



Healthcare
Improvement
Scotland

Equality Impact Assessment

COVID-19 physical distancing measures and
approaches to community engagement –
'Engaging Differently'

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Introduction

Public bodies are required to assess the impact of applying a proposed new or revised policy, against the needs of the general equality duty, namely the duty to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by the Equality Act 2010;
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it; and
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it

The relevant protected characteristics are:

- age
- disability
- gender reassignment
- pregnancy and maternity
- race
- religion and belief
- sex
- sexual orientation
- marriage and civil partnership (relates to the elimination of discrimination only)

Public bodies also have duties to consider the impact:

- on people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage (Fairer Scotland Duty 2018)
- on the rights of children (and the rights of care experienced young people up to the age of 26) (Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014)
- on people living in island communities (The Islands (Scotland) Act 2018)

The recommendations made in this report seek to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 physical distancing measures on the community engagement opportunities available to people who share protected characteristics and people belonging to groups that are also likely to face disadvantage.

This Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) should be considered a 'live' document which will be updated should additional impacts be identified.

Aim/Purpose

Community engagement enables us to understand and act on the needs and experiences of communities to improve care and achieve outcomes that matter to them. [Community engagement methods](#) are wide ranging, but many involve face-to-face in-person engagement.

Due to the outbreak of a new strain of coronavirus (COVID-19) physical distancing measures have been introduced for everyone in the UK (the Government's full guidance can be read on their [website](#)). As a result of these measures, any face-to-face community engagement activities to inform health and care services or national policy will not be hosted or supported until it is safe to do so. We need to engage differently.

The purpose of this assessment is to consider the impact of physical distancing measures on approaches to community engagement. Available intelligence will be used to inform guidance that will support people and communities to influence areas of our work that affect them.

Assessment of Impact

Our approach to 'Engaging Differently' is intended to impact positively on all people living in Scotland, by addressing potential or actual barriers to participation. Given that the situation will shift thinking towards supporting a digital-first community engagement approach, it is important to consider how different groups may be impacted, to ensure that our approach is tailored to our purpose and the groups we seek to involve. While some communities organise and mobilise online, others bridge relations in person and that must be reflected in our approach. We must acknowledge the broad definition of digital exclusion to describe how some people have continuing unequal access and capacity to use Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) that are essential to fully participate in society.

This section will provide information about:

- Groups that might be impacted
- Evidence gathered about the experience of those people who might be impacted
- Engagement activities that would support our understanding of people's experiences

[Lightbody \(2017\)](#) observes that many academics support the claim that those facing inequalities, or discrimination in society, will face the same barriers within community processes. We therefore provide an outline of equality considerations relating to community engagement, organised by protected characteristics and other pertinent characteristics.

Age

Older people are well represented in our community engagement activities. People over 55 represent 55.6 percent of participants according to our 2018-2019 equality monitoring reports, yet only represent 29.5% of the Scottish population (according to the 2011 census).

However, physical distancing measures may impact on the ability of older people to participate in community engagement activities, particularly in digital methods. A recent report states that age is the leading characteristic of low digital engagement, with digital engagement decreasing as age rises. Those over 70 are particularly less likely to engage digitally ([Lloyds Bank 2020](#)). Moreover, older 'Asian' people are significantly less likely to have used the internet than white people belonging to the same age groups ([ONS 2019](#)), suggesting that there may be particular digital barriers to the engagement of some older minority ethnic groups.

Age UK found the factors that most strongly explain the likelihood of older individuals (aged 65 and over) using the internet or not, in rank order of contribution, are:

- Income
- Age
- Household composition
- Mobility
- Memory or ability to concentrate (self-rated) ([Age UK 2018](#))

These findings demonstrate that many barriers to digital inclusion exist at the intersection of age and other characteristics.

Engagement with organisations supporting and representing older people, such as [Age Scotland](#), will be crucial in order to better understand how to meet the needs of a wide range of older people.

Younger people are underrepresented in our community engagement activities according to our 2018-2019 equality monitoring reports, with only 13.1 percent of respondents under the age of 35.

