

Stories of Change

Going Digital in the time of Covid



“Finding ways to address the digital divide in our communities has never been more important...”

Mayor John Biggs - LBTH



Inclusive Broadband: Connecting Communities



The **Inclusive Broadband – Connecting Communities** project was launched in June 2020 as a partnership between Poplar HARCA, East End Community Foundation, Tower Hamlets Council and LETTA Trust.

The project which will run for two years, has launched Phase 1 that aimed to benefit 100 low-income households. Each family was provided with free 50mb broadband Internet connection and a Google Chromebook digital device, basic digital training, and basic ICT support.

Working with two citizen-social scientists, the University College London (UCL) Institute for Global Prosperity (IGP) was commissioned by the partnership to conduct an initial review of the pilot. UCL IGP conducted a qualitative thematic analysis to examine and understand the experiences of nine families participating in the pilot.

This version of the report presents case studies for each of the key findings gathered by the citizen-social scientists involved in the research. The aim is to showcase some of the project’s benefits so far. A separate, more comprehensive report will be available from UCL and can be obtained upon request.



“The partnership set up this digital inclusion project to provide eligible families with a great internet connection, a device and training, all for free. This is a long term solution to tackle the digital divide and minimise the impact of the pandemic on educational achievement.”

Jo Franklin - LETTA Trust.

“The COVID-19 pandemic is having the most profound impact on the most disadvantaged in our community. Improving digital access and skills holds the potential to have a life-changing effect. The project aims to help more residents access essential on-line services with support and training from experienced volunteers and staff.”

Babu Bhattacharjee - Poplar HARCA

“Having launched our East End Emergency Fund to support those in need during the health crisis with food and essentials, we quickly learnt many low income homes are without broadband and kit. Having information at our fingertips is something many of us take for granted and we would be lost without it, so I’m pleased the partnership can make this a reality for others too.”

Tracey Walsh - EECF

Who are most affected?

COVID-19 has shone a spotlight on the digital divide and the effects of digital exclusion on low-income families. Communities are feeling isolated, forgotten about and unable to communicate their expertise and thoughts.

Digital as a Basic Service

The internet has become such a central part of our lives. It opens up opportunities for creativity, entertainment and friendship and most importantly, education, training and work. What was once a luxury is now an essential utility. This is why missing on digital means failing a basic necessity.

The digital divide doesn't just mean having access to Wi-Fi, but the ability to pay for it. Communities who live on a low income or social security benefits are unable to pay for this access. The digital divide also shows in expenses when paying for hardware (computers and devices) and people may not have the opportunity to access support to help them use technology.

Online Education

In many schools across Tower Hamlets, over half of the pupils do not have access to a device to carry out essential home learning and interact with their teachers. The closure of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented challenges for teachers, parents and children. Tragically it is having the most profound impact on the most disadvantaged children in the school community. Since the end of March, schools have been closed and learning has moved online.

Teachers set work using online platforms, put instructions on school websites and email activities to parents. To access this online learning, children need a device and a good quality internet connection.

The youngest learners also need someone at home who can help them. Where children cannot access online learning, already existing attainment gaps are widening rapidly. This is particularly true for children from the poorest backgrounds who are also less likely to have access to other learning opportunities or tutoring at home.

Public Services

Digitisation of public services means that online access is becoming the principal route to finding information about and applying for essential support, such as Universal Credit. Having access to broadband at home and the digital skills to use online financial services, and buy cheaper goods and services online, can help to cut the extra costs of being poor. The 'poverty premium' has been estimated at £490 per year for an average low-income household.*

Digital Skills for Work

Digital inclusion can be a pathway to education, economic and financial benefits. Employers of all sizes and sectors seek digital skills (basic as well as more specialist), with many identifying this as a cause of skills-shortage vacancies. Meanwhile, more employers across all sectors are using online and e-learning to train their staff.

What is becoming clear is that people may have smartphones and use social media but still lack the digital skills required for work or life.

The same is no less true for young people. Digital exclusion is more common among care leavers and those who are not in education, employment or training; this overlaps with low literacy and numeracy skills among young people, with skill levels in the UK lagging behind those in many other countries.

