

Homeless in Europe

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Digital Inclusion and Homelessness





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Digital Inclusion and Homelessness

By **Mauro Striano**, *FEANTSA Policy Officer*

Communication is paramount in our lives and the lack of it can be a major challenge for social and economic integration. Although face-to-face contact is very important, communication is increasingly conditioned by the development of technologies whose main success is to bridge geographical gaps between people. We rely on communication, amongst other things, to organise events, for daily interaction and social affairs, to look for a job or a place to live, to get information – which in some cases might turn out to be matter of life and death - to share experiences and participate in society. For people living in precarious situations, access to information and the possibility to communicate can be very important. Homeless people on the one hand seek information in a variety of ways and on the other need to be directly contacted for several reasons - new housing or work opportunities, change in government programmes, changes in social law related to access to social benefits, but also vaccine recalls and public health issues, to name but a few.

In a research commissioned by the Carnegie UK Trust to examine the relationship between digital exclusion and social exclusion¹, two key conclusions, among others, were drawn: 1) those who are socially excluded are less likely to use the internet and benefit from the internet applications that may help them tackle their exclusion; 2) digital exclusion has the potential to exacerbate social exclusion e.g. in terms of poor educational attainment and some studies have shown a positive effect of digital participation on indicators of social exclusion.

Digital inclusion can therefore break the 'social exclusions – digital exclusion' vicious circle by making online opportunities available also for homeless people who could take advantage from online job-searching, training and other essential services. A study pointed out how homeless people who perceive themselves as having greater access to their social support networks have better physical and mental health outcomes as well as lower rates of victimisation². Another study exam-

ined the effects of communication on attitudes towards homeless people, concluding that it is through communication that people develop positive changes in attitudes and intentions towards homelessness and homeless people³. Indeed, interpersonal communication with people living in homelessness is a way of getting to know them as individuals rather than stereotypes.

In the health sector, the use of information and communication technology (ICT) can enhance communication between service users and their health care providers. The use of mobile phones to contact homeless people would provide a simple way to disseminate information, directly or through an automated system. For instance, through text messages as well as app notifications, information about influenza vaccinations and vaccinations for other infectious diseases can be disseminated. Moreover, through ICTs, prevention and intervention programmes can be delivered, as already tested and proven to be feasible and effective in various populations regarding treatment for HIV, tobacco use and encouraging adherence to a course of medication. Moreover, online peer communication – such as support groups and discussion forums – could be used to enhance the health outcomes of homeless people by sharing information, providing reciprocal emotional support and linking others to material aid. Existing computer-mediated support groups combine online prevention and intervention programs delivered by health care providers with online peer communication in the form of discussion forums. This 'hybrid' model has been used to intervene with individuals who have breast cancer, chronic pain, depression, diabetes, eating disorders, heart transplants, HIV/AIDS, obesity, and nicotine dependence. A meta-analysis found that these computer-mediated support groups led to increased social support, decreased depression, increased quality of life, and increased ability to manage one's health condition independently - all of great importance to those experiencing homelessness.

1 C. Martin, S. Hope, S. Zubairi, Ipsos MORI Scotland, *The role of digital exclusion in social exclusion*, September 2016, <http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/carnegieuktrust/wp-content/uploads/sites/64/2016/09/the-role-of-digital-exclusion.pdf>
2 K. M. Eyrich-Garg, 'Mobile Phone Technology: A New Paradigm for the Prevention, Treatment, and Research of the Non-sheltered "Street" Homeless?' (2010) Vol.87, No.3 *Journal of Urban Health: Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine*.
3 J. E. Hocking and S. G. Lawrence, 'Changing Attitudes Toward the Homeless: The Effects of Prosocial Communication With the Homeless' (2000) Vol.9, No.2 *Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless*

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Digital inclusion is also very important in social relationships. ICTs allow homeless people to keep in touch with family members, friends and social workers, to follow up on job applications, to look for accommodation, to have access to peer support workers when trying to maintain sobriety, and so on. Through the use of internet, and particularly with the development of new smartphone apps, homeless people can also get information about locations where they can eat, sleep and acquire necessities during extreme weather conditions, consult weather forecasts and maps and many other types of information that can make homeless people's lives easier and help them to find a way out.

Furthermore, to be socially connected for homeless people might also mean to have the opportunity to participate by sharing their experiences, coming together around common causes and requesting policy changes. Social media such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Meetup - to name but a few - as well as blogs have become important tools for spreading messages and establishing links. These instruments not only give homeless people a significant chance to express opinions and feelings but also provide the audience with the perspective of someone who knows first-hand the problems faced by people who lack housing and helps fight prejudices, stereotypes and misconceptions. Additionally, use of ICTs also allow for leisure by reading books, keeping up-to-date on the latest news, listening to music, watching videos and movies, locating free goods and services, playing games and so forth.

