



## **Social Innovation Model: Reconnect**

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### Abstract

Scottish charity People Know How have developed their Social Innovation Model, a cyclical process used to develop their innovative strategies and services and solve social issues. The model is composed of four stages: Ask, Research, Do, and Share. This article examines how the model is used to develop and deliver Reconnect, People Know How's service supporting adults and families to improve wellbeing. Today Reconnect is a service that includes three projects: Computer Delivery, Helpline and Wellbeing & Digital. Each project focuses on a different aspect of wellbeing, addressing digital exclusion, loneliness, and isolation for people in Edinburgh and East Lothian. Social innovation is at the heart of the charity's community support and allows the organisation to continue to grow and expand to address society's changing needs. People Know How's Social Innovation Model embodies this and puts it into practice, as evidenced by the successes of Reconnect.

### Keywords

Social innovation, Reconnect, digital, digital exclusion, digital inclusion, data poverty, connectivity, wellbeing, social isolation,

### Key points

- Social innovation is at the heart of People Know How's community support, and their use of their Social Innovation Model allows them to continually develop projects that continue to address the community's needs.
- People Know How's Reconnect service is an example of social innovation in action.
- Reconnect service includes the projects: Computer Delivery, Helpline and Wellbeing & Digital which all help to increase both digital and social inclusion

### Introduction

People Know How is a Scottish social innovation charity working with people and communities to develop innovative strategies and services to address social issues. It was founded in 2013 on the principle that people know how to identify their needs and solutions that will help them (People Know How 2020b). The charity is founded on the concept of social innovation which focuses on maximising social impact through socially innovative programmes with communities, partners, and organisations. One of their core services is Reconnect, supporting adults and families in Edinburgh and East Lothian to help them to improve wellbeing by increasing digital and social inclusion. It has grown with the charity, taking its roots in consultations with the homeless community, and beginning as a standalone project addressing digital exclusion (People Know How 2017a). Since then, it has developed into its own fully fledged service with a focus on wellbeing and digital. Its three projects address wellbeing through digital using the service's three stage approach: getting the device, getting the support and getting connectivity. It does this through its three projects, Computer Delivery, Helpline and Wellbeing & Digital (People Know How 2020a).

Social innovation has been defined by People Know How as “the process of developing innovative solutions to address social issues, solutions which look beyond the symptom and instead to the system which generates it” (Vickers and Robinson 2019). The Social Innovation Model and People Know How take this idea through a cycle, ensuring the solutions derived continue to address current social issues, all the while moving towards wider systems change (People Know How 2020b and Vickers and Robinson 2019). In this way, projects can become richer and continually build on previous findings.

### Mobile Digital Classrooms and Re:Connect

‘Ask’ is the first principle of People Know How’s cyclical Social Innovation Model (People Know How 2020b). It is the starting point of every project as People Know How seek to understand people’s ideas, needs, strengths, and assets.

In 2015 People Know How conducted a consultation around digital literacy amongst Edinburgh’s homeless community. The charity wanted to find out more about how people connect, and address presumptions around how people use technology and devices. This led to the development and pilot of digital drop-ins in partnership with national homelessness charity Streetwork.

The idea came from People Know How's Social Innovation Academy, which initiated the second ‘Research’ stage of the Social Innovation Model. The academy offered people opportunities to learn communication and teamworking skills, while learning about social issues that mattered to them. The group chose to focus their investigation on the role digital exclusion played in social exclusion with the aim of designing and delivering an approach to improve digital literacy and access for people experiencing loneliness or isolation, primarily the homeless community in Edinburgh. They met with charities around Edinburgh and interviewed roughly 50 people who were experiencing homelessness in Edinburgh.

The initial research found that three quarters of people interviewed had a phone and three quarters of those had a smartphone (G. Liddall - founder, personal communication, 25 Sept 2020). The phones were primarily used to stay connected but also as an escape from reality; as a distraction from the difficulties of their current circumstances. However, there were lots of challenges for people to stay connected, including shortage of credit, power restrictions, number changes, and losing or trading the phone (People Know How 2017b). The investigation also found that many of the people they spoke to had an interest in improving their digital skills but

found they did not want to partake in a training course. The team realised it is important to build relationships with the community and learn together at an appropriate pace, and about things that interest the people of this group. This sparked the idea of holding drop-in sessions in collaboration with Streetwork.

Now in the 'Do' stage of the model, they named these Mobile Digital Classrooms, and would later rename them as the Re:Connect project. The original set of drop-ins brought digital devices and workshop to individuals and helped over 300 people to improve their digital literacy and in turn reduce their social isolation (People Know How 2016). It was important that people could learn digital skills that suit them, whether learning about a hobby, improving CVs, or keeping up to date with news and sport. All these skills are part of digital inclusion which aims at giving people the means to improve their own lives and wellbeing. This directly ties into People Know How's belief that people know how to unlock ideas for a better future.