Access for the Vulnerable

It also shouldn't be forgotten that some of those without access to the internet will be elderly and/or vulnerable, those who often need extra care during this time and protection from the virus. They may also be in need of other services such as medication, food deliveries, medical advice or even GP appointments. We shouldn't let them choose between going without or risking their health by stepping outside the front door. Ensuring they can access support online will not only ease the worry for the individual, it could also save lives and keep unnecessary pressure off our stretched NHS services and staff.



Only 16% of working class pupils are taking part in lessons online every day**



12% of teachers think that more than a third of their class do not have adequate internet access*



15% of teachers think that more than a third of their students do not have adequate access to a device*



24% of teachers say that fewer than 1 in 4 children in their class are returning work they have been set*

* Corfe, S., and Keohane, N., (2020) Measuring the Poverty Premium, The Social Market Foundation report published on March 2018 Available at <https://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Measuring-the-Poverty-Premium.pdf> (accessed on 2020.06.12).

** Cullinane, C., and Montacute, R. (2020). Covid-19 Impacts: School Shutdown. The Sutton Trust, report published on 20 April 2020. Available at: www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-and-social-mobility-impact-brief (Accessed on 2020.05.05).

The Stories of Change Research

Methodology

The data collection and analysis for the evaluation of the pilot presented here was conducted between July and November by researchers from the Prosperity Collaborative (PROCOL) UK initiative at the Institute for Global Prosperity (IGP) at UCL, with the support of two Citizen Social Scientists (CSS).

The data collection for the study was carried out by the CSS through online, telephone and in-person interviews, while the analysis of the findings was done using a thematic approach. CSS worked in close collaboration with the IGP researchers to co-design the research questions and do the analysis of the data.

Overall, a total of 9 households participating in the study were interviewed. Prior to taking part in the study, all participants were provided with information about the research evaluation project and its purpose and asked to give informed consent in writing.

All of the case studies and data provided by participants has been anonymised for the purpose of this report. Where known and consented by the participants, their gender, marital status, and number of children and their ages are included.

The aim of the evaluation was to understand the impact of the broadband pilot capturing the personal experiences and stories of change from a small number of participating households from the Burdett Estate in Poplar.

The purpose of the 'Stories of Change' case studies presented in this version of the report was to demonstrate how involvement in the project benefitted the children and parents from the participating families.

Initial Findings

Findings from the research with participants of the pilot reveal important and beneficial impacts in terms of seven key areas:

1. Home Schooling and Learning Opportunities;
2. Work and Employability Opportunities;
3. Physical and Mental Health Well-being and Behaviours;
4. Online Access to and Management of Basic Services and Utilities;
5. Time and Costs Savings;
6. Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and Internet Safety Skills;
7. Overall Broadband Pilot Connectivity and Performance.

“I was having to link devices to get internet through my phone and my son and daughter, who both have schoolwork to do, were having to take turns. They’ve not been able to do a lot and they were falling behind. Having a proper broadband connection has made a big difference.”



Home schooling & Learning opportunities

Uses for the broadband and the Chromebook varied. Sometimes, they used it to connect with families and friends. Many times, they use it to access various entertainment media. But most of the time, it is used by parents to help the children to do their homework and other learning activities, such as distance language courses and online physical education sessions.

Three children participating in the scheme, highlighted the beneficial impact of the Google Chrome device to do their homework, access the Google classroom which they use in the school, and stream videos and tutorials:

“It helped me with searching for educational work by using the internet broadband. I use the Chromebook for Google classroom work and to do my Spanish homework that is set on Google classroom. It has helped me with my Maths and English work” Samir, male student, age 10-11

“The Chromebook has helped me send work on my Google classroom. The school gave us internet which we did not have at home. Google classroom did not work on the iPad but after I got the Chromebook, I could do my school work. Without the internet it was very boring and I have to stay at my grandmother’s house during the beginning of lockdown so that I can do my work on Google classroom” Jaiya, female student, age 10-11

“It’s been great, it has helped me with completing my maths and English work. I also use the Chromebook to watch YouTube videos. I use the internet to learn about Tudors and I am learning about the Tudors in school. My brothers use the Chromebook to do their school work. The internet is very fast” Suki, female student, age 8-9

Parents were also able to help their children with their schoolwork. One participant said himself and his son were both using the Chromebook regularly:

