Communities Connected:
Digital resources for organisations working online

locality
the power of community

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Space to Connect was a partnership between the **Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)** and Co-op's charity, the **Co-op Foundation**, to unlock the potential of community spaces where people can connect and co-operate. Between 2019 and 2021, 57 community organisations received grants totalling £1.6 million to help build social connections, address local challenges like loneliness or access to services, and expand activities.

Leeds Beckett University and **Locality** were the Space to Connect evaluation partners. The experience of Space to Connect projects, the ambitions of the funders and the learning from the programme is captured in a variety of tools, reports and briefings available at **leedsbeckett.ac.uk/spacetoconnect.**

Authors

Leeds Beckett University:
Kris Southby, Mark Gamsu, Charlotte Freeman

New Philanthropy Capital:
Thomas Abrams

Contributors

Roz Davies, mHabitat
Dan Sutch, CAST
Prof. Simeon Yates, University of Liverpool
Alice Mathers & **Emma Stone**,
Good Things Foundation
Meena Bharadwa, Locality

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Introduction

Technology is increasingly reshaping modern life and 'digital' is becoming an essential part of everyday living. This toolkit aims to help voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations navigate and use the different platforms to connect and support communities. We have included a section that covers the policy context around digital. This might be useful when making the case for more digital resources in VCS organisations.

This toolkit covers:

1 The challenges associated with using digital

2 Some practical advice and tips about working digitally

3 The policy context around digital

Two key points:

- **Digital technology is not a replacement for face-to-face or in-person contact.** Many people and organisations may not want to engage digitally or they may not have the right equipment or skills. More importantly, some conversations just work better face-to-face.

- **Digital technology offers a set of tools that can be used as a way of connecting people when face-to-face contact isn't possible or desirable.** Importantly, they can also be changed or adapted to context and to suit the needs and preferences of different groups of people. The range of digital tools and platforms is developing very quickly. However, it is important that digital solutions are used in way that provides added value to face to face work – they are not an end in themselves.

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Further information can be found in the list of key documents on **page 21** and the links embedded in the text. Throughout this guide you will see numbers in brackets e.g **(1)** these relate to page 21. Information about how this briefing was pulled together can also be found on **page 21 - Fig 1**.

What do we mean by 'digital'?

'Digital' and 'digital technology' are vague terms, used to mean various things connected to computing or the internet. This includes everything from individual computer programmes social media to artificial intelligence (AI)-powered 'chatbots'.

In this briefing we are using 'digital' as an umbrella term for any activity or work that uses a computer. There is a focus on digital technologies that are 'online' or 'remote', using the internet to connect people and organisations.

1.

The challenges

In this section:

1a. What is digital exclusion?

As things stand, not everyone has equal digital access. Some individuals and groups may not have the right access or equipment, skills, confidence, or motivation; they might not be in an environment that supports digital access; services might not be set up in a way that best enables their access; or it might be a combination of all three. This is known as 'digital exclusion' (1) and it is more likely to happen to people and communities already experiencing marginalisation and exclusion – people who are older, poorer, from racialised communities, living in deprived communities, who have a disability or long term health condition, or who have fewer qualifications (2).

The gap between those with and without access is called the 'digital divide' (5) and unless it is reduced individuals and whole communities risk further marginalisation and poorer health (18). Covid-19 has already compounded these issues. The economic impact means that many more people may simply not be able to afford to get online, while the closure of places with free public Wi-Fi, such as cafes and libraries, has cut people off from the opportunities they previously had (4, 5, 17).

VCS organisations too – just like the communities they serve – can experience digital exclusion. They may be cut off from infrastructure, such as high-speed broadband and reliable Wi-Fi (9), or staff and volunteers may themselves not have the skills and confidence to use digital tools. The Cabinet Office has recognised that organisational readiness to use digital can vary greatly and that reaching 'digital maturity' may not have been a priority until the pandemic hit (10).

1b.

Addressing digital exclusion

Efforts to address digital exclusion have been broadly split between **a)** helping people and organisations access the right tools/equipment and **b)** improving their skills, confidence, and motivation.

Examples of initiatives to improve access include: the **Everyone Connected** campaign to issue donated internet-enabled devices to community organisations; the **Gigabit Broadband Voucher** scheme for rural businesses; **NHS Digital's plan** to offer greater coverage of free, secure public WI-FI on NHS property **(3)**; and the **Broadband Delivery UK** programme to rollout super-fast broadband.

