



**‘Connecting
Communities’:
Evaluation of a pilot
project aimed at
promoting digital
inclusion in the
London Borough of
Tower Hamlets**

**Research Evaluation of a
Universal Basic Service**

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The IGP undertakes pioneering research that seeks to dramatically improve the quality of life for this and future generations. Its strength lies in the way it allies intellectual creativity to effective collaboration and policy development. Of particular importance to the IGP’s approach is the way in which it integrates non-academic expertise into its knowledge generation by engaging with governments, policy makers, business, civil society, the arts and local communities.

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IGP currently has three PROCOLs in London, Lebanon and Africa. PROCOL Lebanon works on delivering inclusive and prosperous futures for communities impacted by mass displacement. PROCOL Africa focuses on natural and social prosperity. PROCOL UK investigates past, present and future determinants of prosperity in the UK.

About the Report

The 'Connecting Communities' Project aims to improve digital inclusion in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets through a digital Universal Basic Services (UBS) pilot: a viable and integrated approach to providing universal access to public goods and services. The project was developed through a partnership between Poplar HARCA, the LETTA Trust, Tower Hamlets Council, and the East End Community Foundation, and forms part of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets' Digital Inclusion Strategy.

The 'Connecting Communities' project has developed in phases. In phase 1, the intervention was rolled out to 70 households in two primary schools in Poplar coinciding with the UK's first lockdown in March – May 2020. In phase 2 (commencing June 2020) the intervention has been gradually rolled out to a further 130 households in nine primary schools and rollout is ongoing. This report provides a final evaluation of the 'Connecting Communities' Project. The project offers a package of support to participating households that includes:

1. **A broadband connection**
2. **Training**
3. **A Google Chromebook**

The evaluation of phase 1 was conducted by researchers at the Institute for Global Prosperity (IGP) at UCL (University College London) in collaboration with two citizen social scientists (CSS) living and working in Poplar. The aim was to collect 'stories of change' through personal accounts exploring the expectations and short-term impacts of the project. In May 2022, the Institute of Global Prosperity (IGP) at UCL was commissioned to undertake a final evaluation of the project. The research was conducted by Dr Penny Bernstock, Israel Amoah-Norman, and two Citizen Social Scientists based in Tower Hamlets, Pratimas Singh and Sultana Rouf. This final evaluation had two clear aims:

- To evaluate the impact/benefits of digital access for participating households using IGP's citizen-led prosperity framework, which includes digital inclusion, livelihood security, access to good quality work, education, and lifelong learning, as determinants of prosperity in east London (Woodcraft and Anderson, 2019);
- To explore both the potential of and challenges to wider roll out from the perspective of key stakeholders including service users, schools, project managers and funders.

These evaluations form part of the IGP's Prosperity Co-Lab (ProCol) UK's work on rethinking prosperity and livelihood security, as well as redesigning a welfare state that is fit for 21st century challenges through Universal Basic Services (UBS), a proposal developed by IGP's Social Prosperity Network (SPN).

The findings of this research are intended for policy, academic and wider public audiences, and will contribute to an evidence base for a system of UBS, a radical, feasible and sustainable policy framework proposal which aims to support households across the UK based on a re-designed welfare system for the 21st century (Moore and Boothroyd, 2022). Based on the principles

of solidarity, collective responsibility and shared needs, the UBS proposal aims to provide sufficient, high quality public services free at the point of use to all residents across seven areas: health care; education; transport; information (digital services); housing; childcare and adult social care; and legal services (Moreno et al., 2021).

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Executive Summary

BACKGROUND

This report is a final evaluation of the ‘Connecting Communities’ Project launched in June 2020. The project provides a model for addressing digital exclusion in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, through a digital UBS pilot with the provision of a free **broadband connection, digital skills training, and a Google Chromebook**.

Digital inclusion is a pillar of livelihood security. The IGP defines livelihood security as an infrastructure of overlapping assets that provide the foundations for prosperous lives and proposes a programme of Universal Basic Services (UBS) as part of its livelihood security framework. UBS is a radical, feasible policy that can secure people’s livelihoods through a shared infrastructure of public goods and services; it works to enhance the capacities and capabilities of citizens and helps to build the resilience necessary to weather social, economic or public health crises (Moore, Snower and Bruni, 2022; Moore and Boothroyd, 2022).

The ‘Connecting Communities’ Project is modelled on the IGP’s proposal for a Universal Basic Service for ‘Information’ and provides valuable insight into how this policy might help to address digital exclusion, and broader livelihood security.

METHODOLOGY

The research for phase two was undertaken between May and July 2022 and is discussed in more detail below.

1. Semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders
2. Online survey targeted at participating schools
3. Online survey targeted at participating households
4. Semi-structured interviews with households.

KEY FINDINGS

- The findings suggest that the ‘Connecting Communities’ scheme is successfully targeting digitally excluded households and bringing benefits to a range of household members;
- There is a consensus that the scheme should be rolled out more widely;
- There were three key barriers to take up that included structural (related to internet coverage), practical (related to switching providers) and attitudinal (related to trust about the role of the scheme). Strategies were introduced to address these barriers;
- The pilot has played an important role in enabling pupils to access the full curriculum during lockdown. Analysis of school performance data indicated that participation in the scheme had enabled pupils to make good progress during the pandemic;
- Post-pandemic, the Google Chromebook is being used to support home learning and enable access to Google Classroom when pupils are unable to attend their classes;
- There was evidence of good practice in relation to the delivery and design of training. However, both the take up and delivery of training is uneven across schools;
- For those parents who attended training, feedback was positive. Training was perceived as empowering – providing users with independent skills to engage with the digital world and access a wide range of services/benefits, support their children’s learning, and communicate more effectively with the school;
- Schools identified benefits for pupils and for relationships with parents, however, it was clear that participating in the pilot placed additional responsibilities on schools at a time when schools were responding to a range of other challenges.



The 'Connecting Communities' pilot project has provided valuable insight into what the IGP's Universal Basic Service for Information might look like, and how it could contribute to broader livelihood security, in Tower Hamlets and beyond. The project also illustrates how a multi-stakeholder collaboration can help to reach a broader group of residents, particularly those who are most deprived.

The consensus from all stakeholders, including schools and households, was that the scheme should be rolled out more widely with some revisions to:

- **Eligibility:** Looking beyond households with children on free school meals, in order to support low-income families more broadly. Consideration should be given to adopting a need-led approach, by undertaking a needs assessment at the point of entry to a school;
- **Scale:** Assessing whether a free internet connection for one year is sufficient in light of the cost-of-living crisis and considering the overall scale of the project in terms of the number of devices provided to schools;
- **Delivery:** Reducing the burden on individual schools, by sharing the delivery of training and the recruitment of parent/peer champions Borough wide. The take-up of the project could be improved with clearer guidance on the role of participants, multilingual communication and the implementation of a tailored approach based on need;
- **Evaluation:** Developing a baseline survey upon receipt of the package and at two further intervals to track impacts of the scheme over time.

The 'Connecting Communities' project indicates that Universal Basic Services is an effective tool for reducing digital inequalities and securing livelihoods. We therefore make several broader policy recommendations:

- **Expansion** of the pilot within the Borough of Tower Hamlets and across other local authorities and a roll out to other groups e.g., older people;
- **Implementation** of a Universal Basic Service for 'Information,' based on the

three-pronged approach used in this project;

- **Refined** criteria for assessing need e.g., alternative metrics for deprivation such as Universal Credit instead of free school meals;
- **Commitment** to providing digital services to all as part of a basic democratic right of citizens, thus establishing 'digital citizenship';
- **Development** of a theory of change for digital UBS pilots to account for the incumbent cost of living crisis.





1. INTRODUCTION

The ‘Connecting Communities’ project was developed through a partnership between Poplar HARCA, the LETTA Trust, Tower Hamlets Council, and East End Community Foundation. In phase 1 the intervention was rolled out to 70 households in two primary schools in Poplar and in phase 2 it was rolled out to 130 households in a further nine primary schools across Tower Hamlets. The scheme is part of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets Digital Inclusion Strategy. The project offers a package that includes free internet for one year, a Google Chromebook and training.

