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Citizen Research

Reconnect and The Binks Hub

Funded by Capability Grant Round 2 Good Things Foundation and One Research Scotland

Introduction

Reconnect offers support to adults and families in Edinburgh and the Lothians to help them improve wellbeing by increasing digital and social inclusion.

We believe that digital inclusion and social inclusion are linked and together contribute to enhanced wellbeing. We provide a supportive environment to reduce social isolation through building digital skills and maintaining connections, helping people to stay connected, improve financial health, increase employability, access resources and more.

At People Know How we use research to link academic literature to our own findings from consultations and action in the community. Articles are written by our VIPs and staff and offer a unique opportunity as part of their time with us. People Know How research articles also:

- Create an evidence base for our work by integrating the findings from prior research into our projects
- Form a database of resources, important findings and useful ideas that is available to all of the third sector
- Establish partnerships between People Know How and other organisations across the four sectors
- Spread awareness of our work

People Know How worked with the Binks Hub Edinburgh University to carry out research by training Citizen Researchers to help People Know How to have a unique insight into the Reconnect service find way of improving the service and to develop the service further. This research was funded by Good Things Foundation and One Research Scotland.



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Methodology

There were 5 Citizen Researchers who took part in 2 research workshops led by The Binks Hub Edinburgh University and a final analysis workshop. There were a variety of interviews taken place with questions with the same themes:

Interviews with people we support 121 - 4

Interviews with Staff – 3

Interviews with Volunteers – 4

Focus Groups – 2

The idea of having interviewers from different backgrounds and roles was to have an overview of people connected with the organisation's experiences and insights focused on the Reconnect service.

Results- Common Themes

Fear – many people mentioned being left behind

There are various reasons why people may be hesitant to try new things online. These reasons can differ from person to person and often depend on their individual experiences, attitudes, and comfort levels with technology.

Here are some common reasons that were highlighted in the citizen researcher:

- **Fear of the unknown:** This is one of the most common things that came up. A lot of people we support don't trust their own judgement and have already decided digital is not for them. Often, they will get assistance from friends and family members without even seeing themselves as someone who could do things online themselves. The most important aspect of the Reconnect work is building relationships in a safe non-judgmental environment where people can feel comfortable to share their stories so we can guide them in how digital can improve their lives. Moreover, feel comfortable to make "mistakes".
- **Privacy and security concerns:** Many people are worried about their personal information being compromised online. They may fear that trying new things online could expose them to privacy and security risks, such as identity theft or data breaches. These concerns are reasonable especially when many of the people that use the service can't afford to make an error and be cammed. Many people are living week to week on a very limited budget, using food pantries etc. These fears are the hardest to combat and can be alleviated through practice and a growth in confidence. This is where the helpline is very useful if people feel unsure about an email or a text, they can phone the helpline for reassurance and will eventually not need to as they will be able to recognise red flags.



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- **Lack of digital literacy:** Not everyone is equally comfortable with digital. Some people may lack the digital skills or knowledge required to use new online tools or platforms effectively, leading to reluctance to try new things. Most people who attend the groups do have phones and know more than they realise. The Reconnect team although they will make people aware of jargon, e.g. phishing, adapt communication and delivery style to suit the person they are supporting.
- **Technological frustration:** Previous negative experiences with technology, such as software glitches, crashes, or frustrating user interfaces, can make people reluctant to try new things online. They may fear getting stuck or encountering technical difficulties. This reluctance stems from lack of self-esteem as when there is a hardware issue it's often assumed that this is because of the individual.
- **Resistance to change:** People, in general, can be resistant to change. Some people prefer to stick with what they know and are comfortable with, rather than venturing into new and unfamiliar territory, even if it means missing out on potential benefits. One of the things that was very clear in the research is that people felt that the Reconnect team were very welcoming and friendly and having that kind of support meant that people were more open to exploring new ways of approaching day to day tasks.
- **Time constraints:** Trying new things online often requires an investment of time and effort to learn and adapt to new tools or platforms. People with busy schedules may be hesitant to commit the necessary time to explore and master something new online. As mentioned above the people we support have many barriers on a day-to-day basis and investing time in self-development is something at the bottom of their priority list. We support people who may be from single parent families juggling children, home, work. Many people we support are people with experience of mental illness, trauma, substance use and are carers. The reconnect team are very good at supporting people to recognise their importance and what they have to offer to themselves, people close to them and wider society. Making themselves a priority is important. The team can also be quite flexible as we have a group running every day of the week, we offer one-to-one support, and we have the helpline when people need to reach out.

