

CONNECTIVITY IN CAITHNESS

CONNECTING SCOTLAND

The Adaptive and Collaborative Communities (ACC) team identified a need for support around digital connectivity in the Caithness regions. Initially, it set out using a Facebook survey to get an understanding of the community experience getting connected (see appendix).

It was this survey that helped to establish an understanding around connectivity and that it was not only issues of being able to get online but also around the inequality of having the resources to buy the equipment and afford access to the internet.

ACC undertook three rounds with Connecting Scotland, Connecting Scotland is a Scottish Government initiative being managed by the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations.

- Under the first round of Connecting Scotland's programme, the Adaptive and Collaborative Communities team equipped 25 older individuals over 60 and people with disabilities through the distribution of devices and ongoing support.
- Under the second round of Connecting Scotland's programme, the Adaptive and Collaborative Communities team equipped 45 individuals and families through the distribution of devices and ongoing support.
- Under the third round of Connecting Scotland's programme, the Adaptive and Collaborative Communities team equipped 20 individuals in NHS and private elderly care homes, these were provided directly through connecting Scotland.

ACC set up the devices with the recipients and was in regular contact with them to ensure they got the most benefit from their connectivity. ACC trained staff as Digital Champions and also supported several charities and community organisations in transferring their services online during the COVID-19 pandemic, and continue to work with them to ensure their services can continue with relatively little disruption.

ACC established a Connectivity and Digital Action Group in Caithness, which aimed to ensure everyone in the county had fair and equal access to education on the safe and productive use of digital connectivity, and access to the internet, including liaison between the R100 team and the local community.

SUPPORTING FAMILIES THROUGH CONNECTIVITY

These families and individuals faced barriers to accessing the internet and digital devices because they are on very low incomes, or have become unemployed due to the impact of COVID-19.

Many are in very rural areas, where broadband is unavailable or unreliable, and access to 4G alternatives are too expensive. They would usually have had access to shared computers and

internet in local libraries, but this was not possible under the COVID-19 restrictions, and the loss of income had impacted their budgets to the point that, if the services were available again, they now could not afford the transport costs in and out of town to use them.

The Adaptive and Collaborative Communities (ACC) team worked with local organisations supporting these individuals to discover the barriers to them accessing the internet or devices themselves. These include; -

Home-Start (supporting deprived families), Caithness Women's Aid, local schools, Youth Clubs, and Caithness Young Carers support service.

ACC distributed a short, digital survey based on the eligibility criteria and the aims of the Connecting Scotland programme to local charities and organisations. It asked which of the criteria their candidates met, what barriers they faced in accessing the internet and digital devices themselves at home, and what the devices would be used for.

In this way, ACC identified which device (Chromebook or iPad) would be best suited to the candidates' needs. The respondents from Caithness Women's Aid, Home-Start Caithness, Castletown Youth Club (who also gathered responses from Castletown and surrounding schools), Caithness Klicks (Young Carers Support), and Y-People (Supporting vulnerable community members and care leavers), identified those in their networks who would benefit. ACC worked with local charities, organisations, and community groups to ensure they are best placed to help their service users. ACC had regular meetings with them in the form of Action Groups, with themes such as Social Isolation and Mental well-being, and Connectivity and Digital Access support. Through these groups, ACC helped to ensure there was equal and fair access to resources within the county, and that local voluntary services are supported and able to continue their work throughout COVID-19 and beyond. By supporting these groups, ACC helps them support the candidates in this application.

Local support services had to transfer to online communications in the face of restrictions brought on by COVID-19, which meant families and care leavers who would usually have benefited from face-to-face services were cut off, without the necessary access to digital platforms.

Connecting these candidates helped to improve their mental health and wellbeing in the county, relieving some of the strain from the NHS and associated services. Covering the cost of connecting candidates with devices and the internet meant it was not a choice for families between heating their homes and paying for internet to find support which would usually have been free to access.

The Families were able to connect with their volunteer support workers from Home-Start, accessing support with family issues such as tackling children's behavioural problems, parenting techniques and tips. Candidates in education were also able to complete coursework and complete extra-curricular activities.

SUPPORTING THE ELDERLY, ISOLATED AND VULNERABLE THROUGH CONNECTIVITY.

The Caithness Adaptive and Collaborative Communities team identified people through collaborative work with local charitable organisations; - Befriending Caithness, Birchwood Highland, The Dunbeath and District Centre, The Healing Hub, Wick, Caithness Community Connections, Caithness Citizens Advice Bureau, Ability Net, and the Caithness Food Bank.

None of these organisations had the resources to be able to submit an application and commit to the ongoing skills support by themselves. Therefore, ACC partnered together to form a working group. These were also people who would, historically, not have engaged with digital connectivity, through fear and/or lack of skills.

Covid-19 having a profound impact on social isolation meant that attitudes changed and people were actively interested in learning how to utilise digital access to improve their everyday lives and greater physical and mental well-being.

This was a great opportunity to embrace their enthusiasm to get connected, and future-proof their engagement and inclusion in the wider community, particularly in the more rural areas. In some cases, the person was not in charge of their money, through ongoing concerns such as Dementia or a learning difficulty. It was not within their ability to budget more tightly and save up for devices themselves, even if community centres with internet access were open again. Due to their age, mental health issues, learning disabilities, or a combination of all, these people were also in need of help learning digital skills.

By discussing the programme with them through a collaboration with local charities who work with them regularly, ACC identified each potential beneficiaries' specific needs and developed a plan to provide support and build digital confidence and skills.

In 2021 Caithness Voluntary Group asked the Caithness public through a Facebook post about their experiences with connectivity in Caithness.

SUPPORTING THE ELDERLY IN CARE HOMES TO REDUCE ISOLATION THROUGH CONNECTIVITY.

In this third round of Connecting Scotland ACC worked with 5 different care homes in Thurso and Wick. ACC reached out to all care homes throughout Caithness and identified 5 care homes that needed devices to help with the isolation being caused by the pandemic.

The pandemic limited family members and friends from visiting loved ones in their care homes and due to the PPE requirements of sharing devices it made it challenging for residents to maintain contact with their families.

ACC worked with Pentland View in Thurso, Bay View in Thurso, Seaview House in Wick, Riverside house in Wick and Pulteney House in Wick.

ACC communicated with the care homes and completed the applications for them. In this round, Connecting Scotland worked directly with the care homes once the applications were submitted.

APPENDIX

Online survey on connectivity

In total CVG received 68 responses, 55% of the responses received commented on there being poor internet.

Some of the comments were:

- No infrastructure investment from BT as their exchange 'has fibre' advised moving to 4g
- Ancient infrastructure, poor/non-existent 4g signal
- Good until demand increased
- Infrastructure is the issue more than service providers as having tried all providers.
- Given up on broadband and moved to Vodafone or EE 4g but it can't cope with increased demand
- You have to get expensive modifications to get a moderate connection

26% found that they had a good connection and that the internet struggled at peak times and 19% stated that they had fair enough broadband connectivity in some areas but that it was slow or that they had to move to 4G to stay connected, which can be expensive.

A lot of people commented on how challenging it had been to school their children during lockdown because of the connectivity issues and that it caused problems in currently having to work from home.