People's skills, confidence and motivation is often called their 'digital literacy'. The **Civil Society Strategy (10)** acknowledges the need to improve digital literacy, particularly in groups at risk of digital exclusion. For example, upskilling staff through digital skills training is a way of increasing their confidence and the likelihood that they will promote digital tools and services with service users **(3, 12)**. DCMS has **said** that it is the government's role to set the framework for developing digital skills for both people and organisations **(1)**.

More needs to be done to address the multiple interlinked causes of digital exclusion:

● While removing individual barriers is important, we need to go beyond what people and communities don't have (e.g. skills, resources) and recognise that services should reflect individuals' and communities' preferences. Lots of people (but not all) already have very digitally rich lives – just think of the number of people who have a mobile phone or the number of users on Facebook – but service delivery is not aligned to their needs.

● If we are to support people to use digital, we need to help them to do it safely, including understanding privacy and data security.

● To date, very little attention has gone into addressing the social conditions in which people live that cause digital exclusion.

● Not everyone will be able to access digital and some services – particularly those based on trust and personal relationships – may just work better in the real world. So, how does digital best complement these services as part of a blended provision?

● Finally, more resources are needed. Emergency provisions to help organisations provide training or devices for staff and volunteers were valuable in the initial response to Covid-19 **(6, 17)**, although the sustainability of this support is uncertain. The **All-Party Parliamentary Group on Digital Skills** and the **House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport Committee** have called on the government to provide further funding for training, to provide infrastructure, and a clear direction and commitment to move the entire population online **(6, 16)**. But this has not yet translated into any specific support or policy.

2.

Guidance on how to use digital

This section provides some practical advice and tips about how VCS groups can use digital technologies to connect and support people. Links are provided to further sources of support and information.

More information is available in **this document** that has been produced by New Philanthropy Capital (NPC).

In this section:

2a.

What do service users need?

Digital activities and interventions can be effective at connecting and supporting people and most interventions to connect and support people and communities can be adapted to be delivered digitally. This includes creative projects, befriending, online counselling and therapy, peer-support, and online communities.

Some groups of people, such as those with autism, may prefer digital activities over and above those in the real world. However, digital activities are not for everyone. There are risks that digital activities may **exacerbate a sense of social isolation** if they are not appropriate to service users' needs and preferences.

VCS groups embraced digital quickly and effectively to keep supporting individuals and communities in response to Covid-19 restrictions. Moving forward it will be important to think more strategically about how digital activities are delivered and how they are best used alongside face-to-face activities. Taking the time to step back can be a daunting task, particularly when pressure is higher than usual across the sector.

Remember, your digital offer can also change over time to suit service users' changing needs, skills and preferences.

It is important that a digital offer is designed for and with community members as much as possible. This will help ensure that your offer is useful and accessible, matching their preferences and capabilities. You might want to do some research into your communities needs before involving them in the design, testing, and implementation of your digital offer. **This blog from The Catalyst** suggests a few ways of engaging with users remotely.

CAST's **Digital Design Principles** offer some practical steps for breaking down the planning process into smaller chunks — they include:

1   **Start with user needs:** more on this below.

2   **Understand what's out there first:** there is no need to duplicate if the system or resource you are looking for already exists.

3   **Take small steps and learn as you go:** you won't get things right the first time, and that is normal. It is best to start with a small test and build from there.

4   **Be inclusive:** make sure your service is accessible to your users. You can read more on this in the Digital Inclusion section

5   **Collaborate and build partnerships:** now more than ever, it is incredibly important to share learning and to work across the sector to solve common issues.

2b.

Choosing the right platform

There are a variety of digital tools and platforms available. Some are better suited to different activities and may suit different users better than others. Again, it is important to think about the needs and preferences of your users and what it is you are trying to achieve.

Popular options for video conferencing software are WhatsApp, Skype, Zoom, MS Teams, and Google Hangouts. A brief assessment of different formats is available on pages 9-10 of **NPC's guidance**.

There are plenty of options for online message chats – **this comparison of messaging platforms** is a useful starting point.

This digital toolkit also provides a useful breakdown of online platforms with other functions such as note taking, project management tools, and scheduling tools.

2c.