Besides being important for people experiencing homelessness, the use of digital tools is very important for homelessness service providers too. Service providers can not only improve the support they offer, but also can get information in an easier and quicker way, especially recently with the use of apps. Applications, such as *Streetlink* or *Arrels Locator*, allow to rapidly collect information about rough sleepers and to exactly locate them through the use geo-localisation. What is more, these tools engage the public in addressing an important social issue.

This edition of the magazine explores the use of these apps and webpages by Arrels Fundació in Barcelona and Homeless Link in the UK, important tools for homelessness services to find where rough sleepers are and offer services to them. This kind of technology also has the benefit of engaging the wider public in taking small steps to help homeless people, as well as reducing the length of time rough sleepers spend on the streets. Entourage presents another type of app dedicated to homelessness, one where field workers can stay better connected and members of the public can join or create a local initiative on homelessness.

An innovative use of digital tools to remove barriers to reintegration for homeless people is explained in Reconnect's article about their app to hold digital versions of official documents, in order to prevent the costly and time-consuming process of gaining new documents when the originals are lost or stolen. Homeless people also face barriers to digital inclusion through a lack of digital skills and access to tools, and efforts to give them the skills needed are outlined in an article on the work of the Good Things Foundation.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We would like to give you the chance to comment on any of the articles which have appeared in this issue. If you would like to share your ideas, thoughts and feedback, please send an email to the editor, emma.nolan@feantsa.org



StreetLink: Using technology to connect rough sleepers with support services

By **Gareth Thomas**, *Homeless Link*

Anyone can become homeless, and sleeping rough can damage your health and be dangerous. Evidence suggests that some individuals sleeping rough may not be known to local services, while not all rough sleepers are aware that advice and services are available to them.

In response to the rise in street homelessness, Homeless Link developed [StreetLink](#), a key tool to tackle rough sleeping by enabling members of the public to connect homeless people with the services that can help them.

StreetLink is a website, mobile app and telephone line, which provides the first step the public can take to ensure rough sleepers are connected to the local services and support available to them.

Homelessness, and in particular street homelessness (or rough sleeping as it is called in the UK) is on the increase, as a consequence of the financial crisis that started in 2008 and the austerity programmes that are reducing state funding. UK Government statistics show that the number of people sleeping on our streets has risen over the last few years with the best estimates indicating that over 3,500 people are sleeping out on any one night - but rough sleeping is a hidden problem, so the true figure could be much higher.

Since 2011, agencies across the homelessness sector have been working to a principle called 'No Second Night Out'. We know that the faster we can get a homeless person off the streets, the easier it is to end their homelessness before they develop additional support needs and health problems from living on the streets. From the research we have carried out, about 50% of people who sleep rough did not approach anyone for help before they slept on the streets for the first time.

The charities and local authorities working with homeless people need intelligence and information about people who are sleeping rough - especially those that have newly arrived on the streets. And we know that these people are seen by members of the public upon walking the streets of their community, on their way to work, out shopping or visiting friends etc.

When members of the public see people sleeping on the streets, they very often want to be able to help them, but are often unsure of the best way to do this. Should they give homeless people money, food and/or advice? Who could they advise them to approach for help in getting off the streets? How can they find the right people or services to help someone in crisis? There are nearly 350 local authorities across England and Wales and almost a thousand charities with a mission to help homeless people, yet often the opportunity to make this connection is missed.

This is where StreetLink comes in.

StreetLink acts as a tool for the people who care, to connect people who need help with those that can help them. We know three important things about rough sleeping:

1. Most people do not seek help and advice before sleeping rough
2. There are services to help homeless people in every area of the country
3. The faster we can get people off the streets the better the long term outcomes

Since its launch in December 2012, over 57,000 reports of people sleeping on our streets have been made to StreetLink and we have connected 25,000 people to services. Today about 70% of our referrals come via our digital channels and 30% by phone.

Over 4,000 people have been found accommodation as a direct result of their referral to StreetLink.

StreetLink is an innovative platform to engage the public in addressing a significant social issue. We use technology backed up by a small staff team to take reports about people sleeping rough. We geo-code this data and relay the information to the right local authority and services. About a week later we get in touch with the local authority to find out what action they took and what the outcome was. We then get back in touch with the person who made the initial referral to tell them what happened as a result of their engagement. Using this method, we have built a database of over 12,000 supporters who have used StreetLink and want to stay involved.



StreetLink also provides excellent intelligence for local municipal authorities and charities about the number of people arriving on the streets and the precise locations they are sleeping in. Outside London most areas don't record rough sleeping figures throughout the year and data from Streetlink referrals has helped some cities target their investment and services more effectively around areas of need.

STREETLINK WORKS: THIS IS BEN'S STORY

Here is one man's experience of homelessness - and how StreetLink helped him off the streets.

Ben from Manchester became homeless, because of a relationship breakdown. He and his partner had lived together, and when they split up, he had to move out (as his partner's name was on the tenancy agreement).

