

Addressing Digital Inequalities Within the Armenian Community By the Centre for Armenian Information and Advice (CAIA)

The Centre for Armenian Information and Advice (CAIA) is the principal focus for the welfare and educational needs of over 20,000 Armenians scattered across the United Kingdom. Annually over 13,000 applicants and visitors benefit from our various activities such as advice, library, health advocacy services, elders lunch club, lectures, youth club, English classes and many more. The centre thrives from a large number of memberships who often express their gratitude for the continuous support and services provided by CAIA.

CAIA is aware that, despite the transformative impact of technology on society, many Armenians in the UK remain digitally excluded. This matters as those who are excluded digitally are also far more likely to be disadvantaged, according to many other social and economic measures. The management of CAIA values and appreciates the importance of technological knowledge and know how. For this reason, they continually explore various means and ways to facilitate training to the members.

CAIA was an early subscriber with the *UK Online Centres*, now known as the *Good Things Foundation*, which enabled it to gain a small grant to purchase several laptops/PCs and pay a tutor for a few months. That was back in 2014 which enabled us to register and teach basics to 80 people, including keyboard, using mouse, etc. However, everything stopped once the funding dried up but we did learn a great deal, including the fact that it was a very time-consuming process to teach/upskill IT to people who in addition to illiteracy and language barriers, had issues with Wi-Fi and broadband connectivity/affordability, require on going technical support and are also at risk to identity theft, security, etc. In recent months, CAIA has taken part in a new *Good Things Foundation* project called **"Make it Click"**. The project targets people of working age and will support 30+ people to help them improve employability prospects and generally upskill them.

During the current Corona Virus Pandemic lockdown, the inequalities experienced by our community due to digital exclusion have become even more acute/amplified. Furthermore, to promote access to digital skills and connectivity for the elderly, people with disabilities, carers, jobless, migrants and refugees with limited knowledge of the English language, we have the premises and IT equipment/10 laptops to achieve this. To further expand our IT services, CAIA secured a successful grant from the *National Lottery Reaching Communities* fund to employ a part time digital inclusion project coordinator who started this month.

Key project objectives include:

- Engage/target with socially isolated Armenians and those connected to them who are digitally excluded and lack basic IT skills via CAIA advice worker and others.
- Offer them free digital skills assistance in using either a computer, laptop, tablet device or smartphone from their own home including access to free online courses. This includes 1-2-1 support and training and group sessions.
- Also, free technical support either over the phone, by email or text message and even by video call.
- Provide volunteering/work placement experience as progression route to increase use/access to develop digital skills and their online connectivity

The projects will be based at CAIA's Hayashen Community Centre at 105 Mill Hill Road. Acton, W3 8JF London. The venue is fully accessible and close to a major Underground Tube Station.

Due to COVID19 pandemic, as soon as "Lockdown" restrictions were imposed by Government, CAIA managed and facilitated contact with members and staff through virtual connectivity. So that the community would never feel excluded and denied. Restructuring centres' physically based holistic activities online was a major challenge and not ideal to transferred online but we've done well under the circumstances.

For example, throughout the pandemic we've continue to deliver essential services such as:

- **Advisory & Information Services** 5 days a week (not face to face but utilising phone/social media apps)
- **Health & Care services** A weekly informal drop-in online session has taken place, overseen by CAIA's qualified counsellor, for the isolated who are having problems coping. This is a weekly safe space for people to talk/offer mutual support and smile during this difficult time.
- **Armenian Community Pre-school Group**
Supervised by play worker weekly online sessions operating for under 5-year olds to learn/sing/keep spirits high, reduce anxiety and generally have fun (see photo)
- **Elders lunch club/Carers Respite service**
Delivering free food weekly to the most vulnerable, 25 on average across West London, and making on average 30 befriending phone calls weekly thanks to both staff and volunteers
- **Organisationally** Staff and Board meetings have been held as normal throughout via WhatsApp and video conferencing to ensure lines of communication, support and supervision have been maintained, including one annual appraisal carried out on virtually.