Findings from the drop-ins were continually shared with partners including Streetwork, Social Bite, Ragged University and various housing associations and community spaces in which the drop-ins were held. Part of the 'Share' stage, this collaboration and sharing of learning allowed for the project to continually develop and show others the importance of digital inclusion to social inclusion and wellbeing.

### **Becoming Reconnect**

Mobile Digital Classrooms and Re:Connect were developed through initial cycles of the Social Innovation Model. Through a continuation of these cycles, the project continued to grow and develop to meet current needs. People Know How continued to ask the community why people feel lonely, how they could provide support for digital and how this could be done through holistic wellbeing support. Through these previous iterations of the model and learnings from both 'Ask' and 'Do' stages, further research was developed, in

particular through social research such as the Connect Four Journal, then known as Research Briefings.

By reviewing relevant literature, evidence and findings, the charity further developed the information and ideas generated from consultations and action in the community. It aimed at opening up the discussion and encompassing a wider range of evidence and best practice solutions. As mentioned, Re:Connect was initially created to help address digital exclusion, loneliness, and isolation. Digital exclusion is defined as a lack of digital skills, and a lack of access to the internet and issues of accessibility (NHS Digital 2019). During this 'Research' phase, Reconnect built on an evidence base to develop People Know How's understanding of these social issues, and build upon ideas for solutions generated by 'Ask' and 'Do' of previous cycles.

What became more apparent as the project continued was that a lack of digital skills can lead to increased loneliness and social isolation as well as less access to jobs and education (Good Things Foundation 2020). As Age UK (2020) have found, people who do not use the internet are more likely to feel isolated from others and the Good Things Foundation (2020) have reported that 11.3 million people in the UK do not have the basic digital skills they need to take advantage of the opportunities available in today's world. This includes people experiencing homelessness, elderly people, people facing financial exclusion or poverty, and people with disabilities and additional needs. Often the people who are already disadvantaged because of their age, education, income, or disability are also likely to experience digital exclusion (GTF 2020). This further widens social inequality which can affect a person's general wellbeing and opportunities (Kelly 2020).

With a growing body of research and new funding secured through the Power Up initiative founded by Good Things Foundation and J.P Morgan, in 2019 Re:Connect was rebranded and relaunched as the Reconnect service. Continuing through Social Innovation Model

cycles by continually asking, researching, doing and sharing, People Know How had continued to see the deep links between social isolation and digital exclusion, tied together under the larger heading of wellbeing. They decided to focus on the theme of wellbeing, allowing the Do phase of this work to take on a different approach.

In its new form, Reconnect came to be composed of four projects: Basic Digital Skills, Healthy Body (also known as Walking Befriending), Healthy Mind and Growing Your Ideas. The first of these projects embodied the tried and tested digital drop-ins, but the addition of the further three allowed the charity to further develop ways in which to support wellbeing through activities such as walking, art befriending and even offering support for small businesses.

A commonality between all four projects was their use of People Know How's established befriending model, which matches people with volunteers that share similar interests and personalities. This model is prominent within the charity sector because it provides support to vulnerable members of society which can help improve their wellbeing and/or digital skills (Ghanawi 2020).

As the service continued, further cycles of the Social Innovation Model allowed the charity to identify a need to reconfigure their projects towards providing a more holistic model of support, particularly with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. The core digital skill support became known as Wellbeing & Digital, and was joined by projects named Computer Delivery and Helpline. Together, these projects form a cohesive system of support, through which service users can be supported in more than one aspect towards improving their wellbeing.

Perhaps the biggest change due to the pandemic was the development of Computer Delivery, a project created as an emergency response to COVID-19. The project refurbishes donated devices and delivers them to people in Edinburgh and East Lothian who need support staying connected with friends and family, and accessing vital resources for

support or education. They also offer follow up support over the phone to all recipients. People Know How have delivered over 1,500 devices to the community in just over a year of running this project (People Know How 2021a). This feat has been aided by the knowledge they have gathered through various cycles of running Reconnect and helping to address digital exclusion for over six years. True to People Know How's 'Share' stage, the project was initially run in collaboration with the Edinburgh Remakery, allowing businesses to donate and sustainably recycle their old devices (People Know How 2021a).