Ben spent a bit of time sleeping on friends' couches. However, feeling he did not want to impose on them, he ended up sleeping rough (with a tent, sleeping bag and camping stove) in Manchester Science Park.

After three nights of rough sleeping, a member of the public who was concerned about Ben used StreetLink to let local services know about him.

When the case was referred to local housing and support charity Riverside, which runs the 'No Second Night Out' rough sleeper service in Manchester, it responded within 24 hours.

Ben met with someone, who was to become his key worker, and on same day, short-term accommodation was found for him.

Riverside then put Ben in contact with an estate agent, and an arrangement was made for him to move into private rented accommodation after putting down a £400 deposit.

The whole process - from the member of the public using StreetLink to Ben finding a new home - took less than six weeks.

"StreetLink is such an invaluable service" said Ben. "For me, it really stopped things deteriorating as they easily could have done. It has helped me get back on my feet, as quickly as possible. The team that came and found me were incredibly supportive, and helped me to stay positive at a very difficult time."

FUTURE PLANS

Referrals to StreetLink have grown steadily - 2015 saw 44% more referrals than in 2014 and the first nine months of 2016 showed 16% more referrals than in all of 2015. This is most likely due to an increased awareness of the StreetLink service, as much as it is due to the increasing numbers of people sleeping on the streets. However, we firmly believe that the more people know about StreetLink, the greater the chance that people sleeping rough will be found and helped off the street.

StreetLink is a fantastic tool to help us end street homelessness - but we need to develop it further. The key to StreetLink is rapid identification of rough sleepers, accurate mapping of their location and geocoding of this data to connect it with the right local authorities and services. We were fortunate to receive a grant from the Salesforce Foundation and we are currently working on a development project to rebuild all the StreetLink websites, mobile apps, underlying databases and spreadsheets into a single integrated system, 100% built on the Salesforce platform. Using a combination of Salesforce and partner technologies, we aim to develop StreetLink as a new digital tool that will get help to rough sleepers faster, better engage the public who use StreetLink and ensure they can remain involved with the project as supporters and donors.

"StreetLink is a website, mobile app and telephone line, which provides the first step the public can take to ensure rough sleepers are connected to the local services and support available to them."



Arrels Locator – Barcelona

By Ferran Busquets, *Arrels Fundacio*

Arrels is an organization based in Barcelona, where there are 941 rough sleepers according to the latest count held in May 2016. Arrels has three main objectives: attending homeless people in the city of Barcelona, raising awareness among citizens about the reality of homelessness and reporting unfair situations and making suggestions to help transform the reality of social exclusion. To accomplish these objectives we are convinced of the need of active citizens. We count on 390 volunteers and more than 4300 donors who provide 66% of our income.

Some years ago we opened a section in our website to allow people to inform us when they saw someone sleeping rough. In 2015 we received about 224 notifications and in 2016 there were 350. Every day one or two people contacted us by phone, email or messages through social media networks asking for information about what they can do when they see someone on the street. These requests increased the need for better answers.

We wanted to take a step forward and make it possible to send notifications via smart-phone, taking advantage of geo-localization and other technological advances. We created the [Arrels Locator App](#) which was developed for free by BaseTis, a software development company. Arrels Locator is also an open source project available to everybody to modify and improve as needed.

In January 2016 we launched the App and it has been used by almost 1000 different people and we have received around 3800 locations from Barcelona during 2016. On average around 10 notifications per a day. It has to be highlighted that one location does not mean one person as the same person can be notified more than once. The comments that people write on some locations highlight concerns about the problem of homelessness, while there have been no negative messages complaining about rough sleepers.

The App is available to be downloaded in any country in the world. There are no restrictions on locating people in any city. We wanted to see if it could be helpful for other organizations and cities around the world. It can be downloaded for Android and iOS devices by simply searching for Arrels Locator in their stores. It is currently available in English, Catalan, Spanish and French. We are happy to invite anyone to use the app in their city and also to contribute to translating it into another language. Organizations can contact Arrels to establish the best way to receive the information or, as it is an open source project, to adapt it to their needs.

We consider Arrels Locator to be a tool that allows

citizens to take action. With the App we are giving a tiny answer to the people who feel the need to do something when they see a rough sleeper. We are also working on more steps towards giving more feedback to the application users and to validate the locations with the help of volunteers.

It's a pretty user friendly app. When you open it, the first step is to locate on a map the rough sleeper or group. It can be done by tapping on a city map or typing the address. The next step asks how many men and women there are and how many people whose sex cannot be determined. It also asks if it's the first time that the person has been seen, if they are sleeping on a bench, in a doorway, at an ATM machine etc, if they have animals and a final, optional step allows comments to be made.