Addressing barriers

Some people and communities experience barriers to digital access. This is 'digital exclusion'. Below are some tips on how to address these by providing access to equipment, improving skills and confidence, improving accessibility, and helping people access digital safely.

Access to equipment

There are an increasing number of organisations and schemes helping people access the equipment they need. Some examples are:

- **Everyone Connected** – through local 'Online Centres' they distribute donated tablets, smartphones, laptops, dongles, and mobile hotspots to UK households who currently don't have internet access.

- The **Clothworkers' Emergency Capital programme** provides small capital grants (up to £5,000) for non-London based organisations with an income under £2m, 'to adapt or increase services in response to the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic'.

- **The London Community Response Fund** is making grants (up to £50,000) to London-based organisations. There are two funding streams available – a smaller fund for those meeting the immediate needs of their communities, 'from food and essentials, to equipment and additional short-term staff costs', and a larger fund for those having to completely adapt their delivery model, including those who are moving to digital delivery.

- Organisations such as **Turn2Us** provide comprehensive information about eligibility for benefits and charitable grants for individuals who are facing difficulties accessing online services due to financial hardship.

Increasing skills, confidence and knowledge

Developing skills is key to building confidence in getting online. Some free online resources available include:

- **Learn My Way,** a website offering free online courses to develop digital skills and learn how to use the internet.

- **BT's Skills for Tomorrow** courses, which again offers a range of content to teach digital skills to users, ranging from basic functions such as how to use email, to more advanced topics such as coding.

- Tutorials and guides on various tools and platforms including **making video calls** from different devices, using **FaceTime**, using **Skype**, using **WhatsApp**, setting up and using **webcams**, and using Facebook and **Facebook Messenger**.

- Practical guidance and information on downloading apps for both **iPhone** and **Android** devices.

Improving accessibility and user experience

Some key points are:

- Be encouraging and allow users enough time to feel comfortable using technology.

- If possible, have users who have benefitted from using digital services share their experience.

- Be patient and make sure those struggling to get online are rewarded with a positive experience that increases their confidence.

- It is important that any instructions shared are clear, simple and jargon-free.

Some community groups have already produced **guides for Zoom in a variety of languages**.

Good Things Foundation gives several recommendations for helping people with a learning disability get online, including providing paper copies of information with clear images and diagrams, which could be posted to individuals.

This report from the Good Things Foundation provides information on engaging older people in digital.

AbilityNet provide information on how to make adjustments to laptops and other devices to be more accessible. They usually run a free home visiting service and have converted this to an online service, so people with disabilities can get support for getting online safely.

Concerns about online safety

For new users, digital services and being online can seem a scary and unsafe place. There are a variety of resources online designed to increase awareness of good internet safety practices and make people feel safe getting online:

- **SafeSurfing** provides information on internet safety specifically targeted at people with learning disabilities.

- **ThinkUKnow** has internet safety advice aimed at children.

- **Age UK's** information on online safety, targeted at older people.

- Digital Unite's **general guide** to online safety and **email safety tips**.

2d.

Safeguarding and staying safe online

Safeguarding procedures will need adaptations to cover digital activities. A specific section in your safeguarding procedures covering moving to online provision may be necessary. Creating a risk assessment specific to digital activities can be a useful way to identify and manage risks. London Youth have created a helpful template based on using Zoom with young people that can be adapted to suit other digital activities.

Check in with staff to make sure they understand and are comfortable with your digital safeguarding procedures, including knowing how to deal with safeguarding issues. Make sure staff and service users are clear on the boundaries of your digital provision.

As with any in-person delivery, if you are collecting users' personal data during your digital activities, this needs to be stored securely. This usually means that files are encrypted and need a password for access. You should also ensure that your users are aware of, and consent to, having their personal data collected. **YotiSign** is an online tool for collecting electronic signatures, which can also be used for getting parental/guardian consent.

Some top tips to support safeguarding are below. Some more general tips for staff and volunteers running online sessions is provided on page 14 of **NPC's guidance**.

● Enable security features that come pre-set on most digital platforms, set passwords for video calls, and enable a 'waiting room' feature to check the identity of anyone joining an online call before letting them in.

● Ensure online conversations are moderated and understand reporting and blocking procedures of any online platforms you are using.

