

Summary for Service Users

Trends and Friends

Access, use and benefits of
digital technology for homeless
and ex-homeless people



Lemos & Crane

This accessible summary for service users has been developed by Martin Burrows from the homelessness peer-research organisation Groundswell. We are enormously grateful to Groundswell for their contribution to the Trends and Friends project.

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Full report: *Trends and Friends: access, use and benefits of digital technology for homeless and ex-homeless people.*

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Introduction

This short report explores how digital technology impacts on the lives of people experiencing homelessness. The research explores whether homeless people;

- have access to the digital technology necessary for digital inclusion;
- want to make use of digital technologies;
- and, the aspirations for the use of digital technology that this group might have.

Digital Technology is technology used for communication, entertainment and information. This includes the internet, computers, digital cameras, games consoles, MP3 music players, tablets, and mobile phones, smart phones and all smart phone apps.

The findings of this research revealed that people experiencing homelessness have a strong desire to, and in many cases already are, engaging with digital technology but faced clear barriers to doing so. The benefits of digital inclusion identified by the people we spoke to include improved social inclusion and emotional resilience including maintaining a secure social network, engaging in cultural life, pursuing interests and hobbies and developing skills and confidence for employment.

What the study involved

The Study was conducted in two parts: a qualitative questionnaire devised by Lemos&Crane and staff in homelessness agencies and both quantitative and qualitative interviews conducted by Groundswell peer researchers - people with first-hand experience of homelessness themselves. The research was also informed by the presentation of the LankellyChase Foundation Digital Empowerment Awards recognising and rewarding innovative uses of digital technology with homeless people and other excluded groups.

As part of the research we spoke to people across the UK from various services including day centres, hostels and drop-ins. The total number of people interviewed for this report - either by completing the Lemos&Crane questionnaire or the Groundswell peer research - was 319. Twenty-two additional people took part in the Groundswell focus groups.

In this report you will see figures that represent the ideas and feelings of the people we spoke to and quotes that reflect participant's thoughts.

What the study discovered

Access and usage

'[The] internet is my life and so is my mobile phone'

Female, 50 (Lemos&Crane questionnaire respondent)

This study revealed that while stereotypes of people experiencing homelessness may be of a poorly connected group who are uninterested in digital technology, in fact, many of the participants in this study commonly made use of digital technology in the form of mobile or smart phones and were resourceful in gaining access to the internet to make use of it to improve their day-to-day circumstances. However, participants struggled with particular practical, technical or financial barriers to access, including difficulty getting a contract phone or having to work within restrictive data limits. This is particularly visible when compared to usage by the general population, for example:

- 81% went online at least once a week, which is lower than the general population.
- 42% of participants spent between 1 and 3 hours online in a single session.

The devices that participants owned and used

Type of Device	Lemos&Crane
Mobile Phones	91%
Smart phones	46%
Laptop, tablet or computer	39%
Digital Cameras	18%
MP3 Players	16%

Although participants go online slightly less often than the general population, they do not spend significantly less time online per session. However the devices they used for internet access differed significantly between our participants and the general population, reflecting the challenges faced by being homeless.

According to Ofcom, the regulatory body for telecommunications, among all internet users **40% identify their laptop as being the most important device** for internet access, **23% say that their smart phone** is the most important and **20% identify desktop computers** as the most important.

Among Lemos&Crane participants **50% identified a smart phone** was the most commonly used device to access the internet and **50% said desktop computers**. The Groundswell participants were even more reliant on **desktop computers to access the internet: 60%**.

The realities of being homeless shaped the way that participants in this study used digital technology like using desk tops made available at day centres, hostels and libraries or through smart phones which brought with them other considerations like data caps and expensive fees. There were also challenges of owning and using digital technology particular to street homelessness; for example, difficulty finding places to charge a mobile phone and to keep technology safe and dry.

Further to this, among the Groundswell participants **45% had their phone lost or stolen when they were high or drunk**, **22% changed phone number** to avoid family, dealers, creditors or services and **13% said they regularly bought and sold their phone**.