The locations are stored in a database and the data is reviewed periodically by the outreach team. The first step is to determine if the location is in an area they comb. If not, they have to decide if there is the possibility to explore it. If it's a known zone they will consider whether to visit the location or not, depending on, for instance, the number of notifications at that point.

When we launched the application a significant number of people sent us comments such as "I've sent you the location of this person two or three times and he is still there". These messages confirmed to us the perception about how easy it is to reverse the situation of a rough sleeper. We changed the messages shown after a location is sent and on our social media networks and website to make clear that helping someone leave the street is not easy and that it can be a very long process.

Arrels is an organization that wants to involve the citizens because we believe that they are a very important part of solving homelessness. More than one thousand people in Barcelona have been using the Arrels locator to take action and participate in the solution. We feel this tool is important to help empower the citizens and to get real data through crowd-sourcing. And it's a free tool based on an open source project that can be used and improved by whoever wants to.

You can watch this video for more information: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5XtZKImihFA>

“We consider Arrels Locator to be a tool that allows citizens to take action. With the App we are giving a tiny answer to the people who feel the need to do something when they see a rough sleeper.”



An Interview with Lucie de Clerck, Entourage

Translation from French by **Suzannah Young**

Can you explain a little bit about how Entourage was founded and why?

Entourage was founded in 2014 by Jean-Marc Potdevin, an entrepreneur with a tech background. He was co-founder of Kelkoo, then worked at Yahoo, Criteo and Viadeo.

Jean-Marc has always had a concern for homelessness and often chatted with the homeless people he met daily on his way to work. One day, one of them asked Jean-Marc to help him because he had been mugged the night before and all his teeth were broken. He asked Jean-Marc to help him find a dentist. Jean-Marc took his smartphone out of his pocket and sent a tweet. Two hours and many retweets later, Jean-Marc had managed to find a dentist willing to examine the man for free.

That's how he got the first idea of Entourage: using the connecting power of technology to enable people to create local collaborative initiatives to help their neighbours in need.

What makes this app different from other ones which help homeless people?

In France, there are not yet many apps which help homeless people. Many ideas have emerged around this topic, but few projects have reached implementation level.

Compared to other projects, it seems to us that the innovation of Entourage lies in:

1. The purpose of the app: our aim is to encourage citizens to change their daily behaviour towards homeless people. The idea is to promote social interactions and not just material help. Instead of ignoring them, we invite people to overcome their prejudices, to change their mindset and understand that, for homeless people as for any human being, social bonding is as important as food and housing. Solving issues linked to homelessness such as a lack of food, a lack of housing, health problems and addictions need to remain the prerogative of professional organisations. But

we think that any citizen can play a part in making society more benevolent. The idea is not to transform each citizen into a social worker, but rather to encourage citizens to be more benevolent in their social interactions with the homeless people they see every day. We also believe that this contact with their neighbours is essential to give the homeless the desire to reintegrate into society.

2. The way the app works: Entourage is a real social network dedicated to solidarity. People can connect, find and exchange information, and chat directly in the app. We use technology in a positive way; people who do not know each other and live in the same area are driven to the Entourage network by a common interest in solidarity, and can connect and meet in real life.

How many people/communities have used this app so far?

The Entourage app addresses two types of users:

1. Professionals: charity field workers, whether they be volunteers or employed in the sector of social services. The main functions of the app for social workers are
 - a) keeping track of their itineraries & encounters with the homeless
 - b) keeping in touch with other field workers.

The app for professionals has been available since October 2015. Forty-five organisations or local branches of national organisations use it in ten cities in France, which include Paris, Toulouse, Toulon, Lyon, Caen, Lille and Grenoble.

2. Individuals: through the app, people can
 - a) join or create a local initiative;
 - b) have a better insight into life on the streets;
 - c) discover existing social services available locally
 - d) get advice on how to approach a homeless person.

Homeless people can use the app themselves, just like any other individual user.



“Entourage: using the connecting power of technology to enable people to create local collaborative initiatives to help their neighbours in need.”

The features open to all citizens were released only six weeks ago. So far the app is only available in two districts of Paris, the 2nd and 9th arrondissements. The idea is to experiment first and create a community at a local level, in order to refine our educational tools, and assess the social impact on a small scale before scaling up the app.

What feedback have you received from homeless people themselves?

We have created a group called “Comité de la rue”, composed of 5 people who currently live or have lived on the streets. From the beginning, they have helped us design the project and its philosophy, define the limits and solve ethical issues.

All the homeless people with whom we have discussed the project support it. We have had great feedback on the message we promote, that is, making citizens aware of the issue of loneliness in the street and the fact that we engage people to focus on the encounter instead of focusing on assistance. Some people we have talked to were at first reluctant regarding geolocation aspects; we needed to explain that the idea is not to locate homeless people but rather to locate citizen initiatives.

What's the future for the app?

