



# ~~Locked Down~~ and Cut off

Marginalised Young People's  
experiences of and solutions to lack of  
internet access during the 2020  
Pandemic

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*"I can't understand why it's so hard from them to open up WI-FI in  
our hostel when they can do it on buses; we deserve to be able to  
feel like this is our home"*

- A young person living in a hostel

*“without internet I can’t update my Universal Credit, I can’t engage in services, can’t apply for jobs, and any tech course I look at for next year they are saying they are all online. I am being held back because of where I live which is out of my control”*

- A young person living in a hostel

*“Whilst we want everyone to become digital citizens, I realise that there are people who are not online and Government will not leave anyone behind”*

- Hugh Widdis Dept of Finance Permanent Secretary

*“Young people I was working with expressed how thankful they were that the programme still went ahead online. They had mentioned that without the programme their mental health would have suffered. Without Internet access many young people have been left behind during the pandemic and as a worker who cares, I can’t imagine the impact this has had on so many”*

- Youth Worker

across the globe a **deep digital divide** is growing, with marginalised communities everywhere **being denied** access through prohibitive charges, non-dependable connection speeds and lack of appropriate hardware.



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Internet access is recognised as a human right and one upon which many other human rights are increasingly dependent, including rights to family life, healthcare, social security, education and employment.

**However, across the globe a deep digital divide is growing, with marginalised communities everywhere being denied access through prohibitive charges, non-dependable connection speeds and lack of appropriate hardware.**

This denial constitutes one side of an equation – the other exists alongside the almost untrammelled access that digital technology companies have to the personal data of these communities, access from which staggering profits are being made.

Our activity on the internet is being monetized while the social, educational and political spaces on the internet are effectively privatized; where participation is treated as a privilege and not a human right.

The global coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the extent to which digital access is a basic necessity. With all public services moving online, access to essential services including health care and social security, became dependent on reliable internet access. Those without the digital hardware or money to buy data were effectively left behind.

The NI Executive, its departments and agencies, as well as local councils, have all been seen to be ill-prepared for, and incredibly slow in responding to this inequality. Internet infrastructure development and digital access is still being driven by the needs of business. While strategies and policies to address digital inequality exist on paper, little or no practical action had been taken since lockdown in late March 2020 to ensure internet access for all.

The Internet 4 All campaign was borne out of this failure by the state to address the digital divide. It is a coalition of 200 organisations and individuals representing front line workers, asylum seekers, youth service providers, homeless families, care experienced young people and others. In May 2020 the campaign sent an open letter, with over 600 signatories, to telecommunications industry leaders across the island, calling on them to take immediate action to ensure internet connectivity for all. The letter

specifically called for all hotspots to be opened and data caps lifted.

Among those most severely impacted by the pandemic have been marginalised young people. The digital divide places them at a significant disadvantage, negatively impacting their mental health, education, training and employment opportunities.

With the support of their youth workers and PPR, a group of young people in Belfast, aged 16-25, undertook research to document young people's experiences of internet access during Covid-19, including those living in homeless hostels, to identify barriers and develop practical solutions.

Only half of the 140 research participants had dependable internet access via broadband or Wi-Fi, the remainder relied on purchasing data at prohibitive costs. Subsequently this group of already marginalised youth experienced further exclusion from education and training opportunities, were forced to eating or connecting online, and worryingly have provided testimony about deteriorating mental health with no access to a wide range of essential online services and supports.

These negative impacts are utterly preventable. It does not take much effort to break through the digital divide.

The research shows that a key barrier to reliable internet access is the ongoing failure of accommodation providers (e.g. care homes or homeless hostels) to open their Wi-Fi to residents or restricting it to communal areas no longer available due to Covid-19 social distancing guidelines. It was this practice which has led to a reliance on purchasing costly data. The lack of suitable digital hardware is also a barrier which - given the abundance of high quality, repurposed hardware - should not be an issue in our society at all.

The young people worked with PPR and youth workers to develop practical solutions. The steps taken by MACS, a local service provider, to provide all young people living in their accommodation with internet access, was highlighted as a model of good practice for other accommodation providers to follow. A menu of practical and innovative solutions developed by marginalised communities across the world was compiled.

**Internet 4 All are calling for the provision of free and openly accessible Wi-Fi in private and communal areas throughout all residential facilities funded by the Department for Communities, for example homeless hostels and care homes.**

If the statement '*we are all in this together*' is to mean more than just words then digital equality must be urgently addressed by the NI Executive and all relevant central and local government departments and agencies.

On 9th September and 18th November 2020, the young people met with Department for Communities Minister Carál Ní Chuilín who announced that she would carry out an audit of facilities funded by the Department to establish the current Wi-Fi provision and support the young people's efforts. We need all of the providers to work with the Minister and her officials to end this exclusionary and unnecessary practice.

We will be monitoring developments.

**Follow us on social media, on Twitter @PPR\_Org and Facebook.**

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## INTRODUCTION

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Access to the internet has been a life-line for many during the Covid-19 crisis. To adhere to social distancing, an accessible and reliable internet connection is required for people in order to allow them to access all their rights: to keep informed of guidance on how to keep themselves safe, work, engage with state authorities, receive and spend money, communicate with family and friends, meet new people, care for older people, access mental health care, participate in education, collaborate, entertain and play.

**Internet connectivity is as important as the freedom of movement; it is a right, not a privilege to be granted dependent on income or status.**

This should apply to areas throughout NI including those living in homelessness provision however, we were to quickly discover that this wasn't the case.

As a young person trying to complete training opportunities online I quickly discovered some of my peers were not as fortunate as me, some were living in temporary accommodation/residential homes which meant that they didn't have a safe and secure roof over their head let alone access to internet provision.

To attempt and gauge the extent of this we decided to survey all group members across the training programmes being delivered by a local youth organisation. We surveyed 140 young people across the greater Belfast area via Survey Monkey - the results are contained within this report; however, it was clear that WIFI access was a major contributing factor into almost 50% of them not being able to access education/training opportunities. We also set about finding solutions to this issue. We quickly realised that many residential settings out there were able to offer free and accessible WIFI provision and when asked proved how easy it was – (included is a best practice example below from MACS Supporting Children and Young People)

We have found the solution, we know it exists – we are asking the Minister to flick the switch and give all those living in temporary/residential accommodation access to internet provision in order to navigate their way through this 'new world' we have found ourselves living in.

**Georgia - Internet4All**

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## BACKGROUND

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The onset of the Coronavirus pandemic in the early months of 2020 brought about changes of a scale and pace previously unimaginable right across the globe. Covid-19 has resulted in loss of life, illness and suffering on a massive scale, with poor and marginalised communities everywhere bearing the brunt of this pain and loss; it has laid bare structural inequalities, revealed the weakened state of our public services following decades of underinvestment and privatization and exposed the state's inability to be guided by public health when determining pandemic containment policies.

**Covid-19 also required widespread cultural and habitual change as practically all human interactions have shifted online; access to the internet has proven to be critical to the continued functioning of the state, public services, business, communities and families worldwide.**

In response to the health emergency, governments developed new tools such as Covid-19 information portals, virtual healthcare and Covid-19 apps for tracking and tracing. In addition to these digital public health tools, digital platforms were developed for learning and working remotely, for accessing services and maintaining contact with family and friends.

With incredible speed, online interactions between people and the state became the norm. Reliable access to the internet transitioned from what may have been considered an optional form of communication, to one that was required for participation in every relationship critical to a person's well-being.

That need to view internet access as a right, and not a privilege based on income or location, became evident.

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## INTERNET ACCESS AS A HUMAN RIGHT

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While the pandemic highlighted just how essential internet access is in every facet of our lives, the right to access the internet had already been well established as a third-generation human right, and one that is inseparable from a number of other human rights.

In May 2011 in his report to the UN Human Rights Council, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Frank La Rue, made a number of recommendations on securing access to the internet for all. The Special Rapporteur noted that

*‘given that the internet has become an indispensable tool for realising a range of human rights, combatting inequality, and accelerating development and human progress, ensuring universal access to the internet should be a priority for all States’.*<sup>1</sup>

In 2016 the UN Human Rights Council released a non-binding resolution which affirmed that

*‘the same rights people have offline must also be protected online’.*<sup>2</sup>

In addition, internet related recommendations formulated under the Universal Periodic Review mechanism are as numerous as those related to fundamental rights such as the right to food and the right to water. In June 2020 the UN Secretary General highlighted that importance of universal digital connectivity for health and development globally, noting that the pandemic has served to underscore the absolute urgency of addressing this challenge. While noting that

*‘the internet is a powerful and essential public good that requires the highest possible level of international cooperation’, the Secretary General acknowledged that fundamental pillars of that cooperation were lacking. He called for urgent action by all governments to ‘harness the infinite opportunities offered by digital technology to scale up our efforts on health care, on the climate crisis, on eradicating poverty and across all the Sustainable Development Goals’.*<sup>3</sup>

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1 [https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/17session/A.HRC.17.27\\_en.pdf](https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/17session/A.HRC.17.27_en.pdf)  
Recommendation 85

2 [https://www.article19.org/data/files/Internet\\_Statement\\_Adopted.pdf](https://www.article19.org/data/files/Internet_Statement_Adopted.pdf)

3 <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sgsm20118.doc.htm>

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## THE GLOBAL DIGITAL DIVIDE

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At the end of 2019 the ITU, the UN specialised agency for information and communications technology, estimated that around 3.6 billion people globally remain offline. Only around half of the world's population are current internet users, with only 20% in the least developed countries. The UN Secretary General characterised this digital divide as '*a matter of life and death*' for those who are unable to access essential health-care information. He further noted that this divide is '*threatening to become the new face of inequality*<sup>4</sup>, reinforcing existing social and economic inequalities. The impact on lack of internet access on other human rights was laid bare by the pandemic. The digital divide meant lack of access to work, essential services, health information and education. Parents reported having to choose whether to eat or top up data for their children's education<sup>5</sup>.

