



[SO:Let's Connect – Digitally Connecting People \(soletsconnect.co.uk\)](http://soletsconnect.co.uk)

Submission to January 2022 Meeting of Southampton City Council Scrutiny Inquiry on Accessibility

1). Introduction

i). The SO:Let's Connect (SLC) project has been running a pilot since early 2020. It aims to loan digital devices to people within the City of Southampton who don't have them or whose existing kit is inadequate for social contact, access to health or council professionals and services, access to information, education, applying for and attending work, exercise services, online retail, banking or entertainment. The project helps people to become digitally included rather than excluded.

ii). As well as IT kit such as a laptop or tablet computer, where necessary the project supplies an internet connection via a 'dongle' that plugs in to the device. The dongle contains a mobile network SIM card that enables internet access, which is funded by the project for up to a year. In addition to hardware and internet access, where it is needed the project provides a 'digital connector'. Our digital connectors are volunteers who have the ability to communicate with people and help them to use the facilities of hardware, software and internet connection. Digital connectors have had expert backup from our IT specialists.

iii). Please see sections below about which groups are affected by digital exclusion and in which ways they lose out. This includes people who have disabilities that are physical, hidden, psychological or associated with age and other protected characteristics. Access to digital resources is just as important as physical access. For some of our users, the provision of digital access has made it possible to engage with society in ways that would have been impossible without it due to their disabilities. Our pilot focus has included people from the SO18 Big Local geographical area in north east Southampton, people with mental health issues and some people living in Housing Association properties. Examples of ways that people have used digital devices have included speaking with and seeing friends and relatives online, accessing adult education when prevented from doing so easily by disability, engaging in exercise supported online, finding information about health issues, being in touch with health professionals, accessing potential employment by

people with mental health issues, finding work and improving wellbeing by learning new skills. See the website above and Appendices below for more details. People have very individual needs and aspirations. The SLC project triage process with people newly referred and individual volunteer support has made it possible for people to engage as individuals.

iv). The original set of organisations who set up SLC supplied and continue to supply project functions. This includes project management, service management and volunteer deployment, referral triage, underlying IT support, equipment stock management and our Customer Relationship Manager IT system for recording of work with people receiving support.

v). The project has been run by a joint group, with Southampton Voluntary Services SO:Linked project, TWICS, SO18 Big Local (who provided start-up funding), Abri Housing Association (who provided funding), Communicare, Drop the Mask Productions CIC (see link above to the website they have created), Jamie's Computers, Energise Me and with input from other groups. All these groups provided support, as did individuals from within communities. Liaison took place with the NHS, who helped fund and with a range of other City voluntary groups and Southampton City Council Housing. Please see Appendix 1 for details of information shared with other groups and Appendix 2 for further information about working together. In addition, support from the University of Southampton was invaluable in finding new volunteers. Appendix 3 is the report of an organisation, WSA Consulting, commissioned by SO18 Big Local to research the outcomes and Social Return on Investment (SROI) of the SLC project. This report describes the benefits of the project and has case study content. Video content of case studies is also available within the SLC website above.

vi). The pilot project has shown how important digital access is to many people who are digitally excluded. We have prepared a proposal for an ongoing project and are currently assembling the necessary funding. A more detailed report, with a project plan and costings are available.

2). Access to What and By Whom

Accessibility includes access via digital routes. People who are digitally excluded cannot access the range of resources and opportunities that others can. This includes access to social contact, the converse of which is loneliness. Loneliness has been the subject of a previous Scrutiny Inquiry within Southampton which concluded that a plan was needed to address the issue, which was seen as important for many City residents (Southampton City Council, 2018). Loneliness is known to result in increased risk of illness (Valtorta *et al.*, 2016) and risk of death (Holt-Lunstad *et al.*, 2015). It also contributes to reduced wellbeing for many people who are affected by it (e.g. Hare-Duke *et al.*, 2019). Whilst social contact may take place face to face or via older communications media such as telephones, it increasingly happens digitally, including via email, social media and video communication (OFCOM, 2018). Some groups are less likely than others to use

digital devices, especially older people. Although older people are using digital systems increasingly often, many do not use them (OFCOM, 2018). However, people with Equality Act (Equality Act, 2010) protected characteristics are more likely to have reduced access to digital systems. In addition, inability to afford digital devices or access to an Internet connection may result in digital exclusion. For some purposes, public digital facilities are helpful. However, where private social contact is important, or where information security is important, such as purchasing online, public facilities, such as through libraries, will not fully meet needs.

3). Falling Off the Bandwagon

A persisting issue for older people and those who have disabilities is that of 'falling off the bandwagon' (Damodaran *et al.*, 2014:163), whereby people who have been using digital systems cease to do so. This may be because they are puzzled by changes to technology or applications and have no sources of support to make use of changed facilities or operating systems. It may also occur where difficulties with eyesight, hearing or memory make it harder. People's concerns about risks of using devices mean that they choose not to use them.

People who have disabilities and other protected characteristics may have specific needs in using devices, requiring specialist devices, provision of specific apps, support with setup and system use, system maintenance and general troubleshooting. These issues may be handled by individuals, family members, friends, neighbours or using written material. However, some people will struggle to access these. The level of need that exists in all these areas will depend on how the needs are defined, but significant numbers of people are seen as having digital access needs (Lloyds Bank, 2020). More information is available, including information shared with SLC and that found during the pilot.

4). Issues in Addition to Social Contact

In addition to meeting the need for social contact, with all its benefits, access to digital devices and internet connections opens up a range of other opportunities. The SO:Let's Connect project has identified in its own research with referrers and users that people can access online information about a full range of topics, but including health information, exercise opportunities and information about services available from the City Council and the private sector. This is confirmed by the 'Measuring Change' work done by consultants for the Big Local project in the north east of Southampton. Please see Appendices below. As well as access to information, access to professional contact is also helped by digital device use. This has been highlighted during the pandemic, which prompted the SLC project. However, some changes in access routes will remain in use by public services. Access to online retail, banking and other services is also important. Not least, access to entertainment is also important for those people who might be unable to access it in the offline world. This has an impact on mental health and wellbeing. It has become apparent during the pilot project, that use of digital devices can help people access mainstream employment since it is often an important recruitment route and is important to be able to use digital devices in many occupations.