“I was fearful of the whole rigmarole around computers, printers, and paper. I was held back because I couldn't afford it. Community Education classes, they were offered a free iPad, and nearly all of them refused. I couldn't believe it.”

“I think is giving people the knowledge and the power to be able to check things out themselves, not be reliant on, you know, the bank statements coming through the post, for instance. A lot of the checks we can do to make sure they get their entitlements are anonymously done. So there's no fear that anything is going to be taken away from them by doing a check”.

People overwhelmingly spoke about the importance of the service being person centred



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Helping people holistically is essential because it recognises that individuals are complex beings with interconnected physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions. Holistic support considers the whole person and their unique needs, circumstances, and aspirations rather than focusing on a single aspect or issue. This approach in the kind of support we offer is vital as the coordinators may be looked at as people who 'know it all' which creates an imbalance in the power which can make people uncomfortable in the first instance which is why having staff that are down to earth, approachable is incredibly important. We find that not only are there personalised solutions to problems but more importantly, Reconnect service can help with preventing problems from occurring.

"If I were to add something else it would be something like it's supportive of where you are as an individual."

"It's a very holistic service; we look at digital skills, not in isolation, but as part of a person's more general needs"

"It's all down to trust, isn't it? You're not going to ask them personal questions if it is not appropriate or, you know, you're not going to be pushy about their IT skills."

Independence and increase in self esteem

Improvement of self-esteem and independence was a theme that was threaded throughout the research. People were rediscovering hobbies not relying on family members for support and many people and one of the things that really came through was the feeling of not being a burden which was incredibly powerful.

- **Empowerment:** Technology knowledge empowers individuals to take control of their digital lives. When people can navigate and use technology effectively, they feel more self-reliant and capable.
- **Problem-solving skills:** Learning how to use technology often involves troubleshooting and problem-solving. Overcoming technological challenges can boost one's confidence in their problem-solving abilities, which can extend to other areas of life.
- **Adaptability:** Technology is constantly evolving, and those who are tech-savvy tend to be more adaptable to change. This adaptability can lead to increased self-confidence in dealing with new situations and challenges.
- **Increased independence:** Technology knowledge can make individuals more independent in various aspects of life, from managing finances and scheduling appointments to shopping and accessing information. This increased independence can boost self-esteem.



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- **Career opportunities:** In today's digital age, technology skills are highly sought after in the job market. Having technology knowledge can open up career opportunities and lead to professional success, which can significantly boost self-esteem.
- **Communication and social connections:** Technology enables people to connect with others through social media, messaging apps, and video calls. Being proficient in technology can enhance communication and foster social connections, which can positively impact self-esteem.
- **Lifelong learning:** Technology is a vast and ever-evolving field, and those who engage in continuous learning and self-improvement tend to have higher self-esteem. The sense of accomplishment from acquiring new tech skills contributes to self-confidence.
- **Creative expression:** Technology offers various tools for creative expression, such as digital art, music production, and content creation. Accomplishing creative projects using technology can boost self-esteem and a sense of achievement.
- **Access to information and resources:** Technology provides access to a wealth of information and resources. Being able to effectively find and use this information can boost one's self-esteem by making them feel knowledgeable and well-informed.
- **Overcoming fear of the unknown:** Many people experience fear or anxiety when faced with new technology, but gaining knowledge and competence in using it can help individuals overcome this fear and develop confidence in tackling unfamiliar challenges.

"Everything I've done in class has benefited me and made me feel more independent. And stopped me from having so many barriers, and everything feeling so overwhelming. Just a wee victory every so often when I attempt to do it, and it's adding up to big wins in terms of my mental health. And that's priceless."

"For me, it's about a time when I can focus just on my own development and become more independent and learn digital skills. Help me do the things of what I want to do. I have mental health challenges. And so, everything is a challenge, everything is a barrier."

"And their eyes were glowing because they saw how easy it was to do something. Whether they would remember that next time or not is another matter. And there have also been people who have appreciated socialisation as well. No doubt about that, either."

"I always go to my niece's house, and she can help with this. But she also has her own job and sometimes is busy. And I feel like, oh my god, I'm so tired of giving her extra work! So, I feel like, at some point, I want to be independent also."



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Social Isolation

The Reconnect groups are often run along other services, e.g. pantries/lunch clubs/Citizen Advice. Initially be go to these groups because they must be there, but now people are attending because they want to be there. Throughout the research, the people would mention proudly that they were attending the groups to learn about computers, and this was especially noted during the focus groups where people who knew each other would speak about having somewhere to go and learn something and chat with other people reading the transcriptions showed how familiar they were with each other. COVID brought wellbeing and social isolation to the forefront despite people who work in services that support people knowing the effects of it so much, so the Scottish curriculum of excellence has made wellbeing a focus. Combatting social isolation is incredibly important for mental and physical health.