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## DIGITAL DIVIDE IN NI

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This digital divide is very much in evidence in Northern Ireland. While NI has had the largest regional increase in internet use since 2011, it continues to have the lowest proportion of internet users compared with other jurisdictions.<sup>6</sup> It also has the highest percentage of properties unable to get decent broadband.<sup>7</sup> In 2018 in the Belfast City Council area 15.3% of the population had no home broadband, with 10% of those over 15 years of age never having used the internet.<sup>8</sup> Figures from the Department for Economy (DfE) indicate that at least 68,509 homes in Northern Ireland faced the Covid-19 lockdown with inadequate access to internet broadband services. This equates to 8.5% of the total number of homes.<sup>9</sup> Over 10,200 additional

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4 <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sgsm20118.doc.htm>

5 <https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/policypost/Poverty-in-the-pandemic.pdf>

6 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/itandinternetindustry/bulletins/internetusers/2019>

7 [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0023/186413/Connected-Nations-2019-UK-final.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0023/186413/Connected-Nations-2019-UK-final.pdf)

8 <https://www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk/public/PivotGrid.aspx?ds=9828&l-h=73&yn=2015-2018&sk=10&sn=People%20and%20Places&yearfilter=>

9 <https://www.thedetail.tv/articles/almost-70-000-northern-ireland-homes-not-covered-by-adequate-broadband-during-Covid-19-lockdown>

premises, including schools, businesses and religious buildings were also confirmed by the DfE as not having access to adequate internet broadband services. With the onset of lockdown in the north of Ireland in late March 2020 all public services, education and training, leisure and recreational facilities moved online. These included essential services provided by the Health Trusts, GP practices, the Housing Executive, Jobs and Benefits, local Councils amongst others.

Post-lockdown most of these services remained digital by default. The social security system moved online earlier than most public services and the impact of this on marginalised communities has been very significant. Since the introduction of Universal Credit, access to social security has essentially been 'digital by default' despite official claims to the contrary.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty Professor Philip Alston's assessment of the UK's Universal Credit system was this

*'in reality Universal Credit has built a digital barrier that obstructs access to benefits.'*<sup>10</sup>

The Special Rapporteur's stark assessment of the equality impacts of the digitisation of social security should act as a warning to other government departments as they too move to become digital by default.

**At both domestic and international levels, governments have been incredibly slow in responding to the urgent need to close the digital divide as a critical means of addressing inequalities in access to basic services during Covid-19.**

This failure to act is in stark contrast to those on the other side of the digital divide – the private telecommunications companies who are making ever increasing levels of profit from lucrative government contracts.

As evidenced further in this report, it is those who are most marginalised and with the least resources who are being left to address states' failures to act and to develop practical, low-cost and effective solutions to this pressing issue.

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<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Council Forty-first session 24 June–12 July 2019 Agenda item 3 Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development Visit to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights

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## INTERNET 4 ALL CAMPAIGN

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The Internet 4 All (I4A) campaign was born out of the state's failure to address this digital divide. With the onset of the pandemic, internet access was increasingly seen as an essential lifeline for people already living in poverty and marginalised, including asylum seekers, people who are homeless including those living in hostels, people on benefits and many others.

The campaign constitutes a coalition of 200 organisations representing amongst others front line workers, asylum seekers, youth service providers, homeless families, care experienced children and young people.

In May 2020 an open letter was sent by the I4A campaign to the leaders of the telecommunications industry leaders on the island of Ireland, calling on them to take immediate action to ensure that nobody was left without reliable internet connection during the pandemic. The letter, signed by over 600 influential individuals and organisations, called those industry leaders to work with governments north and south of Ireland to immediately open up all hotspots cost free and to waive prohibitive charges for households unable to access decent broadband connection. It further called for medium term action to develop the necessary infrastructure to secure ultra-fast connectivity for everybody regardless of income or where they live.

The text of the Open Letter plus a full list of signatories is included at Appendix B.

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## TELECOMMUNICATIONS COMPANIES HAVE THE POWER AND RESOURCES TO END THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

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As a result of lockdowns and restrictions of movement imposed by countries globally, people were forced indoors and online. Network usage skyrocketed and vast amounts of data were exchanged. For those with internet access, network infrastructure was frequently problematic, with spikes in connection drop rates, slowed down streaming rates resulting in poor audio and video quality.

The large telecommunications providers in Northern Ireland, such as BT and Virgin, have the power and resources not only to address these problems, but also to ensure that those without internet access were connected during this crisis. By way of example - BT has the infrastructure to open Wi-Fi to the public across Northern Ireland, with 62,000 hotspots in Belfast alone.<sup>11</sup> These companies have profited on a massive scale from the public in Northern Ireland, as well as benefiting from significant government grants and contracts paid through the public purse.

In 2019 BT, the largest UK operator of fixed line, broadband and mobile services, had a revenue of £23.4 billion<sup>12</sup>. Virgin Media Inc increased total revenue generated in 2019, bringing in £5.17 billion.<sup>13</sup> Government investment in and support for these companies is substantial. Back in 2005 BT was awarded an eleven-year contract worth £30 million with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) to implement and support a new IT infrastructure.<sup>14</sup> It also secured a 14 year contract, worth £39 million, with the NI Civil Service to provide accounting services.<sup>15</sup>

More recently in 2017 Invest NI gave BT £9 million towards a new BT Ireland Innovation Centre it opened along with Ulster University.<sup>16</sup>

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11 <https://www.bt-wi-fi.co.uk/find/>

12 <https://www.bt.com/bt-plc/assets/documents/investors/financial-reporting-and-news/annual-reports/2019/bt-group-plc-annual-report-2019.pdf>

13 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/290057/virgin-media-revenue/#:~:text=Virgin%20Media%20Inc%20increased%20total,billion%20British%20pounds%20in%202017.>

14 <https://pressreleases.responsesource.com/news/20622/bt-wins-30-million-contract-with-the-northern-ireland-housing-executive/>

15 <https://www.mynewsdesk.com/uk/pressreleases/bt-secures-northern-ireland-public-sector-shared-network-ni-pssn-contract-2812984>

16 <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/news/2017/november/bt-partners-with-ulster-university-to-create-25-research-posts>

In 2019 BT, the largest UK operator of fixed line, broadband and mobile services, had a revenue of **£23.4 billion**. Virgin Media Inc increased total revenue generated in 2019, bringing in **£5.17 billion**.



In September 2019 Virgin signed a multi-year contract with Belfast City Council, worth £25 million, to provide dark fibre across the city to enable delivery of council services.<sup>17</sup>

Both BT and Virgin Media make commitments through their Corporate Social Responsibility statements to using digital communications to improving the lives of the most disadvantaged citizens.<sup>18</sup>

Since the onset of the pandemic there has been a series of announcements by telecommunications companies on how they are contributing to keeping people digitally connected. In April 2020 major telecommunications companies signed a joint statement with the UK government, pledging support for the NHS through a range of measures.<sup>19</sup>

Since March 2020 there have been announcements by some individual telecommunication companies in relation to the lifting of data caps, zero-rating of NHS websites and Covid-19 apps.<sup>20</sup> While most welcome, these measures are often partial and time limited. They do however give an indication of what is possible for these major internet providers to roll out in response to Covid-19.