5). Enough Devices for a Family

Even for those people who have access to a modern, smart mobile phone, it may not be possible to use some facilities with a small screen which is hard to read or with a touchscreen which is hard to use with some applications. Where a family has use of a device more than one family member may need to use it at any one time. These issues may result in partial digital exclusion. People of different ages may use devices for different purposes, highlighted by the differing needs of children, parents and older people.

6). The SO:Let's Connect Project – History and Recommendations

The project was established early in 2020 as the Covid-19 pandemic began. Please see appendices below for more information about the project, the eight initial partners and working together with a wider range of stakeholders. The pilot has been assessed as successful and the wider need has been explored and estimated. More information is available. Whilst some other organisations offer kit, internet access and volunteer support, these areas of support are targetted at particular groups and do not meet the full range of needs. From the report and recommendations appended below, it will be seen that there is a need for a development of the SO:Let's Connect pilot project into a more comprehensive set of support to provide devices on loan, to provide internet access and to provide volunteer support to help people to use the devices loaned. Costings and an outline project plan are available.

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SO:Let's Connect
Digital Inclusion Project
Main Points Summary for City-Wide Group

Introduction

SO:Let's Connect was established in July 2020 when SO: Linked initiated a task and finish group under the leadership of Paul Lewzey. It comprises a partnership of eight local organisations who came together with the aim of providing digital access to the residents of Southampton who have difficulties in achieving this. Discussions to establish collaborative working with a wider range of organisations are in place and ongoing. This report has been informed by monitoring of activity and surveys of people receiving support, which confirms that demand exists.

A pilot project has been undertaken, targeting residents of the SO18 Big Lottery area, Abri tenants in Mansbridge and patients with a diagnosis of mental illness across the city of Southampton. Significant progress has been made.

Digital exclusion can have a detrimental effect on people's health, wellbeing, economic and social opportunities. SO:Let's Connect are aware that this is an ongoing challenge for our communities, further highlighted as a result of the pandemic.

Continued funding and commitment is needed in order to expand and capitalise on the successful outcomes emerging from the SO:Let's Connect pilot project.

Current provision

A number of referrals have been, and are still being received. Pilot managers are in place and a number of volunteer 'digital connectors' have joined the project.

A supply chain for provision of "kit" has been established, using recycled hardware where available and appropriate.

Those referred to the service receive an initial "triaging" call to establish what their requirements are for:

- Type of equipment
- Internet access
- Technical advice/support

Once suitable equipment is in place a Digital Connector makes contact and supports the service user with help and advice to get started and problem shoot whilst they become competent. This includes guidance on how to use the internet safely.

More advanced training is not included but beneficiaries will be given guidance on how to access suitable courses.

A survey has been conducted and a waiting list is being established to estimate the level of demand.

By 26th April 2021 a customer relationship manager (CRM) IT system was in place and training provided to SO: Let's Connect system users.

Objectives for April 2021 – March 2022

Four areas of focus have been identified:

- 1. Build on and develop the work already done to provide a trusted service to those who are digitally excluded in the city by**
- 2. Recruit, train and support Digital Connectors**
- 3. Work together with other providers to ensure that resources are used efficiently and effectively**
- 4. Extend awareness of the scheme through community engagement underpinned by a sound PR strategy**
- 5. Explore the use of assistive technology and other supports for access to systems, as a further development over the period of the main project.**

Funding required

To deliver the priorities outlined above, funding will be needed to provide

- Staffing
- Equipment
- Internet connection
- Volunteer recruitment, training and support

Appendix 2

Working towards inclusion of people who are digitally excluded in Southampton

Rough Draft of Agreement for Working together 1/2/21

Updated 8/2/21, 23/2/21 and 26/2/21

The Groups below have reached agreement on their joint approach to how they would like people who are not digitally included to be supported during the Covid pandemic and also when it is over. This forms part of joint recommendations to the City Digital Strategy group.

We recognise each organisation's specialist areas of expertise. We have agreed that we will share information about sources of potential resources, although each organisation aims to make its own funding applications. We will coordinate our planning for development so that we avoid duplication and can reassure potential providers of resources that we are working collaboratively.

As we enable more people who are digitally excluded to go online, we see it as important that we share our learning with each other.

Agreed approach;

- 1). We want to arrange that people who are unable to access the internet but wish to do so are helped in that and are fully included.
- 2). We want to arrange that anyone who does not have the device and/or tools needed for access gets a device, tools and the support that they need to make use of it.
- 3). We want to arrange encouragement and support with motivation for those people who might be wary of trying to use the internet.
- 4). We will aim to arrange that small trusted groups of providers can be assembled that help people to start their engagement.
- 5). We want people to be safe online. We will ensure high quality training in online safety for those we support. We will explore development of a kitemark approach to digital safety.
- 6). We will respect people's real concerns about privacy and online safety, taking care about how we present online security.
- 7). People should be helped to make use of the good things that access gives you, including access to services and control over their own lives. We will aim not to put people off with technical language that could alarm them.
- 8). We will start from the point of view of potential system users and work backwards.

- 9). We want to ensure that the right opportunities are developed.
- 10). We want to make sure that people have options for face to face connection as well as digital. Digital should not be the default. This may include hard copy contact too. Solutions should be tailored to the needs of the client and best use of resources for the organisation.
- 11). We aim to work together, collaboratively to make sure that people get the best opportunities across the city as a result.
- 12). We want to make sure that limited resources are used wisely.
- 13). We will identify realistic steps for areas where progress can be made.

Groups wishing to give their support to this approach are (alphabetically);

Age UK Southampton

Citizens' Advice Southampton

City Council Housing

Communicare

Saints Foundation

Social Care in Action

SO: Let's Connect

SO: Linked

SVS

Appendix 3

Measuring Change – Study of the part of the pilot of SO:Let's Connect within the SO18 Big Local patch which includes parts of Harefield, Midanbury and Townhill Park.



Measuring Change

SO:Let's Connect
SO18 Big Local pilot study



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Measuring Change – SO:Let’s Connect SO18 Big Local pilot study

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Thanks to all the clients, volunteers and workers who shared their experiences and views as part of measuring the change created by the SO: Let's Connect Big Local pilot project.

I don't think we would have survived lockdown without SO:Let's Connect.

Project client.

Introduction

Background

Initially called “Switched On Southampton”, the “SO:Let’s Connect” project was conceived from an idea raised by a CCG Commissioner¹ to help connect people in Southampton digitally, as the Covid-19 lockdown (March 2020) was exacerbating the digital divide. This was causing people who were not digitally connected to become even more isolated as their usual social connections were not able to happen physically.

