Can the use of technology help to reduce social isolation and loneliness?
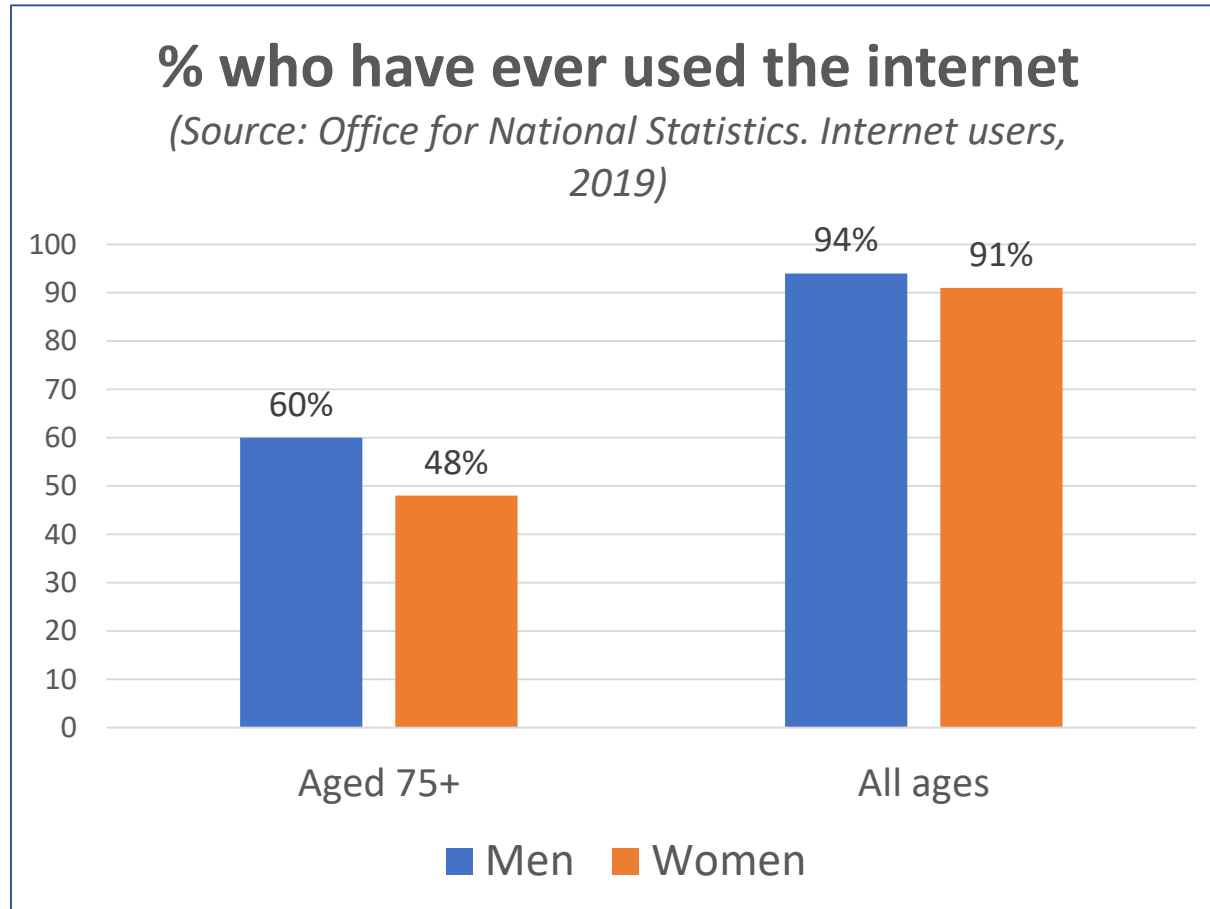
An in-depth study of digital inclusion projects for older people before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

Presentation for Ageing Well in Hackney: Finding solutions to older people's isolation

26th November 2020

Digital exclusion

% who have ever used the internet
(Source: Office for National Statistics. Internet users, 2019)

"How do you find out about your medical condition? How do you register on patient access so you can get repeat prescriptions online or book a GP appointment rather than hanging on the phone for half an hour?"
Project provider

"I'm not very computer literate. I think I learnt when I was about 50 something, so I just want to be able to do more things for myself."
Project participant

Digital inclusion[1]

- Helping people become capable of using and benefiting from the internet by:

  - developing digital skills

  - improving infrastructure

  - improving accessibility in digital design

[1] Centre for Ageing Better (2020). *How has COVID-19 changed the landscape of digital inclusion?* (Online). https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/publications/how-has-covid-19-changed-landscape-digital-inclusion