“My son uses the Chromebook for schoolwork and sometimes game as well. [...] Most importantly I am checking my son for study, some online video. How to improve my son” Nazir Basu, male parent, married, one child

“My daughter is able to do her homework easily and efficiently. I feel very comfortable using the Chromebook and the internet. It has helped because the internet speed is good and it’s free. Also, the Chromebook is good because it’s very easy to use” Erin Young, female parent, one child

Another participant added that they all used the Internet and that one of their sons was using it for learning Arabic:

“Everyone in my household uses the broadband, I use it for work and leisure time and so does my wife. My three daughters use it for schoolwork most of the time and for entertainment, and my son uses it for Zoom calls with his Arabic teacher from Egypt” Kareem Gupta, male parent, married, four children

“Before this, it was really difficult to do home-schooling.”

Some participants shared how much difference having a reliable internet connection and a Chromebook makes. Doing homework during lockdown was very difficult especially in households where two or more children need to share a device.

“Before this it was really difficult to do home-schooling. The kids have tablets and we had one old laptop which doesn’t work very well, which they had to share. Our internet connection was also very poor, so they couldn’t all do everything they needed to at the same time. It was always cutting out, if one was doing one thing, and another started doing something else, our broadband couldn’t handle it. My sons often had to try to watch their online tutorials on my phone, as it was the only way around it. The new broadband connection is a lot better. It means all three of my children can get online and do their classes at the same time, and it also works in every room now too. It’s made it a lot easier for them to do their work, so I’m really happy with it” Nadja Busra, female parent, four children

“It’s been such a struggle. I was having to link devices to get internet through my phone and my son and daughter, who both have schoolwork to do, were having to take turns. They’ve not been able to do a lot and they were falling behind. Having a proper broadband connection has made a big difference” Esra Mallick, female parent, three children



Work and Employability Opportunities

For most parents, the provision of free, reliable and fast broadband Internet also meant the possibility of doing searching for jobs and applying online, as well as working from home.

“It has been positive for us. Obviously for searching and applying for jobs during the Covid-19 lockdown. It has been very good because the connection is much faster.”

Three parents, said they had been using the Google Chromebook regularly for work, emails, doctor appointments, internet banking, or contacting the school.

“I use it myself for work as well, and banking. Sometimes emailing, very important. To contact the doctor or the school. It is very important for me” Nazir Basu, male parent, married, one child

“Entering the Broadband pilot was very helpful as our laptop had broken and we were about to buy a new one when we heard about the scheme with a free Chromebook. [...] It has been positive for us. Obviously for searching and applying for jobs during the Covid-19 lockdown. It has been very good because the connection is much faster. We used to have a lot of problems with the previous [broadband provider]. That has been very helpful to do job applications, [as it] doesn't take a long time” Leyla Miah, female parent, married, two children

Other parents, however, while overall satisfied with the scheme offered some caveats. One mother, said that they were using the Chromebook only for entertainment (watching movies), and that they preferred using their mobile phone for everything else that was related to job searches, online banking or managing and bills.



Physical and Mental Health, Well-being and Behaviour

Having a fast and reliable Internet connection has had immediate positive impacts in terms of physical and mental health well-being and behaviour for both parents and their children.

As one participant reported:

“For my husband it was really good having the Internet during the Covid lockdown. He got some gym equipment online to use in the back garden during the lockdown, as he was shielding as he is in a risk-group because of his heart condition. I don't use the gym equipment, [but] I do join my son when he does online physical workouts in the morning. Sometimes his little brother joins! He loves it, he would say ‘Mom, let's do PE session!’” Leyla Miah, female parent, married, two children

The same participant said that having the Internet was also beneficial for their oldest son as it allowed him to carry out other physical training activities through online videos beyond school PE:

“It was also positive for swimming and boxing. Before the lockdown, my son used to go boxing and would try out Jujitsu lessons. When the lockdown started, he couldn't continue, so he started following class exercises online. We also have boxing pads at home, so sometimes we would train together, I would help him out. [...] He'd do 45-minute sessions and then he's basically relaxed, and a lot more calm” Leyla Miah, female parent, married, two children

Another parent also shared how important having the Internet at home was for their daughter:

“She is in a high-risk group as she suffers from asthma, so I'm having to keep her at home for longer, even now schools are reopening, so we really needed this” Esra Mallick, female parent, three children