SO18 Big Local were approached by the steering group behind SO:Let’s Connect as funding was required for a pilot study to help get the project off the ground. The steering group was formed by representatives from TWICS (Training for Work in Communities), Abri Housing, SO:Linked, Jamie’s Computers² and resident volunteers. The group was then also joined by Drop The Mask Productions CiC³.

SO18 Big Local’s own existing project to support people in using IT (Townhill Helping Hub) had ceased due to the Covid-19 lockdowns, so there was an existing commitment at SO18BL to support people in learning digital skills, but without a project in place at that time.

SO18 Big Local investment

The SO18 Big Local worker joined the steering group during the Summer of 2020 and then presented the SO18 Big Local Partnership Committee (SO18BLPC) with a proposal for funding the pilot project (at the July meeting). There was to be a second, smaller scale, pilot that covered the neighbouring Mansbridge area, funded by Abri Housing. The SO18BLPC agreed to fund a pilot project in the SO18 Big Local area for £15,000 for a year, to provide IT equipment and support to residents that were currently more isolated due to a lack of digital skills/digital confidence/connectivity. The PC acknowledged that while this was a large sum to commit, this would make a real difference to local people, in the very near future. The benefits of this were thought to be clear as we were moving towards the Autumn/Winter period when the option of holding events outside was becoming less feasible, and many people were still concerned about gathering in groups, even if restrictions were relaxed and indoor events were allowed. In addition, there was awareness of the increasing trend for information, support and welfare services to move online.

¹ Clinical Commissioning Group

² Computer Recycling Social Enterprise

³ An IT & Media CIC who are dedicated to supporting people with mental health challenges – DTMP train and employ them as part of their ethos

For a long time we have been aware of a lack of IT equipment for people in our SO18 patch and were doing 'tea & tech' sessions to teach digital skills. However, this was reliant on people coming to the area. With lots of social services and Universal Credit going online during Covid it became even more important for people to have digital equipment and skills in order to be able to partake in society.

SO18 Big Local volunteer

The £15,000 figure was based upon supporting up to 50 residents, providing them with technology (laptop/tablet/desktop computer) and/or internet data and/or volunteer mentoring support. There was to be match funding from SO:Linked (in the form of staff time/work to create referral forms, volunteer recruitment, ongoing management of the referrals) and Drop The Mask Productions CiC (a year's worth of support costs to provide ongoing support to the volunteers and residents to the tune of £5000-9000). Drop The Mask Productions CiC were also offering to produce free promotional videos etc to help publicise the project as well as GDPR compliance support, and TWICS were working on including some online learning for volunteers using the IT in their Adult Education bid.

Project aims

The SO:Let's Connect project aimed to help people (identified on a referral basis, including self-referral):

- Who were nervous of using tech to develop their confidence
- Didn't have tech and / or needed help using it
- Couldn't afford tech equipment or connectivity

To:

- Connect with friends and family, and access online activities, information, advice, support and health services.
- Feel less lonely and isolated

Project methods

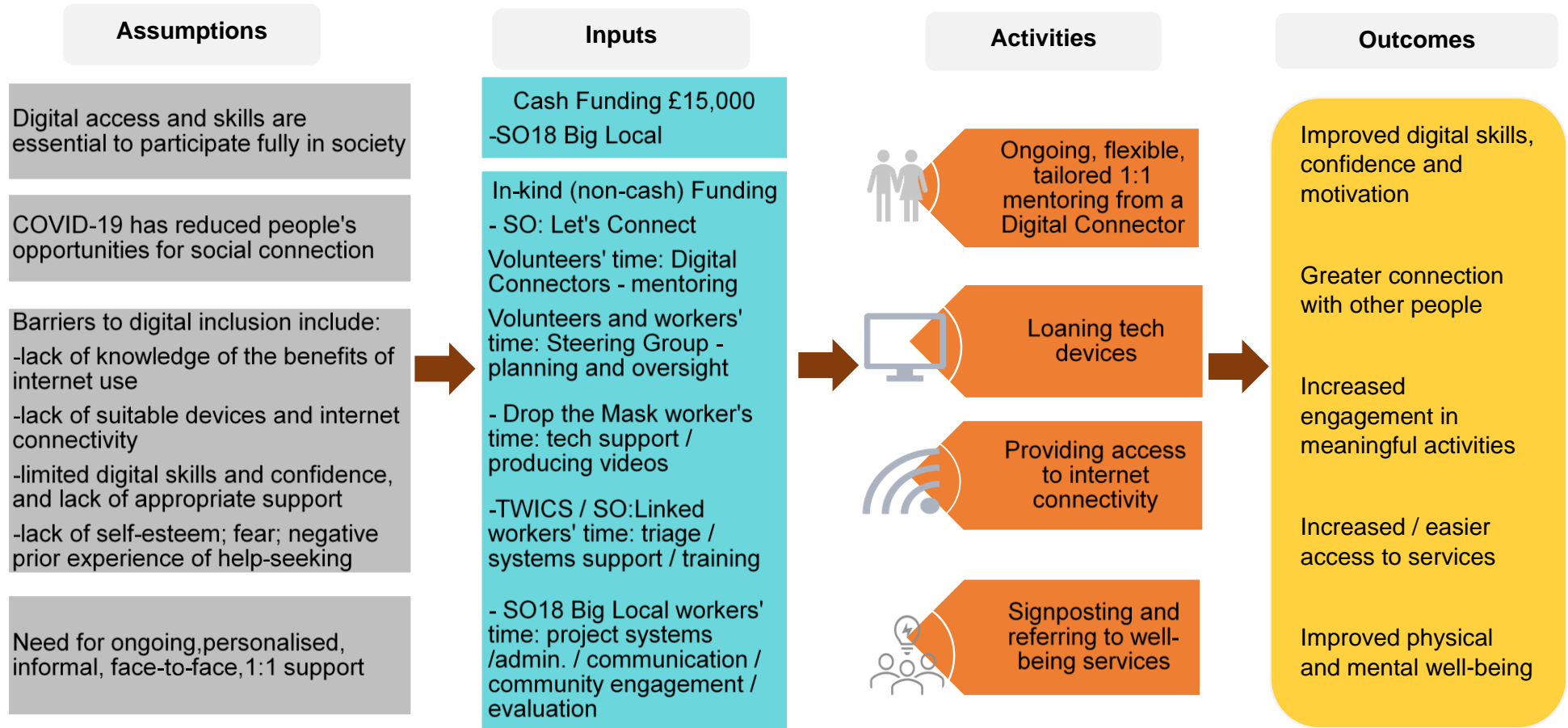
Creating change

The intention of the SO:Let's Connect project was that by supporting clients to be more digitally connected, they would be able to better partake in activities and be more connected to people and local services. This was to be done through a

