Discover DIGITAL

Community Research Findings

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Discover

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Introduction

What is Discover Digital?

Discover was an exciting project in Stoke-on-Trent that worked to increase digital inclusion in the city. We realised that people have different barriers to getting access to digital services and technologies. Discover Digital was led by Staffordshire University and delivered in partnership with VAST, Wavemaker, Stoke-North Big Local, Caudwell Children, The Community Foundation for Staffordshire, Stoke-on-Trent College, YMCA North Staffordshire, The Dove Service, Beth Johnston Foundation and Keele University. It was funded by the HM Government Community Renewal Fund, distributed through Stoke-on-Trent City Council.

Discover aimed to address unequal access to digital technologies and online services through:

- A **Digital Skills** training programme

- A **Get Connected Grant** – to help people get the equipment and connectivity they need to get online.

- A **Digital Access fund** – to help people overcome barriers to digital access, including travel or childcare to attend courses, specific software to improve accessibility.

- A **Digital Innovation Grant** – for community organisations to lead small digital projects in community settings.

- A **Community Connector Programme** – through which members of the public are trained and supported to find out the everyday barriers to digital access and what is needed to overcome them.

- A **Digital Champions Programme** – where people who have come through the programme or are interested in digital technologies can support others less confident than themselves.

This report focuses on the Community Connector programme and associated community research, the findings, and how these findings have helped to shape the rest of the Discover Digital project.

Research Team

The research team included staff from Staffordshire University who ran consultations within different community organisations and within our Pop-up Shop located in the heart of the community. We had a team of Community Connectors who helped to identify the questions and shape the research at every stage. The research asked what people already do online, what they wish they could do online, and what is stopping them from doing these things. The aim was to identify the barriers to digital access and the training needs of the participants we spoke to, but also to find ways to increase digital engagement. We then responded to the findings through the Discover Digital project.

Methodology

We ran a series of monthly Community Connector Workshops, where people with previous experience in community research helped to shape our research. We used Get Talking, an approach to Participatory Action Research, to ensure the voices of those most affected by digital exclusion were included. The model is based on recruiting and training community researchers, then involving them in every stage of the research process.

The initial plan was to recruit a team of Community Connectors and provide them with this support and training to allow them to reach out into their own communities and gather stories and data around digital exclusion in Stoke-on-Trent. However, with the project timescales being so short, it was proving difficult

to recruit and train enough Community Connectors to create a useful sample size and gather enough data.

Figure 1:
Get Talking Participatory Action Research Model

As a result, we combined the above approach with the use of existing relationships with community organisations across the city and asked for their support to help facilitate consultations within their communities. Their support brought trust and familiarity to the consultations, which in turn encouraged participation, and still allowed us to gather information from a large sample size.

Plan

The planning phase involved Staffordshire University and the team of Community Connectors working together to identify the research questions, refine the consultation tool to ensure it was effective, map out who we needed to speak to and whose voices we needed to amplify through the research and, finally, to cross-check and analyse the data to identify any gaps.

The consensus was that to increase participation, the programme should be thought of like a "slow moving bus", where Community Connectors could easily jump on and off to suit them and their commitments. This proved an effective model and helped us to work around the lives and needs of our Community Connectors.

We wanted the consultations to be delivered in a creative way to encourage people to take part. It was also important that the activity was inclusive, and we wanted to ensure that everyone was able to participate, regardless of their ability to read and write, or their understanding of digital terminology. We created a series of icons that represented different activities that people can do online, and the different devices that can be used. Each of the icons had an explanation on the back, and plenty of space for people to include further detail, or stories or drawings – anything that they felt they wanted to add to the conversation.

Five research questions were codesigned with Community Connectors which were asked of participants during the consultations. These were:

1. What do you do online?
2. How do you get online?
3. What would you like to do online?
4. What stops you from getting online?
5. What can Discover Digital do for you?

Involve

In order to maximise reach, Community Connectors and staff at Staffordshire University collectively mapped out relevant stakeholders who were likely to be digitally excluded. We capitalised on the extensive local knowledge of our Community Connectors and Discover project partners and used this information to create a rich, diverse sample. To help increase participation we offered support with grant applications at each of the consultations to encourage people to attend, and we used the icons creative tool to increase engagement. We ran all the consultations in familiar and convenient community spaces, usually as part of each organisation's regular meetings, in order to remove as many barriers as possible.

Listen and Learn

We held a total of 13 consultations, 3 one-to-one sessions and 2 conversations with staff at colleges for adults with additional needs. Everyone was encouraged to be as open as they liked in their responses and were able to add their own stories, experiences, reflections and drawings to the icons. All findings were recorded after each session, and at the end of the data collecting stage we came together to analyse the findings as a group.

Cross check

To help us to identify any gaps and to maximise the accuracy of our findings, we made sure to monitor the demographics of the participants, and constantly looked for more communities to include in the research.

We invited Community Connectors to the data analysis sessions, where we identified further questions that would help to inform the project, and we conducted more consultations to fill those gaps.

Planning for action

We held an event to share the findings of our research with Community Connectors and other stakeholders, including consultation participants, local organisations, grant recipients, local council representatives and organisations that were running their own digital inclusion projects. Approximately 60 guests attended and they were all encouraged to share their own thoughts and reflections on the findings. This was another opportunity to cross-check the data with a large group of people to help us to identify any issues and bring new perspectives to the reflections. Together we came up with a list of recommendations which are included at the end of this report.
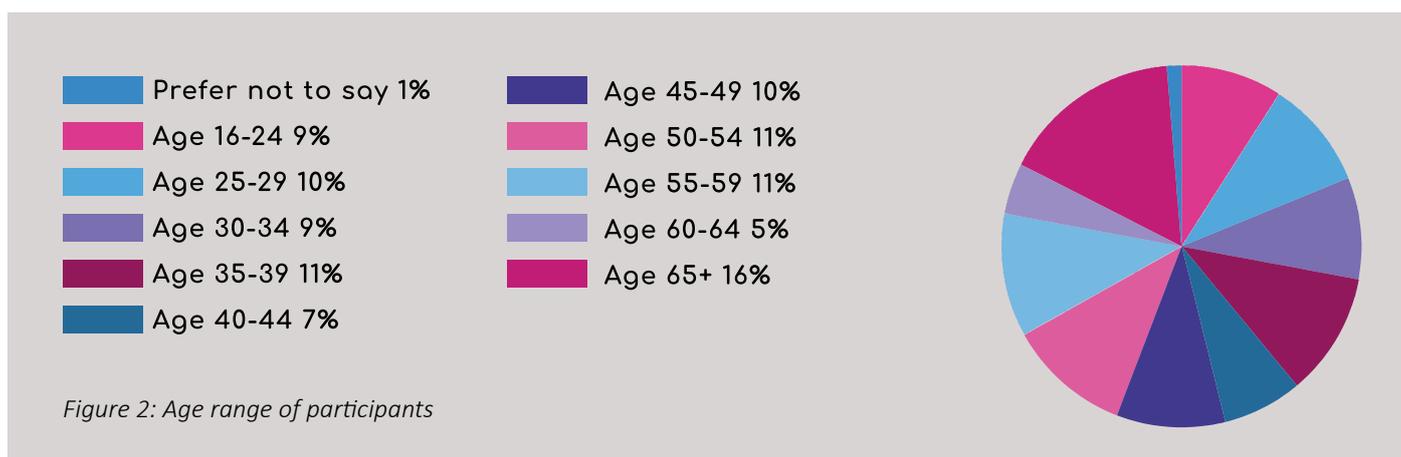
Supporting the Community Connectors