**Overall however, there is no evidence that telecommunications companies have introduced any targeted measures to ensure connectivity for those on the ‘wrong side’ of the digital divide.**

From responses received to the series of Freedom of Information requests submitted by PPR to NI Executive Departments, local councils and non-departmental public bodies, neither is there any evidence that, at a strategic level, government has engaged in discussions with telecommunications companies around how they can meaningfully deliver on their responsibilities as corporate citizens during this pandemic.<sup>21</sup>

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17 <https://www.ispreview.co.uk/index.php/2019/09/virgin-media-uk-secures-local-full-fibre-contract-for-belfast.html>

18 <https://www.bt.com/about/annual-reports/2020summary/assets/documents/bt-digital-impact-sustainability-report-2019-20.pdf>

19 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/industry-and-government-joint-statement-on-telecommunications-support-for-the-nhs>

20 <https://www.bt.com/about/coronavirus/our-customershttps://www.virginmedia.com/help/coronavirus-update>

21 Copies of the responses received can be obtained on request from PPR

Overall however, **there is no evidence** that telecommunications companies have introduced any targeted measures to ensure **connectivity** for those on the **'wrong side'** of the digital divide.



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## **IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON MARGINALISED YOUNG PEOPLE**

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In Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, marginalised young people are amongst those most severely impacted by the pandemic, with many of these impacts being largely hidden. As outlined above, access to almost all fundamental rights during the pandemic rely on good internet access, a right currently denied to many of these young people.

Fortunately, young people as a population group are known to be at less risk of becoming seriously ill or dying as a result of contracting Covid-19. However, it is widely recognised that young people are amongst those who will experience the most severe social and economic impacts as a result of the fallout from Covid-19, including significant disruption to their education, social and leisure activities, experience unemployment, loss of income, psychological distress and trauma. These impacts will be disproportionately experienced by marginalised young people, for whom most of these factors were part and parcel of their lives pre-Covid-19.

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## UNEMPLOYMENT AND MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS

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Unemployment rates are rising sharply and job losses on a massive scale are predicted for the UK. Since the pandemic began employment has fallen by approximately half a million. Amongst the particular groups disproportionately affected are young people. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has estimated that 300,000 young people aged 16-24 have become unemployed, a fall of 60% in employment<sup>22</sup>.

Current predictions are that youth unemployment in the UK is likely to triple to the highest levels since the early 1980s, to levels not seen since the Thatcherite era.<sup>23</sup> Research by the Resolution Foundation estimated that unemployment among economically active 18 – 24-year-olds could hit 17% by late 2020. In the past decade levels of both youth unemployment and long-term unemployment have been much higher in Northern Ireland than in neighbouring jurisdictions.

The impacts on young people's mental well-being are also likely to be very significant, with longer term impacts not known as yet. A survey carried out with young people in the UK during June and July 2020 by Young Minds mental health charity found that 80% of respondents said the pandemic had made their mental health 'much worse', a huge increase from 32% from a previous survey in March 2020. This was often attributed to increased feelings of anxiety, isolation, a loss of coping mechanisms or a loss of motivation. Loneliness was identified as a major issue, with 87% of respondents reporting feeling lonely or isolated during lockdown. Of those who had accessed mental health support prior to the Covid-19 crisis, 31% said they were no longer able to access it but still needed it.

In Northern Ireland the impacts of Covid-19 on mental health will be experienced by a population of young people already experiencing higher levels of mental ill-health than their peers in other jurisdictions in the UK. A major study commissioned by the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) found levels of both anxiety and depression to be 25% higher in young people in Northern Ireland.<sup>24</sup>

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22 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-54520521>

23 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/oct/07/Covid-19-generation-uk-youth-unemployment-set-to-triple-to-80s-levels>

24 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-54601580>

For young people who are homeless all of these impacts will be multiplied. Many of these young people will already have experienced trauma in their lives, had disruptions to their education and normal opportunities such as employment and normal social and leisure activities denied to them. They are forced to survive on income levels that are recognised as being well below the poverty threshold. They experience significant additional barriers to accessing education, training and employment, including lack of opportunities to obtain qualifications and discrimination based on their accommodation status.

As discussed above, internet access is absolutely critical for this group of young people if government is serious about removing the many barriers to their meaningful participation on an equal basis in society.

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## HOMELESS NOT VOICELESS

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Homelessness is a growing issue in Northern Ireland. From January to June 2020 there were over 4,000 placements into temporary accommodation by the NIHE.<sup>25</sup> Of these approximately a third (1,664) were families, followed by 1,200 single males, 870 single females, 680 pensioner households and 190 couples. Temporary accommodation can be a private single let, a voluntary sector hostels, a homeless hostel, B&Bs or hotels or other forms of emergency accommodation. The majority of people are placed in B&Bs/hotels (58%) followed by private single lets (21%) and then voluntary sector hostels (12%). The Department for Communities has indicated that due to the impact of Covid-19 a higher number of households were placed in temporary accommodation in 2020 compared with the same period in previous years.

Since 2012 PPR has worked on a unique and innovative project supporting people affected by homelessness, to use a Human Rights Based Approach to make changes in the services they receive and in wider government policy on homelessness<sup>26</sup>. In September 2014 the Homeless Not Voiceless group launched a Homeless Action Charter, making concrete proposals to the Northern Ireland Executive to end homelessness.

In 2019 the campaign launched a monitoring report, documenting the experiences of people living in hostels or temporary accommodation and making proposals for change. The research found that people were being forced to spend long periods of time in temporary hostel accommodation, with repeated experiences of homeless being common. A key recommendation addressed the situation whereby those living in hostels with Full Duty Applicant status were being denied that status and therefore the housing waiting list points they were entitled to.

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25 <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-homelessness-bulletin-january-june-2020>

26 <https://www.pprproject.org/homeless-action>

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## **RESEARCH INTO HOMELESS YOUNG PEOPLE'S ACCESS TO INTERNET DURING COVID-19**

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### **Background**

Following lockdown in late March 2020, and the subsequent launch of the Internet 4 All campaign by PPR, youth workers from across the greater Belfast area highlighted the difficulties being experienced by the young people they worked with. Due to social distancing measures introduced, education, training and employability programmes (ETE) had to be moved online. However, it quickly became apparent that many of the young participants did not have internet access and were therefore unable to continue with their participation in the programmes. This lack of access was particularly marked for young people living in homeless hostels.

While the research that forms the basis for this report focuses on a specific group of young people, it should be acknowledged that similar issues with internet access exist for the larger population of people who are living in state funded residential facilities. These include asylum seekers living in the UK Home Office accommodation, young people in care and care leavers in residential accommodation and young people in juvenile justice and secure care settings. The solutions identified through this research to the lack of internet access for young people living in homeless hostels should apply equally to this wider group of people.

### **Research Aim**

The aim of the research was to investigate and document the experiences of a group of marginalised young people in relation to internet access during Covid-19, to identify barriers and to develop solutions.

## Profile

The young people were all living in the Greater Belfast and Lisburn area. They were aged between 16 and 24 years of age, with 53% female and 47% male. A number of the young people were from a care experienced background. Approximately a third of young people (42) were living in supported living accommodation, a further 11% (16) were sofa surfing while a very small number (2) were street homeless. For all of them their sole source of income was from the social security system.

## Method

With the support of PPR and their youth workers, the young people developed a quantitative survey which was completed by 140 of their peers in the greater Belfast area during July 2020. They also collated case studies and feedback from participants. They researched and documented the specific barriers to internet access in homeless hostels, drawing on their own experiences and talking to other young people accommodated in hostels. Finally, they researched solutions, both from the local context but also internationally, not only to the specific issue of lack of internet access in homeless hostels, but also for marginalised groups and communities more broadly.

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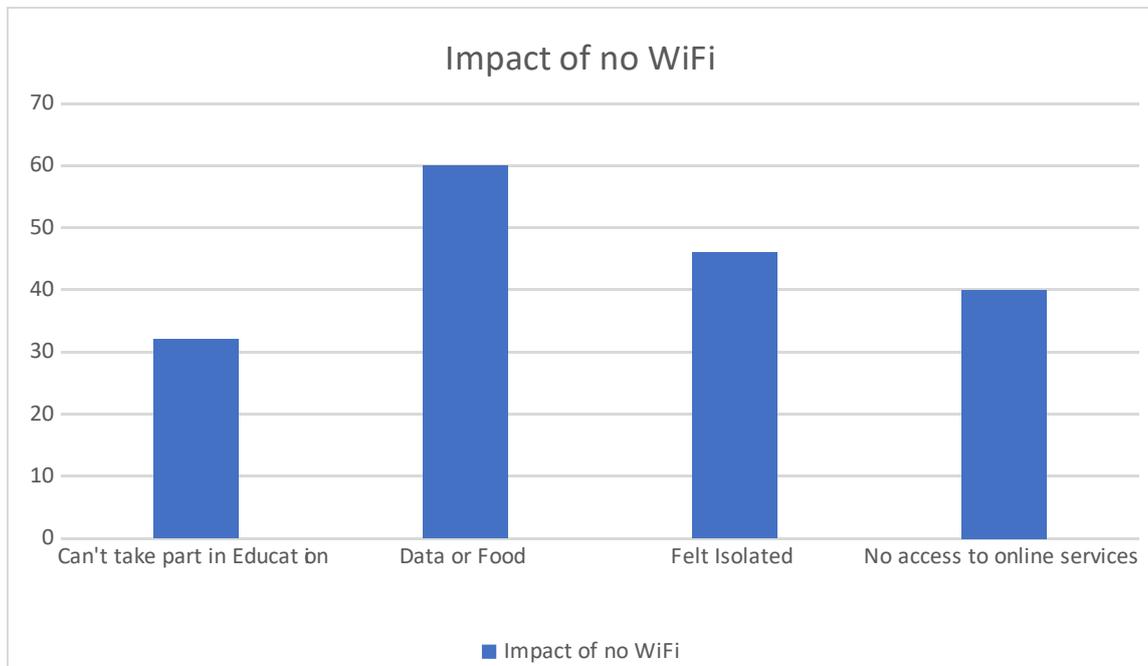
## SURVEY FINDINGS

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### Access to Wi-Fi

50% of young people surveyed reported that they had no access to internet and had to rely on either contracted or pay as you go data.