combination of three things. Firstly, providing them with the physical hardware that they needed, if they did not have access to this already, in the form of a loan for up to a year, of either a laptop, desktop or tablet. The clients would also be given, in circumstances where they had no internet access, an amount of internet data to allow this. Thirdly, every client was offered a “Digital Connector” (DC), a volunteer mentor who would be able to support them to achieve what they wished to learn in terms of digital skills, be that ordering groceries, attending an exercise class, having a Zoom call with family etc. These DCs would be able to advise clients (initially by phone, owing to Covid restrictions) at a pace that was suitable for each client, as opposed to a traditional “IT course” that assumed all learners started from the same skill level.

The assumptions and ways of working behind the project are outlined below in the project’s Theory of Change.

SO: Let's Connect SO 18 Big Local Pilot: Theory of Change



Underlying values and ways of working

Team approach to developing and sharing skills of clients, volunteers and workers

Workers/volunteers trained in tech, listening and communication skills

Client self-referral and referrals from any third party

In-depth assessment of clients' strengths and needs

Regular review and use of data

Measuring the change

In order to capture the success, or otherwise, of the SO18 Big Local pilot study, several methods were used:

- **A simple questionnaire** was developed to capture clients' level of digital connectivity, IT skills and loneliness at the start of them receiving support from SO:Let's Connect, with a second set of "after questions" to measure the same things once they had been involved with the project for a period of time. The questionnaire was designed to be conducted as a conversation with their DC, rather than as a document that they were sent to fill in themselves, and a simple Excel spreadsheet was constructed to record the clients' answers. The questionnaire is included in Appendix 1.
- **Client records** were reviewed.
- For a few clients, "**Life stories**" were written at the end of their period of support, about the range of differences the project had made to them (created from in-depth conversations).
- **Video recordings** were made of people speaking directly about the support they gained and the difference it made.

In addition to the information gathered from SO:Let's Connect clients, we also captured the reflections and feedback from those involved in the project as workers or volunteers as well as SO18BLPC members. As part of this process a video has been produced, which includes a client, workers and volunteers reflecting on the pilot process and its outcomes. The video, which can be accessed at <https://youtu.be/Yj2r4lThj8Q> was produced by Drop the Mask Production CiC as part of their contribution to the pilot.

SO:Let's Connect – what did we learn?

Reasons why clients contacted SO:Let's Connect

Full data from the ten clients who benefited from the project is presented in Annex 2 – SO:Let's Connect feedback from clients. Clients were recruited via referrals either by themselves or via outside agencies, e.g. local schools, doctor surgeries. Advertising was done via a mixture of "offline" – large-scale leaflet delivery across the SO18BL area, including via local schools and online "do you know someone who might benefit..." using SO18BL's existing Facebook and e-newsletter accounts. Fewer clients than anticipated contacted the project during the first year of the pilot study, as Covid-19 restrictions made face-to-face conversations difficult – these were needed to back-up the information on the leaflets, as we encountered some suspicion that "this cannot really be for free" and equally some concerns from people as to whether they "were in need enough" of the support. This led to a significant underspend by SO18BL, and within the first year of SO:Let's Connect, only £5,228 was spent, not the £15,000 budgeted.

While the pilot aimed to reach up to 50 clients in the first year, fewer clients than anticipated contacted the project, with 10 people gaining support – 9 women and 1 man. However, it is likely that the pilot's 'ripple effect' led to more people than this benefiting indirectly, for example:

- Most clients lived with family members who were also enabled to do a range of things online e.g. school work, sports activities and connecting with friends.
- People who reported that connecting with others online had relieved their loneliness, may also have benefited the people that they interacted with.
- The pilot manager reported that some clients who accessed SO:Let's Connect across Southampton had found out about the project from someone using the Big Local pilot.
- If digital devices are not purchased by clients at the end of their loan period, they can be lent to other clients, so can help two or more clients from the one purchase price.

There were a variety of specific reasons behind clients being referred, or referring themselves, to the SO:Let's Connect project but all revolved, as predicted, about the need for being able to better connect, either to services, support or friends/family, particularly within the context of Covid-19 lockdowns and restrictions. Four clients needed only hardware and/or internet data, but six also took up the offer of support from a Digital Connector, to help them with specific tasks they wanted to achieve online.

I have never used IT. I'd like a laptop and someone to show me how to use it - to Zoom, shop and learn to knit. I have friends but because of Covid I can't see

My children are doing school work from home via a mobile phone – it's a nightmare.

I would like to get online and learn to shop, browse the internet and connect with friends. I also need to log into my Universal Credit account.

My family is shielding and we are extremely isolated. As well as needing a laptop to complete college work, it would mean my disabled son could do his judo lessons and we could Zoom with family.

Impact of the project

Changes in clients' lives

The information gathered from the clients (see Annex 2 – SO:Let's Connect feedback from clients) shows that the project helped reduce loneliness for some clients:

Before, I often felt lonely, but I don't now as I can study, do activities and connect regularly with people online.

Being able to connect with people and do fun arts projects has definitely helped with loneliness.

For others, the project enabled them to get online for the first time, increased their digital skills or allowed them to use existing skills in a much better way, i.e. some of the activities they were doing online may not have changed, but the ease with which they could undertake those activities was improved. Each person said that their needs were met very well by the project, with support of mentors being much appreciated and all were keen to continue developing their skills and internet use.

I am still very keen to learn, and I love doing it. My mentor has been very helpful and I appreciate her persistence with communicating with me over these 6 months (when I've been unwell and in-and-out of hospital.)

The videos and life stories show real individual impact and positive change, with quotes showing significant differences have been brought about directly as a result of the project.

Having the internet means I can get help with writing a CV and I will be able to look for jobs. Also, my daughter loves using a drawing App.

It's helped us to survive. Being able to Zoom and see my mother and children face-face when talking to them is completely different.

It's enhanced and opened up new possibilities for me.

To have moved clients from "I feel isolated while shielding" to "we wouldn't have survived lockdown without the laptop" and allowing them, via something as seemingly simple as the loan of equipment, to complete college courses, maintain a sense of routine while during lockdown (particularly for children with additional needs) and help people connect with friends and family when unable to see them in person, is invaluable.