It was important to us that our Community Connectors felt supported throughout the process, so we used the project's Digital Access Fund to help cover any expenses stemming from their participation, including childcare and travel expenses. We also made sure that lunch and refreshments were available at every session. In addition, we recognised that digital exclusion could be an emotive issue for some people, so we made sure that all Community Connectors and participants had access to a list of organisations that could provide support in a range of issues.

Research Participants

154 people took part in the Discover Digital research. The research was conducted in a variety of community spaces to remove some of the barriers that would normally exclude certain community groups from this type of research. The majority of participants were residents of Stoke-on-Trent.

We had a good mix of ages amongst participants, with the 65+ category taking a small majority (16%), and the 60-64 and 40-44 age brackets taking the smaller majority (5% and 7% respectively).

Prefer not to say 1%
Age 16-24 9%
Age 25-29 10%
Age 30-34 9%
Age 35-39 11%
Age 40-44 7%
Age 45-49 10%
Age 50-54 11%
Age 55-59 11%
Age 60-64 5%
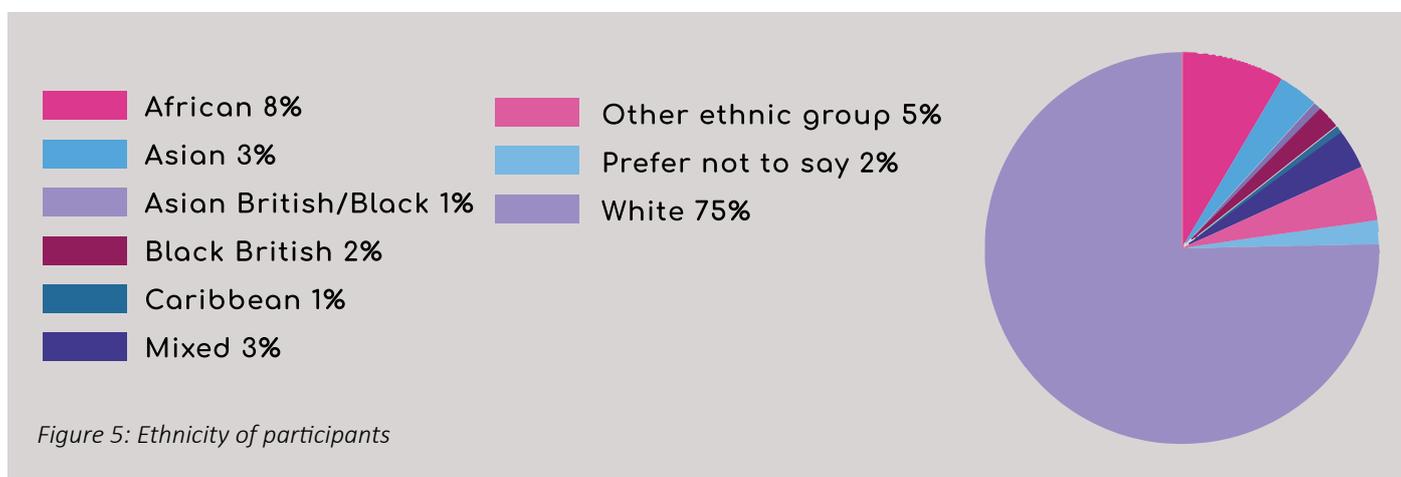Age 65+ 16%

Figure 2: Age range of participants

Over half (59%) of participants were economically inactive. In other words, they were not actively seeking employment as they were either in education, retired or unable to work due to citizenship status or due to a long-term illness or disability. The reason that the majority of participants fell into this category was because of the community organisations that were included in the research, and the link between this status and digital exclusion. A quarter (25%) of participants were in some form of employment (part-time, full-time, casual, self-employed) and 16% were unemployed.

Economically inactive 59%
Unemployed 16%
Employed 25%

Figure 3: Economic status of participants
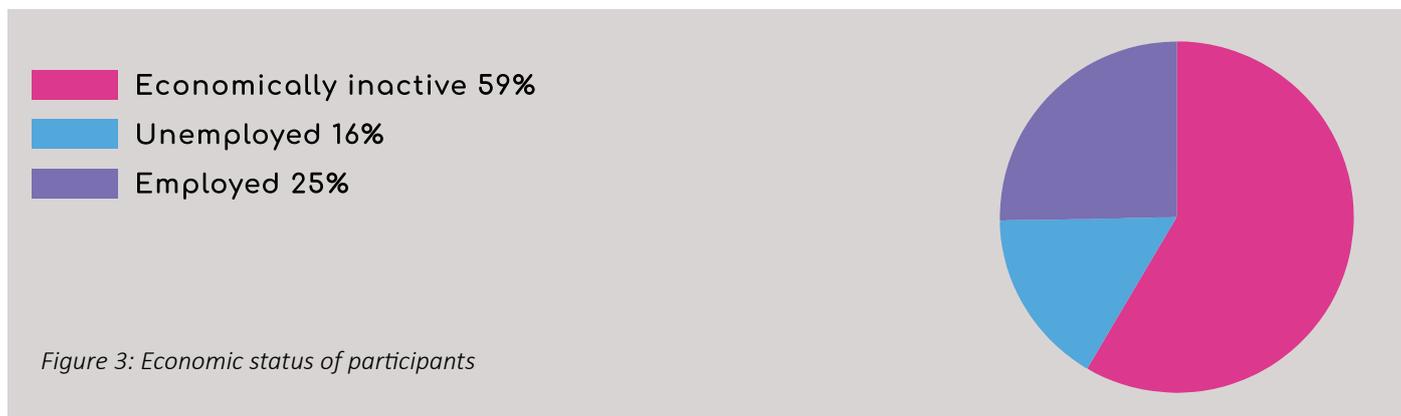
The majority of participants (60%) did not consider themselves to have a disability, and 4% chose not to disclose this information. Just over a third (36%) of participants considered themselves to have a disability.