Connect Hackney digital inclusion projects

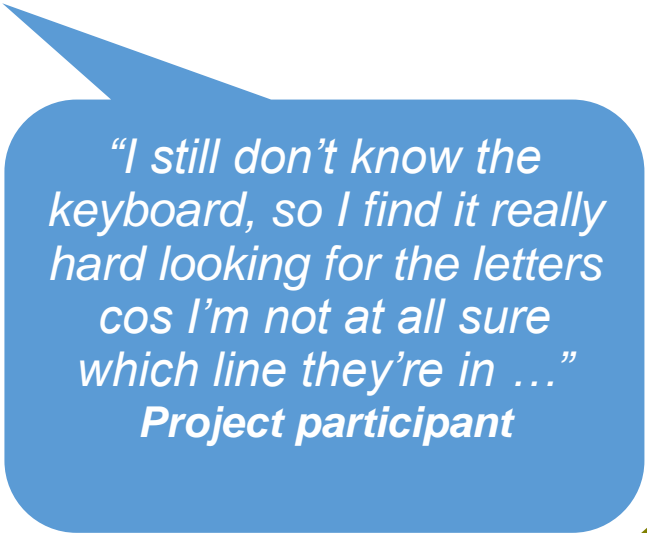|	Silver Connections	@online club
Aims	To build older people's skills in using smartphones.	To build older people's skills in using tablet devices
Length of course	6 weekly 2 hour sessions	8 weekly 2 hour sessions
Format and delivery	Learning in groups (up to 15) with 2 facilitators	Learning in groups (up to 8) with 4 facilitators (incl. 2 volunteers)
Target group	Over 50s who own mobiles but make little use of them.	Over 60s who want to practice going online using tablets.
Other features	Social outing for group in week 5 Held in the same venue	Taster sessions used for recruitment. Follow-on support via e-newsletter. Held in various venues
COVID-19 adaptations	*Groups moved online via Zoom and focused on developing Zoom skills*	*New telephone helpline offering one to one support*

Aims of research

- Project reach

- Engagement and retention of participants

- Impact on participants

- Whether impact was sustained over time

- Impact of COVID-19

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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

INTERIM REPORT

Report prepared by: Lauren Herlitz, Chiara Lombardo, and Angela Harden, Institute for Health and Human Development, University of East London (UEL)

(May 2020)

Evaluation activities described in this report were all conducted prior to COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown imposed by the UK government on 23 March 2020.

COMMUNITY FUND   hackney CVS   University of East London

Project reach

- Most participants joined with no or very basic digital skills.

- The majority of participants were aged 70 and over, female, identified ethnicity as Black or White, and scored higher on social isolation and loneliness measures compared to older Hackney residents in general.

- Ongoing pandemic-related social restrictions pose challenges for reaching the most digitally excluded and recruiting new participants.

"I still don't know the keyboard, so I find it really hard looking for the letters cos I'm not at all sure which line they're in …"
Project participant

"Unfortunately, there are individuals that we have spoken to that would like to join the course but do not have the means to do so."
Project provider

Engagement and retention of participants

- Opportunity to learn new digital skills was a key 'hook' for engagement

- Engagement and retention enhanced by
  - Personalisation within group sessions
  - Warm, friendly and social environment
  - Skilled facilitators

- Challenges
  - Scheduling and remembering to attend sessions
  - Getting to venues
  - 'Digital implementation' barriers

"Everybody was very kind very nice people and because of their ways they encouraged you to learn and I think because of that I managed to learn quite a lot"
Project participant

"It's very hard of course, people at different stages, there was me right at rock bottom and somebody else who would be well away."
Project participant

"Once you were in the Zoom room, it was lovely to be welcomed, once we were coming in, people would welcome us individually and she would give us time to start."
Project participant

Perceived impact on participants: confidence and skills

- Foundational learning and increased confidence for using digital devices; skills enhanced when able to practice at home

- Ongoing assistance and digital infrastructure enhanced continued use of digital devices beyond the short courses

- Confidence and skills were retained, and increased, over time

"It's an accomplishment to me because… I tend to always be self-critical and always say I can't do something. But the mere fact is I have been able to conquer this. I can manage something, so I feel very chuffed." **Project participant**

"I came to update myself or re-learn and I'm so happy I came because I feel somethings now I can manage." **Project participant**

Perceived impact on participants: social participation

- Digital devices were a new (secondary) way to stay in touch with family, friends and community networks.

- Attending the course itself was a way to increase social participation and establish new social connections.

- With the onset of COVID-19, being able to socially connect online became a new motivator for joining the digital courses.

"It has been a boost for me to have something to look forward to weekly, and something which I have learnt from, apart from seeing the friendly faces of the tutors, is the rest of the group."
Project participant

"As a matter of fact it was a family celebration that the relatives were doing on Zoom and I became frustrated to tears that I wasn't able to take part."
Project Participant

Conclusions

- Group-based digital inclusion projects can help older people to learn new digital skills and feel more socially connected.

- Regardless of mode of delivery, this study has identified a number of success factors.

- Future activities during ongoing social restrictions should balance provision of remote groups with reaching the most digitally excluded.

- Action to develop older people's digital skills needs to be supported with action to address digital infrastructure and digital design.

Thank you!

This presentation is based on the forthcoming report which will be available on the Connect Hackney website by March 2021:

Herlitz L and Harden A (2021) 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

Our interim report is available online at:

- https://www.connecthackney.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Connect-Hackney-Digital-inclusion-projects.pdf