Rachel's story

Rachel lives with her husband and 8-year-old daughter. She found out about SO:Let's Connect via a leaflet in a play pack provided by SCPAⁱ during half-term holiday. Rachel had a laptop but was unsure of how to use some functions, and needed support, particularly as there was a growing amount of school work being sent online for her daughter to complete.

Rachel was one of the first residents to ring SO:Linked specifically about SO:Let's Connect and there was some teething trouble with the SO:Linked telephone menu system (that was quickly rectified after Rachel raised this) but once contact was made with the SO:Let's Connect team, they were able to provide Rachel with support quickly.

"I initially needed some help with updating the operating system, but then my laptop actually died before we could do that, so Greg was able to arrange a short notice loan of a laptop. That laptop had some sound issues, but Greg was quickly able to provide me with an alternative and in particular was able to rescue all my files from my broken laptop, so I didn't lose any of my photos etc."

As things progressed and schools were closed, Rachel found she needed to use the laptop more to support her daughter's learning. Rachel's mentor (Digital Connector), Helen, was able to help with some email issues, and helped Rachel with using cloud storage for photos.

"From my first contact with the project, everyone has been so supportive and welcoming. The one who first spoke to me was lovely, and Greg and Helen have always been very patient, and made me feel like nothing was too much trouble. People can feel embarrassed when asking for help, and worried about whether they are deemed 'needy enough' to access projects like these, but I would encourage people to get in touch if they need any support – it may seem like a small thing, but in lockdown, the laptop really was our connection to the outside world and was really needed".

For Rachel, having the laptop allowed her to not only home-school her daughter, but also stay connected to family and friends. She has learned some new IT skills and taken part in online exercise classes – her daughter has even been able to join a ballet class remotely. Rachel has taken the decision to continue with home-schooling post-lockdown, as this was working better for her daughter who is autistic. The laptop means that Rachel has been able to research educational resources and order items to support the lessons, as well as accessing support for her daughter's autism and ordering groceries.

"I've even made new friends via joining online tours of places during lockdown and started an online art class. I feel a lot more confident now and am really grateful to SO:Let's Connect for all the support they have given me. I hope more local people can avail themselves of this support as it's been amazing".

Social return on investment (SROI)

Given the significance for every-day life of being digitally included, we recognise that a range of work has been done to identify what being 'digitally included' is worth to the individual, i.e. what difference it makes in someone's life and what monetary value can be placed on that change. While this is a complex area, which is beyond the remit of measuring the change of our pilot, we find it useful to acknowledge the potential return on investment of the SO18BL financial contribution and contribution in time and expertise of all partners.

As an example, the study 'Valuing Digital Inclusion'⁴ estimated the following values:

We estimate the value of digital inclusion for a new user as £1,064 per annum. This comes from having more confidence, making financial savings online, less boredom, opportunities to pursue hobbies, new job-seeking skills, and a reduction in social isolation. We estimate the additional value of digital inclusion for an advanced user as £1,756. This comes from being online more and being able to do more activities.

Just Economics, for BT, 2014

Changes for SO18BL and SO:Let's Connect

Increased SO18BL profile:

Involvement in the SO:Let's Connect project itself has raised the profile of SO18 Big Local across Southampton, increasing the credibility and reputation of the organisation beyond the area in which it is focussed (Townhill Park, Harefield and Midanbury). The profile of SO18BL has also been raised within the national Big Local programme, as the SO18BL worker's involvement at the Local Trust "Digital Inclusion Cluster" has resulted in several other Big Local areas speaking to SO18BL about SO:Let's Connect and asking for tips and guidance for setting up similar projects in their own Big Local areas.

I have spoken to Big Local areas across the country about this project (a benefit of Zoom) who are working on similar set-ups within their own areas – there is a real drive to support residents to be more digitally connected, and partnership working definitely seems to be the way forward, both in terms of expertise and sustainability.

SO18BL worker

Learning about engaging people in digital inclusion projects:

Running this pilot project during changing levels of Covid lockdowns and restrictions, has really highlighted the importance of face-to-face communication with people. Whilst as a community project this has always been important for SO18BL, this has highlighted how hard it is to reach people (and thus overcome the reluctance to engage, or the suspicion of free support) without those personal conversations.

⁴ This study focused on the experiences of older people: <https://www.justeconomics.co.uk/digital-inclusion/the-value-of-digital-inclusion>

Recruitment in the SO:Let's Connect pilot in the SO18BL area (i.e. the area recruiting based on geography alone) was less than other pilots where there were existing client bases (from housing and mental health services) to refer, and support workers in place.

Evidencing the need for digital inclusion projects and gaining wider investment:

The funding provided by SO18 Big Local enabled the SO:Let's Connect project to get started, which in turn enabled the steering group to secure funding for other pilot projects. In addition to the small scale Abri Housing Association funded pilot, there followed significant investment from the Winter Pressures Fund to support clients city-wide that were accessing mental health support services. In turn, evidence from these pilot projects, and the systems now in place at SO:Let's Connect as a result of running the pilots, are enabling the steering group to bid for funding to cover the whole of Southampton.

Two members of the Steering Group (including the SO18BL worker) also presented at a National Health Conference on the topic of Digital Inclusion, reaching a wide audience including local Clinical Commissioning Group representatives, which could be important in securing future funding for SO:Let's Connect.

The SO18BL worker and I have presented the project to a national "Improving Health" conference. As a result I have been in contact with organisations who wanted to learn more about it and in particular, procedures to keep clients and equipment safe. It has been a pleasure to share learning from the Big Local pilot.

SO:Let's Connect SO18BL Pilot Manager

Learning about measuring change

Gather 'before' and 'after' information to identify impact: The SO18BLPC and workers have learned that **keeping it simple is key** – in order to maximise the likelihood that the before/after questions are completed, they need to be simple, easy to record and quick to carry out, particularly when relying on volunteers to collect this information. "Before vs. after" does however give a very meaningful measurement of change.

Develop 'life stories': In-depth conversations with clients which provided 'stories of change' provide excellent examples of how qualitative information can be just as useful as quantitative, and that it's not always pertinent to focus solely on the numbers of clients reached.

Use a range of methods to gather information in different formats: This not only facilitates validation of findings but adds depth to these and can prove a valuable resource as the techniques used here are easily and readily transferable to other SO18BL projects.