However, digital platforms may offer an opportunity for increased participation. In 2018, 100 percent of adults aged 16 to 24 reported using the internet compared to 38 percent of those aged 75 and over. Younger internet users are more likely to access the internet using a smartphone than older users, with 96 percent of 16-24 year olds using smartphones compared to 29 percent of adults aged 75 and above ([Scottish Government 2019](#)). The devices used by different age groups may therefore impact on the type of platforms suitable for community engagement.

Taking action to support the participation of young people facing disadvantage will be important. Evidence suggests that young people who do participate tend to be those that are 'confident, well-educated, articulate, socially orientated, older children' who are part of youth and school organisations ([What Works Scotland 2017](#)).

Engagement with young people's organisations, such as [YoungScot](#) will be crucial to understand more about appropriate community engagement methods and, particularly, how to support the engagement of younger people who are typically less likely to participate in community engagement activities.

Care experienced young people

HIS has responsibilities under the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 to be alert to issues affecting care experienced young people (up to the age of 26) and to provide opportunities for them to participate in activities which promote their wellbeing. Figures from our 2018-2019 equality monitoring reports suggest that care experienced young people are currently well represented in our community engagement activities.

The internet use of young people suggests that digital platforms may be a fruitful way to engage with care experienced young people. However, while the evidence shows that nearly all young people have access to the internet, as many as 300,000 young people in the UK still lack basic digital skills (The Tech Partnership 2017). And Carnegie Trust suggests that young people who are in care are one of the groups most at risk of digital exclusion (Carnegie Trust 2017). Furthermore, a 2018 report from Bright Spots found that 20 percent of care leavers did not have access to the internet at home (compared to 9 percent in the general population of the UK) (Bright Spots 2018). Who Cares? Scotland have also [highlighted concerns](#) that many of the care experienced young people they support lack the appropriate technology and/or access to home broadband to participate in online meetings.

Any efforts to engage with care experienced young people should therefore consider the context of access to the internet when considering the best methods for engagement, and seek guidance from organisations representing care experienced young people.

Disability

Disabled people are well represented in our own community engagement activities according to our equality monitoring report for 2018-2019. 47.5 percent of respondents identified as disabled, compared with around 20 percent in the national census.

It is important to note that disabled people face many barriers to participating in community engagement activities. Barriers can be financial or physical as well as the fact that organisers rarely understand the issues that disabled people face ([Attree et al 2011](#)). Community engagement processes also often plan for participants to move about or stand or sit for long periods of time. This can be difficult not only for some disabled people, but also for older people ([Edwards 2001](#)). Digital engagement may remove some of the concerns people have around the physical requirements of engagement and therefore widen opportunities to participate.

However, additional barriers may be put in place by digital engagement. [Jaegar \(2012\)](#) describes the internet as 'inherently unfriendly' to many groups of disabled people, with a variety of barriers to access and usage.

In 2018, 27 percent of adults in Scotland who have a long-term physical or mental health condition reported not using the internet, compared with eight percent of adults who do not have any such condition. This divide in internet use is more marked among the older age groups (note: [disability is more prevalent with age](#)), but is prevalent across all age bands to some extent, with the exception of 16-24 year olds. ([Scottish Government 2019](#)). Disabled people are also more likely to face socio-economic disadvantage which is another defining factor in digital exclusion.

The Glasgow Disability Alliance is currently surveying its members on a number of issues including how to have their COVID-19 experiences heard while physical distancing measures are in place. Initial findings show that only 37% of disabled people surveyed report to have home broadband or IT, and many say they lack the confidence or skills to use it ([Glasgow Disability Living Alliance 2020](#)).

While many people use phone or video calls to engage with others while we are physical distancing, Action on Hearing Loss state that people with hearing loss, especially those who lip-read or use British Sign Language, may be excluded from these interactions ([The Guardian 2020](#)). Even in situations where in-person interactions can take place, physical distancing measures may mean that [someone with a hearing aid, for example, may be out of range](#) for conversations. They [recommend](#) adding live captioning through video conferencing software. Deaf people are also using video interpreters to support with daily tasks. Royal National Institute for Blind People (RNIB) Scotland made moves immediately to support people with visual impairments [replace regular face-to-face community groups with telephone groups](#).

