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Digital accessibility for voluntary and community sector organisations delivering services to people with learning disabilities and/or autistic people

Research briefing

May 2025

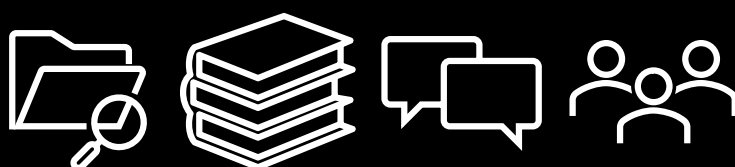
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Background

During the Covid-19 pandemic there was a significant rise in health and care services delivering services remotely, including by voluntary and community sector organisations (VCSOs) to adults with learning disabilities and/or autistic people. However, there was not enough research evidence of how different technologies are used, what works well or not well, for whom, and in what circumstances to support the diverse needs of adults with learning disabilities and/or autistic people.

To address this evidence gap, Leeds Beckett University carried out a participatory realist review in partnership with 100% Digital Leeds, Pyramid and the Autism and Learning Disabilities Digital Inclusion Network (ALaDDIN) to explore how VCSOs can appropriately use digital technologies alongside or instead of in-person activity (hybrid delivery) to provide social care services to different adults with learning disabilities and/or autistic people.

Methods



This briefing is based on the findings of the participatory realist review. The research involved:

- Five workshop and focus group discussions with people with learning disabilities and/or autistic people and representatives from VCSOs who worked with them,
- A comprehensive review of relevant published research, guidance and policy, and
- A deliberative hearing event to bring together findings from research and lived experience

Results

Everyone has the right to choose how they engage with the digital world!

The workshop discussions and preliminary literature review produced 13 areas of interest that we explored in the realist review. The review included 141 articles in total and, following our discussions of the findings with service deliverers and users at the deliberative hearing event, led to six top tips for VCSOs using digital technology for delivering services to people with learning disabilities and/or autistic people:

1. Don't assume digital is the answer for everyone

There's evidence that digital technologies can be used to support people with learning disabilities and/or autistic people with social skills, health and employment. But only if it is used correctly and in the right setting.

Our review found:

STRONG evidence from one low quality, nine moderate quality and 28 good quality research studies and one non-research paper that access to digital provision improves communication opportunities and social skills for people with learning disabilities and/or autistic people.

STRONG evidence from 10 good quality and five moderate quality research studies, and one non-research paper, that digital provision can improve wellbeing and quality of life.

STRONG evidence from five moderate quality and 26 good quality research studies that access to digital improves independence, life skills, agency and choice.

STRONG evidence from ten good quality, one moderate quality and two low quality research studies that digital provision improves cognitive skills and skills for learning.

STRONG evidence from 7 good quality and three low quality research studies that access to digital improves digital skills.

STRONG evidence from one low quality, seven good quality, and two moderate quality research studies that access to digital improves skills for employment

STRONG evidence from 17 good quality and three moderate quality studies that digital provision can improve physical and mental health and access to health services.

Challenges included:

- Safeguarding concerns (STRONG evidence from one moderate quality and 8 good quality studies)
- Additional support needed (STRONG evidence from 4 good quality studies)
- Lack of access (MODERATE evidence from one moderate quality and two good quality studies)
- Negative experience/ not enjoying digital provision (MODERATE evidence from 2 good quality and one moderate quality studies)
- Misinformation (one good quality study)

2. Give people a choice

Digital should not be the default option. It should be what works well for the people and organisations involved.

Our workshops and deliberative hearing found that there were good and bad experiences of digital provision – in some circumstances and for some people providing online services meant that more people could access them as they didn't have to travel. On the other hand, many people preferred to meet face to face, although they might use digital devices to help them get there or while they were together, to play games, or produce creative art. Some service users and organisations providing services felt more confident using digital devices and tools than others.

In our review we found: three good quality and one moderate quality study that having a choice about how much and in what ways to engage with digital provision was important to service users with learning disabilities and/or autistic people. One study reported that people with learning disabilities found social networking sites, email, video-conferencing, blogs, websites and text creation programmes easy to use, but they found spreadsheets, cloud storage systems, video and image editing programmes and presentation production difficult to use.

3. Personalise the experience

Make sure technology fits the person – and also the organisation. Do not assume what people need – offer alternatives if they are not comfortable.

As well as giving people a choice about whether they engage with digital service provision, participants at our workshops and deliberative hearings told us that it was often important to have support in the form of a key worker to discuss with service users what digital options might work best for them, what they would enjoy, and what support they might need to access digital provision.

Our review found **STRONG** evidence from one moderate quality and six good quality studies that lack of digital infrastructure and staff digital skills results in a lack of access to digital provision for their service users. Support for organisations can include design of digital platforms and supply of digital devices as well as digital skills and safety training for staff.

A report by the Tinder Foundation on improving health literacy for people with disabilities (including learning disabilities) recommends basic digital skills training alongside appropriate infrastructure, to enable people to engage with services effectively.

The Good Things Foundation has a range of resources for organisations to improve digital inclusion for everyone, including people with disabilities.

4. Consider 'hybrid' delivery

Hybrid can mean different things. Virtual and in-person options can be blended. Or use technology in face to face settings in valuable ways.

Our review found a wealth of examples of 'hybrid' delivery – from digital resources to help people to develop their social skills, to apps that help them to plan a journey, use public transport, go shopping, prepare food and support them with skills in the workplace.

Examples from our deliberative hearings and our workshops included using tablets or whiteboards during in-person meetings to create art and music, teaching people how to use their own digital tools and devices in an in-person setting, coaching people online or face-to-face, and using digital and video technology to support physical activity such as dance and movement to music.

5. Support goes beyond just tech training

Teach safe usage – and help people get the most out of technology. Parents and carers might also need help getting used to technology so that they can then help the people they support.

Our workshops with service users and deliverers found that safeguarding was a concern for organisations and for parents and carers of people with learning disabilities and/or autism, and that lack of resources and skills meant this often led to restricting their access to digital technology. But people with learning disabilities and/or autistic people, and the VCSO that supported them, were clear that digital technology was important for supporting people's life skills and indeed their human rights to develop independence and a private life.

One part of the solution to this problem is providing clear guidance, training and support to people with learning disabilities and autistic people and to the people who support them, so they are more confident and feel safe using digital tech.

Our review found:

STRONG evidence from 6 good quality studies that supporters of people with learning disabilities and/or autistic people have negative perceptions of the safety of digital tech.

STRONG evidence from 6 good quality studies that supporters of people with learning disabilities and/or autistic people would like more training in how to support them to use tech safely.

STRONG evidence from five good quality studies that training supporters in online safety can lead to better and safer digital access, and digital inclusion.

6. Involve service users in the design process

Work with autistic people and those with learning disabilities to shape tech-enabled services. Consider language use, visuals and technology delivery. Support them in engaging in the co-design process. Listen to their ideas, so the technology delivers what they want and need.

Our review found:

STRONG evidence from one moderate quality and five good quality research studies, and one non-research paper, that co-design is associated with better service delivery in terms of accessibility, suitability and acceptability.

MODERATE evidence from one moderate quality and one good quality research papers that the process of co-design needs to be supported, with participants having a clearly defined role.

PROMISING evidence from one good quality research study and two non-research papers that co-creation is associated with a positive impact on wellbeing.

PROMISING evidence from one good quality research study that the process of co-creation is associated with improved digital and social skills for participants.

This briefing was produced by the Centre for Health Promotion Research, School of Health, Leeds Beckett University, in partnership with Pyramid and 100% Digital Leeds, and the ALaDDIN Consultation Group.

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