Yes 36%
No 60%
Prefer not to say 4%

Figure 4: Presence of disability amongst participants
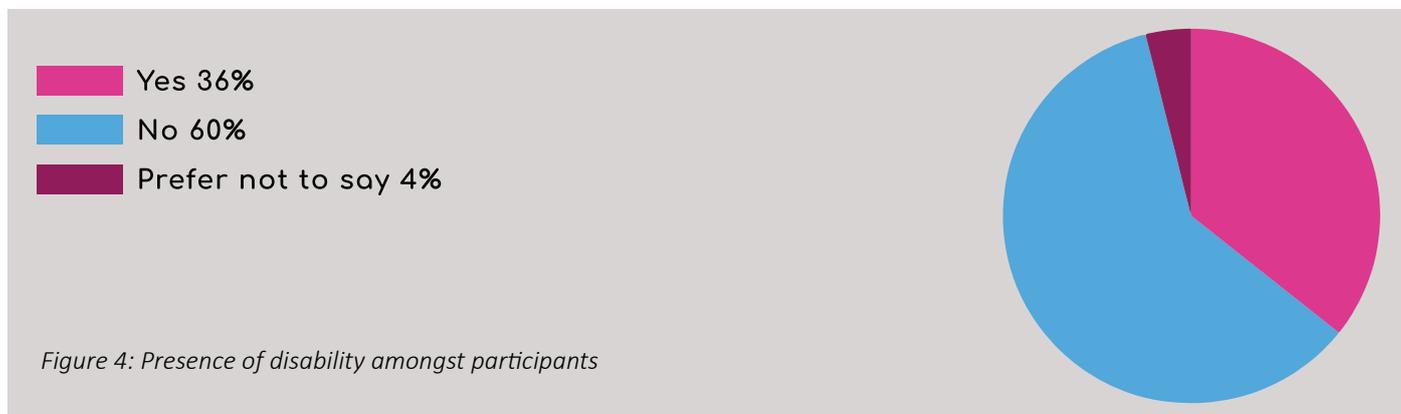
75% of participants identified as white, with the remaining 25% being a fairly even spread across other ethnic groups. The majority of people from other ethnic groups were asylum seekers or refugees thanks to our work with the Jubilee Project and Sanctus. During our time in the Pop-up Shop, word of the Get Connected Grants very quickly spread amongst the Ukrainian community and so we were able to include their experiences in this research.

African 8%
Asian 3%
Asian British/Black 1%
Black British 2%
Caribbean 1%
Mixed 3%
Other ethnic group 5%
Prefer not to say 2%
White 75%

Figure 5: Ethnicity of participants

While we have been able to involve people from a broad demographic range, we recognise that there are some gaps. Future projects need to look at the barriers to digital access and their impact for people who consider themselves to have a disability, people who are/have been homeless, ex-offenders, people with history of addiction (or in recovery).

Consultation Tool

We wanted the consultations to be delivered in a creative way in order to maximise accessibility and engagement with the research. With the support of the Community Connectors, we developed a creative tool to ask the five research questions that they had helped to develop. We created a series of icons that represented different things that people can do online, and different devices that people could use to get online. Each of the icons had an explanation on the reverse, as well as plenty of space for participants to include further detail and narrative to their answers if they wished. The icons represented: activism, education, finances, gaming, health, hobbies, music, news, photography, research, shopping, social/messaging, social media, travel, TV, and work/business. We also had an icon for "I don't go online" and a speech bubble icon where people could identify any other activities they do online. We also had icons representing the different devices that people might use to go online, and we had a "magic wand" and "light bulb" where people could share any recommendations or bright ideas.

In the Pop-up Shop, the icons were displayed on a large WiFi symbol on the wall, with each bar of the symbol representing a different question. This made a real statement, and would often attract passers-by into the shop. Out in the community, where we did not have access to this, we used a variety of methods to display the icons, dependent on what was available in the space, for example we displayed the icons on tables, with a different table for each question, or on walls with a different piece of flipchart paper for each question.

Research Findings

In this section we will go through each of the five research questions and the responses, before sharing our analysis.

What do you do online?

This question was designed to find out what level of digital engagement participants were already at and helped to set the scene for the remaining questions. We encouraged people to think about the different activities they do online, and they chose their own icons to represent this. Many participants elaborated and provided a narrative or further detail on the reverse of the icons. During this exercise, many people commented that they did not realise how much they actually did online until they mapped it out in this way, but there were still 14 participants that did not do anything at all online (almost 10% of the people we spoke to).

> "I hate computers, I'd put a boot through the lot of them if I could. All these computers are taking our jobs and it's not fair."

Figure 6 shows the number of people who provided a positive response for each icon. The highest responses were for education (51), research (51) and finance (51), followed closely by shopping (49), social media (48) and health (42). The online activities that participants said they did the least were photography (15), work (20), gaming (24), hobbies (24) and news (25).

We should note that participants tended to select the education icon when referring to formal education (university/college lectures or home-schooling) and selected the research icon for informal learning, such as learning about things that they are interested in that are not linked to work or study or researching days out and things to do. The point, however, is that there is clearly an appetite for knowledge, with the internet – for those that can access it – being a first point of access for this knowledge.

It is interesting to note that despite finance being one of the highest responses, people still felt apprehensive about it. Participants were happy to manage utilities accounts online and this was generally seen as lower risk, but they would still be uncomfortable with online banking or entering card details online.

> "I prefer to speak to a cashier and deal in cash. I prefer the person to person contact. I'm old-school. And security is a massive concern."

Interestingly, while a number of participants mentioned specific social media platforms there is little to no mention of Twitter in the responses to this question. This could be due to the demographic makeup of the participants – only 25% were in employment, and only 20 participants mentioned work/business as something they do online. It may be that Twitter is seen as more of a professional/work platform rather than a social one.