At 50% without internet access, this is a much higher percentage than in the general population, with the ONS putting estimates at approximately 13% of the general population.



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### IMPACT OF HAVING NO ACCESS TO WI-FI ON THE LIVES OF THE YOUNG PEOPLE

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46 (32%) young people reported that as a result of having no internet access they felt that they couldn't fully participate in their ETE programme, which was, crucially, designed to give at-risk young people a sense of inclusion and belonging.

60 (42%) young people reported that the lack of internet access meant they were forced to choose between paying for food, data or bills.

Lack of internet access had a major impact on the psychological well-being of young people surveyed. Almost a half of all respondents (46%) said that as a result of lack of internet access and digital connectivity to others, they felt lonely and isolated. One young person commented:

*'living in this hostel is really damaging my mental health, I just feel so isolated'*

Access to essential public services, including health, to social security and employment opportunities were all significantly impacted through lack of internet access. Young people identified difficulties with accessing Universal Credit, applying for jobs and accessing counselling provision:

*'Without internet I can't update my Universal Credit, I can't engage in services, can't apply for jobs and any tech course I look at for next year they are saying they are all online. I am being held back all because of where I live which is out of my control.'*

For those young people with internet access, they reported that it helped improve their social life and connections, giving them the opportunity to participate in education and an online social life during lockdown:

*'Through studies all classes being online and tests being the same it was a necessity, so I couldn't have lived without it. It was my sat nav to get to Covid tests, it was my gateway to loved ones, kept friendships together and relationships alive'*

One young person connected their ability to continue participating in the ETE programme during lockdown as extremely beneficial to their mental health:

*'If it wasn't for this course I don't know where I'd be, especially with lockdown and all. My mental health could have suffered badly but this course helped me build better routine, keep up positive mental health and stay connected'*

This observation was echoed by youth workers providing support to young people during lockdown:

*"Internet was a life saver for the work we do, during lockdown. As youth workers we aim to ensure young people are supported and their needs are being met and this was especially important during a global pandemic. Internet enabled us to carry out our work and be a consistent support for young people during such uncertain times."*

The following case studies encapsulate how the lack of internet access significantly restricts the daily lives of young people who are living in hostels in a myriad of ways, including education and job opportunities, mental health and well-being and family relationships.

## **Michael** <sup>27</sup>

*My name is Michael and I am 19 years old. I have been living in a supported living hostel for the past 10 months. It is two bus journeys away from my own community, my family, my friends & all of the connections I have had all my life. My room consists of a single bed and a small kitchen. From my Universal Credit I pay £30 per month service charge towards the hostel, £50 a month repayment to Universal Credit because I had to take out an upfront loan while waiting for the first payment, as well as money for food and bills. I have a young son who I provide for also. As you can imagine I am left with very little at the end of the week for anything else.*

*I was so excited to gain my place on this programme back in March. I was wanting to better myself and do something worthwhile whilst also being a positive role model for my son who lives with his mummy. The programme started and I never missed a day, the support was brilliant and I knew this would be my next step to help me get into tech, university or employment.*

*But unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 outbreak the course went online at the end of March. All of the workshops and classes went online. I have a phone but it is an old version as I can't afford the newest one, it doesn't have internet access and it doesn't receive or make calls so I couldn't access the coursework.*

*My hostel received thousands in Government funding to put a computer suite in, so I asked about using it to help me keep up on the course.*

*I was told due to restrictions it was only one at a time so I could never get a place in the room at the time when my course was happening, or if I did I had already missed part of the week which led me to fall more and more behind.*

*I asked could I use the phone at reception to receive calls from my mentor and at least get my one-to-one support however, I was told I'm not allowed due to Covid-19.*

*I asked about getting Wi-Fi access in my room or somewhere in the hostel, this place that is meant to be my home, but was told it's against the rules.*

*I felt myself falling further and further behind in my course. The rest of the group who had Wi-Fi were getting involved online with google classroom for our studies, online activities and games through a Facebook page and Zoom for our group sessions but for me to try and pay for data to keep up with all of that was impossible.*

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27 Names have been changed to protect the young people's identities

*The people in the course with support of PPR tried everything to help me in any way they could as they knew I was really trying to keep engaging but I just kept being met by barriers because of the hostel. Youth workers could see that my mental health was getting lower and lower. I saw people on the course succeeding when I couldn't. I felt so isolated, I couldn't connect with anyone outside of my room at the hostel. And especially in full lockdown I wasn't even allowed to leave to visit family or friends.*

*Having access to internet was the only thing standing between me and connection, me and support for my mental health, me and my son and me and opportunities for future employment or tech. I want to be able to join tech and apply for jobs like friends from my course are but I have no way of doing it as its all online. A lot of hostels got a lot of funding to help us during lockdown and I can't see why we are being denied our human right to be able to have the same opportunities offered to other young people just because we live in a hostel.*

## Catherine

*Catherine is a 19-year-old young woman living in a supported living hostel. She has a one-year old daughter and at the time of signing up to the programme was pregnant with her second child. She was never involved with a youth programme and felt that she wanted to meet other young people with similar experiences to her own. She felt that she still wanted to work on her personal development to improve her self-esteem and confidence.*

*As a result of the Covid-19 restrictions, Catherine struggled with engaging in the group work element of the programme due to not having access to the internet at her hostel. She could not afford the cost of putting in internet or having to constantly put data in her phone with trying to keep up with food and other bills. Her main engagement on the programme was over the phone with staff providing one to one support via telephone conversations and when restrictions were reduced meeting up in a local park.*

*Catherine told staff that she was in a turbulent relationship which was at times violent. Staff supported her through being in regular telephone contact and providing information around services that may help her situation. It was clear that Catherine would have benefited greatly from more supports during this time however could not avail of them due to restrictions imposed by the hostel she lived in.*

*To help Catherine to engage with group work, staff supported her through providing a pay-as-you-go router, with top ups accessed through supports at PPR. This enabled her to take part in sessions and helped her feel part of the programme and build social connections to help improve her mental well-being.*

*When reflecting on the programme Catherine felt that she had missed out on a lot of the activities and was extremely isolated and at risk because of not being able to engage fully with no internet access.*

This research highlights how the impact of a lack of internet access for young people who are marginalised, and in particular for young people living in hostels, is far reaching and how it has been greatly compounded by Covid-19 restrictions. A denial of rights in and of itself, the lack of internet access also undermines their enjoyment of a wide range of other rights, including right to privacy, education, training, employment, healthcare, participation and family life. It is potentially discriminatory towards these young people on the grounds of their socio-economic status as well as other equality grounds such as disability. This point was succinctly articulated by one of the young people interviewed

***‘We are being denied our human right to be able to have the same opportunities offered to other young people just because we live in a hostel’***

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## **BARRIERS TO INTERNET ACCESS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN HOSTELS**

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Among the barriers identified by the young people were the following:

- 1** Cost – young people who accessed the internet via their mobile phones or other devices had to buy data. For most of these young people their sole source of income was Universal Credit, and as explained by Michael above, this was not enough to cover other bills and living costs, let alone buying sufficient data for data-heavy activities such as video calling or online learning.
- 2** Hostels restricting Wi-Fi connectivity to communal areas which could not be accessed due to Covid-19 social distancing requirements.
- 3** Lack of suitable digital hardware – some young people had no digital devices or their devices were too old and therefore not suitable.

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## **SOLUTIONS**

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Young people worked alongside youth workers and PPR organisers to develop low-cost, workable solutions to the lack of internet access in hostels. A comprehensive list of practical and innovative solutions developed by local communities and administrations in various jurisdictions is attached as Appendix A. The most promising initiative to address immediate barriers for young people in temporary accommodation was being implemented by an NI-based provider MACS.

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## CASE STUDY

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### **MACS – Leading the way in ensuring internet access for all**

Young people identified measures undertaken by a local service provider, MACS, to successfully address the issue of internet access within hostels as a model of good practice for other providers to follow.