However, participants showed considerable resourcefulness and ingenuity in finding ways to get online and making use of digital technology.

Friends, family and relationships

“The main things I find good about being on the internet is going on Facebook [...] I found my sister who I haven’t spoken to for 9 years, so I found her on the Facebook and got her number and now we’re in contact again so it’s a good thing.”

Male, 38 (talking to a Groundswell peer researcher)

Using the internet and phones is an important way to stay in touch with family and friends and this was the most frequent use of digital technology among participants. People greatly valued digital technology for this, which was especially useful for those experiencing disruptive or difficult life events. Facebook and other means of online social networking have made contacting family and friends easier especially when people are unable to get out (nearly half of Groundswell participants agreed with this). This is especially so for contacting families outside of the UK.

73% of Lemos&Crane participants said they used the **internet to keep in touch with family and friends**.

55% of all the Groundswell participants said they had used Facebook to try and **reconnect with their families**. Seventy-six per cent of these participants said it was good to stay in touch with their family and 39% that it had brought them closer. However, **28% said that it had been unsuccessful and for 27% it had brought back upsetting memories**.

Be careful with what you share on Facebook and other social media – once it is online it is public and it can be difficult to remove it completely.

68% of those who answered the Lemos&Crane survey said they **had not experienced any problems at all with their use of digital technology**, however, among those who had experienced difficulties **the largest proportion (48%) were to do with their use of Facebook and social networking**.

A few people, however, had experienced more serious difficulties or had concerns relating to online behaviour, such as online bullying and name calling, blackmail, not trusting people they speak to online or feeling frustrated or anxious about online culture. Using the internet brought

If you experiencing bullying or harassment on Facebook or other social media platforms you can block or report the person responsible.

anxiety for some as well as potentially feeling overwhelmed. A striking finding was that 47% of the Groundswell participants agreed that the internet had information 'which can make you paranoid'.

Leisure, entertainment and personal interests

"[Leisure and entertainment is] very important- it is how I engage with the world as it is comparatively cheap compared to accessing these things in reality- for example, buying a magazine is the same price as a tube fare so I would usually not but I can read online for free."

Female, 18 (Lemos&Crane questionnaire respondent)

Leisure and Entertainment was the second most popular use of digital technology and was highly valued by participants, who had a varied range of interests and hobbies, reflecting different ages, backgrounds and experiences.

For Lemos&Crane participants **80% said that using digital technology for entertainment and leisure was either important or very important, 13% said it was not important.**

Of those who answered the Lemos&Crane survey, **67% said they used the internet for leisure and entertainment. 56% used the internet for their interests and hobbies.**

Participants had an extremely diverse range of interests and hobbies including making music, animals and nature, werewolves, zodiac signs, celebrity gossip, sports, chess, learning new languages, flower arranging, crime, history and local history, crafts and cooking. A few participants (6) used the internet to access discussions, debates, forums and blogs and engage with a wider conversation.

Online and mobile banking is a secure way to keep track of your money and see when payments have gone in.

However, our participants were notably less likely than the general population to use the internet for shopping or banking; perhaps they don't do as much of either whether online or offline. Some expressed anxiety about personal information - and especially bank details - being accessible online. Of the Groundswell participants **28% agreed they lacked the knowledge or confidence to use online shopping.**

Aside from the potential risks when shopping online a few people spoke about online shopping taking something away from the experience of actually purchasing something. For some it was the confidence that the item being bought was right for them. For others it was more the emotional experience of making a purchase.

Everyone who mentioned something to this effect saw online shopping as an inadequate substitute.

Engaging Support Services through Digital technology

Although some participants reported accessing services using digital technology, in practice this took the form of researching information about services on offer and receiving text reminders for appointments (a popular service).

A useful resource to find homelessness services online is: www.homelesslondon.org

29% of Groundswell participants agreed that they had **used email when sleeping rough to keep up to date with services** and **25% said they had used the internet to find free food.**

However, there were far fewer instances of people actively engaging with services online, attaining information and guidance specific to their situation (for example, through online assessment tools). Further to this the inaccessibility of many services' online platforms, particularly government services – such as Universal Jobmatch – were often considered too complex and difficult to use.