● Be mindful of platforms like WhatsApp where all members of the group can access phone numbers. Make sure users understand the risks before agreeing to use a certain platform, and that they know how to leave a group or block users if required.

● Ensure that you have a reporting procedure in place in case of a security breach that might compromise users' information.

● It is important that staff use work accounts rather than personal accounts to communicate with users—for example, you should create an organisational Facebook account rather than staff message users from personal accounts.

● Check the age-restrictions, and appropriateness, of any platforms you are using to communicate with children or young people—for example, Facebook can only be used by young people aged 13+.

The NSPCC provides useful advice about types and signs of online abuse and provide resources on what to do if a disclosure is made. The information is specific to children and young people but could also relevant to other vulnerable groups.
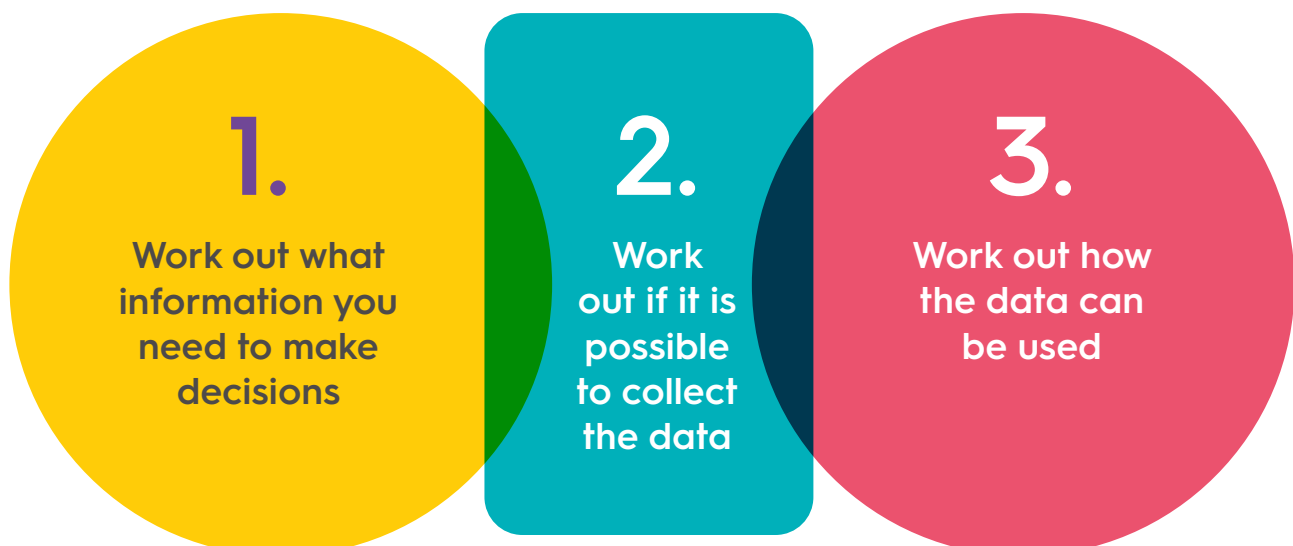
2e.

Measuring and evaluating the effectiveness of digital interventions

During the initial rush to digital as a result of Covid-19, traditional impact measurement approaches may not have been possible or suitable.

As you adjust to new ways of working and begin to think more systematically about incorporating digital alongside face-to-face activities, you might be thinking about how best to evaluate these activities.

NPC's guide suggest 3 steps for digital evaluation that can support ongoing processes of monitoring and evaluation and can help you adapt your services in a fast-changing environment. It might be helpful to make these cycles very short, so that data can be gathered and learning implemented quickly.

More details of this step-by-step process can be found .

1.
Work out what information you need to make decisions

2.
Work out if it is possible to collect the data

3.
Work out how the data can be used

3.

The policy context

In this section:

3a.

The growing importance of digital

The government has been talking about and promoting digital for a number of years and the policy landscape is clearly pointing towards a desire for greater engagement with digital and online tools and services across all sectors.

- The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has produced policy papers on **digital skills and inclusion** **(1)** and on the **role of digital in tackling loneliness** **(11)**.

- The NHS's **Long Term Plan** commits to increasing the amount of support provided online **(12)**

- The Cabinet Office's **Civil Society Strategy** promotes developing digital skills and resources to help tackle complex societal issues, such as loneliness **(10)**.

