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# **TIMEBANK RESEARCH REPORT: ONLINE SERVICES DURING COVID-19**

**FUNDED BY CATALYST AND THE  
NATIONAL LOTTERY COMMUNITY FUND  
COVID-19 DIGITAL RESPONSE  
DISCOVERY PROGRAMME**

## ABOUT OUR RESEARCH

For the last 5 years, we have run our Talking Together programme, providing almost 8000 people with free, informal, volunteer-led English sessions held in the community. This came to an end with the onset of Covid-19. When trialling online sessions, we found it challenging to engage learners in the same way and wanted to explore why this was and how we could support them to continue learning through the pandemic.

## WHAT WE DID

With guidance from Ayup, we undertook user research with our Talking Together delivery partners. We carried out phone interviews and online surveys with 12 of our partners from London and Birmingham about their experiences of digital since the Covid-19 pandemic began in March 2020.

## WHAT WE FOUND

- 80% of partners had started providing online services since March 2020.
- Zoom was the most popular platform, with Whatsapp also widely used – both are seen as more accessible to those with limited digital literacy.
- Demand is still there! Many of our partners reported that they had experienced increased interest in ESOL since the beginning of the pandemic, particularly from those who were looking for work.

## CHALLENGES

- Lack of digital literacy – this was mentioned by all partners. While most learners had a smartphone, many lacked the digital knowledge and skills to be able to attend virtual classes.
- Part of the value of informal ESOL sessions is that they are a social space where people can learn together and make friends; this atmosphere can be harder to recreate online.
- Lack of technology or inappropriate technology – for example, it's more challenging to access an online class on a small phone screen than a laptop. Another issue raised by multiple partners was lack of stable internet access and reliance on phone data if no wifi in the home. Some had devices at home but these were shared with other family members.
- Limited English language skills meant some learners struggled to understand how to log on to or navigate unfamiliar digital platforms (even if they had digital skills).
- Not having the personal space at home to find a quiet spot to attend classes.
- Reluctance to allow strangers to see inside their homes. Online lessons can feel more personal than a session in a public space.
- Learners not having time to attend - this was particularly true in the earlier days of the pandemic when many were home-schooling their children.
- For many partners, a lack of funding and of staff time and capacity made making the move to online services difficult.

# WHAT WE FOUND

## SUCCESSSES

- Around a third of partners had seen significant success with online delivery. All of these were London based partners, and most invested significant time at beginning of pandemic in teaching service users to use the technology they were using.
- Of these, all said that the challenges that had been there initially had lessened as learners grew confident with technology.
- Three partners commented that the benefit of offering services virtually is that you can reach learners anywhere, not just in your local area.
- Another benefit identified by partners was that it's easier for those with small children to attend virtual sessions as they don't need to worry about childcare. It also allows greater flexibility when learners don't have to factor in travel time.
- The partners who were most successful in delivering online services were those who got funding to provide tablets for learners with little tech and those partners also invested time in teaching the learners how to use the tech. And also those partners who are able to offer dedicated IT classes/sessions.

## HOWEVER...

- Multiple partners raised concerns that their most vulnerable service users, particularly those with the lowest levels of English, hadn't transitioned to online services. One commented that because of this, the move to online had 'increased inequalities'.
- Some partners had been keen to offer tech support to their service users to enable them to access online services but either didn't have the staff capacity to offer this support or found it challenging to provide tech support remotely where Covid-19 restrictions prevented any face to face interactions.
- While we interviewed partners that work with people from a range of backgrounds, we recognise that with our small sample size, we were not able to identify if there were clear patterns in challenges experienced by particular demographic groups.

## WHAT WE'LL DO NEXT:

“If you want to get more women on bikes, you don't spend millions on a cycling infrastructure – you buy the women bikes and teach them to ride in the places they live.”

- Reframe our approach to digital. As in the quote above from one of our delivery partners, our research has shown that the answer lies not necessarily in a digital solution but in investing time and money into improving our participants digital skills.
- We may look to train volunteers to act as digital ambassadors/champions in local communities.
- We hope to return at some point to face to face delivery!
- Find out more in TimeBank Project Director Andy Forster's blog, linked below.

A thank you to Ayup and the Discovery programme for helping us to reflect on the services we provide, think about how we can make them more user-led, and for teaching us best practice for carrying out user research.



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<https://timebank.org.uk/the-answer-to-getting-our-learners-online-bicycles/>