“[Universal Jobmatch] was terrible. It was like – the website wasn't very helpful. It was very confusing ... it was for me. What I found was ...I don't know how to answer these questions. So I could potentially be answering questions wrong and they might think that I am trying to pull a fast one so to speak. It's not, it's just I don't understand what is being said in front of me.”

Male, 22 (speaking to a Groundswell peer researcher)

For some participants, however, their use of digital technology was an example of the potential for day-to-day use of digital technology for regular, useful contact with support staff as well as control over financial and social circumstances.

“I often text staff and social care. Project staff often email me with information, reminders etc. My school also email me to let me know what is happening in terms of timetabling and coursework for the week. I manage my benefits claims online and also receive my pay slips to my email account. I regularly use online banking. I use the forums on orange and other mobile phone companies to resolve problems with phone contracts and give feedback. I use internet to make my GP appointments.”

Female, 17 (Lemos&Crane questionnaire respondent).

Concerns

Although some had experienced online and offline bullying, harassment or threats to well-being, proportionately very few reported being worried about bullying and blackmail (6%). Participants' concerns about digital technology were largely focused on privacy and the risk of identity theft or fraud, hacking or security of their personal information. Although relatively few participants said they had experienced a problem with safety, security or privacy using digital technology, a higher proportion had concerns about this.

To stay secure online it is best to use a different password for different sites – use a combination of upper and lower case letters, numbers and symbols.

9% of the Groundswell questionnaire participants said they had had their identity stolen online.

48% said that safety and privacy online was something that concerned them (Lemos&Crane).

Using shared computers for social networking led some to feel uneasy about accidentally leaving their social media sites accessible to others. There was a clear correlation between age and concerns about safety and privacy.

If using a shared computer never save your password and always remember to log out of all of your online accounts when you finish.

35% of those under 30 were worried about safety and privacy, compared to **84% of those over 30**. While some (mainly younger) participants were confident they could manage online risks. Others avoided particular uses of the internet so as to avoid difficulties.

A common worry was losing face-to-face contact with people, that would reduce levels of trust and connection between people, increasing isolation and that complex online systems would make accessing services more difficult and may mean they are denied services due to an increased systematic use of digital technology.

67% of Groundswell participants agreed that phones or computers stop people communicating properly

Other concerns mentioned were support services putting personal information online, spending too much time on the internet, developing physical problems (such as poor eyesight or a bad back), being found by somebody they didn't want to see or accidentally downloading a virus.

If homelessness services want to put any information about you online (like case studies) they have to ask your consent – if you ask to have this information removed at any time then they should remove it. If you have a complaint about a support service using your personal information lodge a complaint with the organisation and if this does not work the Information Commissioners’ Office may be able to assist you (www.ico.gov.uk or Helpline 0303 123 1113).

Barriers to access and the role of support services

Despite the potential for positive outcomes and the clearly defined interests of participants in this study of better using digital technology, services used by people experiencing homelessness are not meeting the need of their users in terms of facilities, training or online resources.

“It just seems that...because you are homeless, or because you are living in a hostel, digital technology just passes us by. Which I think is a pretty sad thing, especially for a person my age.”

Male, 57 (speaking to a Groundswell peer researcher)

Inappropriate and unavailable training. Participants in both groups felt the training they were offered was not appropriate for their needs and usage aspirations. Typically training wasn’t basic enough or they thought the skills and programmes being taught (for example, Microsoft Office) were not relevant to their experiences and aspirations. While participants typically felt confident using Facebook and other social media sites but found office and word processing programmes difficult. The majority learned by teaching themselves. **Only 8% learned through training provided at services, typically older participants.**

Free IT training is available in many day centres and building based services. For example, Crisis Skylight offers excellent classes and informal open-access support on weekends to help with using computers.

Poor provision of equipment in hostels and day centres.