Share learning on measuring change: SO18BL have also been asked to share their learning regarding Measuring Change with other Big Local areas, and again have been approached by Local Trust and associated organisations to share their experiences of working within the SO:Let's Connect steering group, as part of research into Big Local's working with external agencies.

Measuring the change in SO18BL's reputation and the benefit of these increased relationships with other organisations is harder to quantify but is already proving an important source of support, expertise and contacts for SO18BL workers and will undoubtedly do the same for the SO18BL volunteers as the organisation moves forward and starts to seek further funding itself in years to come.

I've learned to keep it simple and use software that is simple to use. Before and after is the best meaningful measurement. The role of people stories shows a more in-depth picture of people's experience.

SO18BL volunteer

Marie's story

Marie, who previously had a successful career, had to give up work on health grounds and now is largely confined within her home, drawing disability benefits and with a family member providing care. She was shielding during lock-down and feeling isolated.

She was fairly confident using digital devices; however her PC was very old, without a microphone or camera and she could not afford to buy a newer one. She was unable to connect with her family online and struggled to do be able to join in arts projects, that she loves and is a vital creative outlet since she struggles to join in activities.

My mother is in her 90s and lives far from me, as do my children. I could talk to them but it's completely different being able to see them face-face. I was not going to be able to see my mother for a long-time and when someone is elderly you just don't know what might happen.

Marie heard about SO:Let's Connect from a Big Local worker and was loaned a Chromebook, which she said had made a big difference:

I don't think we would have survived lockdown without it.

As well as doing all sorts of her usual online activities more easily, such as shopping, banking and getting prescriptions she explained the significance of now being able to have face-face contact with her family and to do creative activities:

I can chat to my mother and children on Zoom and it's a completely different feeling. being able to see them. Also, it's been great doing craft activities – it's fun, let's me develop my creativity and makes me feel I've achieved something. I'm also keen to get involved in organising community events and online is the way to do it.

How change was created

Providing tailored support: Change was created in clients' lives directly thanks to, in practical terms, being able to provide them with the support and equipment they needed, but also due to the commitment and determination of all those involved in SO:Let's Connect to make it work.

The project has a lot of flexibility build into it and responds to changing needs of our clients. A client who moved house found that she had to wait two weeks for broadband to be installed but needed the internet for work and home schooling. We were able to provide her with a MiFi device the same day.

SO18 BL SO:Let's Connect Pilot Manager

Effective partnership working: Partnership working was crucial in the SO:Let's Connect project – the SO18BL funds were the first that the SO:Let's Connect project gained and so were vital in enabling the steering group to gain other funding; conversely, SO18BL could not have implemented such a Digital Inclusion project without the tech support, systems, access to DCs, policies e.g. safeguarding, and so on provided by the steering group.

What worked well to create change

- SO:Let's Connect, due to the way it was set up, was able to provide a **bespoke, flexible service** that was able to respond to clients' needs. Clients that accessed the project were "triaged" to access their needs in terms of what support they needed (hard-ware-wise) and who might be able to best support them (from the pool of available DCs). When recruiting DCs, the target was to recruit volunteers that had good people skills with a sufficient level of tech knowledge, rather than to recruit technical experts that may have had less in the way of people skills. The backup of the technical organisations (Drop The Mask Productions CiC and Jamie's Computers) meant that if needed, the DCs could themselves access tech support if their client had a query that they could not answer themselves. The DCs are committed to supporting people, and themselves find this a worthwhile project - one told us:

I really enjoy it when I can help people to do things that they couldn't do before. It's lovely to get people over the hump when they've got stuck trying to do an application.

- The project benefited from **the expertise of those within the steering group, combined with the local knowledge and contacts of the SO18BL worker and volunteers**. The SO18BL Vice-Chair also joined the Steering Group during the course of the SO:Let's Connect project and was proactive in developing the bespoke database used to measure change.

- The focus on recruiting the first group of Digital Connectors was on **finding volunteers from the SO18BL area**, which provided a level of trust for local clients.
- **The embedding of the SO18BL worker within the Steering Group** also allowed her to gather information directly in order to help measure project progress and provide updates to the SO18BLPC. This also worked in the other direction – for example, with SO18BLPC members querying the “exit strategy” leading to conversations at SO:Let’s Connect to develop the agreement that clients could buy their equipment at the end of the loan period.
- There was a **high level of commitment** among steering group members and the organisations that employed them (where they were workers) – a significant amount of “people time” was provided, particularly in the early stages, in order to allow the project to move forward rapidly when getting established.
- There was similarly a **high level of engagement in the work being done to measure the change** created by the SO:Let’s Connect project. The involvement of both steering group members and SO18BLPC members in capturing and measuring the changes being made to clients lives via the project, **allowed both measuring change work and the SO:Let’s Connect project to be adapted where needed as processes evolved** e.g. when challenges were being reported with regards to timescales of accessing equipment.
- The **separate BL pilot database** to collect the client before/after information made the recording of the information much simpler and quicker, rather than relying on the SO:Let’s Connect CRM (Client Relationship Management) database.

What could have worked better

- There were **challenges in setting up such a project during Covid restrictions** – demand for hardware soon outstripped supply and it proved hard to source equipment within budget at some points as around the country there was a **surge in demand for laptops etc**. Some **workers were also furloughed**, while others had significant demands on their time.
- There were also some pinch points in people’s time, as although everyone “round the table” was incredibly committed to the project, there was also a **need for a dedicated Project Manager**, which was / is not possible until funding is sourced for the city-wide project.
- **Without a dedicated client list to refer to the project, and without the ability to conduct face-to-face conversations during lockdowns, it was a challenge to recruit clients to the SO18BL pilot**. Advertising was challenging as by the very nature of the project, we were trying to recruit people that in the main, were not online – online advertising was able to reach those using only their mobile phones to access e.g. social media, and advertising on social media used the approach of “do you know someone who needs support...” but this was not as effective as being able to talk to people, particularly when needing to overcome concerns about whether one was

“needy enough” to access the project, or “what’s the catch?” fears when offered free support.

- Providing support solely over the telephone and **being unable to support clients face-to-face** (due to Covid restrictions) was particularly challenging, both for the clients and the DCs.
- As the SO:Let’s Connect project grew, and secured the additional funding from Mental Health services, there was a need for increased recording systems within SO:Let’s Connect. **Moving to the new CRM part way through the project was a challenge** – as with any new tech system there were some teething troubles, and a balance to be struck given the DCs are all volunteers and having to learn a new system.
- **There were concerns as to whether the project was providing value for money** among some members of the SO18BLPC, given the level of committed investment but the low number of clients supported.