For those accessing health services online, most responses referred to managing GP appointments and prescriptions. With regards online appointments, these can be especially challenging when people need to go to public spaces in order to access the internet, not just in terms of the difficulty of getting this access, but also with regards the lack of privacy in public spaces. Many also commented that they tend to look up any health concerns online and self-diagnose before making an appointment.

During the team analysis sessions, one of the Community Connectors raised the point that the need to have an email address to simply get online is, in itself, a barrier to someone who is just beginning to access the internet. Accessing public WiFi points usually requires some form of email registration, and even setting up a smartphone now requires an Apple ID or Google account.

Another observation was that the more creative, or "fun" aspects of internet access received fewer positive responses to this question than things like health, finance, and the more "serious" tasks. That said, it was noted that the internet opened up access to creative spaces. For example, access to things like the free version of Spotify meant that individuals were able to access massive amounts of music without having to pay for each album, and one participant commented that all of their photographs were uploaded to Facebook and as a result, they were able to reach more people than they would have done in any exhibition.

The responses to this question helped to paint a picture of the way that people use the internet, but they also highlighted how many participants rely on friends and family for this access. However, many people do not have anyone who can provide them with this support, and so it shows the value of the Discover Digital Champions Programme which encourages organisations to become a Discover Digital Hub, staffed by Champions who can provide this informal support to those that need it.
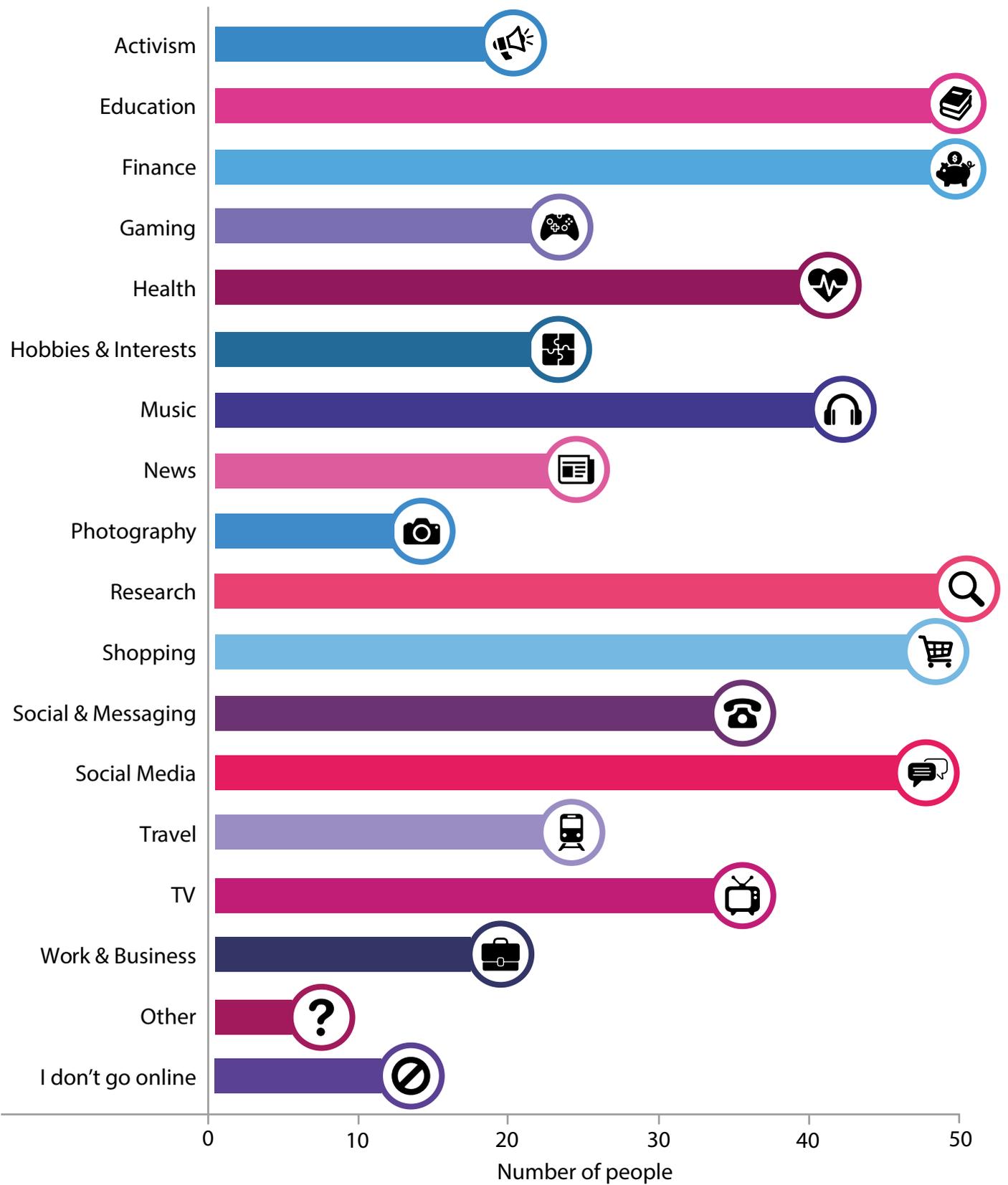
Figure 6: Graph to show what activities participants do online

How do you get online?

We wanted to understand the different ways that people access the internet to determine whether or not the type of access was appropriate for the tasks being undertaken.

As expected, smartphones were the most widely used device to get on the internet (63), followed by computers (56), tablets (37), smart TVs (32) and, lastly, games consoles (15).

While smartphones ranked the highest, it was acknowledged that they are not always the most appropriate device to use, and most people would prefer to have access to a second device. For example, when completing assignments, signing forms, using Teams or Zoom, or using websites that are not designed for mobile access, a laptop or a tablet are required in order for the task to be carried out easily. Having the technology to get online is not always enough – the devices need to be appropriate for the task.

> "My life is in my phone!"