CAIA is an outwards looking organisation in many ways, including:

- Active in *the Ealing Together*, a collaboration between local community and voluntary groups, Ealing Council, resident associations and concerned residents that want to help.
- Ealing Advice Forum which CAIA leads. EAF endeavours to be the point of contact for information, consultation and communication on all advice and information issues that are relevant and important to the advice and information providers in the borough. It meets six times a year and in May held a well-attended online meeting for the first time.

Digital exclusion is regularly discussed and raised at both these forums to provide a voice to those who are voiceless and unable to access their rights because everything is now going digital. Digital exclusion is the illiteracy of the 21st century.

Recommendation to overcome Digital Exclusion:

- **Teaching & Training courses:**
Internet use requires a certain level of literacy and intellectual competence. Some people whose first language is not English but are bilingual/literate and are educated can relatively easier to overcome digital barriers but for example older people who have arrived in the UK much later in their lives are less motivated to participate in digital training courses. Older people may have different or specific limited purposes in mind to learn and gain digital knowledge. One of the reasons could be them using skype, messenger or sharing photographs/video with friends and relatives.
Any learning process is effective if it is motivated.
Developing digital skills broadens people's minds and opportunities in every aspect of their lives, such as **educational, economic and cultural**. So, they could be motivated to learn more digital tools, to be able to use them not only for communication, but also for learning languages, doing online shopping and online banking visiting museums and galleries, attending cultural events (Armenian Festivals, Ceremonies), participating at the conferences, watching news, movies and listening to music.
In contrast, those with greater level of literacy and education may have different motivation in overcoming digital exclusion. Therefore, when designing/planning any form of IT/digital training, an organisation should be aware of the both the learners state of mind as well as their existing skills sets.

- Engaging BMER people in digital learning:
Arrange IT/ digital classes in familiar settings such as community centres where they are already known and trust those who are seeking to teach them digital skills. Engaging them will also be easier because they may already be using other services of those community centres such as advisory services, childcare provision and ESOL.
As described above, it may be advisable to arrange group courses based on the abilities and the expectations of the potential learners. This will ensure the classes operating more smoothly and reduce potential dropout rates because sometimes learners can become frustrated/held back by the uneven learning progress of their peers.
- To Combat loneliness and social exclusion:
Promoting and explaining the practical benefits of digital skills to the most marginalized such as those whose first language is not English, have suffered historically, and have had less educational opportunities and/or are disadvantaged due to other factors is a major challenge.

Therefore, every effort should be made to explain the importance of digital inclusion to them in their own language. Hence the importance of tutors being multilingual and share empathy with the learner's culture, background and circumstances.

Most obviously for example older people/most socially excluded need to be explained and supported that gaining digital communication skills is part of a journey to address their social, economically, cultural exclusion from the host society they live in.
Various research has made it clear that internet use is not an answer to improve all older people's quality of life, but the internet can affect in some older people in certain situations helping them to connect to the outside world, gain social support and engage in activities and interests.

- Training and teaching Internet privacy and safety:
Confidentially, data protection and internet privacy are paramount for people who have experienced persecution, discrimination and violence by authorities prior to arriving in the UK. They generally have great reservations in disclosing private information to anyone.
Overcoming these fears when teaching about digital skills such as filling online forms, banking/shopping/DWP or using NHS on line represent major challenges. The situation is further compounded because as refugees/migrants or older people/Carers with low level of English, who are unfamiliar to British society they are unprepared for the overwhelming role the internet now plays in every aspect of managing/administering day to day living and as such as they are more susceptible to various risks, scams and fraud.
Hence the importance of building up their confidence, reassurances that the internet can be a positive tool as long as some basic measures are taken to safeguard personal data.
- Financial barriers
The elderly/low income/newly arrived BAM people often find it complicated or expensive to acquire an internet provider. To attend classes, it may require travel or one to one assistance. Classes could be challenging and overwhelming for those subsisting on low incomes, older people with caring duties, uncertain immigration status, women with young children with little time and a lot of apprehension about this all-encompassing/dominant new technology.

Some of these challenges could be overcome by the following good practice:

- How digital skills are designed and delivered to learners. This can only be done and delivered based on the specific needs/circumstances of learners (i.e. bespoke including 1-2-1 sessions)
- Explain in mother tongue the overview of the course
- Build trust by answering questions and concerns to overcome fears
- Reimburse traveling costs and child care to encourage learners' attendance