The evaluation of phase 1 was conducted by a small team of researchers at the Institute for Global Prosperity (IGP) at UCL (University College London) in collaboration with two citizen social scientists (CSS) living and working in Poplar. The aim was to collect ‘stories of change’ through personal accounts exploring the expectations and short-term impacts of the project. Findings from phase 1 of the research demonstrated that the project was having a rapid and beneficial impact on the behaviours and capabilities of participating households across four key areas (Moreno et al., 2021): home schooling and learning opportunities, work and employability opportunities, physical and mental health wellbeing and behaviours, and time and cost-savings.

In May 2022, the Institute of Global Prosperity (IGP) at UCL was commissioned to undertake a final evaluation of phase two of the project. The research was conducted by Dr Penny Bernstock, Israel Amoah-Norman, and two Citizen Social Scientists based in Tower Hamlets, Pratimas Singh and Sultana Rouf. The findings from phase two of the evaluation reinforce the findings from phase one, with improvements in enabling access to information and employment opportunities, promoting greater digital inclusion, beneficial impacts on education and learning as well as, benefits for well-being and social capital.

In section 2, we highlight the importance of digital inclusion through the lens of livelihood security, Universal Basic Services (UBS) and digital citizenship which relates to how digital UBS like this can empower citizens. Section 3 outlines the research methodology underpinning the evaluation. Section 4 explores digital inclusion/exclusion in the UK and

Tower Hamlets. Section 5 provides an overview of research findings and section 6 concludes the report evaluation suggesting lessons for future roll-out and broader policy recommendations for consideration.



2. LIVELIHOOD SECURITY AND UNIVERSAL BASIC SERVICES

Livelihood Security

Livelihood security is defined as a set of intersecting and interconnecting factors that enable people to lead fulfilling and flourishing lives. It was consistently identified as one of the most important drivers and foundations underpinning prosperity. This is based on extensive research in east London as part of the IGP's Citizen Prosperity Index for London (Woodcraft and Anderson, 2019) as well as, recent research carried out in north London (Euston).

The following five areas depicted in Figure 1 below constitute the infrastructure of a 'secure livelihood' of which digital inclusion is a key component that is inherently linked with other aspects of inclusion such as financial, economic and social.

Universal Basic Services and Digital UBS

The importance of services such as access to digital communications, transport, child and social care all collectively determine an individual's ability to lead a

good quality of life. From access to digital services, housing, and affordable childcare, to education and health outcomes, these cannot be effectively addressed by our existing welfare systems. The pandemic revealed and exacerbated inequalities, demonstrating how insecurity is not experienced in isolation but is the result of intricately and inextricably linked domains of insecurity. The incumbent cost of living crisis has highlighted the need for new forms of universal social protections and welfare (Moore, Snower and Bruni, 2022).

To secure people's livelihoods, the IGP proposes a programme of 'Universal Basic Services' (UBS). UBS works to enhance people's capacities, capabilities and bring opportunities for greater economic and social participation through a new basket of public goods and shared infrastructure of public services thereby, building a solid foundation from which people can thrive. UBS also facilitates place-based change and provides people with the resilience necessary to "navigate the next wave of social and economic transformations within the



Figure 1. Infrastructure for Livelihood Security (IGP, 2022b)



economy including data and Artificial Intelligence (AI), automation and climate change” (Moore et al., 2022, p.4; Moore, Snower and Bruni, 2022).

UBS would include shelter, food, education, transport, information (digital), health and care, legal services free at the point of need (Moore et al., 2022a). A UBS for ‘information’ forms the backbone of a digital UBS pilot and should include digital access, devices as well as, literacy and skills (Percy et al., 2022). The ‘Connecting Communities’ project seeks to implement this approach through the three-pronged provision of a broadband connection, a Google Chromebook and training.

Digital Citizenship

The rationale behind the three-pronged approach is not just aimed at improving outcomes for individuals but about empowering citizens and increasing social participation. The provision of support, training and education equips citizens with the necessary skills and knowledge to become ‘digital citizens’ in their communities (Percy et al., 2022; Moore et al., 2022b).





3. METHODOLOGY

The research was undertaken between May and July 2022. It included:

1. Semi-Structured Interviews with five key stakeholders

Interviews were undertaken with five key stakeholders - three of these interviews were with members of the project steering group and two with staff leading on implementation. These interviews were aimed at finding out more about the key aims/intentions of the project, perspectives on implementation and roll out.

2. An online survey aimed at participating schools

The survey was designed in consultation with the 'Connecting Communities' steering group and included a mix of qualitative and quantitative questions. The survey was designed with the intention of gaining insight into the views/perspectives of participating schools on the benefits of the scheme, its implementation including the delivery of training, its utility as we exit the pandemic and the potential and benefits of any further roll out. The survey was designed for completion by either the family liaison officer involved in implementation of the scheme or the headteacher and was completed by 8 of the 11 participating schools.

3. An online survey aimed at participating households who had benefitted/were participating in the scheme

An online survey was designed in consultation with the 'Connecting Communities' steering group. The survey included a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions and was designed to illuminate the perspectives of participating households on the different elements of the scheme, use of the internet and to assess the impact of the scheme on digital inclusion. Each participating school was responsible for distributing the survey to participating households within their school. Response rates were particularly low, despite weekly reminders and we extended the deadline a number of times i.e., just 7 households completed the survey. These survey findings are therefore not statistically significant. Nevertheless, this data does provide some useful qualitative reflections that have been incorporated into our analysis where appropriate.

4. Semi-structured interviews with households

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with the intention of interrogating in more detail perspectives on different elements of the scheme, including usage, perceptions of benefits and views on further rollout. We worked closely with family liaison officers/leads in four participating schools to recruit up to 10 households to participate in a 30-minute online semi-structured interview. We encountered problems in recruiting 10 households despite numerous contacts and therefore, we were only able to interview seven households. The interviews were undertaken and transcribed by two citizen social scientists, one of whom was fluent in Bengali. Two interviews were completed in Sylheti.





4. THE PROJECT IN CONTEXT

4.1 Digital exclusion in the UK (United Kingdom)

The Good Things Foundation describes digital exclusion as:

“Not having the access, skills, and confidence to use the internet and benefit fully from digital technology in everyday life”
(Stone 2021, p.5)

Digital inclusion is dependent on access to relevant equipment, the internet, and the skills to use the internet. A recent report observed that whilst the pandemic enabled more adults to gain new digital skills and access online services, for others the digital divide was further entrenched as more services moved online (Ofcom, 2022). Digital inclusion enables access to a range of services, is a useful tool for searching and applying for jobs, accessing education, and training opportunities, searching for information, buying goods and services, supporting home learning and home working, connecting with friends and family, and accessing entertainment/leisure services.

The ‘Connecting Communities’ project is designed to promote both access and skills and has evolved as one part of a wider strategy to address digital inclusion in Tower Hamlets, intended to promote both digital access and digital skills by offering a three-pronged approach that offers equipment, an internet connection and training (London Borough of Tower Hamlets, 2021). This three-pronged forms a UBS for Information. The pandemic highlighted the extent and severity of inequality, poverty, and livelihood insecurity for the most vulnerable sectors of the UK population and the interconnections between inequalities in income, health, housing, education, working conditions, and digital inclusion/exclusion. Immediate responses to the pandemic by the UK Government, namely lockdown and social distancing measures, presupposed that households could shift to home working and home-schooling. However, in the UK and across the world, it became clear that digital exclusion was a major barrier for low-income households, vulnerable individuals, and those living in deprived areas (Moreno et al., 2021; ONS, 2019).

More recent research by Ofcom (2022) has concluded that the pandemic did result in an increase in connectivity with the number of households without internet access declining from 11% at the beginning of the pandemic to 6% just one year later. The ‘Connecting Communities’ scheme was in the development stage at the onset of the pandemic and its delivery was accelerated to support home learning during the first lockdown. As we exit the pandemic, the issue of digital exclusion/inclusion continues to be a major policy concern and this evaluation sheds light on the ongoing role of this scheme.

Access and skills are two key barriers impacting access to digital exclusion. There are a number of factors that may impact access, including poor connectivity and coverage affecting people living in some rural areas and in particular types of housing such as basement flats or high-rise towers in urban areas and affordability barriers that may result in households not having access to a device or enough devices for all children, an internet contract or sufficient data. (Ofcom, 2022).

