Manchester Metropolitan University

Digital Lifeline

Digital Lifeline Research: Key Findings and Recommendations

Sue Caton, Rod Landman, Chris Hatton, Katie Heard, Rachael Hall and Jo Barnard

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Background: Digital Devices Gifted During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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. The programme of work was delivered by the Good Things Foundation and specialist partners. Digital Lifeline's launch was too late for some social care and community organisations who had already taken steps during 2020 to fund and support people with learning disabilities to access digital devices during the pandemic.

Early evaluations carried out by the Good Things Foundation showed positive outcomes such as recipients feeling less lonely, improving digital skills, and that devices enabled people with learning disabilities to participate more fully in their local communities and society. The report did, however, highlight significant barriers faced by people with learning disabilities around digital participation. The early evaluation project reports emphasised that while the initial emergency response was successful, further intervention would be needed to ensure the sustainability of long-term digital inclusion.

The Digital Lifeline Research Project

While the evaluations of the Digital Lifeline Fund carried out by the Good Things Foundation provided very useful short-term data, there was a gap in understanding the longer-term impact of the widespread distribution of digital devices to people with learning disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. To bridge this gap, in 2024, the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) funded our research team to carry out the Digital Lifeline research project. The central aims of the research were to:

a) explore what difference rapidly distributed tablets given out during the COVID-19 pandemic, including those that were part of Digital Lifeline, have made to the lives of people with learning disabilities who received them four years on

b) explore which packages of support were most effective in supporting people with learning disabilities to fully participate in their own digital lives.

Research Methods and Participants

To achieve our aims, we carried out **12** participatory workshops, one individual interview and distributed an online survey. Nine workshops were with people with learning disabilities who received devices in the pandemic (**64** participants) and three online workshops were with supporters of people with learning disabilities (18 participants). In total **83** people participated in a workshop or interview. In addition, **160** people with learning disabilities completed an online survey. Approximately half of the survey respondents had been given a digital tablet in the pandemic.

Summary of Research Findings

The methods described above have resulted in an extensive and rich qualitative and quantitative dataset providing insights around: digital skills; digital inclusion and exclusion; digital cultures; digital aspirations; barriers to participation; and strengths and weaknesses of different models of support. Here, we report **nine 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. The devices have supported relationships with families, friends and carers. There are many instances of the free devices both initiating and sustaining interest in digital participation.

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. The survey showed a drop-off in device use: only 54.4% of beneficiaries are still using the free tablet they received, and of those, 34.9% use it less than when they first got it. Many workshop participants described feeling let down or abandoned as emergency support ended and devices were not replaced.

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. Our survey clearly illustrates the necessity of interdependence with 74.7% of tablet recipients stating that they required help to set up their tablet, and today, 53.2% would still ask a support worker or PA if they encountered a technical problem. Finding original Digital Lifeline recipients was a challenge because of staff turnover and an absence of organisational responsibility for supporting digital participation. When people who can support are not available, digital participation quickly declines.

4. Different Devices for Different Needs

Our research shows a clear mismatch between the hardware provided (tablets) and the hardware now being used in daily life (smartphones). Survey data shows that 51.9% of tablet recipients use a smartphone many times every day, while only 6.3% use their free tablet with that same frequency. Workshops revealed that while smartphones are now the main device for active social connection, people often use multiple devices, choosing tablets for leisure activities at home, such as watching YouTube or playing games. Crucially, some participants preferred tablets for their large screens, citing them as an essential accessibility feature for visual clarity.

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 who don't live nearby. However, there was strong resentment when people were being forced into formal systems like banking, benefits, and health apps that are inaccessible and confusing. This was also reflected in the survey, where engagement in these complex systems such as online banking (2.5%) or online shopping (6.3%) remain very low.

6. Underestimation, Gatekeeping and Online Safety

Workshops highlighted that people with learning disabilities are frequently underestimated and assumed to be non-users by supporters, even when they are active internet users, perhaps in private. Digital tools are sometimes being withheld because supporters believe the person they support won't be able to 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. Support is most effective when it is friendly, approachable and ongoing rather than a time-limited intervention.

8. Not All Digital Participation Looks The Same

There are vastly different ways that people with learning disabilities who took part in the research engage with technology. Some people have highly developed digital skills and use digital devices for many aspects of their lives, the middle group consists of most of our participants who 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. For this group, a digital device can be an essential therapeutic and social lifeline.

9. Supporting Aspirations for the Future

Despite the decline in use, there is still a strong interest in digital participation, with 55.7% of those with a tablet saying that they want to get better at using digital devices. Reflecting the need for relational learning, the most popular way people want to improve is by learning from people who support them (39.2%) or attending a course in person (29.1%). YouTube was also identified as an important resource for both learning and entertainment. Support is required across people with learning disabilities and supporters alike around rapid change of the digital world.

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Digital Lifeline Research: Recommendations

We have developed several key recommendations that both reinforce and expand upon the 2022 recommendations proposed by the Good Things Foundation. To align with those recommendations, we propose recommendations for the same stakeholder groups (policy makers, funders, and practitioners). We have, however, added recommendations for people with learning disabilities, moving them from passive recipients of support to active agents in their own digital lives.

For People with Learning Disabilities

- **Be a Peer Supporter**: If you have digital skills, share them with your friends. People often learn best from each other and feel comfortable asking a friend.
- **Use Technology for Your Own Dreams:** Use the internet for your own aspirations and hobbies, whether that is photography, learning crafts, making TikToks, or learning a new language.
- **Daily Practice:** Try to use your device every day for something small to ensure your skills stay fresh and you don't lose the progress you have made.
- **Explore Accessible Tools for Communication:** Accessibility features on your phone, AI chatbots, and voice messages can all help you communicate online.

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 actually 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 environments 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.

For Practitioners (Support Organisations)

- **Foster a Digital Culture:** Encourage a visible digital culture within organisations where experimentation is role-modelled and curiosity is encouraged rather than feared.
- **Challenge Gatekeeping:** Organisations must facilitate digital equality by addressing internal cultures where carers decline devices or Wi-Fi on a person's behalf because they believe the user "won't be safe" or "isn't interested".
- **Address Staff Turnover in Digital Support:** Ensure digital support continues when staff leave.
- **Upskill the Workforce:** Digital literacy should be a requirement in job descriptions for support staff, ensuring they have the competence to help users navigate daily digital challenges.
- **Build Confidence with Personal Hooks:** Use fun and creative activities (like photography, making videos, digital art, or gaming) to build motivation and confidence needed for digital use. Support should focus on showing possibilities (e.g., creative AI, photo editing) rather than just technical steps.

Contact the authors:
Professor Sue Caton s.caton@mmu.ac.uk

Invest in People, Not Just Hardware: Future funding should prioritise the digital skills and time of supporters (paid and family carers).

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