MACS<sup>28</sup> provides a range of services to young people across Northern Ireland, including supported housing. Prior to lockdown in late March 2020 MACS had provided Wi-Fi free of charge in the communal areas of their accommodation. With the onset of lockdown, they realised that they needed to provide Wi-Fi access in all individual rooms, flats and communal areas.

MACS kindly shared the following information as to how this was achieved, as follows:

- Network installation was funded out of under-spend from housing maintenance budgets from the preceding year
- Installation cost was £5000 across all four sites
- The system works on: Power over Ethernet switched (POE switch), The buildings were network cabled (cat5e / cat6)
- Wireless access points were installed and configured to work off a hosted controller (Unifi) LR model which is costed monthly through an IT company.
- There are 2 networked projects in each building – one for staff and one for young people.
- There is an ongoing annual cost (additional to their maintenance contract costs) at approx. £1500 per annum and this includes running and maintenance costs.
- Since installing the WI-FI in all flats MACS reported that there have been no specific issues have arisen that have not been possible to resolve.

This approach provides a useful template for other hostel providers to utilise in order to address the issues of internet connectivity.

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28 <https://www.macsn.org/>

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## WHAT STEPS HAS GOVERNMENT TAKEN TO ENSURE INTERNET FOR ALL IN NI?

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The survey results and case studies above provide stark evidence not only of the extent of lack of internet access for young people who are homeless, but also of the impact of this on every aspect of their lives during the pandemic, including education, employment, income, mental health and social connections.

Yet a brief review of just a small number of key government policy documents, at both central and local government levels, make it abundantly clear that there has been little if no consideration given to the urgent need to address this digital divide, one which, as evidenced above, is experienced most acutely by young people who are homeless and living in hostels.

While there has been some limited acknowledgement of the rural/urban divide, if little improvements as yet<sup>29</sup>, there has been even less attention paid to tackling the general gap between the digitally connected and disconnected. It is clear that government at all levels, both pre- and during the pandemic, have prioritised support for business connectivity at the expense of addressing digital exclusion.

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## NI EXECUTIVE

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The NI Executive's Programme for Government, whilst not including a specific commitment to ensuring digital access for all, contains a number of outcomes and associated actions with relevance for digital connectivity.<sup>30</sup> These include making more government services available online and the development of a Digital Infrastructure Strategy.

**Surprisingly, the Executive's commitment to a multi-year Programme for Government, underpinned by a multi-year budget and legislative programme, included in the New Decade New Approach document, makes no reference to the need to address digital exclusion.<sup>31</sup>**

The Digital Transformation Strategy published in 2017 focuses solely on maximising the use of digital technology to drive better services and lower delivery costs and is also silent on the issue of lack of connectivity for marginalised communities<sup>32</sup>.

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29 <https://www.nlb.ie/scrutiny/post/rural-urban-digital-divide/>

30 <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/topics/making-government-work/programme-government>

31 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/856998/2020-01-08\\_a\\_new\\_decade\\_\\_a\\_new\\_approach.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/856998/2020-01-08_a_new_decade__a_new_approach.pdf)

32 <https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/publications/digital-transformation-strategy-2017-2021>

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## BELFAST CITY COUNCIL

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The largest of the eleven local councils, Belfast City Council does not appear to have prioritised internet connectivity for those of its residents with limited to no internet access, either before or during the pandemic. Since March 2020 the Council has undertaken some stand-alone interventions, such as the provision of tablets for families via the Family Support Hub and work to address the lack of internet access for asylum seekers, all of which are to be welcomed. However, there is no indication that the Council is actively addressing the lack of connectivity for its most marginalised residents to the scale or speed required.

In response to a Freedom of Information request by PPR, the Council confirmed that since lockdown in March 2020 it hadn't taken any steps to ascertain levels of access to digital hardware or levels of digital literacy or capacity among residents. It also confirmed that it relied solely on data from an OFCOM 2018 Connected Nations report with no additional local needs' assessment being undertaken.

Its customer focus programme '*Putting You First – Transforming Customer Experience*'<sup>33</sup> included a commitment to '*help those who don't have the technology or the skills to access our services online*' but provided no concrete details of how they had identified those residents or how it intended to close the tech and skills gap that exists. Despite the Council's claims to be adopting a '*Digital First, not digital only*' approach to service provision, worryingly it appears to be moving towards digital only, a development that should be challenged on equality grounds.

The recent appointment of a Digital Innovation Commissioner by the Council represents a good opportunity to develop some targeted approaches to tackle digital exclusion<sup>34</sup>. The actions taken by a number of local municipalities in the United States and elsewhere, outlined in Appendix A of this report, provide an excellent template for Belfast City Council's Commissioner to work from.

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33 [https://consult.belfastcity.gov.uk/finance-and-resources/customer-vision/consult\\_view/](https://consult.belfastcity.gov.uk/finance-and-resources/customer-vision/consult_view/)

34 <https://minutes3.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/g9843/Printed%20minutes%2019th-Jun-2020%2009.30%20Strategic%20Policy%20and%20Resources%20Committee.pdf?T=1>

**the Executive's  
commitment to a  
multi-year Programme  
for Government,  
underpinned by a  
multi-year budget and  
legislative programme,  
included in the New  
Decade New Approach  
document, makes **no  
reference to the need  
to address digital  
exclusion.****



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## DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES

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The Department for Communities (DfC) is the largest of the nine government departments with a budget of some £7 billion. Its areas of responsibility include housing, social security, social inclusion, tackling poverty and disadvantage and promoting equality of opportunity. DfC is responsible for taking forward the delivery plans for 8 of the 49 indicators supporting the strategic outcomes outlined in the NI Executive's Programme for Government. As such it plays a key role in addressing the digital divide experienced by those individuals and communities most marginalised.

In response to a Freedom of Information by PPR in June 2020, requesting information on steps taken to determine the digital access and capacity of the population it provided services to, and accompanying steps taken to any gaps or barriers identified, the Department responded by stating that it did not hold any of that information<sup>35</sup>. Instead it referred PPR to the Department of Finance's Enterprise Shared Services (ESS). This directorate within the Department of Finance is responsible for information technology, finance and digital services amongst other briefs. While the ESS might not be expected to play a front-line role in addressing digital exclusion, the Department for Communities certainly would be.

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## HOUSING EXECUTIVE

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The Northern Ireland Housing Executive's vision is as follows *'everyone is able to live in an affordable and decent home, appropriate to their needs, in a safe and attractive place'*<sup>36</sup> It also includes *'having a home which has access to the appropriate infrastructure in terms of transport, education, schools, shopping and recreation'*. In 2020, an understanding of the terms *'appropriate to their needs'* and *'appropriate infrastructure'* must incorporate access to the internet.

A review of a number of Housing Executive documents reveals no evidence that it is actively considering or directly addressing the issue of internet connectivity for its tenants, including in its provision for those who are homeless.

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35 Freedom of Information response received by PPR from the Department for Communities dated 30 June 2020. Reference No: DFC/2020-0103

36 <https://nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Corporate/Corporate-plan-2017-18-2020-21.aspx>

Annual progress reports for the years 2017/18 and 2018/19 make no mention of internet connectivity as an issue. Neither is it referenced in its Homeless Strategy for 2017-2022.

Its Customer Excellence Strategy 2017-2020 sets out a number of improvement strands, including increasing digital services and details a pilot digital inclusion strategy to enable tenants to access services via digital facilities within Housing Executive offices. During and following lockdown in March 2020 the Housing Executive's default is to provide services online.<sup>37</sup> In line with government guidance, access to its offices is by appointment only. This has very significant implications for service users who cannot get online.

The Housing Executive's most recent Continuous Tenant Omnibus Survey (CTOS) available, indicated that in 2018 less than two thirds of respondents had access to the internet, a significantly lower percentage than for the population as a whole.<sup>38</sup> Over three quarters relied on mobile/smartphones to access the internet.<sup>39</sup> Only one-fifth of respondents with access to the internet had accessed a Housing Executive service via its website.

Since lockdown the Housing Executive has undertaken a number of positive actions to address barriers to digital connectivity, including the provision of devices, training and funding support, but these actions are overwhelmingly targeted at staff and stakeholders, as opposed to tenants<sup>40</sup>. There is no evidence of any direct measures having been undertaken to address the lack of internet access for young people living in hostels.

The NIHE issued Covid-19 Guidance for Homeless Service Providers in Northern Ireland at the end of August 2020.<sup>41</sup> This guidance contains key messages for providers of homeless hostels, refuges, day centres and shelters. It includes detailed guidance on procedures and adaptations required to deal with Covid-19, but yet again not address the vital issue of internet connectivity for residents.