Data on Internet Use/Digital exclusion in the UK indicates that there are a significant but declining number of adults that are non-users (described as people who have either never used the internet or not used it within the last three months). In 2011, 20% (10.2 million) of adults were described as non-users, and this had fallen to 10% (5.3 million) in 2018 (ONS, 2019). According to the Lloyds Bank 2022 Consumer Digital Index (2022), it is estimated that this figure decreased to 1% (500,000 people). However, the report also highlights the variation in digital capability across the UK (Lloyds Bank, 2022). Equally, IGP’s livelihood security analysis of 9 English regions depicts how digital exclusion varies across the regions of the UK (IGP, 2022b). The ONS (2019) study provided an insight into the characteristics of non-users. Women and in particular older women, those with a disability and those who are economically inactive are more likely to be non-users. Other studies have highlighted the relationship between income and use of the internet. For example, a study by Lloyds Bank found that just 51% of those on incomes of between £6 and £10,000 had an internet connection compared to 99% of those earning £40,000 or more (Lloyds Bank, 2020). A review of existing research on digital



exclusion found that 7% of UK adults are affected by device poverty, i.e., they have limited access to the internet because they do not own a PC, laptop, tablet, or smartphone. This increases to 9% for those with a limiting illness, 13% for those not working and 20% for those on incomes below £11,500 (Ofcom, 2022).

Another key challenge in promoting digital inclusion is that a considerable proportion of the population lacks the skills needed to utilise the internet. The 2022 Digital Consumer Index report by Lloyds Bank (2022) acknowledges that approximately 10% of the population (circa 5.3 million) still lack basic foundational digital skills and essential digital skills for use in everyday life. The CEBR (2015) identified five key benefits linked to having basic digital skills i.e., accessing employment, increased earnings, savings on retail transactions, time- saving and communications. Further benefits are outlined by Lloyds Bank (2022) in the form of greater confidence and financial well-being, improving access to key services and building financial resilience. The ONS (2019) Study estimated that 9 million people (16% of the population) are unable to use the Internet and their device by themselves, this includes being unable to undertake basic and foundational digital activities such as turning on a device, connecting to Wi-Fi, or opening an App. A review of the demographic characteristics of those lacking basic skills has some crossover with non-users (ONS, 2019).

A correlation has been identified between those lacking digital skills and income i.e., people on an annual household income of £50,000 or more are 40% more likely to be able to carry out basic digital tasks compared to those earning less than £17,499 (Lloyds Bank, 2020). A skills gap has also been identified between older men and women, with older women less likely to have digital skills than older men (ONS, 2019). The ONS have also identified an ethnicity gap, noting that people from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds are less likely to have all five Essential Digital Skills for Work than those from a White background, whilst acknowledging that this gap is closing. For example, in 2011, the ethnicity gap was most pronounced between those from a White background and those from a Bangladeshi background, however, by 2018 this gap had disappeared illustrating the dynamic nature of this issue (ONS, 2019).

However, whilst there is evidence that the ethnicity gap is closing it is important to note that there is

a strong correlation between income and digital exclusion and between ethnicity and poverty. For example, a recent report on Poverty in the UK confirmed that poverty levels for certain ethnic groups have been consistently above average, with 53% of Bangladeshi households, 48% of Pakistani Households and 40% of Black African/Black Caribbean groups living in poverty compared to 24% for those from a white background. Moreover, people from Black and Minority Ethnic groups are also more likely to have higher rates of in-work poverty and child poverty and are more likely to live in larger families and lone parent households, family types that are more prone to poverty (JRF, 2022).

Burgess and Holmes (2022) highlight the complex interaction between housing and digital inclusion. They argue that digital inclusion intersects in important ways with offline aspects of people's lives. For example, poverty which can preclude people from affording to buy devices or internet connections and impact on the spatial and material contexts of their lives. It is this interaction between digital exclusion, poverty, and housing which can, for instance, prevent someone from gaining access to a desktop computer because they do not have a desk or suitable surface inside their homes to enable them to use one properly, or from taking advantage of online shopping services because their homes are not considered suitable for delivery.

The shift to online learning highlighted the problem of digital exclusion for children and young people. Ofcom (2019) found that one in five children who had been home-schooled did not have access to what their parents considered 'an appropriate device' for their online home-learning needs all of the time and 2% of school-aged children relied on smartphone-only internet access to get online. This problem was most pronounced for the poorest households with as many as 23.4% of 5–15-year-olds experiencing access issues because of not having access to either an adequate device and/or internet connection (Ofcom, 2019). A further study found that 20% of students on free school meals did not have access to a computer at home, compared to 7% of other children during the first lockdown and identified a gap in engagement with remote learning between pupils in the most deprived (30%) and the least deprived schools (49%) (Nelson and Sharp, 2020). Research undertaken by Montacute and Cullinane (2021) found that during the first months of the lockdown, middle class pupils (30%) were much more likely than working class pupils (16%) to participate in home schooling and the gap was even

more pronounced between pupils attending private and state schools, where pupils in private schools were twice as likely to participate in online learning compared to their state school counterparts.

These two studies identified a parental support gap between the educational qualifications of parents and their ability to support their children's learning. For example, three quarters of parents with a postgraduate degree, and just over 60% of those with an undergraduate degree felt confident directing their child's learning, compared to less than half of parents with A level or GCSE level qualifications (Montacute and Cullinate, 2021). Similarly, parental support with remote learning increased from 42% in the most- deprived schools to 62% in the least deprived schools (Nelson and Sharp, 2020).

As we have exited the pandemic the problem of digital exclusion continues. Ofcom's (2022a) survey found that more than a third (36%) of primary school-age children did not always have access to an adequate device for online learning at home, compared to (17%) of secondary-age children. Furthermore, one in ten primary-age children (11%) rarely or never had access compared to (3%) of children in secondary schools. They also identified several differences in access and use between children living in the most financially vulnerable (MFV) households and those living in the least financially vulnerable households (LFV). Children in the most financially vulnerable households were less likely to use a tablet to go online (61% vs 75% LFV) or a laptop or netbook (34% vs 61% LFV) and were more likely to use a device other than a computer to go online (56% vs 29% LFV). For example, whilst less than one in ten children in (MFV households) only used a mobile phone to go online (8%), this declined to (2%) for those living in LFV households (Ofcom, 2022b).

The ongoing cost of living crisis is further exacerbating the problem of digital exclusion. As inflation soars, and the price of energy, food, transport and housing go up, basic services are shifting further out of reach. Recent analysis suggests that 6 million UK households are now struggling to pay their mobile, landline and broadband bills (Which, 2022). This poses a serious threat to digital inclusion, and to broader social and economic participation.

A number of organisations and institutions are advocating the importance of digital inclusion as a basic right/need. UNICEF UK and the Carnegie UK Trust (2021) have highlighted the link between children's rights and digital inclusion arguing that the

pandemic has shone a spotlight on the problems faced by digitally excluded children and young people and its role in potentially impacting on the equitable life chances of every child under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child where every child has the right to a quality education (Articles 28 and 29), to access information (Article 17) and to leisure, culture and play (Article 31). Their strategy for addressing digital inclusion aligns closely with the 'Connecting Communities' project where they advocate a four- pronged approach aimed at addressing inclusion that includes access to a device, a stable connection, skills, and a safe environment (UNICEF UK/Carnegie UK Trust, 2021).

The Good Things Foundation is currently working on a Minimum digital living standard underpinned by a citizen science approach that suggests that in addition to access and skills there is a need to focus on online safety (Good Things Foundation, 2022). Similarly, the Institute of Global Prosperity has highlighted the relationship between digital inclusion and prosperity/secure livelihoods (Woodcraft et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2022a). Secure livelihoods are identified as an infrastructure of interrelated assets that people can rely on to prosper including secure income and good quality work; food and energy security; affordable, secure, and good quality housing; access to key public services – childcare and transport, healthcare, education, enabling inclusion in the social and economic life of the city by supporting and creating the capacities and capabilities that allow people to participate fully in society (Woodcraft et al., 2021; IGP, 2019).

