

Key Messages



From a Digitally Healthy Members Zoom Meeting

9th April 2020

Background and aims

This Zoom discussion was a collaboration with NHS National Education Scotland (NES) Digital Service, organised by VHS to help explore the nature of the digital divide during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. Twenty-two people from a wide range of third sector organisations participated and three from NHS Digital Service. Organisations represented were predominantly national charities: Waverley Care, Spina Bifida Hydrocephalus Scotland, Teapot Trust, Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs, Terrence Higgins Trust, Scottish Palliative Care Partnership, Home Energy Scotland, Breastfeeding Network and Diabetes UK. One local voluntary organisation, Highland Senior Citizens Network, participated and one third sector interface, Aberdeen Council of Voluntary Organisations. Three national third sector intermediaries participated: Sencot, Health and Social Care ALLIANCE and SCVO.

The discussion was informal but designed to strengthen understanding between voluntary health organisations and NHS Digital Service, with a view to holding a future event on digital health and health inequalities. Participants were invited to share intelligence on the impact of their services, support and activities being driven online. How are third sector organisations re-configuring services and support to meet these challenges and what barriers are they trying to overcome? Is the move to digital during the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating health inequalities or opening up new and better ways to support people in future?

Introduction

Blythe Robertson of NES Digital Service gave a short introduction setting the scene. He explained that NHS NES is a Special Health Board with an education and workforce remit. NES Digital Service is a new department that is focused on the Digital Health and Care Strategy, which aims to reduce digital fragmentation across the health system in Scotland. Historically, digital equality has been a weaker area of government policy-making but COVID-19 has made it imperative that 'digital' is implemented equally and accessibly. An understanding of the digital challenges that organisations face across the health and voluntary health sectors, as well as the challenges facing individuals most at risk and vulnerable, must inform the strategic development of digital health.

Aaron Slater of SCVO gave an update on the No-one Left Behind initiative, an emergency national aid effort coordinated by Scottish Government, which aims to tackle the three main barriers to digital connectivity:

- Access to a device
- Connectivity
- Skills and ability to use digital technology

The initiative will support those who are shielding, those with underlying conditions and people in deprived communities, by providing them with a device, most probably a tablet, 6 months' worth of free connectivity and support with how to use the device. The Scottish Government's partners in the initiative include ScotlandIS, SCVO, Healthcare Improvement Scotland and the Glasgow Disability Alliance who are already working to understand: who is not currently online, where are they, and what are their needs. In order to support this work SCVO is calling for organisations to join their online Slack community by emailing digital@scvo.org.uk

Participants in the zoom discussion noted the importance of digital technology but also highlighted the role of off-line methods of communication and how these needed to be further improved. The recent letter issued by the NHS for people who are shielding caused immense anxiety amongst people with HIV and was not accessible at all to people with sensory impairments. Nor were text messages about shielding accessible to all. Participants emphasised issues faced by vulnerable groups such as those who are homeless. Participants pointed out that it was important to continue to utilise non-digital mechanisms for communicating with some populations: messages regarding COVID-19 need to be clearer to reduce anxiety and misinformation and methods of delivery of messages need to be more accessible to groups who will otherwise be left behind.

Many of the elderly people known to Highland Senior Citizens Network are not digitally connected and 'staying home' means their access to normal sources of information like newspapers and printed newsletters has been greatly reduced. But this is the very group that would benefit from more non-digital communication during the crisis, not less. The value of community radio as a communication channel is being ignored. Blythe commented that government and the NHS have been on a steep learning curve but that the mindset has now shifted and inclusive communications are understood to be crucial. He mentioned the Scottish Government's recent guidance on how to engage with the traveller community and spoke about needing to sustain this level of engagement with other 'hard to reach' groups.

Participants also discussed how they were working to stabilise support for vulnerable groups by avoiding withdrawing services and providing alternatives online. The Terrence Higgins Trust spoke about providing online counselling, offering low-cost or free home HIV testing kits and providing online and telephone support to help people through the testing process. The Teapot Trust spoke of providing online counselling and art therapy. The Breastfeeding Network said digital connectivity has actually expanded their reach but that they can continue to provide face to face support for the most vulnerable because they work in close partnership with the NHS.

However, some organisations also spoke about requiring support to choose the right digital platforms to use for different types of support, to address issues about patient/service user confidentiality, and to increase referrals and reach a wider group of people. The Breastfeeding Network said that there had been confusion about whether the third sector was able to use Attend Anywhere but that the Scottish Government has now confirmed it can. Attend Anywhere is a web-based platform that helps health and social care providers offer video call access to their services as part of their ‘business as usual’, day-to-day operations. Spina Bifada Hydrocephalus Scotland said they use Attend Anywhere and find it great.

Discussing other aspects of ‘technology’ and their impact on health, Home Energy Scotland said that British Gas will not top up pre-payment meters until they are actually empty and that this is causing people, especially elderly people, a lot of stress and anxiety.

Conclusions and next steps

It was clear that while many third sector organisations are already moving services and support to digital platforms there is a need to share best practice and learning across the sector to improve this. There was significant interest in the No-one Left Behind initiative. The discussion highlighted the impact of the COVID-19 lock down on people with no or little access to digital technology, on those who cannot easily understand or use digital technology, and on those for whom a digital service may not be appropriate for other reasons, e.g. dementia. We must not fall into the trap of thinking digital is a solution for everything and everyone, it is not.

Claire Stevens of VHS explained that VHS and NES Digital will reflect on today’s discussions as they continue planning a third sector round table on digital health and health inequalities, to be held in four to six weeks.

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