People with learning disabilities are also affected by changes to the support they require and the ways in which they can have their voices heard. In response to the situation, the Scottish Commission for Learning Disabilities (SCLD) [identified an opportunity](#) to connect with their members on Facebook through forming a group, having realised that a large number of members were active on the social media platform. A variety of activities take place on the group page, including gathering people's experiences. It's important to note that familiarity with online platforms is a key factor in choosing how to engage with disabled people. Unfamiliarity may create stressful situations for groups, such as people on the autism spectrum ([Zolyomi et al 2019](#)).

Marriage and civil partnership

See 'sex', 'sexual orientation' and 'gender reassignment' for related issues.

Pregnancy and maternity

Flexibility offered by the offer of online community engagement methods may suit parents and pregnant people.

There are large online parenting communities, for example Mumsnet has around 10 million unique visitors per month (100 million page views) according to its 'About us' page at the time of writing. This type of site allows people to access help and peer support and suggests that there may be an appetite for online engagement among this group. See 'sex' for related issues.

Race

Minority ethnic people are underrepresented in our reported engagement activities, with 3.7 percent of people identifying as minority ethnic or having a mixed background, compared with 4 percent reporting that they are minority ethnic in the national census. Cultural and language differences are notable barriers to successful community engagement ([Liljas et al 2017](#)). Arora and Khatun 1998 found that one of the main reasons members of particular minority ethnic communities do not participate in research/engagement on sensitive issues is due to fear of others in the community finding out.

Carrying out community engagement activities in familiar places is cited as a successful strategy for engaging with minority ethnic groups ([Williams 1996](#)), but with limitations on the use of community spaces, trusted contacts will become even more important in bridging links with people who may be otherwise isolated and thus underrepresented.

The uptake of digital platforms may offer opportunities to engage with minority ethnic communities. A report by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) shows that nearly all minority ethnic groups were more likely to have used the internet in the previous three months than white groups, with people identifying as Chinese most likely to use the internet. However, [survey results](#) published in 2018 also suggest that the UK Gypsy/Traveller communities are more likely to be digitally excluded .i.e. use the internet less frequently, possess fewer digital skills and are significantly less likely to have a household internet connection.

While questionnaires can be an effective way for people to have their views heard, [Farooqi et al \(2018\)](#) note that self-completion questionnaires sent to certain minority ethnic groups (e.g. postal surveys) often have poor response rates due to misunderstanding the purpose, or language/literacy issues. Actions such as including a translated cover sheet to allow respondents to request information in another language should be considered. However, translations may not always be cost effective.

It will be necessary to work closely with third sector organisations supporting minority ethnic groups to better understand how communities are utilising and becoming familiar with digital platforms and available methods to overcome well-known barriers.

Religion or belief

Community engagement requires consideration of religious and cultural factors that may limit participation, e.g. when engaging with British South Asian people with type 2 diabetes, [Prinjha et al. \(2020\)](#) took steps to arrange their focus group sessions on days and times that did not clash with Sikh, Hindu or Muslim religious festivities, prayer times, with Ramadan, or with childcare responsibilities.

The authors also observed that their familiarity with the language, culture, religion and local community organisations supported recruitment to the study. This backs up the recommendations of [Waheed at al. \(2015\)](#) who recommend inviting minority ethnic facilitators because they can contribute cross-cultural skills and knowledge. Another consideration is the facilitating team's fluency of required languages to recruit participants and establish relationships ([Farooqi et al 2018](#)).

[Prinjha et al. \(2020\)](#) state that collaborating with local community organisations supporting people of different ethnic groups and religions is key to addressing underrepresentation in these populations.

Remote and rural/Island communities

The Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 requires HIS to assess the impact of our work on island communities.

Place can exclude people, whether due to lack of accessible transport or connectivity. The cost of transport to events can be an issue, with transport costs much higher on the islands and in remote rural areas than in the rest of Scotland ([Transport Scotland 2019](#)). However, poor (or no) broadband or mobile infrastructure is also more likely to be experienced in remote, small towns. It has also been reported that 18 percent of adults living in the Highlands have never been online ([Citizens Advice Scotland 2018](#)).