It was also noted that the technology becomes out-of-date very quickly, so security updates become an issue that puts people off using the devices. For people that are the most digitally excluded, this brought with it the anxiety that their data was not safe, and resulted in further disengagement in digital technologies.
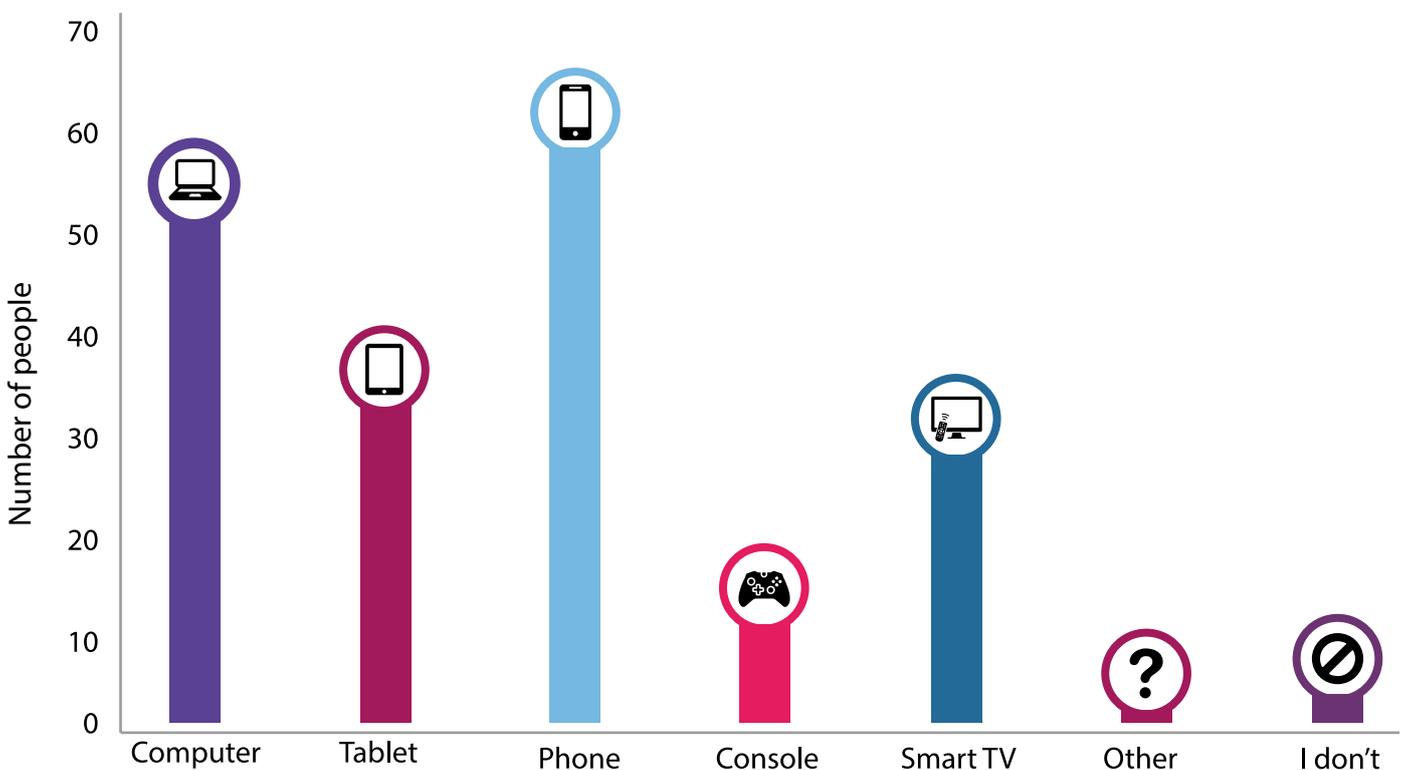

Figure 7: Graph to show the different ways that participants get online

What would you like to do online?

In this question, we wanted to explore what people really wanted to do online if there were no barriers getting in the way. The highest responses were for hobbies and interests (11), health (9), research (8), social media (8), photography (6) and music (6). In contrast, very few people said that they wanted to go online for work and business (2), finance (2) and shopping (2). The low responses here were expected, as we can see from the first question that many participants were already accessing these things online. But the higher responses in creative and leisure categories appear to show that people are looking for enjoyment in their internet access.

> "My daughter does all my shopping for me online, she orders my meds, she's sorted all of my direct debits. She does it all from her phone as she doesn't have a computer, only at school."

Surprisingly, the news did not feature at all in the responses to this question. During the data analysis session, where we worked with Community Connectors to cross-check our findings, it was pointed out that this supports the narrative that the constant rolling news that we are fed, whether through traditional news outlets or through social media, is undesirable and, in fact, damaging to our mental health and wellbeing. This was especially prevalent during the height of the pandemic, but also in recent news around the war in the Ukraine and news around the current cost of living crisis. Another fascinating result was that when speaking to a group of university students, there was not a single response to this question, with comments like "there's nothing that I would like to do online that I can't already do", which is a clear indication of the generational differences in online engagement.
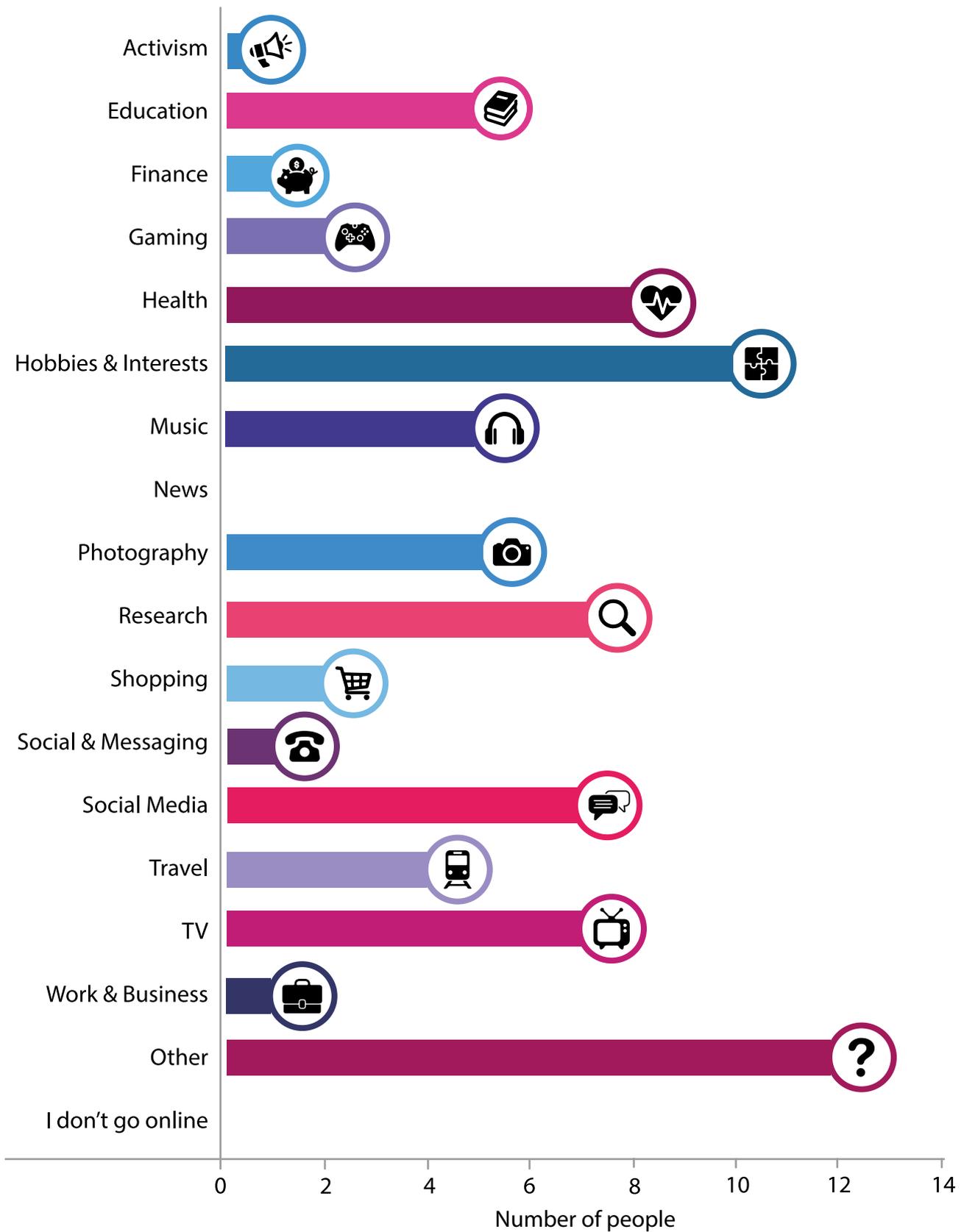
Figure 8: Graph to show what activities people would like to do online