**Across both central and local government, it is clear that the issue of digital exclusion, brought into sharp focus by the pandemic, is not receiving the attention it urgently requires. Without urgent intervention those who were already most marginalised pre-Covid will be left even further behind.**

37 <https://nihe.gov.uk/My-Housing-Executive/Online-Services>

38 Freedom of Information response from NIHE to PPR dated 3 July 2020/No reference number provided.

39 Ibid

40 Ibid

41 <file:///C:/Users/Sara%20Boyce/Desktop/Hostels%20report/COVID-19%2019%20GUIDANCE%20FOR%20HOMELESS%20PROVIDERS.pdf>

Across both central and local government, it is clear that the issue of **digital exclusion**, brought into sharp focus by the pandemic, is not receiving the attention it urgently requires. Without urgent intervention those who were already most **marginalised** pre-Covid will be **left even further behind**.



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## COMMUNITY BASED SOLUTIONS TO LACK OF INTERNET ACCESS

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Across the globe those impacted by this digital divide, alongside progressive elements within communities, have come together to both challenge the failure of states to progress and guarantee digital rights for their citizens. These groups and alliances have developed policy recommendations as well as practical and innovative solutions on the ground.

The Human Rights, Big Data and Technology Project based at the Essex University Human Rights Centre has developed five urgent principles to ensure no one is left behind through technology.<sup>42</sup> These include guaranteeing internet access as a human right and public good, increasing availability and acceptability of digital infrastructure and increasing accessibility and affordability of digital services. They point to the need for states to take urgent action to enable people to get online. Steps identified include lifting data caps and increasing access to free public Wi-Fi. Importantly, attention is drawn to the risks of states using their response to the pandemic as a pretext for introducing new surveillance tools under the guise of public health or other necessary measures. They note that a failure to ensure that any digitally based responses are lawful, necessary, proportionate, time limited and accompanied by effective safeguards would in fact reinforce the digital divide.<sup>43</sup>

Meaningful connectivity is about more than simply access to the web. The international Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI) has argued that for people to get the internet's full benefits, people need regular access to a suitable device and enough data at sufficient speeds. They suggest that in order to ensure that everyone can access the most vital information during the Covid-19 crisis, websites for official health organisations and other essential government services should be zero-rated, meaning that they don't draw from people's data plans.

The A4AI has called on governments to provide all necessary support to keep citizens connected. Solutions proposed include national connectivity pledges, solidarity plans and the creation of digital inclusion initiatives and funds.

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42 <https://www.hrbdt.ac.uk/the-Covid-19-pandemic-five-urgent-principles-for-leaving-no-one-behind-through-technology/>

43 <https://www.pprproject.org/a-shadow-penal-system-surveillance-in-the-welfare-state>

Practical and innovative examples abound as to how communities and groups impacted by lack of internet access have developed workable solutions to this problem in the face of state inaction. Many of these initiatives and projects pre-dated the pandemic, with the learning and knowledge gained providing inspiration and assistance during the Covid-19 crisis. Some have received municipal or central government support, support from the private tech sector, but many are wholly funded and rolled out by local communities on a 'needs must' basis.

Initiatives include lift zones for Wi-Fi across community centres in the US, tech companies providing free internet and Wi-Fi, drive-in hot spots including in public library car parks, Wi-Fi enabled public buses (Wi-Fi on wheels), Wi-Fi gardens, free installation of equipment with zero cost service, provision of tablets and laptops equipped with mobile Wi-Fi, pledges by internet companies not to disconnect customers for non-payment and waiving late fees. See Appendix A for more information on these solutions.

An interesting pre-Covid-19 example is that of one UK digital tech company, Wi-Finity, which in 2017 installed Wi-Fi, free of charge, in four homeless hostels. The company set itself the challenge of connecting all four hostels within one day in the run up to the Christmas holiday period. Its CEO Mark Parry explained their motivation

*'Internet access is now a basic utility. We all rely on the internet to search and apply for jobs, to work, and to keep in touch with friends and family. People in temporary accommodation need access to help them get back on their feet.'*

The potential for tech companies in Northern Ireland, some of whom have been awarded large government contracts and have benefited from government grants, to step up and do likewise exists and would certainly demonstrate their commitment to being good corporate citizens.

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## CONCLUSION

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The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the extent to which digital access is a fundamental human right. It has also shone a light on a growing global digital divide. With all public services moving online, access to essential services including health and social security, became dependent on reliable internet access. Those without the digital hardware or money to buy data have effectively been left behind.

Among those most severely impacted by digital inequality have been marginalised young people – locked down and cut off. This exclusion has further compounded their marginalisation and has impacted negatively on their mental health, their education and training, employment opportunities and their family and social life.

The research undertaken by young people involved in the Internet 4 All campaign and presented in this report provides ample evidence of this, from difficulties updating Universal Credit to engaging with services, applying for jobs, staying connected with families and looking after their own mental health.

However, these negative impacts are utterly preventable. As this report demonstrates, it doesn't take much to break through the digital divide. The young people have presented solutions to the immediate problem of lack of internet access within homeless hostels, comprising of two simple, low-cost steps – open up WiFi and lift data caps. They have also compiled a list of innovative, grass roots responses from across a range of countries.

**Those with little or no access and resources have taken the lead in developing practical solutions to close the digital divide. Yet, those with the power and responsibility to ensure that all residents have good digital access, have been found to be severely lacking in their response, both in speed and scale.**

As this report has highlighted, the demands of business continue to be prioritised over the needs of the most marginalised groups and communities within our society. A wide gap exists between written policies in relation to digital inclusion and action on the ground across central government departments and agencies and local councils.

The Internet for All campaign was borne out of this failure by the state and the urgent need to break the isolation and exclusion felt by marginalised communities across the north of Ireland. This coalition of over 200 organisations and individuals will continue to demand that government, along with digital technology industry leaders, step up to their respective political and corporate responsibilities and address the digital divide.

Those with little or **no access** and resources have taken the lead in developing practical solutions to close the **digital divide**. Yet, those with the power and responsibility to ensure that all residents have good digital access, have been found to be **severely lacking** in their response, both in speed and scale.



## ***Appendix A***

### Menu of locally developed solutions to lack of internet access

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#### **1 Campaigns and lobbies for Internet Access**

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##### **US Federal Level**

The US Federal Communication Commission has a “Keep Americans Connected” programme which has urged telecoms companies to sign up and agree not to disconnect broadband customers for non-payment during the pandemic, waive late fees and make Wi-Fi hotspots available to the public. A rolling list of which companies have signed up and what they’ve agreed to is publicly available.

##### WiFi for Online Learning During Covid-19

##### **California**

Lack of access has become an emergency for students as schooling becomes remote in response to the pandemic. Many students with no access at home have been cut off from school computer labs, libraries, or other places where they may usually get the access they need. This type of situation is exactly what led to the viral pictures of two Salinas students—who clearly wanted to learn—doing their school work on the sidewalk outside the local Taco Bell<sup>44</sup>.

Democratic Party Senator Lena Gonzalez built broad support for a deal that would have secured more than 100 million dollars a year to secure access to high-speed Internet for families, first responders, and seniors across the state.

##### California groups call for urgent action on broadband access

##### Wyden colleagues push Comcast to open public WiFi to students lacking access

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44 <https://www.nbc15.com/2020/09/04/more-than-145000-raised-for-family-of-2-girls-who-did-homework-outside-calif-taco-bell/>

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## 2 Action by local administrations

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### Philadelphia

The Covid-19 pandemic affected Philadelphia drastically and reinforced the need to focus on digital equity across the city.

**The City's initiative includes three core strategies:**

- Ensuring all K-12 public school students have consistent access to the technology, internet, and support that they need to engage in remote learning in the fall of 2020 and the beyond.
- Reimagining the future of public computing centers, including KEYSPTS, in the context of a limited budget, Covid-19, and social distancing, and creating more in-home access for students and their families.
- Guaranteeing that all Philadelphians have access to affordable and reliable digital solutions so they can work and access everything from education to training to healthcare and other essential online services.

The City has stated that it will create a Digital Equity Coordinating Committee that includes cross-departmental collaboration among various offices.

The committee plans to work with a broad range of stakeholders and communities to create solutions. The Digital Literacy Alliance also plans to take on a leadership role and act as an advisory board that oversees this work.

[How City of Philadelphia plans to approach digital access](#)

## Ohio, US

Ohio's Lieutenant Governor Jon Husted announced that Broadband Ohio had been working with internet service providers to create public Wi-Fi hotspots for Ohioans who may not have access to the internet while staying home.

[Ohio expands hotspot access](#)

## Cork, Ireland

Broadband Connection Points (BCP) have been installed in Co. Cork to provide isolated communities with free high-speed internet access at publicly-accessible sites under the Government's new Connected Communities initiative. The five BCPs are among the first premises to be connected under the National Broadband Plan and are located in some of the most isolated and rural communities in the country, including islands off the coast of Cork, Donegal, Kerry, Mayo, and Galway.

[Key broadband connections for five locations in rural Cork](#)

## England

The Local Government Association's (LGA) Digital Connectivity programme will see several councils chosen to receive £20,000 to better meet the needs of their residents, improve productivity and their livelihoods through connectivity innovation.