The IGP's view coincides with the above literature as universal access to digital inclusion services as part of a wider set of seven basic social protections should be provided as automatic and reciprocal entitlements of citizenship (Moore et al., 2022a; Moore et al., 2022b). Such universal access of a comprehensive set of UBS together can enhance productivity, increase solidarity and social cohesion, and protect citizens through the transitions set to take place in the upcoming years (Moore, Snower and Bruni, 2022; Moore et al., 2022a).

4.2 Tower Hamlets in context

Tower Hamlets is the most densely populated area in the UK and has the fastest growing population. Between 2011 and 2021 the population increased by 22.1%, from 254,100 to 310,300. This was the highest increase of any London Borough (Census, 2021). The Borough has a larger proportion of mothers



born outside of the UK (68% in 2018) compared to (57.1%) for London and (28%) for the UK. The Borough has one of the youngest populations in the UK with a median age of 31.6 and a comparatively small older population i.e., just 6% of the population are over 65 compared to 12% in London and 18% in England, although this is predicted to grow significantly between 2020 and 2030. Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic groups comprise more than two-thirds (69%) of the Borough's population. The two largest ethnic groups are White British and Bangladeshi each comprising around a third of the Borough's population. (London Borough of Tower Hamlets, 2020a).

The Borough has one of the highest rates of economic output of any local authority in the country. The employment sector is both large and growing. However, there is evidence of economic polarisation. For example, there are currently 300,000 jobs in the Borough, paradoxically 86% of these jobs held by people from outside of the Borough. The median earnings of workers in the Borough are the second highest in the UK and the income gap between people working in the Borough and residents is the largest of any London Borough. The number of people claiming out of work benefits is higher than in London and Great Britain as a whole (LBTH, 2020b).

Tower Hamlets moved from the 10th most deprived to the 50th most deprived on the Index of Multiple Deprivation between 2015 and 2019. However, both Children and older people continue to be severely affected by poverty. Despite an overall decline in deprivation, children living in the Borough continue to be the most impacted by income deprivation of any Borough in England. Data for 2018/19 indicated that 27.3% of children in Tower Hamlets lived in households in relative poverty and 21.4% lived in households in absolute poverty. This is the highest rate in London and well above the average for Great Britain. Moreover, 72% of all children are in a family that receives either child tax or working tax credit, 32% of children in primary schools and 37% in secondary schools claim free school meals. Attainment levels in both primary and secondary schools are similar to the national average, however, children who are eligible for free school meals do less well at all levels (London Borough of Tower Hamlets, 2020c).

Digital Inclusion in Tower Hamlets

Tower Hamlets have undertaken a range of strategies and initiatives aimed at promoting digital inclusion including the establishment of a digital inclusion steering group. In their most recent Digital Inclusion Strategy 2021 they report an improving situation, with internet access increasing from 88% in 2013 to 95% by 2021 (LBTH, 2021). They estimate that 5% of residents are still without internet access and that the profile of non-users in Tower Hamlets reflects the findings of other national surveys. The London Borough of Tower Hamlets sets out an ambitious strategy focussed on access, skills and safety broadly aligned with the ambitions emanating from both the Good Things Foundation's minimum digital living standards framework. The 'Connecting Communities' project is identified as an important part of their overall strategy. This evaluation will contribute for the evidence base for rolling out digital inclusion strategies in Tower Hamlets (LBTH, 2021).

Equally, data from IGP's Prosperity in east London 2021-2031 longitudinal study of 4,000 households in east London also provides insights into the scale of digital inclusion within some areas in Tower Hamlets. The results in Table 1 show the number of households reporting access to the computer or access to the internet. Overall, 15% of survey respondents do not have access to a computer at home and 17% do not have access to the internet at home. Furthermore, 6% of households do not have access to the internet anywhere.



In Table 2, the data for the five LSOAs named in Table is split into ethnic groups. Comparing 'White'





Table 1. Digital Inclusion from Prosperity in east London 2021-2031 Longitudinal Study (IGP, 2022a)

Lower Super Output Area (LSOA)	Number of Households surveyed	Access to computer at home (%)	Access to internet at home (%)	Access to the internet anywhere ¹ (%)
Coventry Cross (Tower Hamlets 008D)	259	86%	73%	95%
Fish Island & Sweetwater (Tower Hamlets 001C)	264	94%	92%	98%
Teviot East (Tower Hamlets 018D)	254	78%	82%	95%
Teviot North (Tower Hamlets 018B)	374	88%	88%	93%
Teviot West (Tower Hamlets 018C)	241	75%	76%	90%
Total	1392	85%	83%	94%

and 'Asian' ethnic groups (due to similar sample size), we see that those from a 'White' background are more digitally excluded than the 'Asian' ethnic group.

¹ 'Anywhere' includes at home via a laptop/computer; A tablet, smart phone/mobile phone; Family member/friend; Work; Public places such as a community centre, library, or internet café; Elsewhere

Table 2. Ethnicity breakdown of above digital inclusion data (IGP, 2022a)

Ethnic Group	Number of Households surveyed	Access to computer at home (%)	Access to internet at home (%)	Access to the internet anywhere* (%)
White	544	82%	81%	91%
Black African, Caribbean	166	84%	83%	95%
Mixed Ethnicity	15	73%	73%	80%
Asian	586	89%	85%	97%
Other	38	89%	87%	92%
Total	1349	85%	83%	94%

4.3 The 'Connecting Communities' Scheme in more detail

The 'Connecting Communities' scheme is a pilot project that has been designed to promote digital inclusion by offering targeted support to children on low incomes (and their households) attending primary schools in Tower Hamlets. Several studies have confirmed that children attending primary schools are more likely to be digitally excluded than those attending secondary schools and this exclusion is more pronounced for those living in households on low incomes (See for example, Ofcom, 2019; Ofcom, 2022).

The pilot evolved as a result of a collaboration between the LETTA Trust, Poplar HARCA, and the East End Community Foundation with internet connections provided through Community Fibre. The LETTA Trust is a founder member of the Poplar Partnership set up in 2001 to improve the quality of education in Poplar. It initially comprised two primary schools, Bygrove and Stebon. In 2013, Bygrove received a teaching school designation and established the London East Teacher Training Alliance or LETTA, where it offers teacher training, and

a wide range of professional learning opportunities. Poplar HARCA is a housing association that is the largest social landlord in the Poplar Area. It places a strong emphasis on regeneration and has initiated a range of digital inclusion strategies for its residents. The East End Community Foundation is a grant-maker and philanthropy advisor dedicated to improving lives in the East End. The project is underpinned by a three-pronged approach in line with good practice guidelines (UNICEF UK/Carnegie UK Trust, 2021; Good Things foundation, 2022). Users are provided with:

- A free stable broadband connection for one year provided by Community Fibre;
- A free Google Chromebook;
- A comprehensive 'train the trainer' package delivered by each participating primary school covering basic skills including how to keep safe online, how parents can support their children with their studies and how to access government services online.

“I think having that three-pronged approach has worked well. There were lots of different companies giving out laptops, our project is

² See Table 1 Footnote

unique because you get to keep the device (so you do not have to worry about spilling something on it), You get a years broadband and training. The training element is one of the key successes.”
(Stakeholder Interview)

The scheme was under development in the period leading up to the pandemic and was expedited in response to the urgent need to support online learning. One key challenge has been how to prioritise distribution of the laptops and policy has evolved over time:

“Originally it was for families on free school meals but just going through the programme we realised that the school is best placed to identify families not only on free school meals but others that might just be on the threshold of eligibility and who do not have broadband or a device, we have left it up to the schools to ensure the devices are going to the right people because they have relationships with the families.”
(Stakeholder Interview)

Stable Internet connection

Each household was provided with a free and stable internet connection for one year. This was provided by ‘Community Fibre.’ One barrier that emerged early on was that Community Fibre was not able to provide coverage for all households. To overcome this barrier, relationships were developed with other broadband providers.

Training

One of the unique elements of the intervention is the provision of a comprehensive training programme organised into three blocks delivered across seven weeks aimed at all participating households. The training programme was developed by the training manager at the LETTA trust and the IT lead in Poplar HARCA who have extensive experience in delivering digital inclusion skills training to their residents. The

training is delivered by each Primary School through a ‘train the trainer’ model. The rationale for this model of delivery assumed that training should be offered in a context that households were familiar with, as this would be more acceptable and result in higher take up.