Several participants also expressed how having the Internet had made things easier and helped to cope with anxiety and stress during the lockdown months. One parent said that the broadband pilot had also made a big difference to the whole family:

“About a month into lockdown, we had to self-isolated as my baby was ill and then I was struggling to keep up with bills because I couldn't make payments online. Now I've got broadband, I can get on my accounts and do that anytime, it's made things much easier” Esra Mallick, female parent, three children

Another participant, shared that they had lost their job during the lockdown and their husband was on furlough, and that having a fast and secure broadband connection had made things easier, especially as they were struggling with the local Job Centre to find jobs and relevant opportunities.

“...I do join my son when he does online physical workouts in the morning. Sometimes his little brother joins! He loves it, he would say ‘Mom, let's do PE session!’”

Online Access to and Management of Basic Services and Utilities

Beyond online shopping and job searching, the use of Internet for accessing and managing other services (e.g. online banking, utilities, and government benefits) was limited or seldom reported by participants.

One participant said that he sometimes used the Internet for online shopping, banking, emailing and sometimes for contacting the GP:

“Sometimes online shopping. Most importantly I am checking my son [for study], some online video. How to improve my son. And banking, sometimes emailing, very important. Contact the doctor or the school, very important for me” Nazir Basu, male parent, married, one child

Another participant also expressed how having the Internet had made things easier and helped coping with anxiety and stress of staying up to date with bills and services during the lockdown months.

“About a month into lockdown, we had to self-isolated as my baby was ill and then I was struggling to keep up with bills because I couldn’t make payments online. Now I’ve got broadband, I can get on my accounts and do that anytime, it’s made things much easier” Esra Mallick, female parent, three children

“I was struggling to keep up with bills because I couldn’t make payments online. Now I’ve got broadband, I can get on my accounts and do that anytime, it’s made things much easier.”



Time and Costs Savings

When asked whether having the Internet broadband had allowed them to save some money and/or time for doing other activities, at least two participants confirmed that having the broadband internet was saving them some money that they could put to other use:

“The broadband money yes, I can use [the money] for something else” Aalia Ahmed, female parent, single, four children

“Yes, I’m saving roughly £7 a month from my initial broadband company” Kareem Gupta, male parent, married, four children

One other participant also shared that the Internet broadband pilot had saved them time, allowing them to buy food and clothes online, and money with the free Chromebook:

“Our laptop had broken, and we were about to buy a new one when we heard about the scheme with a free Chromebook” Leyla Miah, female parent, married, two children



“Yes, I’m saving roughly £7 a month from my initial broadband company”

Information & Communications Technology (ICT) and Internet Safety Skills

There was a very low uptake of the ICT training provided; only six families taking part in the training, and the majority of participants did not mention or seemed to be entirely unaware of the training provided. More worryingly, very few showed concerns with issues around internet safety.

Despite the low uptake, however, most participants interviewed, including both parents and their children, expressed that using the Google Chromebook was easy for most members of the family. The children especially were very confident in using the device and different learning applications. Conversely, some said that some members of the family who are suffering from health conditions were not able to use the device.

One participant described how confident their sons were with using the broadband for doing homework and using different learning applications in the Chromebook:

“My sons are very confident with using the Chromebook and internet. They can do their online homework including watching school online videos and using different learning applications. They practice their English, maths, history and other learning” Romuz Singh, male parent two children

One participant mentioned that she had attended the course. While another thought that they did not think that they needed more training as they had quite some knowledge prior to receiving the Chromebook. However, speaking about their son, they said:

“My son, I think he needs to double up his skills” Nazir Basu, male parent, married, one child

The same participant also shared that his wife had some medical issues and therefore could not make use of the device:

“My wife has some medical issue, so she’s not able to do anything” Nazir Basu, male parent, married, one child

Regarding safety, one parent seemed aware of the school having added some parental control to the Chromebook device:

“Basically, I cannot tell you exactly, but from school they developed some restriction. I checked it and there is some restriction. Me, personally, I am checking what he is doing all the time. If there is something [I don’t like] I say don’t do it. But, essentially the computer has some restriction” Nazir Basu, male parent, married, one child

Another participant said that they were able to monitor what and how their children were using the internet by monitoring their browsing history:

“Yes, I’m able to monitor what my child is using the internet by checking browsing history” Kareem Gupta, male parent, married, four children

“I’m able to monitor what my child is using the internet by checking browsing history.”