The Digital Connectivity programme is intended to help councils create environments to test and develop innovative technologies and services to improve the lives of their communities while modernising ways of working and living.

[Councils offered £20,000 to improve digital connectivity](#)

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### **3 Opening up hotspots**

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Across the globe local communities have worked with education providers, libraries and others to open up Wi-Fi hotspots. Public and school buses, no longer in use during the pandemic have been re-purposed as mobile Wi-Fi providers for students and their families. They have tapped in Wi-Fi from school and library car parks amongst other sites. These initiatives have proven to be particularly effective in rural areas. Below are links to just a few examples of such initiatives.

#### **USA:**

[Metro Atlanta school district equips buses with WiFi to help students](#)

[Using school bus WiFi to support distance learning](#)

[Russell county school district deploys WiFi enabled buses to spread internet access](#)

[Sussex County Libraries offer parking lot WiFi hotspots during Covid-19](#)

[WiFi access expanded at all Erie County public library locations](#)

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### **4 Distribution of devices**

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#### **Albany US**

Following the use of an initial 'quick fix' of students sitting in the library or school car park to connect to school Wi-Fi, and the use of 'hotspot' vehicles around the community, Berne Knox Westerlo School District partnered with the Albany County Executive Office and Hudson Valley Wireless to bring internet access to more than 50 families. The district also partnered with Capital Region BOCES to send Kajeet hotspot devices home, which work off of cell service. The district purchased about 20 devices. However, they found that there was a waiting list the devices, and they didn't work well for every household, so there were still some students who had trouble connecting. 'We've considered those circumstances and on a case by case basis, and we've allowed them to come every day because now, our school buildings are the most technologically advanced buildings in the hill town region.' Schools

Superintendent Timothy Mundell pointed to the longer-term solution as being fibre optic cabling.

Rural schools' districts have trouble connecting remote students to the internet

## England and Northern Ireland

In April 2020 Westminster government announced that they had partnered with Facebook to give tablets and internet access to help care home residents stay connected to their family. This was being rolled out in Surrey, with Manchester, Newcastle and London and other areas to follow.

NHS works with tech firms to help care home residents connect with loved ones

In April 2020 the Westminster government announced that children who receive support from a social worker / are care leavers were to be given a free tablet or laptop computer and 4G based mobile broadband service, which was intended to help with their education during the Covid-19 (Coronavirus) crisis.

Westminster announces major new package to support online learning

This was followed by a similar announcement by the NI Executive's Department for Education, which in May 2020 announced that it would provide up to 24,000 digital devices including laptops and tablets to disadvantaged school children, including those in receipt of Free School Meals, asylum seeker children, looked after children and other children considered vulnerable.

NI Education Minister outlines plans to provide digital devices for disadvantaged kids

It should be noted however that a review of education policy responses across the UK to the pandemic by the Nuffield Foundation and the Education Policy Institute<sup>45</sup> found that in the case of Northern Ireland (and Scotland), delivery of devices was only completed by or after the end of the school year, whereas by contrast, policy makers in Wales were able to make use of the well-established infrastructure on digital inclusion.

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45 <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/education-responses-uk-pandemic/>

## Initiatives by Internet Providers

In addition to the above, there are also many examples of once-off initiatives by telecommunication companies, including in the UK, offering free internet or Wi-Fi for time limited periods, primarily for the purpose of school children connecting with their online school work. Links to just a few examples are included here.

[Grande Communications offer free WiFi to those affected by Covid-19](#)

[Local internet provider gives free WiFi to students in rural areas](#)

[Comcast extends free WiFi offerings to eliminate disconnects and late fees](#)

[BT gifts 6 months free WiFi access to disadvantaged kids](#)

## Appendix B

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### Open Letter and Signatories

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*All-island Free Internet Connectivity*

*#NoOneLeftBehind*

*TO: Philip Jansen, CEO British Telecom*

*Marc Allera,*

*CEO EEMairead Meyer,*

*Director Openreach (NI)Shay Walsh,*

*MD BT IrelandLutz Schüler,*

*CEO Virgin MediaTony Hanway,*

*CEO Virgin Media IrelandMark Evans,*

*CEO Telefónica UK (O2)Nick Read,*

*CEO Vodafone UKAnne O'Leary,*

*CEO Vodafone IrelandDavid Rey,*

*CEO Sky Wi-FiStephen van Rooyen,*

*CEO Sky UK and IrelandDavid Dyson,*

CEO Three Robert Finnegan,

CEO Three Ireland Colm Piercy,

CEO Digiweb Carolann Lennon,

CEO Eir Matt Sanford,

CEO Pure Telecom Mark Kellett,

CEO Magnet Networks

Dear telecommunications CEOs,

The world has been fundamentally changed by the coronavirus outbreak.

Whole countries, including our own have entered lockdown.

Different levels of government have enacted emergency policies providing homes for the homeless and essential provisions for some of those in most need.

Families and communities are adhering to historically unprecedented social distancing guidelines as a universal act of love towards their neighbours and the most vulnerable in our society.

Non-essential industry has been brought to a halt to protect workers and the general public.

Essential workers risk their health, and their lives daily, by continuing to selflessly perform work which has been undervalued and subjected to callous austerity measures which have weakened our public services and ability to respond effectively to the current crisis.

At this time we all need to put our shoulder to the wheel and make available what resources we have to ensure that, together, we overcome this crisis and build infrastructure, public services and communities which are prepared to face future challenges.

One thing which has become evident is the absolute necessity of internet connectivity - a lifeline for social existence.

To adhere to social distancing, an accessible and reliable internet connection is required for people to access all other rights: to keep informed of guidance on how to keep them-selves safe, work, engage with state authorities, receive and spend money, communicate with family and friends, meet new people, care for the elderly, access mental health care, participate in education, collaborate, entertain and play.

*Internet connectivity is as important as the freedom of movement; it is a right, not a privilege to be granted dependent on income or status. Neither should rural areas be disadvantaged.*

*Considered as such, we are calling on you –as industry leaders who have both contributed to our society and profited greatly from the privatisation of telecommunications, government assistance and the public's custom -to take immediate measures to remove all barriers to internet connectivity as expeditiously as possible.*

*This is doable.*

*In the Republic of Ireland, the Central Statistics Office estimates that 9% of households are without internet access. In Northern Ireland, according to the OFCOM Connected Nations (2019) report, it is estimated that 20,000 homes cannot access a decent fixed broadband service. While medium term action is required to develop infrastructure to secure ultra-fast connectivity, immediate measures can be introduced by you to open up connectivity. The infrastructure largely exists, and where it does not immediate measures can be taken quickly:*

- *O2 already offers free Wi-Fi hotspots to the general public where available*
- *Eir boasts 100,000 restricted Wi-Fi hotspots which operate by tapping into domestic Wi-Fi hubs paid for by the public. Similarly, BT FON also uses household/domestic bandwidth which is already paid for by its customers, to provide BT-FON Wi-Fi hotspot connectivity limited to paying customers. Virgin Media and Sky Wi-Fi have similar hotspots in place which could be opened up now to give universal access*
- *Eir have removed all data limits for customers during the crisis to enable personal devices to be used as Wi-Fi hotspots for home connectivity*
- *Across the island, everyone is able to request a decent connection from BT (NI) or Eir (ROI) through the broadband Universal Service Obligation, however existing costs can be prohibitive for families.*

*We are calling on you, in the public interest, to work swiftly with Dáil Éireann and the Northern Ireland Executive to immediately open up all hotspots cost-free and to waive the prohibitive charges for households who are unable to access decent broadband connection.*

*You can lead an industry wide approach to opening access and guaranteeing an adequate, mini-mum level of internet connectivity to everyone. Broadband infrastructure needs to continue to be improved through fibre connections and the development of white space technology, but hotspot access and ending prohibitive charges are things you could do today.*

***#NoOneLeftBehind respectfully requests a considered response by Thursday  
30th April at 12pm***

See original letter in full at [bit.ly/net4all-letter](https://bit.ly/net4all-letter)

## **List of Signatories**

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### **Community and Voluntary Groups**

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Adam Turkington

Aideen Gilmore

Alicia Toal – Voice of Young People in Care

Andrew McCracken, CEO Community Foundation for Northern Ireland

Angus Lambkin – Consultant Humanitarian Planning for Emergencies

Annette Curley, Mental Health Charity Support Worker Galway

Ann Godfrey

Anne McVicker, Director Women's Resource and Development Agency

Barry Murray, Turas na nDaoine

Bernadette McAliskey, Director South Tyrone Empowerment Programme

Brian Mac Domhnaill, National Federation of Group Water Schemes Monaghan

Charlie Fisher, Development Trust NI

Cherif Labreche, CEO New Communities Partnership

Chloe O'Malley, Community Activist Louisburgh Co. Mayo

Ciaran McClean, Chair Save Our Sperrins

Ciarán O'Brien, Belfast Housing Action

Claudia Belloni, Co-ordinator Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre & North Belfast Friendship Club