How can we use our learning to improve our delivery?

- **Adapt/develop recruitment methods:** Whilst £15,000 was initially committed by SO18BL to the SO:Let’s Connect project, thus far £5200 has been spent of this, mainly on hardware for the project, which means that there is some SO18BL funded hardware “ready and waiting” for future SO18BL referrals. SO18BL can now work on recruiting more clients to the SO:Let’s Connect project, as the SO18BL community Hub reopens and other projects are set up/restarted, allowing face to face conversations once more when we can more easily address reservations highlighted by potential clients. Follow up leaflet drives could be conducted, targeting e.g. charity shops, local food projects and so on. We could also utilise the videos we have of how the project benefits those involved, and show them at local events.
- **Continue to use feedback to adapt and improve delivery:** Good use has been made of feedback to improve delivery as the pilot project evolved. Some specific suggestions include: ensure clients who choose not to have a mentor / DC have follow-up from the project to check that they do not need support at a later stage and to gain feedback. This would also ensure that clients who choose not to have a DC, are still clear on who to contact in the event of any technical difficulties with equipment. Build in regular communication with clients to inform them of timescales or any delays with equipment being delivered to them, and make contingency plans when doing future IT system improvements to manage any delays getting new system up and running.
- **Build on the benefits of partnership working** to ensure a SO18BL legacy (or to ensure sustainability of SO18BL projects): Involvement in the SO:Let’s Connect project and the Measuring Change work has led to greater understanding among SO18BLPC members with regards to value for money measurements, qualitative and quantitative data and that low client numbers do not always represent a poor result.

It's also provided an important insight into partnership working, as opposed to SO18BL running things solely themselves or paying an organisation to deliver a specific piece of work. As SO18BL funding draws to a close in the next few years, and funding will have to be sought in order to continue specific projects, this will be valuable experience for the group.

- SO:Let's Connect is working to **source funding to cover a dedicated Project Manager administrator and other "core costs" (including tech support)** in order that the project can expand and support a wider client base. Costings have been calculated, thanks to the experience of the pilot projects, of a "per client" basis for future organisations that are wishing to buy support for a number of clients.

Emma's story

Emma is 37 years old and lives with her husband and 10-year-old son, who has special needs. She is completing foundation courses in Maths and English, but during lockdown, was finding this very hard to access as the remote learning system used by the college was not compatible with her mobile phone. When she mentioned this to a Big Local worker, we gave Emma the information about SO:Let's Connect, and she made contact with the project.

"It was really straightforward – I contacted SO:Let's Connect, and they explained everything over the phone, and were able to work out what equipment I needed. They lent me a laptop so that I could access my college courses more easily and allocated me a volunteer to support me in using the laptop if I needed it. It's also allowed me to maintain my exercise sessions whilst shielding".

Emma was a fairly confident internet user, already having email and social media accounts, and having used Zoom a little, but her mentor Chris was on hand if queries came up, or there were specific things she wanted to do online that she was less confident with.

"It's really good to know the support is there, and that I can just send my mentor a message if I need any help. Having the laptop has been amazing, as my son doesn't like using the telephone, but this means we can have Zoom calls with family, and my son was even able to continue his martial arts lessons remotely while shielding."

Emma told us that being able to continue with her college courses, improve her IT skills and maintain access with both classes for her and her son throughout the lockdowns when shielding, has really helped with her own confidence:

"Having the loan of this equipment has meant I have been able to sign up to be a Body Shop Consultant and earn some extra money, as well as joining the Skills Network, where I am now registered to do a SEND course online. I'm now determined to write my CV and look for some part time work. This a project I have recommended to others, and I would really be lost without now".

Annex 1 – Measuring Change questionnaire

“Before” questions asked to clients:

1. How did you find out about SO: Let’s Connect? <i>Prompts: Were you referred by someone? Another client? Worker?</i>				
2. What’s the reason for you accessing SO: Let’s Connect? <i>Prompts: What support / help do you need? What do you want to use digital devices for? What are the barriers for you in using digital devices? (Unsuitable kit, access to data, lack of confidence, worried about security / privacy issues, limited tech skills)</i>				
3. Do you have access to the internet for your personal use (not work-related)? Yes No, never had access Not now, but I have in the past				
4. What device do you mostly use to go online? <i>Prompts: Mobile phone, laptop, tablet</i>				
5. Overall, how confident do you feel using digital devices? Very confident Fairly confident Not very confident Not at all confident				
6. What do you use digital devices for at the moment? <i>Prompts: Connect with people, get health information, access services, do activities, bank, shop</i>				
7. How often do you connect with people using digital devices? <i>Prompts: Skype / zoom / Face Time, chat groups, support groups, emails, WhatsApp</i> Daily Weekly Monthly Never				
8. How often do you feel lonely? Often Some of the time Occasionally Hardly ever Never				
9. How often do you go online for health-related issues? <i>Prompts: find out about health issues, make a GP appointment</i>	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Never
10. How often do you do activities online? <i>Prompts: Listen to music, games/puzzles, read, exercise, attend faith services, blog</i>	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Never
11. How often do you do physical activities online? <i>Prompts: Exercise class, dance, yoga</i>	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Never
12. How often do you shop or bank online?	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Never

13. How often do you go online to study (or to help someone else to study)?	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Never
14. How often do you go online to look for work?	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Never

“After” questions asked of clients:

1. How well has SO: Let’s Connect met your needs? Very well Well A little Not at all				
2. What support have you received from SO: Let’s Connect? <i>Prompts: Borrowed kit, gained data, support from DC</i>				
3. Do you have access to the internet for your personal use (not work-related)? Yes No, never had access Not now, but I have in the past				
4. What device do you mostly use to go online? <i>Prompts: Mobile phone, laptop, tablet</i>				
5. Overall, how confident do you feel using digital devices? Very confident Fairly confident Not very confident Not at all confident				
6. What do you use digital devices for at the moment? <i>Prompts: Connect with people, get health information, access services, do activities, bank, shop</i>				
7. How often do you connect with people using digital devices? <i>Prompts: Skype / zoom / Face Time, chat groups, support groups, emails, WhatsApp</i> Daily Weekly Monthly Never				
8. How often do you feel lonely? Often Some of the time Occasionally Hardly ever Never 8 a) <i>If there is a change in the response since before the project, ask – Has SO Let’s Connect contributed to this change? If so, how?</i>				
9. How often do you go online for health-related issues? <i>Prompts: find out about health issues, make a GP appointment</i>	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Never
10. How often do you do activities online?	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Never

