SECTION 2 : LEARNINGS

Intro

PACT's Digital Inclusion Project began in early April, shortly after lockdown was introduced. Pact, is a Southwark-based community project, under Citizens UK, that is focused on tackling social isolation experienced by many families in the area. Traditionally, the organisation promotes peer support and community engagement through regular group activities. The pandemic forced PACT to move many of its services online and it quickly became clear that many of the parents were not able to join in because they either did not have any or enough devices, internet connection or digital knowledge. This project is ongoing.

What we planned for

During lockdown a number of services moved online, including the group sessions run by PACT. Once appreciating the challenge of getting online for many families, we planned this project in response to the initial conversations we had with parents and the

then-limited knowledge and understanding we had of the situation. Here is the basis of our original approach:

- A Covid-19 response that provides digital access to families so they could continue accessing PACT's services through devices, internet and digital support.
- All responses were based on a needs-based audit to be carried by our team of Action Researchers over the phone. Action Researchers are trained members of our community using a prepared questionnaire to guide their conversations and collect data.
- The list of families we contacted first was decided by a team decision on who the most 'at risk' were during the pandemic. This was based on the many personal relationships the PACT team has with our community.
- We thought it would take one month to complete these calls.
- Allocation of devices and wi-fi was based on criteria established together as a team. Devices are only lent to families with children about 4 years old, who would get a tablet and a chromebook if they were about 14 years old. Wi-Fi to those that could not get online, not just a slower internet speed.
- These devices would be lent out to families for 3 months and reviewed.
- Parents that had difficulty using online services could be referred to digital support provided by 'Digital Champion' volunteers.

What we have now

- A listening campaign available in two languages: Spanish and English. Carried out by either Spanish or English-speaking Action Researchers.
- This listening campaign asks specific questions about digital needs and barriers. It also gives space for individuals to talk about other challenges during lockdown.
- We have a weekly committee meeting where we unanimously agree on any actions related to the audit, there are 3 of us on this call so we can get a majority agreement.
- We set-up all devices before handing them out with apps downloaded and new e-mail addresses created.
- We provide devices and internet either in person or by delivery with a 'Welcome Pack' that has additional information, and we text login details to recipients.
- A team of 5 Digital Champion Volunteers are providing one-to-one digital support over the phone to parents both to help get them started with their devices, but also for support in accessing other services.

- Any concerns with food, education, health (mental and physical) are addressed with a check-in call and a referral or additional support if relevant.
- We are currently working with a Spanish-speaking researcher to develop a buddy system for our Latin American community to support each other online.
- Important to note that along this journey we have made numerous connections with other organisations and networks. From charities devoted to tackling digital exclusion, foundations and of course, other local community groups providing essential support during lockdown.

What we have learned / What is important
- Digital exclusion is certainly not new, however the pandemic has both highlighted and exasperated it.
- While we gain a better understanding of our situation over time, it is also changing. It is therefore important we reflect and share learnings at each stage.
- Digital exclusion is multi-faceted and complex. We are dealing with multi-disadvantages that are entangled.
- Internal factors can be a barrier to inclusion. Insecurity and a lack of confidence can form emotional obstacles for parents.
- The project requires a lot more resources and time than we thought, it is still on-going. This is down to factors including: the amount of data we are dealing with, the detail we are assessing, applying criteria as well as making referrals all within a small team with already limited capacity.
- Language is a barrier, and is one of the greatest challenges in our community. This not only affects the detail provided during the phonecalls, but also the ability to get parents set up with digital support
- There is a great spectrum of digital abilities that we need to cater for and this makes digital support more complicated.
- Not all schools provide the same digital support, which demonstrates the importance of postcodes and how they determine the level of support you recieve.
- Be cautiously ambitious. We are so proud of the work we are doing, however we were not prepared for the level of needs during this pandemic and managing these as a small team has been overwhelming.
- A renewed appreciation, and excitement in providing face-to-face support.
- Having young children often makes the challenges even greater, as it is harder to find a moment to engage and learn.

What we want for the future

- We want to provide ongoing support for all our volunteers and Action Researchers. This includes supporting their mental health and wellbeing, reflecting on practices and including them in updates and decision-making.
- It is important that parents with lived experience, from our community, participate directly in the change we want to see whilst they gain valuable skills and support.
- In line with our organization's values on leadership from the community we want parents from the PACT community to lead Digital Champion sessions and support.
- Once everyone is set up on Zoom, we can try holding group sessions with different themes / areas of interest as well as creating useful resources with parents like video tutorials or guides.
- For parents to feel confident, safe, empowered and independent when getting online, both when supporting their children and themselves. This includes promoting a healthy balance with kids and screen-time.
- To advocate for Digital Inclusion through strategic campaigning, not just in access to devices and the internet, but participation in the development of the digital world.