Colum Benstead, Senior Social Worker, Childrens Safeguarding

Conchur O'Muadhaigh, Bainisteoir Abhcóideachta Conradh Na Gaeilge

Collette O'Regan, LGBT Ireland

Deirdre Garvey, CEO The Wheel

Dermot Devlin, My Way Access

Dermot Nelson, Addiction Services, Co. Cavan  
Denise Charlton, Denise Charlton Associates  
Denise Wright  
Desy Jones, Counsellor  
Ed Peterson, Chairperson Forthspring Inter Community Group  
Ellen McNally  
Emerge Counselling Services, Lisburn  
Emma Cassidy, Public Interest Litigation Support (PILS) Project  
End Deportations Belfast  
Etain O’Kane, Therapy Belfast  
Feargal Mac Ionnrachtaigh, Stiúrthóir, Glór na Móna  
Felicity Mckee, Disability Rights Campaigner  
Frankie Quinn, Co-ordinator Éalú  
Gerard McCartan, Chairperson Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR)  
Grian Ní Dhaimhín, Student Renters Group  
Hugh Brennan, Director Ó Cualann Housing  
James Orr, Director Friends of the Earth NI  
John Dunbar, Chair Alternative A5 Alliance  
John O’Doherty, Director The Rainbow Project  
John Peacock, National Secretary YMCA Ireland  
Josh O’Dowd, Sean Óg Le Cheile  
Karen McGuigan, Suicide, Talking, Education, Prevention, Support (STEPS)  
Kate Clifford, Director Rural Community Network  
Kerry Melville, Belfast Food Network  
Kyle Heffernan, Council for the Homeless Belfast  
Laura Wright  
Lilian Seeno, Director North West Migrants Forum  
Nicola Browne  
Nigel McKinney  
Mairtín Mac Gabhann, Cathaoirleach Loachra Loch Lao  
Mary Ryan, CEO MACS Supporting Young People  
Manus Maguire, Director Cliftonville Community Regeneration Forum

Markets Development Association  
Margaret O’Riada, Director Galway Travellers Movement  
Margaret Walker, West Belfast Suicide Awareness  
Oyedamola Bolajoko, Project Co-ordinator Sawa Womens Space  
Padraig Bennett, Community Worker Co. Meath  
Pádraic Mac Coitir  
Pádraig Ó Tiarnaigh, Gníomhaí Teanga Gaelphobal Ard Mhacha Theas  
Patrick Yu, Executive Director Northern Ireland Council for Racial Equality  
Pat Finucane Centre  
Pilip Ó Ruanaí, TACA  
Phillip McTaggart, Mindskills  
Rachel Mullen  
Rachel Powell, Women’s Resource and Development Agency  
Rebekah McCabe  
Ryan Doherty, Homeplus NI  
Ryan McKinney  
Refugees Welcome NI  
Richard Higginson, Loveworks  
Rory Doherty, Quaker Service NI  
Sara Connolly, Homeless Services, Tallaght, Dublin  
Sara Ferrigan, Clare Public Participation Network  
Sarah Mason, CEO Women’s Aid Federation NI  
Sister Maureen Lalley, CEO Tochar Valley Rural Community Network Mayo  
Stephanie Leonard, Founder Act Build Change  
Stephanie Mitchell, Director Belfast Friendship Club  
Stephen Wood, Co-ordinator Tools for Solidarity  
Stevie Nolan, Trademark  
Susan McCrory, Director Falls Women’s Centre  
Suzanne O’Brien Participation Officer EPIC – Empowering People in Care  
The Lantern Intercultural Centre

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## **Trade Unions**

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Caoimhín MacColaim, INTO Northern Committee Rep

Gerry Murphy, Northern Secretary of INTO

John Boyle, INTO General Secretary

Kevin Daly, INTO Northern Chairperson

Mary Magner, INTO President

Niall McCarroll, Derry Trade Unions Council and UNISON Community and Voluntary Branch

Taryn Trainor, Unite the Union

UNISON NI

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## **Academics**

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Dr. Brian Kelly, School of History, QUB

Dr Brigitte Anton

Professor Colin Harvey

Dr. Deena Haydon

Dr. Elizabeth McArdle

Goretti Horgan

Dr. Ionnis Tsioulakis

Professor John Barry

Professor John Pinkerton

Dr. Maria Pentaraki

Dr. Paula McFadden

Dr. Siobhan McAllister

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## **Arts and Entertainment**

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Alan Braniff, Belfast Grime Man

Anne Devlin, Playwright

Ciarán Mac Giolla Bhéin, Stiúrthóir An Chultúrlann

Charlotte Dryden, Oh Yeah Centre

Colin Murphy, Comedian

Colum Sands, DJ and folk artist

Connor Kerr and Rebecca Clough, Another World Belfast

Daniel Jewesbury, Artist

Denis O’Hearn, Author

Declan McLaughlin, Singer/Songwriter

Damien Dempsey, Singer/Songwriter

Finn Kennedy – Theatre-Maker

Gareth Moore, Artist

Joby Fox, Singer/Songwriter

John Connors, Actor/Playwright/Director

Maria McManus, Poet

Mimi Turtle, CEO Strand Arts Centre

Niamh Flanagan, Director Theatre NI

Oliver Martin, Artcetera

Paula McFettridge, Artistic Director Kabosh Theatre

Peter O’Neill, Director Imagine Belfast

Robin Wilson, Author and Campaigner

Ruth Carr, Poet

Simon Magill, Creative Director The MAC

Sarah Clancy, Poet

Tim Brannigan, Writer

Vincent Higgins, Playwright/Actor

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## **Education**

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Ashleigh Galway, Principal Currie Primary School

Bronagh McVeigh, Principal St Vincent de Paul Primary School

Emer Hughes, Principal Our Lady’s Primary School

Emma Clarke, Acting Principal Wheatfield Primary and Nursery

Máire Uí Éigeartaigh, Príomhoide Bunscoil Bheann Mhadagáin

Pádraig Mac Cathail, Oideachasóir, Coláiste Feirste

Siobhan McQuaid, Principal Holy Family Primary School

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## **Media**

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Adam Ramsay, Open Democracy

Chris Donnelly, commentator

Craig Dwyer, For A Change

Daithí McKay - commentator

John Gibbons, Retired Producer

Marilyn Hyndman, NV Media Trust

Sean Murray Film Maker

Trevor Birney, Below the Radar, Fine Point Films, Meon Ellie, and The Detail

Tyler McNally, The Last Round

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## **Youth**

---

Barry Fegan, Clonard Monastery Youth Centre

Carmel O Connor, Talk About Youth Project Dublin

Eddie Burns Youth Leader in Charge St Malachys Youth Centre

Israel E Nogie, Diverse Youth NI

Mary Field, CEO Northern Ireland Youth Work Alliance

Niall Enright, Manager Upper Springfield Youth Team

Paddy Mooney, Director Include Youth

Philip Glennon, Head of Operations Northern Ireland Youth Forum

Sean Madden, Holy Family Youth Centre

Shane Whelehan, Director Ardoyne Youth Enterprise

Siobhan McKinley, Quakers Teen Project Belfast

Sinead Keane, BeLonG To Youth Services

Start 360 - Stephen Barr

Steph O Rourke, Springboard Opportunities – Director of Springboard Angila Chada

Thomas Turley, Ardoyne Youth Club

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## **Sports**

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Árd Éoin GAC

Joe Gormley, Cliftonville Football Club Player

Mick Conlan, Boxer and Intercontinental Title Holder

Paddy Barnes, Ex-Pro Boxer and Olympic Medallist

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## **Religious**

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Adam McCormick, Site Pastor Christian Fellowship Church Sign Language

Alister and Ruth Wallace, Site Pastor Christian Fellowship Church Antrim

Andrew Gibson, Site Pastor Christian Fellowship Church Holywood

Rev Brian Anderson, Superintendent East Belfast Mission

Rev David Campton, Superintendent East Belfast Mission

Rev Ivan Steen for Windsor Presbyterian Church, Belfast

David Smith, Head of Northern Ireland Evangelical Alliance

Garath Baxter, Missions Pastor Christian Fellowship Church East Belfast

Laura Bell, Site Pastor Christian Fellowship Church South

Fr. Martin Magill

Owen Crane, Senior Pastor Christian Fellowship Church East Belfast

Thomas and Leanne Todd, Site Pastor Christian Fellowship Church Inner East

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## **Legal**

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Ciaran Moynagh, Director Phoenix Law Human Rights Lawyers LTD

Daniel Holder, Deputy Director Committee for the Administration of Justice

Paddy Kelly, Director Children's Law Centre

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## **Other**

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Emma Bricknell, Made in Belfast

John Dennehy, Founder ZARTIS

~~Locked Down~~  
and Cut off