A handbook was developed to support roll out of training in all participating schools. The handbook comprises:

- A range of online resources including PowerPoint slides and a bank of short videos linked to the topics covered in the training sessions;
- The training programme is organized into three units/blocks;
- Block one introduces households to how to use the equipment, connect to the internet and register for an email account that enables access to an online system that the school might have such as parent pay, and newsletters;
- Block two is designed to help parents support their children’s learning whilst familiarizing themselves with learning platforms such as Google classroom, how to access additional learning resources such as BBC Bitesize, how to manage online risks such as cyberbullying and how to keep children safe online. Content for this block was developed in conjunction with the two computing leads at the LETTA trust;
- Block Three focuses on how to access/connect to a range of services such as online banking, GP (General Practitioner) services. Content for this block was developed by the IT Team at Poplar HARCA.

The training was delivered as a weekly online one-hour session during the pandemic, and then moved to a one and half hour weekly face to face session as we exited the pandemic.

We now move on to consider the findings of this evaluation. The findings are organised into two sections. In the first section we explore the perspective of schools’ on the scheme and in the second, household/user perspectives.





5. RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1 Key findings - Perspectives from Schools/Headteachers/Family Liaison Officers and Stakeholders (Project Steering Group and Implementation Staff)

- All schools felt that the scheme was beneficial and should be rolled out more widely across the Borough;
- The scheme is playing an important part in addressing digital exclusion both for children and households;
- All schools indicated that they participated in the scheme because of an awareness of the impact of digital exclusion on their pupils and the urgent need to close the digital exclusion gap;
- In phase 1, The schools prioritised distribution to pupils on free school meals without a laptop; In phase 2, greater flexibility was introduced to enable schools to target resources where there was a need. Most schools continued to prioritise those on free school meals, although some schools targeted the package in other ways, such as the use of the food bank or households with no recourse to public funds;
- The advantage of distributing the scheme via primary schools including training was that schools were trusted and familiar and schools were well placed to identify and target support to those in need;
- There were three key barriers to take up that included structural (related to Community Fibre internet coverage). Practical (related to switching providers) and Attitudinal (related to trust about the role of the scheme);
- The scheme has played a key role in enabling pupils to access the full curriculum;
- This project has enabled parents to support their children's learning more effectively;
- Most schools (76%) either agreed or strongly agreed that parents had improved skills in digital literacy because of participating in the training and most schools (88%) agreed or strongly agreed that the training had enabled parents to effectively support their children with their schoolwork;
- Post Pandemic, the Google Chromebook is

used to support home learning and enable access to Google Classroom where pupils are unable to attend their classes;

- There is evidence of good practice emerging in relation to training, However, delivery and take up of training was uneven across schools;
- Half of schools completing the survey indicated a willingness to deliver training on other topics;
- The scheme has played an important role in improving communication between parents and schools.

In this section we summarise the key findings that emerged from the survey distributed to schools. The survey was completed by 8 of 11 participating schools. This survey provides an insight into a range of issues related to implementation and roll out. We assess the criteria applied to distributing the package, barriers to take up; the rationale for schools joining the scheme and the benefits to schools, children, and families. We explore issues related to the delivery of training, and the propensity for wider roll out. We begin by considering how the scheme was implemented.

Criteria for allocating the package

The scheme was designed to offer a targeted approach aimed at supporting the most disadvantaged pupils. Initially the scheme was targeted at pupils on free school meals but as it has been rolled out schools have been given more agency in deciding who would most benefit from the scheme. Most schools continued to prioritise distribution to those on free school meals/eligible for pupil premium. However, some schools targeted support in other ways. For example, one school prioritised those who had accessed the school food bank regularly and another prioritised those who had no recourse to public funds. Another school targeted families who were known to have no device or insufficient access to online learning and another school did a survey with households to identify those who did not have access to a device or internet connection.

Barriers to take up

It was clear in interviews with stakeholders from the project steering group and implementation staff and



participating schools that there were some barriers to take up. These barriers were structural/practical and attitudinal.

1. Structural – Internet coverage – As has been noted above Community Fibre does not currently offer coverage across the whole area, and therefore some families were excluded based on their postcode. There were some strategies put in place to overcome this barrier that included arranging cover from other broadband providers. In one instance dongles were provided but this was perceived as less effective in providing a stable internet service.
2. Practical (reluctance to switch broadband providers) – Some households were already tied into contracts with broadband providers and for households living in HMO's (Houses in Multiple Occupation) they did not have the authority to simply switch to a different provider.
3. Attitudinal/mistrust about the scheme - It became clear quite early on that there was a reluctance from some families to take up the scheme driven by a lack of understanding and trust.

“At the initial stage, we were saying Chromebook, we were calling them Chromebook, which is what they are, but we found that a lot of people said no I do not need a book, so we had to change the language. That is why we now go to the schools with an ESL translator.” (Stakeholder Interview, Project Lead, EECF)

“Families thought it was ‘too good to be true’ and took some convincing of the genuine, amazing offer. With many other priorities for us as a school, it was challenging to find the capacity to work with parents effectively to encourage take up.” (Respondent, school Survey)

“Initially families were afraid to get involved with the project as they believed there could be a hidden agenda that would eventually result in unexpected cost. This was addressed by having one to one meetings with families to go through the criteria and to remove any fears.” (Respondent, School Survey)

It is clear then that there were some barriers to take up that have been addressed as the scheme has been rolled out and that should be considered in any plan for further roll out.

Why did schools join the scheme?

All schools were attracted to the scheme because of its potential to promote digital inclusion/offer support to their families, with some explicitly mentioning the specific design/three-pronged approach of a device, training, and an internet connection. For example:

“Lockdown highlighted the vast digital gap for our families with many children sharing devices, trying to access on-line work via a mobile phone and many simply not having the technology or know how to log on and learn. Post pandemic it is still very much apparent that several families lack access to devices and/or the knowledge to enable children to browse safely with parental controls in place. The ‘Connecting Communities’ Project ticked all the boxes - devices-training-connectivity; it was an offer too good to miss.” (Respondent, School Survey)

“We observed during the COVID period the high number of families without ‘digital access’



and the negative impact this was having on their lives at a time when digital connectivity was so needed.” (Respondent, School Survey)

“We identified parents who found supporting their children with online learning during the lockdown as challenging and families who would benefit from the support to maximise the benefits of digital in education, health, and well-being and employment.” (Respondent, School Survey)

5.2 Training

Training was a key element of the scheme. Therefore, the survey included a number of questions aimed at assessing a range of issues linked to the delivery/ implementation of training.

Delivery of the training package

One key organising principle of the training was that it would be delivered by each participating primary school through a ‘train the trainer’ model. Participating schools were provided with a bank of resources (see above). Initially, the training was delivered online, but over time has moved to socially distanced face to face delivery. There was considerable effort put into the planning of the training by some participating schools and again practice has been honed to be more efficient. For example:

“The in-person session was delivered in a quiet, designated, safe space with refreshments with Bengali interpretation available - thus helping all parents to feel welcomed and enabled them to recognise their skill level and additional needs. The training was modified to meet parent needs.” (Respondent, School Survey)

“Some parents felt embarrassed at being at such an early stage of technical skill or, felt the training was all about their child’s schoolwork and they would struggle with that. Face to face conversations and reassurance, plus text reminders about the training all helped to get a high turn-out.” (Respondent, School Survey)

“When we gave them the devices, we signed them up to training in the line and we recommended that to others.” (Respondent, School Survey)

It was felt that the move to face-to-face training brought real benefits and enabled a more tailored approach in response to learner needs:

“Now we can offer shoulder to support to parents. We can sit with them and show them what we are talking about, it is possible that we might cut the workshops down to an hour.” (Stakeholder Interview)

Take-up and effectiveness of training

We were interested to understand more about attendance/take up of training. There was a low response rate to this question in that just five of eight schools provided details on take up. One school reported 100% attendance for Unit One – but no detail on the take up in subsequent blocks. One school reported 53% attendance for all three blocks, one school indicated that they had not recorded attendance and two schools indicated that they were not able to offer the training.