What stops you from getting online?

The aim of this question was to begin to investigate and understand the barriers to digital access that people are experiencing.

The issue of fear and anxiety around fraud and scams came up at every single consultation. It was more of a concern with older participants, but it still played on the minds of younger participants too, who acknowledged that anyone could fall victim to online fraud. There is a lot of misinformation surrounding this subject, and we were surprised by some of the comments that were being shared between participants in the consultations, and how quickly this misinformation would spread across the room.

The word cloud (Figure 9) was generated from the responses to this question, and really highlights the main barriers around skills, confidence, training and support; affordability; and anxiety around scams and security.

But there are wider issues of accessibility here too. While libraries can offer free internet access, getting to the library is problematic, especially with library opening times being reduced, limited or time intensive public transport services and rising costs making it increasingly difficult to get to them. For those who find it especially difficult to use public transport, for example wheelchair users, this is an even bigger barrier to overcome. This will be explored further on page 23 Theme 1 – Barriers. This question also highlights the importance of education around accessibility settings which would make these devices easier to use by individuals with additional needs – the fact that the accessibility settings are themselves difficult to find stops people from feeling empowered to engage in digital technologies.


Figure 9: World cloud generated from the responses to Question 4 What stops you from getting online?

What can Discover Digital do for you?

The aim of this final question was to find out what people would like to see from a digital inclusion project and to learn how we could engage and benefit those most in need of increased digital inclusion. These findings were then fed back into the project so that Discover Digital could truly address the local need.

Most of the responses were around meaningful, convenient education, financial support with devices and/or connectivity, and better accessibility. One of the successes of Discover Digital is the way that it reached digitally excluded communities and successfully engaged with them. The way that these responses were heard and actioned through the project is testament to this.
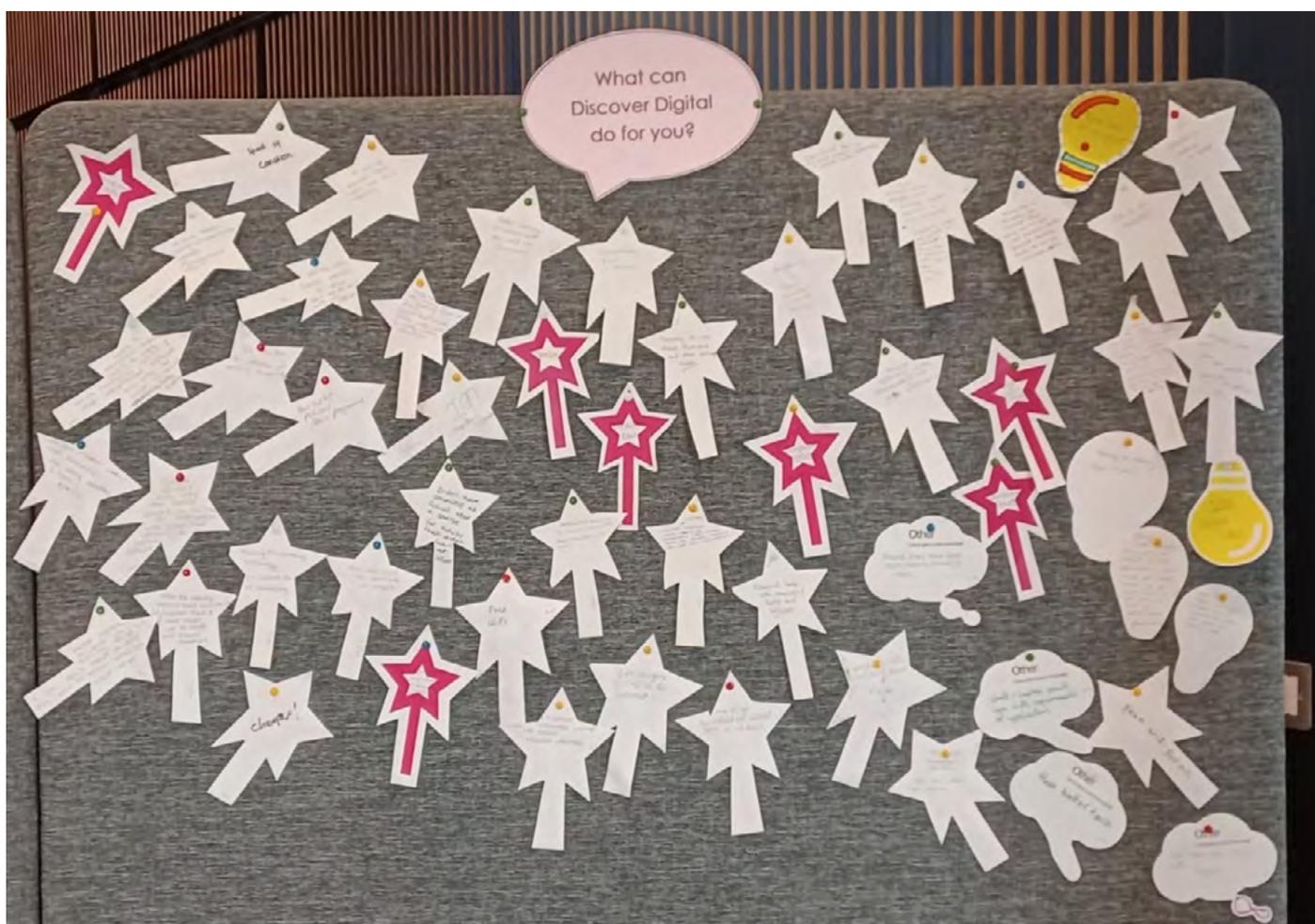
Analysis

