed the digital divide between older residents, as those without access to home internet and a digital device were difficult to reach through off-line communications and were unable to take part in remote group sessions. For those that were able to participate remotely, online activities and services helped them stay socially connected to others. It should be noted that these findings are based on a small sample of participants and will be supplemented by forthcoming quantitative analysis on the impact of the digital inclusion projects prior to COVID-19. The effectiveness of digital inclusion projects will also be addressed at a national level by the Ageing Better programme evaluation.

Based on the findings from this study and the likelihood that the COVID-19 pandemic and associated social restrictions will be ongoing for some time, the following recommendations are offered for the digital inclusion projects within the Connect Hackney programme and beyond.

### **For the development and scale up of the Connect Hackney digital inclusion projects:**

- Continue to offer remote group sessions during social restrictions and inform participants about the range of activities that can be accessed online.
- Consider with the Connect Hackney team and Hackney Council whether and how to reach older residents who are the most digitally excluded.
- Linked to the above, the need for home-based equipment for older people to connect remotely was a dominant theme in the evaluation. Projects should consider how to support residents to access such equipment or partner with another organisation to do this.
- To help increase participant numbers through referrals, consider with the Connect Hackney team how to revise the capacity of the projects so that greater efforts can be put into outreach and relationship building work.
- Continue to develop and apply for funding for follow-up activities so that participants can continue their learning after a course is completed. This could include offering past participants new remote services during social restrictions.

### **For any organisation developing digital inclusion projects for older people:**

- The research identified a number of best practices to help improve the design and delivery of digital skills instruction for older people:

- Provide a warm, social learning environment; focus on basic technical content using plain English and simple analogies; consider including a social online or face-to-face group activity to support group bonding.
- Employ facilitators with high levels of social and communication skills; attend proactively to accessibility issues to support participants with physical, cognitive, or sensory impairments;
- Offer group sessions that are device specific where possible, and if not, ensure there are sufficient staff or volunteers in sessions to support people on a one-to-one basis.
- Ensure sufficient capacity for dedicated outreach, promotional work and relationship building with other organisations to reach potential participants through off-line methods, with particular thought given to reaching under-represented groups such as men and minority ethnic groups.

## **Acknowledgements**

We are very grateful to all the participants who spoke to us and shared their experiences. We give our thanks also to the @online club and Silver Connections project teams who gave up their time to share their insights. We would also like to thank members of the Connect Hackney programme team and our evaluation advisory group for their in-depth comments and suggestions on the study and report.





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