- We recently released the app with all the functions for both professionals and individuals.
- The next 6 months will be dedicated to experimenting at a local level. For professional users, it will enable us to test the coordination functions and see what added value it brings. For the citizen functions, it will enable us to monitor interactions between citizens and homeless people, to improve educational content and build community animation tools that will facilitate replicability.
- We will start scaling up in Q2 2017, first in the other districts of Paris, then in other cities.
- We also want to improve the educational side of the project. We are currently working on a video programme composed of several modules. These videos will help people to have a better insight into life on the streets, to dissipate prejudices, to learn how to identify and overcome their barriers and to get concrete advice on how to approach a homeless person.
- Another possible function for the app is for it to be used by organisations working in other social fields, such as services for vulnerable elderly people, services for single mothers, etc. Adoption in other areas of social work could be a great outcome for our technology.



Making Good Things happen for homeless people in the UK

By **Abi Stevens**, *Good Things Foundation*

Good Things Foundation (formerly Tinder Foundation) is a charity which aims to make good things happen through digital technology. We believe that technology can help us address some of the key social challenges we face in the UK - and poverty and homelessness are part of that picture.

There is a great deal of crossover between social exclusion and digital exclusion, with those most vulnerable or excluded in society also most likely to lack digital skills and to be further excluded by not being able to take advantage of online opportunities - like searching for work, accessing key services, saving money and gaining new skills.

The intersection of social exclusion factors behind homelessness is particularly complex, including low literacy levels, mental health problems, and drug and alcohol misuse. But it is vital for us to understand that picture and those relationships in detail if we're to overcome the barriers to digital inclusion for homeless people. We believe that by doing so, by integrating digital skills into homeless support, we can help to improve lives and life chances.

ABOUT US

Good Things Foundation works through its award-winning Learn My Way learning platform, and the 5,000 strong community-based Online Centres Network - including organisations like libraries, community centres, faith groups, charities, adult education organisations and social enterprises. The network was originally set up in 1999 to provide ordinary people with access to the internet. Since then its role has become more about providing people with basic skills, and in recent years to social inclusion, with the team running Good Things Foundation setting out on their own and winning the contract to run the Online Centres Network in December 2011 as a not-for-profit social enterprise. The organisation then became a registered charity in March 2016.

Good Things Foundation receives a large amount of its funding through the UK Government's Department for Education under the Future Digital Inclusion fund, but increasingly is diversifying income streams by working on projects and pilots to reach different audiences with differing social needs. That includes working on the Widening Digital Participation programme with NHS England, supporting small businesses and charities with Google Digital Garage, training volunteers from large organisations like Lloyds Banking Group to become digital champions within their communities, and creating a new online safety course with communications giant TalkTalk.

REBOOT UK

A recent project funded by the Big Lottery Fund has seen Good Things Foundation focus in on homelessness through the Reboot UK project. The project aimed to rebuild the lives of people in poverty through personalised basic digital skills training and community-based support. Consortium partners working alongside Good Things included other specialist UK charities Homeless Link, Family Fund and Mind.

It's those partnerships on a national and local level that have allowed Good Things Foundation to reach the people and communities with most the to gain from digital skills, and often the least motivation to learn. By working with trusted intermediaries and introducing digital skills into other interventions, we can support communities we wouldn't otherwise reach, and in which other Government programmes and private sector-sponsored digital inclusion interventions find it harder to operate.

12.6 million people in the UK still lack basic digital skills, of which a significant number face multiple or extreme disadvantage. The Reboot UK project followed test and learn principles, and investigated possible models of support, before delivering and evaluating them in community environments. The idea was to build an effective and evidenced model that could have real impact on both individuals and communities, with the aim of scaling it more widely across the Online Centres Network.

THE PROJECT MODEL

Between January and August 2016, Reboot UK supported **994 beneficiaries** to improve their digital skills and wellbeing through 21 delivery partners. These delivery partners are all Online Centres, but they are also specialist services. We recruited a mixture of frontline services to the project, including homeless shelters, supported accommodation, homelessness day services, mental health day services, and a community project that works in a forensic psychiatric ward.

Reboot UK developed the capacity of specialist services to deliver digital inclusion. Reboot UK allowed Good Things Foundation to fund more intensive work with clients, with smaller targets allowing organisations more time to engage and support learners. Through the project, we learnt that specialist delivery organisations are uniquely placed to engage vulnerable individuals, and support them to improve their digital skills.



The project co-developed digital skills delivery with participating organisations. Co-development with the whole delivery cohort identified three major challenges of digital skills delivery in specialist services:

- Engagement is vital for effective delivery, but complicated when clients have multiple and complex needs
- Specialist services may not have the inhouse capacity to deliver digital skills in house. In this case, they need to build partnerships with other community organisations who can deliver digital skills, and support them to build an outreach offer for complex clients
- Access is a major issue; providing reliable and affordable access for clients is crucial, whether that is at the service, at the client's accommodation, or through mobile technology.