Reliance on (mostly hardware) facilities in homelessness services to access the internet was common but many people experienced difficulties. Roughly half of the Lemos&Crane participants accessed the internet at homelessness services and **19% used a library.** Of all the Groundswell peer research participants, **22% usually**

accessed the internet at the particular service where they were interviewed and 18% at a library. 60% relied on the use of a desktop computer, though only **6% owned one**. Common problems included services having too few computers, time restrictions, unreliable internet connections and lack of privacy when using computers.

Restrictions at Libraries. Although libraries are often important places in the lives of homeless and ex-homeless people, they also brought challenges for internet access, despite being relied upon by a significant proportion of participants (19% of the Lemos&Crane group and 18% of the Groundswell group). Common difficulties in libraries included time limits on computer use and too few computers available. People also faced particular difficulties arising from being homeless. Many libraries required members to have a permanent fixed address to join the library, excluding some from accessing library resources. Perhaps more troublingly, participants reported being excluded from libraries for having too much luggage.

Libraries can be more lenient about letting people access them and time restrictions on usage if you go at quieter times of the day.

Services blocking particular sites or web searches. Sixty-six per cent of the Groundswell participants reported problems in accessing the internet through services. Of these, **38% complained about limitations on times they could go online and 33% that the sites they could access were limited.**

Cost, contracts and data. Participants reported difficulties with contract phones and typically had price-imposed restrictive data caps on their phone usage.

Phone contracts are often also subject to a credit check, excluding many homeless people. **55% of Groundswell participants said they couldn't get a phone contract.** Participants were very conscious that they were often restricted to expensive and limiting pay-as-you-go contracts for their phone and spoke eloquently of the difficulties those experiencing exclusion or poverty have in overcoming such restrictions, as well as the negative emotional and social consequences. Just one person mentioned using cheaper alternatives to pay as you go or long-term contracts.

Cheap pay monthly packages which include data are available without a contract and in some cases without a debit or credit card. Check out bundle deals from EE and GiffGaff.

What we want to change

The benefits of having access to and knowing how to use digital technology were a clear finding of this study and the people we spoke to wanted to use digital technology in their everyday lives. However, being homeless can mean there are specific barriers and frustration to doing this. In order to overcome these barriers we recommend services used by homeless people make the following changes:

Improving internet access at homelessness services

Access to the internet at homelessness services should be considerably improved. Switching from cabled internet to far less restrictive Wifi in all service settings would be particularly beneficial. Similarly removing unnecessary restrictions on content would be highly desirable. Access would become easier and the costs of using mobile phones for internet access would be reduced.

Library access for homeless people

Public libraries should review their access requirements to reduce exclusion of homeless and vulnerable people. Not requiring a fixed permanent address to access the computers and the internet would be a significant benefit. In addition, current policies or practices of turning people away because of their luggage or other characteristics associated with homelessness should be abandoned. Providing somewhere for people to leave their belongings would also enable people to make valuable use of library services.

Support and information to find cheaper access solutions

Service users need assistance to get away from expensive and restrictive contracts for phones and the internet and accessing cheaper or better value for money options. Staff at support services should assist service users in accessing affordable options for mobile phone and internet services as part of keyworking and resettlement.

Digital inclusion as part of support workers' support planning approach

Support workers should include advice on and options for affordable access to phone and internet services in their needs assessment, key working, support plans and resettlement.

Services to provide cheap or free equipment for clients

Homelessness services could forge partnerships with low-cost suppliers of digital technology to provide cheap or free hardware such as laptops and mobile phones for clients. Similarly, arrangements for WiFi provision in hostels and supported

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housing would be beneficial. Homelessness Services could also broker access to cheaper mobile phone contracts by offering credit guarantees and passing on the savings of group purchasing of mobile contracts. Mobile phone and internet service providers might even be persuaded to give a greater discount to homelessness services in the spirit of corporate social responsibility.

Use of digital technology by services themselves

Using digital technology to provide service users with information relevant to them - reminders and practical help and guidance such as information on money, health and available services or opportunities - would be a welcome development with obvious benefits in support and resettlement.

The full report can be read here: www.lemosandcrane.co.uk/home/freedownloads

You can find out about the next steps for this project at www.lemosandcrane.co.uk