“The training element of this project was impossible due to risk assessments due to Covid. We were unable to allow families into the building. Therefore,

we sent information to the families digitally and using paper information. I was able to do some one to one support work with some of the families from the project.” (Respondent, School Survey)

Therefore, we can conclude that whilst training is a key element of this package, there is scope for ensuring that a more consistent approach to training is applied.

We were interested in understanding whether some elements of the training package were more effective than others. Perspectives varied. For example:

“The initial introduction was extremely effective and allowed for parents to gain a complete understanding of the purpose of the project.” (Respondent, School Survey)

Whilst two respondents specifically referred to the effectiveness of training elements that focused on supporting children with learning and staying safe online:

“Units 4-5 were most useful for our parents to help them understand how their children work online and what they can do to help.” (Respondent, School Survey)

“Keeping children safe online was highly effective. Parents wanted to learn about what’s online and how they can have control on what their children are watching on their devices.” (Respondent, School Survey)

Impact of training on parents

We were interested to understand the perspective of schools on the impact of training on parents. Most

schools agreed that the parents had improved their skills in digital literacy because of participating in the training and that the training had enabled parents to support their children with their schoolwork.

Three respondents provided examples to illustrate the impact of parents participating in the scheme on their ability to support their children’s learning.

“One example is of a child who seldom logged in for online classes during lockdown. Dad said this was because he had no idea how to support his child.” (Respondent, School Survey)

“Parents were able to sit with their children and support them during their online session.” (Respondent, School Survey)

“Parents have reported back being able to access things like My Maths & Times Tables Rock Stars.” (Respondent, School Survey)

Extending the training offer within primary schools

This initiative was relatively unique in offering training for families in a primary school setting. Schools were asked if they would be interested in extending their training offer to parents on a wider range of issues linked to inclusion, such as skills training, support with employment search, etc. Half of respondents indicated that they would be interested in offering further training and all of those interested in offering training specifically mentioned training in employability/basic skills. For example:

“We would consider offering all aspects of training including employment skills, parenting skills, managing behaviour in the home and Online safety.” (Respondent, School Survey)
“Improving employability. basic skills training / access to basic qualifications / GCSEs English Language courses for non-first



language English individuals/ Financial literacy.” (Respondent, School Survey)

One school observed that their ICT suite was well designed to accommodate training for parents. Schools were asked to identify any barriers to extending the training offer; two specifically mentioned time and another the physical space to offer training.

What are the advantages/disadvantages of distributing this package through schools?

Schools were asked to identify the advantages and disadvantages of distributing the package through schools. Two key advantages were identified including the ability of schools to identify those who were in need or would benefit most from the intervention and schools being trusted by families. One disadvantage identified was the time pressure associated with delivery.

5.3 Assessing the impact on pupils, families, and schools of participating in the ‘Connecting Communities’ Scheme

In the next section, we focus in more detail on the perspectives of schools on the benefits for pupils, families, and participating schools.

Benefits for pupils

Schools were asked to identify the benefits on children of participating in the scheme during the pandemic. The overriding benefit identified related to access to learning both during the pandemic and in the post pandemic period. Two respondents who completed the School Survey specifically mentioned the free internet service and one respondent indicated that digital inclusion enabled pupils to gain online support on a range of issues such as mental health.

“I can think of the schools that weren’t able to access this project immediately. They were sending home a pack of paper and there is no way children who were working with a stack of paper

were getting the same quality of instruction that children who had the device had.” (Stakeholder Interview)

Benefits were also identified in terms of academic performance:

“We thought when children returned to school, we were going to see large gaps across the board. That is not the case, there are gaps where online learning did not lend themselves too, the data around writing is not as good as it would have been if children were face to face because writing needed to be heavily scaffolded but reading and math’s data looks rather good, that would be down to children being able to access reading online.” (Stakeholder Interview, Director of School Improvement, LETTA Trust)

Benefits for parents

Schools were asked to identify the benefits for parents participating in the scheme. A range of benefits were identified, including enabling parents to support their children’s learning, improved communication with schools, access to the wider benefits of digital inclusion and financial savings at a time of increased hardship. Two schools explicitly mentioned the role of the scheme in valuing and supporting households at this challenging time.

“It will have given insight into lessons and shared discussions about learning and participating in the many family activities that went on-line.” (Respondent, School Survey)

“Families feel ‘valued’ and cared for. Parents can access information more readily about their children’s school and to



access services – e.g., GP/local council/ etc.” (Respondent, School Survey)

“A higher level of confidence from both parents & pupils when accessing learning materials online.” (Respondent, School Survey)

“Parents felt much more able to access local amenities and give their children access to school learning.” (Respondent, School Survey)

“Financial support for families that may have been affected by covid-19. They were able to access free internet. ICT training – parents were able to learn about how to use the devices that they received.” (Respondent, School Survey)

“Relationships between schools and parents are stronger today than they have ever been, a lot of that is down to ‘Connecting Communities’ and the broader response of the pandemic. You are looking for a silver lining in two years of awfulness, it has brought families and schools closer together and we have established a really good sense of community” (Stakeholder Interview)

Benefits for Schools

Respondents were asked to identify the impact on schools of participating in the scheme. A range of benefits were identified including enhancing access to online learning for their pupils; improved relationships with the community and parents,

improved communications with families and the ability to support vulnerable children and families at their school. For example:

“It’s provided a way to communicate regularly with pupils and check who was accessing the online lessons and who was not enabling more targeted follow ups.” (Respondent, School Survey)

“Helped ease the strain of educating pupils at home who would otherwise not have been able to keep up.” (Respondent, School Survey)

“The scheme allowed schools to gain insight into some of the digital issues faced by families and some of the struggles that were hindering children’s learning.” (Respondent, School Survey)

“Developed stronger relationships with parents.” (Respondent, School Survey)

“We are able to set up meetings via zoom/teams when parents are unable to attend face to face.” (Respondent, School Survey)

“More parents can access our means of communication, e.g., school app./website (School Website).” (Respondent, School Survey)

“It has enhanced our parent communication and brought a new wave of parents on board in a positive way.” (Respondent, School Survey)



Role of the scheme – Post Pandemic

We were interested in understanding more about the role of the scheme as we exit the pandemic. It was clear that the scheme continued to play a significant role in supporting learning at home as we exited the pandemic. For example:

“Home learning is provided on Google classroom; children have learning using online platforms such as Mathletics and purple mash.” (Respondent, School Survey)

“We use them within school and the children use their Google accounts to access learning at home and broaden their skills and development.” (Respondent, School Survey)

“Google Chromebooks are now used to do children’s homework, or extra research for projects.” (Respondent, School Survey)

“Children are encouraged to use their devices at home to support their in-school learning.” (Respondent, School Survey)

“If children are poorly but well enough to sit in front of a device, they can join in in learning which they could not do before. I am not sure if every school is doing that, but we are certainly. We have a three-form entry. We had a situation where one week across three classes, we had one teacher teaching from home via video link, one classroom who were all joining via video link and the third classroom, teaching in the regular way. If we returned

to lockdown we could do so in a flash.” (Stakeholder Interview)

“Across our schools they have been well integrated into lessons, things that children are working in the class might be integrated via Google Classroom, then the devices can be taken home to finish off or revisit a piece of learning and I think things are a bit more joined up, these devices enable you to join home and school learning more effectively.” (Respondent, School Survey)

Should the scheme be expanded?

All Schools supported the further roll out of the scheme, with some specifically mentioning the need to expand it to pupils in need across the Borough. One school felt that the requirement for parents to attend training, could be a barrier to further expansion.

“We are big fans of ensuring no pupil is left behind digitally due to lack of devices and parental training. If the programme could be expanded so more pupils can benefit – fantastic.” (Respondent, School Survey)

“Going forward, I think that it should be rolled out to anyone that needs a Chromebook. Schools have a bank of these and when we hear of or get to know of a family that need a device, we could give these out.” (Respondent, School Survey)

5.4 User views on the ‘Connecting Communities’ Scheme

In this section we consider in more detail user perspectives on the ‘Connecting Communities’

Scheme. This section is informed by:

1. Semi-structured interviews with seven households;
2. Interviews with three pupils undertaken at one of the participating primary schools.
3. Qualitative feedback from the online survey.