The identification of these issues led the group to decide on three themes which would shape the design of each of their projects: peer mentoring, shared services, and home access.

The majority of delivery partners designed their digital skills around peer mentoring. This took a number of different forms. In some cases, delivery partners established specific volunteering routes for service users. These volunteers were designated as peer mentors, and were given specific responsibilities in the organisation, recruitment, and delivery of digital skills. The delivery of digital skills varied; in some cases delivery was through designated classes or job clubs. In other cases, delivery was through informal 1-1 contact, or embedded into pre-existing 1-1 advice sessions.

DEPTFORD REACH

An example of this latter case was delivery at Deptford Reach, a homelessness day service in London. Deptford Reach were already providing 1-1 advice and guidance sessions. Reboot UK gave them the resources to spend longer in each of these advice sessions. By doing this, the advice worker was able to flip the computer around, and encourage the

client to access the internet themselves. In this way, the client was being assisted to access information, apply for benefits, or seek support (such as food banks). Crucially, they were given the time and support to learn how to use a computer to do this independently.

The projects of each delivery partner were very different, but they all provided ways of engaging individuals with complex needs with digital. A major finding from the project is that, although digital skills are a highly beneficial end in themselves, digital is also an engaging first step to further engagement. As digital skills support, particularly at a basic level, is seen as an informal skill, it helps raise individuals confidence, making them more open to further learning, and leading to job progression. In this way, digital can be a gateway to further learning by building confidence, skills, and independence. Improved digital skills help people to take specific steps that lead to wider benefits, such as being able to cope with benefits payments, moving towards work readiness, and feeling more in control.

KEY FINDINGS

The programme built the evaluation around the possible links between digital skills and wellbeing. Through the evaluation, we learnt the following:

- Across the project, learners have increased their digital skills by an average of **14.6%**
- Learners are **17% more confident** to use the internet without help
- Improved digital skills helps beneficiaries feel more **confident, in control, and ambitious** about the future
- There is strong evidence, both quantitative and qualitative, to show digital skills **increases mental wellbeing** for individuals supported by the programme. The average wellbeing score for beneficiaries has increased from **21.41** to **23.46**, against a national mean of **23.6**. Benchmarking against similar projects suggests that an increase of 2.05 compares favourably with similar community-based skills interventions.



CASE STUDY: OWEN'S STORY

One of the beneficiaries from the Reboot UK project was Owen Popperwell, a man from Crawley who went from sleeping rough in the park to a part time job and a flat. He describes finding his way into participating centre Evolve Housing and Support as "like the turning point in a road that was going nowhere."

At Evolve, Owen was assigned a key worker, Gamel, who helped Owen work through some of the problems he'd been facing. Owen continues: "I told Gamel everything that was going on and he said "We can deal with that problem". I'm thinking, 'What do you mean we can deal with it? I've been trying to deal with it for the last 20 years and I'm still not dealing with it'. But Gamel made a list and we just started going through it, making phone calls, writing letters, sending emails, helping me out - doing all the things I'd been putting off or ignoring or couldn't cope with. Then I just felt good in myself because I'm finally doing something to make my life better."

Gamel persuaded Owen to get involved in the shelter's activities, including Evolve's new peer-run computer classes.

"I'd used the computers but I was going on Facebook, YouTube, just recreational stuff, killing time," explains Owen. "Then one day I thought, 'You know what? I need to sort my CV out'. I've not worked in years but it was like I was just ready. I felt good enough and better enough and settled enough to start looking for work."

"I knew about these websites and stuff to look for jobs but not how to use them, and I didn't have anything like a CV to send out. So the tutor, she got me to gather together all my qualifications and put them on the computer. At the same time the IT classes were going on and I was finding out things I didn't know you could do on a computer, like attaching documents to your email and things like that."

Owen started job hunting online, applying for 10-15 jobs a week. He says: "I got feedback from quite a lot, and then all of a sudden, bang, I'm getting interviews - people actually want to see me, which I've never had in my life!"

"The next thing I know I've been offered two jobs! I thought to myself, 'I can't believe this'. I've gone from no job for years to getting two in a week. Now everyone's talking to me again. People are phoning me, and my Mum, she's so proud of me. I don't think she thought I could turn myself around, you know?"

Owen is a customer rep at Evolve and a peer mentor in Evolve's computer classes. He's also working 16 hours a week, and he's finally got his own flat.

"I feel good in myself now," says Owen, "I feel like Owen. I wasn't myself for a long time. I wouldn't be where I am now - I wouldn't have done even a quarter of it - without Evolve. Without Gamel helping me, being so positive, believing in me. Without the computer centre, and the shelter, and all of that. I've come from sleeping on park benches to my own place, my own job. And I'm pretty happy with that - in fact I'm over the moon. I owe everyone there a really big thank you."