Four main themes were identified from the findings by Community Connectors and the team leading on the community consultation at Staffordshire University. In this section we will go through the themes and provide a discussion on each.

Theme 1 – Barriers

People face a variety of barriers to digital access, with eight barriers in particular coming up most frequently: confidence, anxiety, safety, skills, access, inequality, finance, connectivity/technology. Confidence (or lack of it) came up mostly with the older generations and those that did not have computers in school or as part of everyday life. The fear that pressing the wrong button could have disastrous consequences seemed to cause a lot of anxiety. There were a lot of anxieties around online safety – something which is amplified by the existing narrative around scams and fraud and the constant warnings about the dangers of the internet. There is a general feeling that people put themselves and their information at risk when they go online. There are also issues of access, where perhaps language, mobility or even finances make it harder for people to access trainings or devices. This results in inequalities – so being online becomes a privilege that is not available to everyone. Having the right kind of access is also important. It is not enough to simply have access to an internet device. It needs to be the appropriate device for the intended task.

The first four barriers – confidence, anxiety, safety and skills – can all be addressed with appropriate support and training. If we can provide people with skills and support them to use (and practice using) devices, key software/apps, and teach people about the red flags to look out for to avoid scams and identity theft, then we can build confidence, reduce anxiety and begin to break down these barriers. However, the way that this support and training is delivered will determine its success. The Discover Pop-up Shop has demonstrated the value of informal, learner-led drop-in support in engaging digitally excluded communities. We can begin to overcome these barriers by ensuring we engage with communities in a way that is right for them, and that is safe, inviting, convenient and inclusive. We need to build relationships and build trust – use human connection to achieve digital connection. We also need to look at digital accessibility to ensure anyone with additional needs can still have easy digital access. The key is effective signposting so that people are aware of what is available to them and how they can access it.

For the latter four barriers - access, inequality, finance, connectivity/technology – we need more initiatives that address the current inequalities, including free IT schemes, cheaper (but good quality) data packages and long-term funding that will allow inequalities to be addressed on a local level.

Theme 2 – Safety and Wellbeing

Being online can both help and hinder our feelings of anxiety. People are worried about being left behind as the world becomes more digital and they simply cannot keep up. Even those who are digitally savvy often worry about online security, but commented that they felt they would be called out as conspiracy theorists if they voiced these opinions. People feel anxious about online safety, fraud and scams. The narrative around online safety exacerbates this further – for someone who is already feeling anxious about being online, constant reminders of the dangers will not help them to engage. We need to acknowledge that anxiety, but we also need to move the focus away from the fear and more towards how we can make online engagement fun and help people to understand and experience the benefits of digital.

Concerns were also raised around child safety and wellbeing, especially on social media platforms, in the gaming world and the wider effects of increased screen time. In contrast, some parents found the use of GPS tracking on their children's phones to relieve their anxiety.

People feel a lot of guilt around going online. Feelings of guilt when we choose screentime over family time, or when we choose Amazon over the local high street, or Uber over the local taxi firm – essentially, we feel guilty for choosing convenience. For some, they feel they are being forced to do something they are uncomfortable with for the sake of convenience.

But that convenience can also support wellbeing. The ability to check the bank balance at any time, or check-in with friends and family, or use Google Maps when lost – these are all things that have helped people to reduce feelings of anxiety. Furthermore, during the pandemic, online access helped to bring people together and alleviated feelings of isolation – but the flipside is that this has led to people choosing the convenience of virtual connections over real-world connections.

People can find escapes online that can support wellbeing, with many people mentioning learning a new skill or hobby, listening to music online or planning holidays and days out as a way to reduce stress levels.

There is a lot of disdain amongst some communities to digital. Ultimately, people want to feel safe online. A balanced education which balances the negative aspects of being online with the positives will help people to feel more informed and more confident, and having access to digital support will help people feel less isolated when things go wrong.

Theme 3 – Digital Hooks

We can see from the responses to Question 3 - What would you like to do online? - that there is a real thirst for online activity to be fun and creative, even from those who already do quite a lot online. Perhaps, then, in order to make the digital world more attractive to those that have no current interest in getting online, we need those fun, exciting "hooks" to entice people – a fun and creative gateway into the digital world.

> "I'm online all the time, but it's all for work or paying the bills. I'd love to be able to do more online that's connected to relaxing or leisure activities. Even my social media is mostly for work stuff. It'd be great if there were more free/accessible arts and crafts community groups to be a part of"

This idea has already seen great success in the Discover Digital Pop-up Shop where the exciting and creative digital technologies such as VR headsets, green screens, 3D printing and drones helped draw people into the shop, and allowed them to try something new, but then we were able to have those conversations with them about their digital habits, wants and needs. We can see this lack of fun and creativity in the types of beginners' digital courses offered by traditional providers, which tend to focus on digital skills that would support "life admin", such as emails and Word. For someone who is disengaged with digital, these are dry, uninteresting courses with little appeal. Instead, support and training needs to be relevant to the needs of each individual, using their broader interests as a "hook".

Theme 4 – Vicious Circle of Inequality

Many inequalities have been highlighted throughout this research. Those that are unable to get online miss out on the chance to develop their digital skills and confidence. Not having this online access also results in people missing out on opportunities (e.g. online job adverts, cheap deals, or not having the digital skills/ confidence needed for many jobs), which means they are more likely to face financial barriers, which in turn will make it harder for them to pay for adequate online access.

