Manchester Metropolitan University

Digital Lifeline

Digital Lifeline:

The impact of the distribution of new digital devices during the Covid-19 pandemic on the lives of people with learning disabilities

Key Research Findings and Recommendations

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Introduction

In February 2021, the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) initiated the Digital Lifeline Fund which, as an emergency response during the COVID-19 pandemic, gifted 5,500 people with learning disabilities Lenovo tablets, data, and digital skills support.

Concurrently, many social care and community organisations took steps to fund and support people with learning disabilities to access digital devices during the pandemic.

The Problem

Little is known about the longer-term impact of the widespread distribution of digital devices to people with learning disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our Research

The Digital Lifeline research project explored what difference rapidly distributed tablets given out during the Covid-19 pandemic have made to the lives of people with learning disabilities who received them; and to explore which packages of support were most effective in supporting people with learning disabilities to fully participate in their own digital lives.

Twelve participatory workshops were held with people with learning disabilities who received devices in the pandemic and with supporters of people with learning disabilities.

- In total **83** people attended a workshop.
- In addition, **160** people with learning disabilities completed an online survey.

ARC England

Good Things Foundation

LDE Learning Disability England

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Key Findings

1. Enthusiastic Digital Users

The digital devices distributed during the COVID-19 pandemic made a meaningful difference to many people's lives. People with learning disabilities have technology in their lives and are using it for positive ends and a wide variety of uses.

2. The Post-Pandemic Withdrawal and Deskilling

The pandemic acted as a forced accelerator for digital skills, but this has been followed by a significant withdrawal of both support and the routines that anchored digital participation during the pandemic.

3. The Interdependence of Digital Inclusion

Digital participation is not an individual achievement but an assemblage of support from other people, motivation, and access to the preferred technology. When people who can support are not available, digital participation quickly declines.

4. Different Devices for Different Needs

There was a clear mismatch between the hardware provided (tablets) and the hardware now being used in daily life (smartphones). Smartphones are now the main device for social connection. People often use multiple devices, choosing tablets for leisure activities at home, such as watching YouTube or playing games.

5. The Power of Necessity

Necessity was identified as a strong enabler of digital participation. People embraced digital technology when it helped them meet important needs e.g. connections with family during the pandemic. However, there was strong resentment expressed where people were being forced into formal systems like banking, benefits, and health apps that are inaccessible and confusing.

6. Underestimation, Gatekeeping and Online Safety

People with learning disabilities are frequently underestimated and assumed to be non-users by supporters, even when they are active internet users. Digital tools are sometimes being withheld because supporters believe the person they support won't manage or won't be safe – often this is based on their own fears about online safety.

7. Daily Practice, Fun Learning

Sustained digital participation for people with learning disabilities usually requires repeated learning, daily practice, fun reasons to engage and safe spaces where people can "practice, practice, practice" without the fear of breaking something or making a mistake.

8. Not All Digital Participation Looks The Same

There are vastly different ways that people with learning disabilities engage with technology. Some people have high level skills, others might be everyday users of smartphones, yet require consistent, trusted people to navigate more complex tasks. There are also those with profound and multiple learning disabilities for whom digital participation is about benefits facilitated entirely by others.

9. Supporting Aspirations for the Future

Despite the decline in use, there is a strong interest in getting better at using digital devices. The most popular way people want to improve is by learning from people who support them. YouTube was identified as an important support tool for learning as well as for entertainment. Support is required across people with learning disabilities and supporters alike around rapid change of the digital world.

Recommendations for Policy Makers and Funders

For Policy Makers

- **Establish Learning Disability as a Distinct Part of the Digital Inclusion Agenda:** National and local digital inclusion action plans must move beyond seeing disability as one group and explicitly prioritise the needs of people with learning disabilities.
- **Avoid Forced Necessity:** Policy should ensure that while digital services (like banking, health, and benefits) are expanded, in-person options remain available so people are not forced into systems that are inaccessible and confusing.
- **Recognise Interdependence:** Move away from a policy focus on independence and instead recognise and fund the network of support (carers, family, and peers) that make digital participation possible.
- **Standardise Digital Inclusion in Social Care:** Digital inclusion should be embedded into care plans as a core duty of care, rather than being seen as an optional extra.

For Funders

- **Address the Post-Pandemic Withdrawal:** Provide funding to replace failing tablets with up-to-date devices to prevent the deskilling and sense of abandonment that many users currently feel.
- **Invest in People, Not Just Hardware:** Future funding should prioritise the digital skills and time of supporters (paid and family carers), as their lack of confidence is often the greatest barrier to the user's progress.
- **Invest in Co-Produced Service Design:** Funding should require that people with learning disabilities are involved in designing and delivering digital inclusion programs, not just receiving them.
- **Recognise Technology as an Essential Lifeline for People with profound learning disabilities:** Digital inclusion strategies must not exclude people with profound learning disabilities simply because they may not operate devices independently. For this group, a device can be a vital sensory and therapeutic tool that families describe as something they would be 'lost without'. Funding and policy should classify these devices as essential equipment, acknowledging that benefit.
- **Fund Experimentation Workshops:** Create safe, low-stakes digital spaces where people can practice and try things out such as high-stakes tasks like Universal Credit logins or banking without the fear of breaking a device, incurring costs, or falling victim to a scam.

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