"As digital skills support, particularly at a basic level, is seen as an informal skill, it helps raise individuals confidence, making them more open to further learning, and leading to job progression."



Reconnect – Cloud Solidarity: Giving Digital Technology a Human Face

“Reconnect - Cloud Solidarity” solves vulnerability caused by administrative problems through digitally competent social work that speeds up people’s journey to independence.

By: The Reconnect Team

“We believe and we hope that a digital tool like Reconnect can contribute to helping vulnerable people gain independence.”

People often think of the ‘digital revolution’ as an unavoidable, global shift, one that affects our ways of working, how we produce things, how we consume products, our means of exchange, how we present ourselves or even how we conceive our identities. In the field this article is about, social work, the move towards increasingly virtual contacts with public administration is coming on thick and fast. And this process is set to speed up even further in the coming years. This move can be seen as progress (saving time and money, increasing efficiency) but also independence – the passive ‘recipient’ becomes an active ‘user’ or a step backwards (the human contact person is replaced by a digital interface that very vulnerable people are not able to use). This is the famous ‘digital divide’.¹

We are not going to promote either point of view here. Instead, we want to turn the standard view of digitalisation as a ‘revolution’ on its head. We should stop thinking about it as an uncontrollable force, both frightening and wonderful, which will inescapably turn our way of life upside down. We should think about it instead as a tool with the potential to respond to clear needs and provide solutions to specific problems. Here at ‘Reconnect – Cloud Solidarity’, we are convinced that digital technology can be a tool. We try to work out how digital technology can contribute to solving the recurrent problems social service providers face.

We have identified one of these problems, which is familiar to social workers, that people living unsettled lives invariably lose their identity documents. This affects homeless people, migrants, unaccompanied minors, hospital patients experiencing poverty, women survivors of violence who have to leave their homes, street children, etc. We know that for these people, losing their identity papers or having them stolen effectively means losing their access to their rights and, eventually, not even being recognised by social services anymore. When vulnerable people lose their identity papers and official documents, it is also a problem for social workers. We know that social workers spend around 30% of their time helping users reapply for identity documents, that will often be lost or stolen again somewhere down the line.

What we can offer to solve this problem is the expertise of a digital start-up company. We have leveraged the powerful technology and specialist methods that a company like this can use (which sometimes generates new needs too) to respond as accurately and as efficiently as possible to the problem pointed out to us by social workers, that of *vulnerable people routinely losing their identity documents and social workers having to deal with this issue*. We have deliberately used the term ‘deal with’ here, as it implies a certain passivity on the part of service users in the way the problem is handled now. We want to find out how to deal with this specific issue. How can digital technology be a driver for vulnerable people to gain greater independence? Can digital technology as a tool, if it is used to solve a specific problem, help transform the relationship between social workers and service users?

Our project, which is empirical in essence, started off by listening to the people it concerned – potential users. A number of social workers from various bodies were also willing to give us their time regularly. We took a number of (sometimes unexpected) things away with us from these very fruitful exchanges, and they made up our design brief. Then, when we had developed a beta version of ‘Reconnect’, their feedback on their user experiences was very valuable in helping us adapt the service to its intended uses.

To give an idea of these constant back-and-forth exchanges between user experience and building the tool, we will quote a few extracts from an interview by Patrick Declerck. The author of *Les naufragés : avec les clochards de Paris*² (*Stranded souls: living with the homeless people of Paris*) actually grasped a lot of these issues. In printing these extracts, we will show what vulnerable people gave as the different aspects of the problem of losing their identity documents and then we will look at the solutions offered by Reconnect.

¹ In his 2013 annual report, the Ombudsman estimated that digital illiteracy affected between 12-18% of the population and warned of a possible ‘digital blind spot’, meaning “the remaining core of citizens who cannot access what they need via the different digital methods in place, which are absolutely fine for processing the majority of requests but are not adapted to dealing with complex cases or appropriate people experiencing social exclusion”. (www.defenseurdesdroits.fr)

² *Les naufragés : avec les clochards de Paris*, Patrick Declerck, Plon, 2001



(1) “Sooner or later, you will lose your identity papers. It always happens.”

Vulnerable people are at constant risk of losing their identity documents or having them stolen. We can't give them stable accommodation quickly, so we have to find another way to keep their identity documents safe. If they can't keep a hard copy of these documents, why not keep a digital copy of them? The solution we found was to scan people's identity papers so as to keep them long-term in digital format.

What is the status of the digital copy for the government, you may ask? Its real value at the moment is that of a photocopy and not of an original. In some cases, the copy counts as evidence in the same way as the original does, in other cases it does not have the same value as the original but it does make the procedure to apply for a new original much easier. The status of digital copies is nonetheless still uncertain and the trend is moving towards valuing them as evidence in their own right. The State is also in the process of considering whether or not to recognise people's digital identity. Having digital copies thus seemed to us to be a solid piece of ground work.