- Greater use and integration of digital has been put forward as part of a new '**social covenant**' by the MP Danny Kruger **(13)**.

Those promoting digital, point to the many potential benefits. It is seen as a tool to help improve physical and mental wellbeing **(12)**, reduce risks of isolation and loneliness, and allow people to get health and wellbeing information when they need it **(7)**. Digital can also be a 'leveller' for people who find online activities more accessible and inclusive, such as some people with disabilities or living with mental health difficulties. Evaluation of the NHS' widening digital participation programme found that using digital apps made people happy, connected them with family and made them feel less like they were being left behind, especially among older people **(8)**. The **All-Party Parliamentary Group on Digital Skills** have said that along with the direct benefit of helping people stay connected and access support, digital tools can enable access to wider services, like banking and shopping, and increase people's employment and training prospects **(6)**.

For providers, digital can offer greater flexibility for service delivery, particularly when resources are stretched. Digital can enable services to triage users and prioritise who needs in-person support **(12)**.

3b.

What about the Voluntary and Community sector?

The digital agenda is important for voluntary and community sector (VCS) groups for three reasons.

1. Digital is becoming an important arm in the delivery of VCS services and support to communities. In the pandemic, we have seen how VCS organisations responded quickly to transfer online to keep meeting need in their communities and providing support to those at risk. Digital can help VCS organisations provide wraparound support based on what matters to people. Treating digital delivery as a facilitator, rather than the answer to every problem, has helped community organisations continue to be valuable community assets and meet the needs of the people who use their resources (7).

2. VCS groups are in the ideal position to help address digital exclusion (discussed above), supporting the move into the online world for those excluded or reluctant to use digital. They already have the trusting relationships needed to support people to enter the digital world (2, 5, 8). They also already know who needs help and support in their communities (7).

3. One of the roles of the VCS – and the whole of civil society – is to champion those with the least power. Gradual increases in the amount of community owned digital infrastructure – and everyone not just using Facebook – suggest a new role for the VCS as owners and organisers of the digital landscape and not just participants. As the real and the online worlds become more overlapping, we need to question where these conversations are taking place and who 'owns' them.

3c.

What about Covid-19?

The pandemic has seen digital connectivity move from a 'nice to have' to an essential. Engaging with the online world has been a vital part of keeping in touch with family, friends, colleagues and employers, finding information and accessing services, from banking and health services to having groceries delivered **(5, 6)**.

Organisations have had to move online to keep delivering. Local Trust and Good Things Foundation **report** how the VCS responded quickly to the challenges of the pandemic by transferring online in order to keep supporting those at risk or facing difficulties **(7, 17)**.

Covid-19 has also seen changes in the way people engage with each other. Without being able to meet in-person, new communities have emerged online, and civic and voluntary action has developed without the involvement of established organisations.

Many influential civil society organisations – like Local Trust, Good Things Foundation, and The Kings Fund – have suggested that the pandemic provides an opportunity to rethink the relationships between communities, organisations and the state to ensure a fairer system. Place-based approaches and a shift toward digital could be part of this **(7, 14, 17)** but the exact mix of digital provision for different organisations and communities is unclear.

4.

Further resources & information

Fig 1. What we did

In November 2020, We searched the websites of 29 government and civil society organisations in the UK for publications about 1. why VCS organisations should be using/preparing to use digital and 2. how they can do it. 18 relevant publications were found (listed below 'Further resources').

We also worked with New Philanthropy Capital (NPC) to adapt their '**Tips to help your remote project tackle loneliness**' as the basis for our guidance about how VCS organisations can use/prepare to use digital to connect and support people.

A draft of the toolkit was discussed with 10 Space to Connect projects at a workshop in June 2021 and their feedback changes incorporated into this final version.

For further information, please contact the authors.

Further resources

1. Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. 2017. Digital skills and inclusion - giving everyone access to the digital skills they need.

2. Stone, E., Nuckley, P and Shapiro, R. 2020. Digital inclusion in health and care: lessons learned from the NHS widening digital participation programme (2017-2020).

3. NHS Digital. 2019. Digital inclusion guide for health and social care.

4. House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee. 2020. Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors: First report. Third report of Session 2019-21.

5. Baker, C., Hutton, G., Christie, L and Wright, S. 2020. Covid-19 and the digital divide.

6. All-Party Parliamentary Group on Digital Skills. 2020. The impact of Covid-19 and lessons learned for improving digital skills in the future.