The gap in internet connectivity between rural areas and the rest of Scotland has decreased over time to 37 percent in 2016 ([Scottish Government 2017](#)). However, the gap between the areas in terms of average broadband speeds has widened over time and stood at 24mbps in 2016 ([Scottish Government 2017](#)). The Scottish Government's [Digital Strategy](#) aims to reduce this gap and recent improvements may have been made.

It will be necessary to work closely with people representing remote rural and island communities to better understand how to best facilitate the engagement of these communities.

Sex

Women are currently well represented in our community engagement activities, making up 62.9 percent of respondents, but only 51.5 percent of the Scottish population. However, physical distancing and home-life situations may impact on the ability of some women to participate in community engagement activities. Staff should be alert to these issues.

People experiencing domestic abuse may be particularly isolated during this time. Women are considerably more likely to experience abuse. Of 60,641 cases of domestic abuse in 2018/2019, 82 percent of cases involved female victims with a male accused ([Scottish Government 2020](#)).

Since the introduction of physical distancing measures a number of UK charities have reported a significant increase in the number of people contacting their services for help in relation to domestic abuse. Refuge UK, for example, reported a 700 percent increase of people using their helpline in a single day, while other charities have also reported increases in demand for their services since the measures were introduced ([the Guardian 2020](#)). Domestic abuse may place limitations on a person's ability to participate in community engagement activities. [Women's Aid](#) have been offering [a number of discrete online services](#) to people experiencing domestic abuse during the pandemic and may be in a position to share the experiences of women who may otherwise be underrepresented.

Women are also more likely to assume caring responsibilities for both children and older relatives and these responsibilities are likely to be greater when schools are closed and support services are limited. This could decrease women's capacity for participation in engagement activities.

Women within professional networks or stakeholder groups may also become underrepresented as they are more likely to reduce hours or give up paid work as a result of the increased pressure of maintaining both childcare and paid work ([Fawcett Society 2020](#)).

It has been observed men are far less likely to be involved in community engagement activities. This is also reflected in our own activities. For example, our 2018-2019 equality monitoring report for community engagement activities showed that men made up only 32 percent of participants while accounting for 48.4 percent of the Scottish population.

Barriers to engagement include fear of stigma, with men being more reluctant to share health issues or problems for fear of being perceived to be embarrassing or not 'manly'. Other reasons include men being less likely to take time off work for fear of losing their jobs ([Johal et al 2012](#)).

However, digital methods may offer opportunities for men to share their experiences in spaces where they can feel safe and/or at flexible times that will not impact on their employment. According to the [Office for National Statistics \(2019\)](#), the proportion of men who had recently used the internet in 2019 was slightly higher than women, at 92 percent and 90 percent respectively. The big difference appears to be in the oldest age groups, with 54 percent of men aged 75 years and over recently using the internet, compared with 41 percent of women in this age group.

Interestingly, despite men being less likely to be involved in community engagement activities, a study by [Han et al. \(2015\)](#) found that men spoke disproportionately more than women during participatory processes. Facilitators should be aware of this to ensure that each voice is given equal time and weight.

Sexual orientation and gender reassignment

Our 2018-2019 equality monitoring report for community engagement activities showed that 4.6 percent of respondents identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual. No census data exists for this category, but the most recent estimates suggest that 2.6 percent of people in Scotland identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual ([Office for National Statistics 2019](#)). 0.75 percent of our respondents identified as trans. Again, no census data exists for this category, but it is estimated that 0.6 percent of people in Scotland may identify as trans ([NHS Scotland 2018](#)). Sexual orientation and trans identity is however often under-reported as a result of prejudice and the safety of 'coming out' in the space the questionnaire is completed. Official figures however suggest that LGBT people are currently proportionally represented in our work.

Physical distancing measures during COVID-19 has resulted in many more LGBT people feeling unsafe in their home environments and made it harder for them to engage with/access support services they need. Many LGBT people were not safe in their home before the crisis, e.g. a report found that more than one in ten LGBT people have faced domestic abuse from a partner in the last year ([LGBT in Britain: Home and Communities 2018](#))

A disproportionate number of LGBT people also experience homelessness. Research has shown that a quarter of the British youth homeless population is LGBT, with over two-thirds having experienced familial rejection, abuse and violence ([Albert Kennedy Trust 2018](#)). Young people in insecure housing are therefore more likely to face barriers in accessing community engagement activities.