When we had made this first step, we still had to find the most appropriate way of digitising people's identity papers for social workers to use in their actual working environments. We initially developed a system based on using scanners. This tool worked and continues to work but we realised that it was not really usable in every situation (for example during street outreach work). Our start-up company can react swiftly to problems so we were able to find a solution to this difficulty quickly. We developed a mobile application called *Reconnect Pro* that works with the application *CamScanner*. It allows users to create high-quality digital copies of documents using their smartphone camera and syncs them in real time with the *Reconnect* computer interface. This means that storing documents does not have to be laborious and time-consuming. We still need a good storage space, though - one that is both secure and easy to use for the user and the social worker.

(2) “So we offered patients the option to store their identity documents here and collect them whenever they wanted to.”

The issue of confidentiality of digital data and data storage conditions began to occupy public debate a few years ago. It affects public and private data, businesses' and local authorities' practices and users themselves - who are more or less aware of the status and value of their private data anyway. We do not want to rehash the details of this debate here but do we want to stress that although protecting personal data is of course important for everyone, it is even more so for people who do not have a place to live. Protecting their private life is of key importance to someone who has walls to protect them from the eyes of others and drawers to keep their documents in. This is precisely why it is necessary to ensure the highest level of security to those who don't have any

of that! That's why we have endeavoured at *Reconnect* to guarantee a high level of confidentiality for user data, particularly in their contacts with social workers. We hope to make it easier for social workers themselves to use *Reconnect* and still take seriously their important responsibility to users when they handle their personal data.

(3) “We can't get anything done if we have to take part in research”

As we said earlier, social workers devote on average 30% of their time to reapplying for identity documents on behalf of users. Not only does this administrative task take up time that could have been used to develop the user's personal project, it also means that while it is going on, nothing else can get done. The user's pathway to accessing their rights is blocked. Because losing their papers is disheartening for people, it is like a dark cloud over their future and often means a step backwards. It also means the social worker can't dedicate their time and energy to building a positive pathway with the user. That's why, at *Reconnect* we think that digital tools, far from being there to replace the support provided by social workers, should actually allow them to concentrate on their core business of guiding and supporting users towards independence. Helping them to get through applications is also a way to limit the risk of 'losing' a service user who might otherwise be discouraged by the maze of administration. The digital safe is a basis from which the social worker and user can build a relationship of trust going forward.

(4) “It's a clear sign [...] in the process of rough-sleeper entrenchment [...] We know that losing their identity documents is a precursor to it, which allows the person to hide away from the pressures brought on by reality. They think “oh well, I can't do anything anyway, I haven't got the right documents”.

From our humble standpoint of working on a specific and clear problem that we try to deal with from every angle (vulnerable people losing their official documents) we think digital technology offers practical opportunities for people to become autonomous, even empowered. For some users, being able to use *Reconnect* has actually been their first clear, immediately useful and eye-opening introduction to the use of digital technologies. We don't promise users that creating an email account will find them a job ... but we guarantee them that their proof of address at the hostel, which allows them to register their children at school, for example, is safe. This way, we hope to help those people who are furthest away from digital technology to start using it in a way that is useful for them.

We haven't set up introductory workshops on using digital technology yet but some users have already started sharing *Reconnect* spontaneously with their peers. We are now looking at the idea of setting up workshops run by the users themselves.



In one of the last texts he published before he died,³ André Gorz stated that “IT skills [...] are part of “everyday culture” and do not need to “be taught”. Quoting Ivan Illich (who probably wasn’t a militant technology-lover!), he argued that “everyone can adopt information technology, because, as Ivan Illich wished, everyone can use it easily, as often or

as little as they like [...] without its use encroaching on other people’s freedom to do the same; and because using it [...] fosters personal fulfilment and increases everyone’s independence.” We believe and we hope that a digital tool like *Reconnect* can contribute to helping vulnerable people gain independence.

RECONNECT – CLOUD SOLIDARITY IN BRIEF

www.reconnect.fr

- The *Reconnect* platform was launched in September 2015.
- If an agency becomes a *Reconnect Centre*, it benefits from access to *Reconnect – Cloud Solidarity* and training in using the platform for its social work teams.
- More than 900 users have a *Reconnect* account.
- More than 4,000 documents are stored on the platform.
- 80 agencies have *Reconnect* services (accommodation and resettlement centres (CHRSs), university hospitals (CHUs), nursing beds in homeless shelters (LHSSs), solidarity and integration centres (ESIs), acute care nursing beds in homeless shelters (LAMs), etc.).
- Contact: Tel: +33 (0)1 58 30 55 29 / Email: contact@reconnect.fr

³ *La sortie du capitalisme a déjà commencé [We have already begun to leave capitalism behind]*, Eco’rev – Revue critique d’écologie politique [Critical papers on political ecology], André Gorz, 2007

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For more information see: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/easi>

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