7. Local Trust and Good Things Foundation. 2020. Why is digital connectivity important for communities during and beyond Covid-19?

8. Sugarman, W and Baker, L. 2020. Digital health hubs: an evaluation for the NHS widening digital participation programme.

9. Honeyman, M., Maguire, D., Evans, H and Davies, A. 2020. Digital technology and health inequalities: a scoping review. 2020

10. Cabinet Office. 2018. Civil Society Strategy: building a future that works for everyone.

11. Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. 2018. A connected society: a strategy for tackling loneliness laying the foundations for change.

12. NHS England. 2019. The NHS long term plan.

13. Kruger, D. 2020. Levelling up our communities: proposals for a new social covenant.

14. Charles, A and Ewbank L. 2020. The road to renewal: five priorities for health and care.

15. Good Things Foundation. 2020. Digital health hubs in community assets.

16. House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee. 2020. The Covid-19 crisis and charities. First report of Session 2019-21.

17. Local Trust. 2021. Making Connections: community led action on data poverty.

18. Good Things Foundation. 2021. Digital Exclusion and Health Inequalities.

Digital delivery

- **Top tips for running remote workshops** from My Best Life.

- **The Catalyst**. Links to a range of free resources and support on offer from The Catalyst, an initiative to increase the charity sector's engagement with digital, design and data.

- **Coffee Connections**. An peer-learning network for charities about digital

- **Design Hops**. CAST's free online workshop and follow-up support offer for charities adapting to digital working.

- **Digital Candle**. Free question & answer service for charities about using digital.

- **Covid-19: Digital Service Delivery for Charities**. An open source document containing case studies from a variety of charities who have moved to digital delivery.

- **Hyper Island Toolbox**. A collection of tools and resources that may be useful for digital services.

- **10 principles for design in a crisis**. A blog outlining some top principles for digital delivery during a crisis.

- **Covid-19 (Coronavirus)**. Tips from Befriending Networks on adapting befriending services during lockdown.

- **Future Barnardo's presentation B4U**. Slides from Barnardo's explaining the process for developing their WhatsApp service for young people.

- **Getting to grips with video gatherings**. A free online course that may be useful for staff and volunteers as well as users.

- **Episode 2 - Social Isolation, Loneliness and Digital Inclusion by DigiListen**. DigiListen's recent podcast on adapting to digital service delivery, with a focus on charities working to reduce isolation and loneliness.

- **Covid-19: Digital Service Delivery for Charities - April 8th 2020**. DigiShift charity Zoom call recording, discussing issues around digital service delivery.

- **New service delivery models**. Relevant information and resources from SCVO.

- **Youth Access's resources** for projects with a strong mental health focus.

- **Top tips for facilitating digital co-creation and arts activities during lockdown** from Effervescent.

- **Guide to delivering digital youth work** from UK Youth.

- **The Coronavirus Tech Handbook**. A crowdsourced google document with a wealth of resources on topics such as digital inclusion, running virtual events, and remote working support.

Digital inclusion

- **Loneliness and digital inclusion**. Useful information from Age UK on their learning around digital inclusion and loneliness.

- **Report from the Good Things Foundation** on digital exclusion relating to low income families.

- **A Blueprint for a 100% Digitally Included Nation**. A report from the Good Things Foundation looking at the steps to increasing digital inclusion across the UK.

- **Online Centres Network's** page of digital resources, including resources that can help users of digital services to get online.

- **NHS's information** on digital inclusion, including statistics on those facing barriers to getting online.

- **Catalyst's flowchart** on choosing the right video conferencing software for your project.

- **Crowdsourced digital signposting resources**. A useful collection of resources and tools that can help those who are less familiar with tech, including links to guides on using a webcam, Skype tutorials and video calling.

- **This article** by Common Knowledge comparing the best tools for online chat.

- **RCCE Working Group's guide** to engaging those in at-risk groups due to Covid-19 online.

- **Charity Digital's guide** on tools and tech to make your charity accessible.

- **The Proud Trust's** online LGBT+ Digital Youth Work Pack for work with LGBT+ children and young people.

- A **detailed guide** to leading groups online by Jeanne Rewa and Daniel Hunter, with an educational focus.

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