Key Findings

- The ‘Connecting Communities’ scheme is successfully targeting digitally excluded households;
- The package of support offered is bringing benefits to a range of household members;
- The ‘Connecting Communities’ scheme is playing an important part in enabling access to education, information, employment opportunities and a wide range of services associated with greater prosperity on the IGP’s Citizen Prosperity Index (Woodcraft and Anderson, 2019); Participating households appreciate the support offered through this pilot;
- Households are satisfied with the Google Chromebook;
- There is a lower-level satisfaction with Community Fibre linked to delays in getting connected;
- The training is appreciated by those households who attended training, however, some families had not attended/ accessed training;
- Some households expressed the need for additional training over time covering additional content and refresher sessions; Households identified a range of benefits on their children’s learning as a result of participating in the scheme.

We were interested to understand why households had participated in the scheme. It was clear from analysis of semi-structured interviews that the scheme is playing a key role in enabling digital inclusion for digitally excluded households. For example:

“It was challenging when Covid started. We did not have enough money, we did not have a digital device, so the children were struggling. The school offered this brilliant project for some

families who were struggling.”
(Participant, Semi-structured interview)

“I took part in the community fibre project because it was during the lockdown and our children needed to do home learning.... We needed the Internet and a Chromebook, so it was a perfect solution. The school where my children attend offered it to us and I was grateful.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

“I have three kids all at primary school and I do not have any laptop at home. They always need my phone when they have online homework to do. I asked once at school if they could give me a laptop or something so that he can do homework. When the ‘Connecting Communities’ project came to the school, they contacted me and said I had been selected to participate in the scheme... I said yes this will be extremely helpful.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

The thing was- we needed-two Chromebooks for both my kids – which we did not have. We really did not have enough money to buy extra laptops urgently because of the lockdown, so the school saw that. I said I do not have no Chromebook at home and even with the internet, we do not have internet service at home; so that was really a great help that they provided us with a Chromebook and the internet to support



my children with their home learning.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

“I joined this project because my boys do not have any laptops to do their homework. Our financial situation was not so good. I was in dire need of a laptop. Sometimes my elder son, and sometimes my younger son used to use their father’s phone. In short, we faced a lot of difficulties; therefore, I joined this scheme.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

Utilising the Google Chromebook

We were interested in understanding more about how Chromebooks were used. Analysis of semi-structured interviews and qualitative feedback from the survey indicated that the Chromebooks were being used for educational purposes by both children and parents to access information, services, and employment opportunities, including using the package to compare products and services, search for employment opportunities online, access advice and support on health and wellbeing, access GP services and entertainment; find out about services in their area and to stay connected with friends and relatives. For example:

“Mostly the Google Chromebook was used for school home learning. During the pandemic they had to access Google Classroom every day.” (Qualitative feedback, Household Survey)

“Thank God! We got it by GCSE time because my older child used it to revise for GCSE’s. My youngest used it to play online with her cousins... Mostly it’s education, shopping, and gaming from time to time... Night-time I use it to listen to books and that helps me to go to sleep faster.”

(Participant, Semi-structured interview)

“I am looking for jobs, searching for jobs online” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

“We really do not use it much for entertainment, but I did do my online shopping on there during the pandemic. It has mostly helped us with paying our bills and booking my appointments because I have poor health- so I do have lots of appointments through zoom. So that really helped.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

“We use this laptop for ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Language) classes homework. My husband uses this for his official work. Especially for our son’s study.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

A range of household members were using the Google Chromebook for a substantial chunk of time i.e., between 10 and 40 hours per week. For example:

“There are five of us. We are all using it, especially my children.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

“Four of us use this. My husband, me, my elder son, and my younger son. We use this for sending anything like benefit letters, any papers to our home, agency, etc also, for the children’s parent meetings, etc.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

“There is a total of six people live in my house. My first child is 14 years old, second one is 13 years old, third one is 10 years old, fourth one is 9 years old and the younger one is 5 years old. One laptop is not enough. And it tends to be used by my older children.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

We were interested in understanding user perspectives on the Google Chromebook and the Internet connection. Findings indicated that there were higher levels of satisfaction with the Google Chromebook than the internet.

“Our old computer is very slow that’s why my elder son got more benefits from this new laptop.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

“We like the big screen.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

Dissatisfaction with the internet tended to be linked to the slowness/problems in getting connected. For example:

“The broadband was promised and even after chasing up we did not receive any broadband support. In any case we appreciate whatever support we received.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

“I am still awaiting to be connected to the internet provider it has been a very slow process.” (Qualitative feedback, Household Survey)

“I haven’t received the broadband package, but I am very satisfied

with the Chromebook.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

“No, they didn’t give us free Wi-Fi, I don’t have an internet connection, and my internet contact is finished.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

One household highlighted the benefits of being provided with a stable internet connection:

“Our internet connection was weak..when we moved online it was a nightmare because they could never send their work to teachers and teachers would complain and call and I have to always be there to explain the case.... but when we got community fibre it made a big difference...we had Wi-Fi and no more complaints.”

“The community fibre was best in this area. I am still using community fibre, I am paying now but it is a very good service, and it is very high speed.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

One interviewee raised the issue of the transfer to payment:

“they told me they will start collecting the money...I will have to start paying £25.00 per month so I stopped.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

Children’s perspectives on use of the package

We undertook interviews with three children whose households were participating in the project. These interviews provide an insight into how children and their households were using their Google



Chromebook/internet.

“My mum uses it for exercises, to keep fit. My brother uses the Chromebook to do his homework. Me and my younger brother go on to play games and she (mother) makes sure they are all safe. I go on Google docs to write stories because I like writing stories. Me and my family we find the Chromebook useful.” (Pupil, Participating School)

“My mum uses it for her college work and my dad used it to search for jobs.” (Pupil, Participating School)

These interviews also offered insights into the use of the scheme during and after the pandemic:

“I used to go into my computer and go into Google Classroom, see what work had been setup, usually there would be a message from my teacher and a live link, and I would press it and it would take us to the meeting. We would wait for everyone to arrive, and the teacher would explain what work we would have. You could send a message to your teacher, and they would reply, and they could give you feedback on your work. ...If you had problems, you could go back to the live link and ask for help.” (Pupil, Participating School)

“After the pandemic I use the Chromebook for Purple Mash and Mathletics they are the two main places we go.” (Pupil, Participating School)

The children provided insights into how Google Chromebook was being used to extend their knowledge:

“I like exploring different fonts that you can use. I like making my story look colourful, there is a grammar thing and when you make a mistake it corrects you. It is good for spelling because it helps me focus on my English.” (Pupil, Participating School)

“My favourite subject is maths, I used Google Chromebook to practice my maths and now I am one of the top in year six.” (Pupil, Participating School)

“Yesterday it was the hottest day in the century, so I used my Chromebook to find out how to stay cooler. To find out the latest news what has been happening because of the heat.” (Pupil, Participating School)

Support from school

Most households who participated in the semi-structured interviews indicated that they felt supported by their respective schools to use the 'connecting communities' package.

Training

Training was a key dimension of this initiative. More of those participating in semi-structured interviews had attended the training and found it useful and identified it as a vital part of the package. For example:

“Computer training classes were needed because I found it hard, I do not know how to do it... I listened but it is not about the class it is about me. They teach us how to use the computer,

how to use the mouse. It was not for a long time one hour. (The interviewee implies that more time was required to reinforce knowledge). You might teach me when I get home I might forget. Teaching for me is not just one class. With time, I will get used to it and I will do it.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

“Yeah, that helped me a lot because- to be honest, my IT skills ain’t that great- so I was told how to use the Chromebook, how to access Google Classroom, how to join meeting through meetings.. You had to speak to teachers often with emails and all that stuff – which was a struggle but the training that they provided did help us-“ (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

“They arranged the training on how to use the computer... I personally benefited from training on how to protect my myself when I am using the internet, like internet banking or where a third party might steal your information. How the internet is good and bad for children and how to protect children. The teacher was very good. He was explaining everything. I learnt how to understand if the email is professional or fake email. We are not very educated people, so it is very difficult.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

“I did not know how to open Gmail account, how to open laptop

or anything, always if I need help my brother helps me but now after I went for the training, I can do it. There were so many parents, and every parent had the same problem. How to open the Gmail account. The training was 2 hours, and the teacher was very nice spending time with every single mum...two hours was not enough for all the parents who got the laptop. She was helping each one by herself and told us aif we want to learn anything else she will help.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