Socio-economic disadvantage

We do not collect information on socio-economic status when carrying out community engagement activities, however, it has been observed that community engagement is generally skewed in favour of people with higher socio-economic status ([Ryfe and Stalsburg 2012](#)) with evidence that people who are in low income households and/or have lower levels of education are consistently less likely to participate in activities addressing public concern ([Marcinkiewicz et al 2016](#)). [Roberts and Escobar \(2015\)](#) also found that those with higher education – university and upwards - were more likely to get involved in a process than those without, with just under half of their participants holding some sort of university qualification.

[Han et al. \(2015\)](#) also reported that those with a university degree were more likely to participate over those without.

There is evidence that providing compensation and/or incentives for participation can support people on low-incomes to get involved ([Roberts and Escobar 2015](#)). Financial support is important as many people may not be able to participate without child care, transportation or wage replacement.

Some of these issues could be overcome by digital methods of engagement *if* people have access to broadband and a suitable device. However, there is a strong relationship between the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) and internet uptake in Scotland. In 2018, 69 percent of households with an income of less than £10,000 had internet access at home. In comparison, almost 99 percent of households with an income of £40,000 and over had home internet access ([Scottish Government 2019](#)). 23 percent of adults in social rented housing reported not using the internet in 2018, compared to only five percent of those in private rented housing, and 12 percent of those who owned their own homes. ([Scottish Government 2019](#)).

Protected characteristics are associated with higher rates of relative poverty, e.g. disabled people ([Scottish Government 2020](#)). People from minority ethnic (non-white) groups are also much more likely to be in relative poverty after housing costs compared to those from the 'White – British' group ([Scottish Government 2020](#)). Due to minority ethnic people being overrepresented in low-paid and 'gig economy' employment they will be disproportionately impacted by a lack of financial support for people in this sector.

A Citizens Advice Scotland ([2018](#)) survey found that the most common barriers preventing respondents from using the internet were financial, with broadband costs and phone and data costs considered barriers.

While, libraries can provide free Wi-Fi, access to computers and other technology, widespread closures across the country over time will have had an impact on access. Libraries have also been closed since physical distancing measures were introduced. It should also be noted that limits on computer time, lack of privacy, etc., might make internet access at libraries inappropriate for community engagement purposes ([University of West of Scotland 2017](#)).

Recommendations

The evidence demonstrates that people face a range of barriers to getting involved in community engagement opportunities. The availability of digital options may support some groups to overcome these barriers, however an over-reliance on digital methods of engagement will exclude many groups of people who are more likely to be more frequent users of health and care services and have poorer experiences of these services, thus further widening inequalities. As detailed above, these groups include older people, disabled people and people living with long term conditions, women, minority ethnic groups, young people facing disadvantage and people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. Groups and organisations representing the interests of these people need to be part of the discussion about how to encourage and enable them to participate.

Below are some recommendations to address these issues.

- **Engage with third sector organisations supporting communities facing disadvantage, to better understand how inclusive engagement can be achieved**
- **Consider how to address evolving training needs of NHS staff who carry out community engagement activities**
- **Update online resources to support colleagues in the NHS and integration authorities to plan for inclusive community engagement opportunities while physical distancing measures are in place**
- **Collect and share case studies demonstrating good practice in engaging at a distance, including the experiences of people participating**
- **Develop a plan to publicise our approach to community engagement to stakeholders and how they can help inform it**

Monitoring and review

Consider developing measurement and review plans to regularly assess impact and success of engagement plans and activities. Use feedback to inform improvements and capture learning.

Who carried out the assessment?

The equality impact assessment of COVID-19 physical distancing measures on approaches to community engagement was carried out by Graeme Morrison and Marie McIlwraith.

EQIA completed by: Graeme Morrison and Marie McIlwraith

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Contact information

If you have any comments or questions about this report, or if you would like us to consider producing this report in an alternative format, please contact our Equality and Diversity Advisor:

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