Overall Broadband Pilot Connectivity and Performance

Overall, out of the 100 households targeted to take part in the pilot, at the time of writing this report there were a total of 76 families who had managed to connect to the broadband and received their Google Chromebook device.

Of those who had yet to be connected, some had shown reservations to participate as this meant having to cancel their current broadband provider and incurring fees, while others said they were experiencing delays as the Internet provider for the pilot, Community Fibre, did not have sufficient permissions to access or there was no fibre infrastructure available for specific house of residents or postcodes. Yet one other family, who have now joined the scheme, said that they had initially rejected to participate in the pilot as they did not believe it was free, in other words that it was ‘too good to be true.’

For the majority of participants, the broadband pilot has been hugely beneficial and positive in many ways. As some of the cases above show, the scheme has allowed children to continue with their studies, access learning via video streaming, and carry on with extra curricular activities like language learning or physical activities like swimming or boxing. For parents it has made things faster and simpler for some including searching for jobs, doing online shopping, and it has saved time and money for others.

More specifically, responses to satisfaction about the Google Chromebook device and the broadband internet speed and quality were somewhat mixed.

For some, the internet was slow and stopped sometimes, however they thought it was OK:

“Broadband is a bit slow, but OK. [...] Everyone is comfortable using the internet. Sometimes it stops working and we have to wait until it comes back. But it’s OK. They [the children] are comfortable, yeah” Aalia Ahmed, female parent, single, four children

For others, the internet was fast and very easy to connect:

“It is very easy to connect and use the device. [We are] very comfortable using it” Nazir Basu, male parent, married, one child

One parent said that everyone was happy and felt comfortable using the Google Chromebook but added that they would like if software such as MS Word could be included for work and study:

“I would like it if you could provide Microsoft Word, etc., so my children can use it for their schoolwork” Kareem Gupta, male parent, married, four children

Conversely, other parents felt that the Google Chromebook was easy for

“creating and editing word documents” Nazir Basu, male parent, married, one child

One participant was eager that the project continued and was expanded to other families, and hoped that the support that Stebon Primary School had provided to parents – through training, internet parental restrictions – continued next year:

“It is very helpful for the people. But if you continue, my recommendation, my advice, it’s gonna be very helpful for the children and the families that don’t have the ability to use it. So, I’m very happy that you provided me with laptop and internet. I’m very satisfied. And I can develop my son, and his future is gonna be bright I think. [...] If you continue, if you support more people, it’s gonna be good for the families and good for future and for this country as well, I think” Nazir Basu, male parent, married, one child

Several parents emphasised how important the pilot had been for their children, including some who had never had Internet broadband in their homes:

“According to me, community broadband project is a great idea to improve children’s learning. Through this project children have been able to access their online learning during school closures. It has brought a positive impact in the community” Romuz Singh, male parent two children

“I never had broadband at my flat. It’s been great so far. Having a free connection and being able to surf the net at the same time. My daughter had issues doing Google classroom. However, since the Chromebook was gifted, she was very content and completed her class work successfully. She gets to do other activities on there with delight. We are all privileged to be offered such a great project all free of charge! Feel lucky that we got selected. It’s on very rare occasions you get opportunities like that. We are glad we was one of them. Thank you” Sheena Ram, female parent, one child

“Community broadband project is a great idea to improve children’s learning.”

Reflecting on the overall impact of the pilot, children’s engagement at school, and the feedback from parents, the Stebon Primary School’s Inclusion Leader said that the Broadband Pilot had: **“opened up access to children who previously wouldn’t have been able to work online at home. It’s levelled out the balance for those without internet at home so they can access programmes to support them to practising key skills - such as mathematics, lexia and accelerated reader. It’s also meant they can carry out research. It definitely helped engagement for those who received the Chromebooks.”**

“Through this project, more children have been able to access their online learning during school closures.”



“...Moving forward we will look to expand not only this scheme, but also other initiatives that make digital inclusion a priority. We recognise there is more work to be done to ensure every child is connected and has the right equipment to access effective tutoring and education.”

Mayor John Biggs - LBTH