<i>Prompts: Listen to music, games/puzzles, read, exercise, attend faith services, blog</i>				
11. How often do you do physical activities online? <i>Prompts: Exercise class, dance, yoga</i>	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Never
12. How often do you shop or bank online?	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Never
13. How often do you go online to study (or to help someone else to study)?	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Never
14. How often do you go online to look for work?	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Never
15. What are you doing differently now as a result of getting support from SO Let's Connect? <i>Prompts: connecting with people more / joining support groups, finding out local information, doing new activities online, getting prescriptions, shopping, banking</i>				
16. What have you tried out online but decided not to continue to use / do? Why is this?				
17. What difference has getting support from SO: Let's Connect made to you?				
18. What has been the most useful part of SO: Let's Connect for you?				
19. What one change would you make to improve the project?				
20. Would you recommend SO: Let's Connect to someone else? Yes No Not sure				
21. What could we do to encourage other people to use SO: Let's Connect?				

Annex 2 – SO:Let’s Connect feedback from clients

Summary of information collected about people who contacted the project and why they got in touch

(Collated from the SO18 Big Local database)

10 people took part in the pilot - 9 women and 1 man. 2 other people who were referred did not take part as they were able to access equipment from a school.

How did you find out about SO:Let’s Connect?	Number of people
BL worker	3
Digital Connector	2
Local school	3
Local knowledge	1
Townhill Pals	1

Do you have access to the internet for personal use?	Number of people
I have access to the internet	5
I had access in the past but not now	3
I have never had access	2

How confident are you using digital devices?	Number of people
Very confident	4
Fairly confident	3
Not very confident	2
Not at all confident	1

What do you use digital devices for at the moment?	Number of people
Zoom	4
Email	2
Children’s school work	2
Activities	2
Access services	1
Facebook	1
College work	1
Shop / bank	1

I have never used IT. I’d like a laptop and someone to show me how to use it - to Zoom, shop and learn to knit. I have friends but because of Covid I can’t see anyone and feel extremely isolated.

I only have a phone and a very old laptop and my daughter can’t do her school work during lock down.

I tried Zoom a couple of times but the sound never worked.

I’m feeling panicky during the lock down and really isolated. Zoom and Facebook will connect me with friends.

My children need IT for school work. I also want to access the job centre, do on-line shopping and use video calling as I’m feeling isolated.

I need internet (data).

My family is shielding and we are extremely isolated. As well as needing a laptop to complete college work, it would mean my disabled son could do his judo lessons and we could Zoom with family.

My children are doing school work from home via a mobile phone – it's a nightmare.

I have been shielding – I would like to access adult-ed classes to fill my time.

I would like to get online and learn to shop, browse the internet and connect with friends. I also need to log into my Universal Credit account.

Summary of support received by project clients

Information was gathered from the SO18BL database, the SO:Let's Connect CRM (customer relationship management) database and conversations with clients.

Of the ten clients:

- Information about the type of help received was available for all ten clients
- Details about help offered was available for six people who were supported by a Digital Connector. Four clients received equipment/ internet data only and did not choose to have the support of a mentor. These clients did not have follow-up from the project and further information is not available (except for one client who was able to be contacted by phone for the evaluation). Details about the support offered and its impact was available from 7 clients in total.
- Conversations were held with five clients as part of 'measuring change'.

What help did you receive?	Number of people
Laptop / Chrome book	9
Dongle (access to data)	3
Support from a Digital Connector / volunteer mentor	6

What support was provided by the Digital Connector?

Clients were supported to:

- get online, use the keyboard, navigate and undertake searches
- use email, WhatsApp and Zoom
- save and send documents and photos in different formats
- complete and send homework
- use WhatsApp, do internet searches, and set up shopping
- problem solve e.g. improve sound; access cost-effective printing; rescue files from faulty equipment
- install / update software
- access data credit (from SO:Let's Connect and local school)
- receive free weekly meal deliveries.
- access Energise (to engage in physical exercise)

What difference did the support make to clients?

Clients were using the internet in diverse ways depending on their differing needs, interests and skills. All were doing things that they were unable to do before and while two people were currently using digital devices in limited ways, due to health issues, each person said that their needs were met very well by the project and all were keen to continue developing their skills and internet use.

Examples of what seven clients were **now** able to do include:

- Accessing and being able to use the internet for the first time
- Having reliable internet
- Connecting with people via Zoom and WhatsApp
- Completing school, college work, arts classes more easily and efficiently
- Starting a college course
- Get help with developing a CV
- Shop online
- Get health information and prescriptions
- Update information required to access welfare benefits
- Gain income from selling products online
- Do activities e.g. exercise classes, drawing, martial arts,
- Attend online events
- One person was hoping to help plan community activities online, one was exploring digital design and another was planning to look for work.

Impact on loneliness

Four people shared their experience of loneliness before and after accessing So: Let's Connect. Three of these said that they felt lonely less often after receiving support from the project and two people were clear that being more active digitally had contributed to this. One person had made new friends from joining on-line tours.

Clients' words

Having the internet means I can get help with writing a CV and I will be able to look for jobs. Also, my daughter loves using a drawing App.

I am still very keen to learn, and I love doing it. My mentor has been very helpful and I appreciate her persistence with communicating with me over these 6 months (when I've been unwell and in-and-out of hospital.)

The most useful thing has been having the laptop and getting support when I need it.

I'd suggest advertising it better as lots of people could benefit from the project – maybe distribute leaflets and put-up posters e.g. at the different food banks, free food shops, charity shops and schools.

Being able to connect with people and do fun arts projects has definitely helped with loneliness.

Before, I often felt lonely, but I don't now as I can study, do activities and connect regularly with people online.

It's helped us to survive. Being able to Zoom and see my mother and children face-face when talking to them is completely different.

It's enhanced and opened up new possibilities for me.

I'm happy that I now have reliable internet.

My only suggestion is to have better communication – I wasn't sure when I'd get the Chromebook but then I got a call out of the blue. Also, while I had no problem, it would have been good to have a follow-up contact in case there were any problems

ⁱ SO18 Big Local funded SCPA (Southampton Children's Play Association) to deliver play packs to families during holidays as Covid-19 lockdowns prevented the running of traditional playschemes.