“We received training from the school. They gave us training 3 times. They showed us nicely how to use it. It helped us to use the laptop properly. We are happy, with the Bengali language they used for training. It was very helpful.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

One parent was unable to attend the training but did provide some insight into what would be useful for her:

“I am looking for training on internet safety for kids like bullying and negative comments. Because my knowledge about IT is limited... I just know how to use it but not like really good.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

5.5 User perspectives on the Impact of ‘Connecting Communities’ Scheme on children’s learning

We were interested in understanding more about the perspectives of users on the impact/benefit of



the scheme on Children's learning. Semi-structured Interviews offered a more qualitative insight into the perspectives of households on the impact of the package on children's learning:

"I am honestly grateful for the help and the support that they gave us by giving us the actual Chromebook because if the kids did not have that Chromebook – children could not have done home learning. It made it much easier and calmer for everyone to do what they had to do." (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

"Before I had the Chromebook or any laptop in house my year 4 son would have to use my phone to do work online." (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

"It is very important Chromebook and laptop or computer because we rely on technology, it enabled him to join his class, he could talk to the teacher. If my son could not participate it could have impacted on his life. In the future he would have suffered. So, it was very helpful and great for our community. Our children." (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

"My youngest got it you know as a year six child. She was so happy. She liked reading so she started looking for books, she already had so many books, but she read all of them and at the same time my other daughter has been struggling with her PC and was preparing for her GCSE's, it was too much pressure and so that helped a lot

with my daughter's preparation for her actual exams." (Participant, Semistructured interview)

"Because of the Chromebook I feel like my children have not fallen behind in the learning, they kept on top of it, they were able to engage and focus- They joined every single day, and their learning has not been affected by Covid- the pandemic. So, at the end of the day, the end of the year- the report was fine, good. I know lot of people have fallen behind - as I work in a school. There were lots of situations where children, they needed a bit more help and they could not get it. But with my child having access to Chromebook, my kids were able to stay on top of their learning and I am just grateful they did not fall behind." (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

"My younger son who got this laptop was showing me his flower project that was given from school. He was enjoying working on this project in the Chromebook. My elder one wanted to do his schoolwork." (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

"It helped them a lot with their homework." (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

5.6 Overall perspectives on the benefit of the scheme

We were interested in exploring in more detail benefits of the scheme. Analysis of semi-structured interviews illuminated the transformative benefits of



the scheme:

“It has changed my life for my children. They do not need to ask for my phone. We need this project for children.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

“I was proud to receive the package, but I did not understand what the benefit would be. We realised it was very important, it was big help for my family. So, the situation teaches us that it is very important internet and Chromebook. The Chromebook is good quality, and the internet is very high speed as well in this area. Your project is very good.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

“It has impacted positively on every single area, calling a GP, doing things online, connecting to my family abroad as well, and connecting with cousins...we recognise the enormous difference between the internet access that I have right now, so we are happy, satisfied and with the device. When my daughter was revising for her GCSE she always said “O thanks God I got this it helped me so much.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

“I am honestly hundred percent grateful for the service, for receiving the internet and the Chromebook at the time when I really needed it. And it has made a very big impact. The main thing is that we joined at a time when the things were really- bad

because the pandemic. People were struggling... people did not know what to do. I was like thinking Oh my God. I am paranoid about learning, about my children’s education and I was really upset that schools were closing- How am I going to cope. and mentally it has- like supported this so much- It helped me with my mental health so much knowing that I had that access to those projects and that help and that support. So that was the best thing and now I have the confidence and it is there for the kids to do their homework, to do the research, to look for anything they want. They are always using it and they are getting really good at using computers and laptops and Chromebook. So that’s good because nowadays everything is online.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

“We are very happy after having this, especially my child. The laptop has a big screen, so, they can use it when they want. They do not fight like before; they do not stay bored. My kids enjoy it so much.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)

“We were very happy. It was very helpful for us. My elder son was very happy. His old computer did not work properly that is why he lost his work so many times. He was very happy about the new one.” (Participant, Semi-structured interview)





6. CONCLUSION

The 'Connecting Communities' pilot project utilises a three-pronged approach to addressing digital inclusion. The project has provided a valuable insight into what the IGP's Universal Basic Service for 'information' might look like, and how it could contribute to broader livelihood security, in Tower Hamlets and beyond.

The 'Connecting Communities' project also represents a multi-stakeholder approach in public service delivery, design, and implementation, with partners from local authority, housing association, third sector and other public and private sector institutions. Our findings demonstrate how multi-stakeholder collaboration can help to reach a broader group of residents, particularly those who are most deprived (in this case, digitally excluded).

The research methodology utilised employed a wide variety of techniques to evaluate this scheme. This included interviews with key stakeholders; a school survey (completed by 8 of 11 schools); semi-structured interviews with users and an online survey. Given that this research was aimed in part at exploring user perspectives, the low response rate to the survey means that the findings are of limited use. This will be addressed going forward by ongoing evaluation with new households.

Lessons for future roll-out

The consensus from all stakeholders, including schools and households, was that the scheme should be rolled out more widely with some revisions. Below we set out the areas for refinement and the following considerations for future roll-out:

Eligibility:

- Evidence suggests that utilising free school meals (FSM) as the key criterion for allocation may exclude many children whose parents are on low incomes but not eligible for FSM;
- There should be additional guidance to support schools in allocating this finite resource, such as a survey template to support the identification of need and guidance that enables flexible allocation to a range of households, e.g., those who are eligible for Universal Credit and not free school meals or with no recourse to public funds;

- Consideration should be given to introducing a digital needs assessment for all pupils on entry to primary school.

Scale:

- Currently, all participating households are provided with a free internet connection for one year. The cost-of-living crisis poses an additional threat to digital inclusion, and consideration should therefore be given to implementing a needs led approach;
- In phase 1, the two participating primary schools each received 30 laptops and in phase 2 this declined to 15. The reduction in provision may result in increased rationing and be counter-productive to a need led approach. Further consideration to the scale of the project is therefore needed for roll out to ensure a needs led approach is maintained that targets disadvantaged groups.

Delivery:

- Given the existing pressures on schools, there should be consideration given to reducing some of the responsibilities regarding training. For example, two neighbouring schools could share the delivery of training or parent/peer champions fluent in different languages could be recruited to lead the training;
- Efficiency of training could be improved by developing a training needs assessment proforma to more effectively understand and tailor training approaches. Equally monitoring attendance is recommended in order to track participation;
- To support take-up, clear information should be produced that explains the scheme and sets out expectations around attendance of training and providing feedback. This should be translated into different languages;
- Some households may already have an internet connection, but no device. Therefore, consideration should be given to offering a more tailored approach in response to need;
- Relationships should be developed with a wider range of internet providers to ensure there is more comprehensive coverage.

Evaluation:

- The steering group should devise a theory of change and develop a short baseline survey distributed to coincide with receipt of the package and repeated at two further intervals to assess impacts of the scheme over time.

Broader Policy Recommendations

Universal Basic Services is an effective tool for reducing digital inequalities and securing livelihoods. Therefore, we are calling for Tower Hamlets Council and other local authorities to consider implementing the following:

1. Establish a Universal Basic Service for 'Information,' based on the three-pronged approach used in this project e.g., digital access, devices, and training. This would enable citizens to participate fully in society and enhance their capacities and capabilities in the long-term;
2. Expand digital UBS pilots across the Borough in order to reach more deprived areas and cater for a wide range of needs, e.g., older people. This expansion could be based on existing knowledge from the Council as well as IGP's research findings from the Prosperity in east London 2021-2031 longitudinal study of household prosperity to see the change in digital inclusion over time;
3. Explore and refine the criteria for assessing needs;
4. Digital Citizenship – commit to ensuring each individual has access to digital services as part of a basic democratic right of being a citizen (Percy et al., 2022; Moore et al., 2022b);
5. Devise a theory of change post-pandemic to reflect how digital UBS schemes can minimise the impact of cost-of-living crisis and rising inflation;
6. This pilot demonstrates both the benefits and potential of innovative collaborative partnerships that bring resources and expertise to address digital inclusion and therefore, we recommend that policymakers actively promote and support such partnerships.





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