There is also the issue of stigma, where individuals need to ask friends, family, school or work for internet access, often needing to share details of why they need that access. This creates a lack of privacy for those who can only access internet in public spaces. There were several accounts of people being forced to have personal conversations in public spaces due to certain banks and GPs insisting on online appointments.

People who desire fun and creativity in their online access as discussed in Theme 3, but who are unable to access the internet easily, find they have to prioritise that time, or that data, to do the higher priority tasks like education and life admin, and not the fun, new, exciting stuff. So the enjoyment of the internet also becomes a privilege, and not something that everyone has access to.

We need to find ways to break this cycle. Discover Digital has achieved this by providing grants to those that were unable to pay for their own devices and connectivity, and by helping people to build their skills and confidence in an environment and format that was right for them.

Recommendations for Change

At the end of the research period, we collated our findings and held an event to share our learning. Participants, Community Connectors, local organisations, council members and project beneficiaries were all invited to reflect and contribute to the following recommendations.

- Local government should provide more comprehensive information - a central directory of services - which can inform communities of all the current local digital inclusion initiatives, with support and information on what people can access and how. This information needs to be available in a variety of accessible formats, both digital and non-digital, to ensure it reaches those who need it most.

- Local and national government should provide companies with funding to create and collate learning resources that support digital skills. Discover Digital will support this further by opening up its collective training resources (which includes infographics, lesson plans, videos and reports) for use by individuals and organisations. All partners will continue to add resources to this repository, and other organisations are invited to contribute in order to continue to grow the resource.

- Local and national government should support people with the cost of digital access. This should include (but not be limited to) childcare and transport costs to enable access to support/ training or help with the cost of devices and data. There are plenty of short-term initiatives that provide an immediate solution, and while these are essential to our communities, we need longer-term investment in resources to ensure the sustainability of these resources, instead of providing one-off interventions.

- Government must support educational institutions to ensure all students have the digital access they need, regardless of household income. By ensuring that digital life skills - including online safety, online shopping, online banking - are embedded into the curriculum, we can safeguard future generations against digital exclusion.

- Future digital inclusion initiatives need to meet people where they are. Discover Digital made use of existing relationships with community organisations, and brought the project to their spaces, that were familiar, welcoming and inclusive. By including these groups in the research and feeding those voices back into the project, Discover was able to create a digital inclusion initiative that was meaningful for the needs of the local community.

- Long-term government funding to scale up the Discover Digital model will allow more communities to access digital support, advice and grants. A Discover Digital Roadshow would take the project right to the heart of the communities that need it most.

- Governments, mobile and broadband providers need to work together to provide Universal free WiFi that does not require lengthy registration forms in order to gain access, making the internet widely available and easily accessible to all.

Digital Inclusion Levy

To achieve the above recommendations and raise the bar of digital inclusion both locally and nationally, more funding is needed. A Digital Inclusion Levy which organisations can reinvest is a sustainable way to provide that funding, and will allow a collective and multi-faceted solution to digital exclusion. This issue is not for one organisation or institution to solve – it requires a collaborative approach from all sectors.

Our recommendation is that organisations should set out their plans to support digital inclusion in their communities, and show how they will implement, monitor and evaluate those plans. This should be informed by participatory work to ensure that the needs of the community are met. Government approval of the Digital Inclusion Plans will allow organisations and businesses to access the extra funding and will incentivise more organisations to work towards the same goal of boosting digital inclusion.

Organisations should work with local communities to create innovative solutions in their Digital Inclusion Plans. Collaborative work between universities and third sector organisations can support these initiatives further. Digital Inclusion Plans could be used to:

- provide social tariffs on mobile or broadband deals (and ensure they are promoted to eligible clients).

- create device distribution schemes or grants programmes to ensure everyone has access to an appropriate device.

- set up Digital Hubs and appoint Digital Champions who are prepared to support members of the public with their digital needs. The funding will ensure sustainable support and training for Digital Champions.

- provide funding for local organisations that advocate for marginalised groups, including (but not limited to) refugees, asylum seekers, older people and people with disabilities. This will allow organisations to further support their own communities to improve digital access, while remaining inclusive, accessible and appropriate to the needs of their communities.

- provide funding for community hubs that can support digital access and education.

- provide free, secure, easily accessible WiFi in their public spaces as well as a private space to access the WiFi.

But organisations need to be creative in their approach and think of more ways to support the digital needs of their communities. They need to come together to lobby the government to bring about this long-term and sustainable solution to digital inclusion. By working collaboratively towards one goal, we can bring about meaningful, lasting change to digitally excluded communities across the country.

Conclusions

The Discover Digital project, as well as the community research that ran alongside it, has demonstrated the importance of using human connections to improve digital connection. By listening to individuals and communities, we have been able to build positive relationships which, in turn, has allowed us to provide an effective solution to boosting digital inclusion in Stoke-on-Trent.

When offering digital skills training, a one-size fits all approach will not do. Priorities for different groups must be identified first, and then delivered in a bespoke way that is meaningful for each group, or individual. The approach needs to be flexible and learner-led. For the most digitally excluded communities, a structured classroom setting will not help with engagement. Instead, an informal, welcoming, inclusive environment has allowed us to be more approachable and has increased our reach.

We have also learnt that people are wanting enjoyment from their digital access, and we have used this knowledge to entice the least digitally engaged communities into experimenting with the fun side of digital. This "hook" can then motivate and encourage people to delve further into the digital world.

Through our conversations, we have learnt how many people receive informal digital support from family members who are more digitally skilled or confident. Encouraging local networks of Digital Champions will enable everyone to have this type of support, and it ensures that the advice they receive is good, up-to-date advice that will keep them safe and will allow them to continue their digital learning journey.

And finally, the success of the Discover Digital Grants programme has demonstrated the real need for financial support to help people purchase devices and data. This is the first step to boosting digital inclusion, as without access to connectivity and technology, the rest of the barriers to digital access cannot be addressed.

Appendix 1: Organisations Involved in the Research

Alice Charity

Beth Johnson Foundation

Brighter Futures Clubhouse Network

The Community Foundation for Staffordshire

The Dove Service

Expert Citizens

Get Growing @ The Bridge Centre

Hanley Team Ministries

Jubilee Project

Health and Social Care Students (Staffordshire University)

Portland Inn Project

The Potteries Centre

Saltbox – Money Matters

Saltbox - Carelink

Sanctus

Step Up to HE (Staffordshire University)

The Hub at Fenton

VAST

Figure 10: A word cloud containing all the qualitative data collected during the community consultations

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