- **Mental health issues:** Prolonged social isolation can lead to increased feelings of loneliness, depression, and anxiety. It can exacerbate existing mental health conditions and contribute to the development of new ones.
- **Physical health problems:** Social isolation has been linked to a range of physical health issues, including increased risk of cardiovascular diseases, weakened immune system, and higher rates of chronic conditions like obesity and diabetes.
- **Cognitive decline:** Social interaction is crucial for mental stimulation and cognitive health. Isolation can lead to a decline in cognitive function and an increased risk of conditions like dementia in older adults.
- **Reduced quality of life:** Social isolation can lead to a diminished quality of life, as it limits opportunities for engaging in meaningful activities, experiencing joy, and maintaining a sense of purpose.
- **Decreased emotional well-being:** Without social connections, individuals may struggle to manage their emotions effectively, leading to feelings of emptiness, frustration, and a lack of emotional support.
- **Impact on self-esteem:** Social isolation can erode an individual's self-esteem and self-worth, as they may feel unimportant or unloved when they lack social interactions and positive feedback from others.
- **Lack of social support:** Social networks provide crucial support systems that help individuals cope with life's challenges. Isolation can lead to a lack of emotional and practical support during difficult times.
- **Increased stress:** Isolated individuals often experience higher levels of chronic stress, which can have detrimental effects on both mental and physical health.
- **Social skills atrophy:** Social isolation can cause a decline in social skills and communication abilities. This can make it more difficult for individuals to re-engage with others when they do seek social interactions.



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- Lower life satisfaction: Overall, social isolation can lead to lower levels of life satisfaction and happiness. The absence of meaningful social connections can diminish one's sense of fulfilment and contentment.
- Reduced lifespan: Research suggests that prolonged social isolation is associated with a higher risk of mortality. Loneliness and isolation can be as harmful to one's health as smoking or obesity.
- Risk of addiction: Some individuals may turn to substance abuse or other addictive behaviours to cope with the feelings of loneliness and social isolation.

“People can come as often as they would like to; some people come once and get help to fix something, and we don't see them again; other people come regularly. Part of why they like coming is the social interactions they have with people as well as the way they're developing their skills.”

People have different views of what the Reconnect service is

It was enlightening to observe the various perceptions of our Reconnect service. Some individuals were uncertain about the concept of 'digital', while others viewed our services as a computer class or a resource for bill assistance. Despite the name of our organization, it appears there is room for improvement in conveying our mission and services. Our role extends beyond being an advice service or a class. We leverage digital tools to support individuals in enhancing their well-being. This could mean accessing entertainment to alleviate bouts of depression, gaining control over finances and appointments, or simply guiding people on how to access information to make informed decisions. Our goal is to empower individuals, especially during a time when resources such as the NHS, Social Care, and mental health services are overwhelmed. We believe in giving power back to the individual, and we are committed to supporting them on this journey.

“See about not being able to apply for jobs, is that the whole reason for the project being here and the exclusion like that?”

People who are older don't tend to talk about what they do online as there is a lot of embarrassment

A fascinating insight that was highlighted was the reluctance for people from an older demographic to talk about what they do online and share that with other people which was completely different from what we have identified from younger demographics. It may be that older people don't want to share things that they don't feel confident about as there may be a risk of giving people wrong information. This was highlighted when we asked questions about how people heard about the service and most seen posters in centres that they already attended for other things or had been notified by other organisations. When asked if anyone shared this with friends and family their seemed to be the assumption that they would not need the support.



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“And I was falling further and further behind the technology curve. And it was beginning to get embarrassed, and it was starting to say, you know, I feel like a dinosaur, and I'm not going to be in this education path for much longer. So, I saw that poster, you know, but it's morphed, and it's so much more than that. It's literally been life changing.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, addressing the fears associated with digital inclusion is a key focus for us. We aim to incorporate testimonials in our marketing efforts to alleviate these concerns. We also recognize the importance of person-centred language and aim to make it more central in our formal texts and internal training.

To ensure we are meeting our person-centred goals, we plan to conduct quick weekly evaluations. This will allow us to track our progress and make necessary adjustments. Furthermore, we are open to making changes or amendments to our internal policies and practices to better serve our community.

Our commitment to these strategies underscores our dedication to enhancing digital and social inclusion, and ultimately, the well-being of the individuals we serve.



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