

Digital inclusion and disability: learning lessons from pandemic efforts to secure a strategic approach

Outcomes briefing from a workshop held by the ATech Policy Lab, (a partnership between Policy Connect, Bournemouth University and Ace Centre) and Tech London Advocates Tech For Disability.

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Access to training and support

- At the roundtable, an academic who teaches social work spoke about the lack of devices for children with learning disabilities. In one school of 250 pupils, only 80 had access to a device. Parents of the children also did not have the skills to use platforms like Microsoft Teams, so it fell to the social work students at the university to support them. A participant working in digital poverty highlighted the upcoming [UK Digital Poverty Evidence Review 2022](#) as further support for this point. This suggests that **support to use a device is as crucial as having access to a device**.
- A C-level executive of a charity that supports disabled and seriously ill children shared lessons they learned from offering services online. Young disabled people's experiences of attending meetings online varied significantly: some had better access to devices and support than others. For example, some parents lacked the time to support their children with online meetings. Also, some disabled children with sensory difficulties did not have the right devices or support to get online. This shows that **the digital experience of the whole family must be taken into account** in our efforts to improve digital inclusion for disabled children and young people. This point was supported by an accessibility professional who shared that some NHS trusts they work with are encouraging patients to access services online. However, some families did not feel adequately supported to use the devices they had been given to do this.
- An academic emphasised that, in order for devices to meet the need of disabled people, accessibility must be considered at the design stage.

Inclusion

- An academic shared that it is important to employ disabled people when developing digital inclusion projects about them.
- Another participant shared their experience of working at a grassroots level with the South East branch of the National Autistic Society and a local NHS Mental Health Trust. The participant found that autistic people with social and sensory sensitivities or learning

disabilities could go online in familiar and comfortable surroundings without having to consider the logistics of public transport. They learnt how to tailor their online experience to their sensory needs by using the chat function, emoticons and switching cameras on and off. This helped them to feel less anxious, engage in more activities and feel more involved in their local community. They felt in control and had autonomy over their experience by going digital. This suggests that **the way technology benefits people is unique to each individual.**

Funding

- An academic noted that many digital inclusion initiatives received funding for a short period of time, and so did not effectively address the long-term issues of digital exclusion.
- One participant spoke about the [£57 million of funding distributed to community organisations through the London Community Response](#) during the pandemic. 90% of funding requests to the scheme were for devices and getting online. This shows **community organisations were underprepared for the impact of the pandemic.** The participant noted that it is important for funders, businesses and the government to focus on maintaining the progress made in the pandemic, so that we do not fall back into old ways of working.
- A participant from a tech organisation suggested that corporates could use their allocated employee volunteering time to deliver support to help disabled people access technology.
- A participant highlighted that it is important for funders to collaborate with one another on what funding good digital spaces looks like.
- When considering the shortfall in funding for digital inclusion initiatives, one participant shared that it is important to consider that different people work in different ways. For example, the funding application process may require disabled people to use certain language and structure conventions, which can be less accessible for some disabled people. This shows that **funders need to consider alternative ways of supporting disabled people, so they can communicate their case effectively.**

Strategy and coordination

- Participants noted that society became more aware of the extent of the digital divide during the pandemic.
- One researcher said that self-advocacy groups and learning disability charities had shown themselves to be agile and creative in coordinating digital inclusion initiatives during the lockdowns, despite having little resources, compared to public sector organisations. They also said that the gains of digital inclusion from the pandemic are now being reversed as organisations are no longer incentivised to support digital inclusion. An example given is that some employers are not accommodating the use of technology and have insisted on a return to face-to-face working. The researcher called for more government and philanthropic support for self-advocacy groups to continue their work on the digital divide, and for self-advocacy groups to be able to share the skills they have learnt across the community in a way that is permanent.
- One participant asked what factors are leading some services to step back from digital post-lockdown?

- One suggestion was that some services lack capacity to go hybrid. Another suggestion was that some services may only have funding for in-person support.
- An executive of a digital inclusion charity emphasised the need for organisations like their own to coordinate with one another towards a shared collective goal, whilst remaining autonomous and independent.
- A self-advocate from a learning disability charity shared a resource called the [Good Lives Framework](#), which discusses how to get the right equipment and support to people. The resource notes that a strategic approach to digital inclusion should consider those who use a range of assistive technologies and should include community, user-led and self-advocacy organisations, in addition to large organisations.
- One participant emphasised that investing in digital inclusion prevents the need to spend in other areas, such as emergency and public safety services. This could be a driver for government intervention. They also emphasised that having access to digital services can improve disabled people's overall wellbeing. This can lead to lower use of A&E and fewer early care admissions.
 - In response to this, an executive of a digital inclusion charity shared findings from an economic analysis of digital inclusion, which found that **for every £1 spent, there was a [£9.48 return to businesses, government and the public.](#)**
- An executive of a disabled children's charity posed a question about the relationship between in-person, online and telephone spaces and how they impact disabled people. For example, some staff who have traditionally supported disabled children in person have expressed concern about how services will be affected as they move online. At the same time, local authorities are seeing digital as a cheaper way to deliver these services. The participant noted that the public sector, corporates and philanthropy have a big role to play in assessing this shift in relationship.