The Connecting Scotland Helpline is another example of collaboration in action. People Know How are the sole operators of the Scottish Government's national Connecting Scotland Helpline (People Know How 2021b). The scheme is run by SCVO, distributing devices to organisations across Scotland for distribution. People Know How distributes devices through Computer Delivery, but also runs the helpline, receiving calls from across the country. As well as devices, the scheme offers temporary solutions around connectivity and recipients can obtain a MiFi device allowing them fixed term internet connection (People Know How 2021b).

Once a service user has obtained a device through schemes such as Computer Delivery or Connecting Scotland, they then need the digital skills to be able to use it – the Wellbeing & Digital project provides such support (People Know How 2021c). It aims to help people keep in touch with friends and family, find jobs online, navigate the internet and social media, and improve financial awareness and health. Each person involved in Wellbeing & Digital is matched with a volunteer who helps them learn and supports them throughout (Baldacchino 2020). Digital skills are crucial for navigating many aspects of life today and it is important that people are not further excluded because they lack the opportunities to learn.

Another aspect of the Wellbeing & Digital project has been developed to & those who may not yet be comfortable using a digital device, the project aims to improve

the health and wellbeing of people who are feeling isolated. Again, using the befriending model, people are matched with a volunteer. Volunteers offer support and friendly conversation chatting about hobbies, sharing stories or advice. This has become increasingly important during the COVID-19 pandemic as people are increasingly isolated. In the first month of lockdown, 5% of the UK population experienced loneliness (ONS 2020). This has increased to 8% of the population experiencing loneliness up until the beginning of November (Coughlan 2020). The concept of telephone befriending is a low-cost and low-risk service which means that people who require the service can receive it without budget concerns for the organisation (Ghanawi 2020).

People Know How's work in digital over these last six years has demonstrated that as our society becomes increasingly digital, people without sufficient digital skills or access to the internet are suffering. Furthermore, government services and financial support are also moving online, which can affect someone's ability to access these essential services, further excluding people (Low Income Tax Reform Group 2012). A person's mental health and wellbeing can also be negatively impacted by digital exclusion. Being able to contact family, friends and online services is harder without the use of digital devices and skills. This has become increasingly important during the COVID-19 pandemic as we have become more reliant on digital than ever before. Many of us are using social media and video calling platforms to stay in contact with our family and friends: 71% of online adults are using video calling services at least weekly (Ofcom 2020). It has become a lifeline to many so they can continue socialising and running businesses (Dawes 2020). However, many of our most vulnerable members of society experience further exclusion. Digital inclusion is an important tool for reducing inequality while helping to improve mental health and wellbeing which has become increasingly important during COVID-19 (Liddall 2020). Reconnect was formed after People Know How asked and researched the current experiences of digital exclusion, loneliness, and isolation.

### Connectivity Now

Reconnect is a great example of People Know How's Social Innovation model in action, showing how People Know How uses cycles of the model to continually assess, review and develop their work in the local community. The model also features a second tier cycle, demonstrating how People Know How aim to take their findings and apply them to affect change on a national level.

Reconnect and People Know How's other services are designed to be accessible and to present models of practice that can be applied by other organisations to support their local communities and tackle similar issues. Reconnect has been shared with several such organisations who have gleaned insights from, and been inspired by, elements of the service. In doing so, the charity creates an open dialogue between itself and partners, communities, and organisations.

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of digital inclusion in today's society. In November 2020 People Know How held their event Connect Four: Digital Inclusion. It invited key voices in digital from across the four academic, third, business and public sectors, inviting key speakers and showcasing the charity's findings from six years of delivering projects focusing on digital inclusion. The event also encouraged discussions around digital inclusion and a sharing of experiences in the pandemic (People Know How 2020e). The findings of the event were shared in a report that contributed to the Scottish government's consultation in the development of their new digital strategy. From this report, People Know How developed their Connectivity Now manifesto, launching their national campaign to combat data poverty across Scotland (People Know How 2021e). The campaign aims to lobby the Scottish government to implement policy change on a national level. In this way People Know How are using their learning from Reconnect to eradicate data poverty not just in Edinburgh and East Lothian, but across all of Scotland.



### Conclusion

People Know How's Social Innovation Model is at the heart of their services. Reconnect is an important example of this model in action and is useful in displaying how this model relates to People Know How's mission.

'Ask' aims at giving people a platform to share their needs and ideas to work towards identifying innovative solutions. This is based on the notion that people know how to identify their own solutions which gave the organisation its name. Reconnect has done this by consulting people experiencing homelessness in Edinburgh on their use of technology and creating drop-in sessions. 'Research' aims to review the literature to develop the information and ideas generated from asking members of the community and to find best practice solutions. With Reconnect this was done by consulting the relevant literature and organisations already working on digital inclusion, loneliness, and isolation. 'Do' aims to run and deliver services and projects which help to address the issues found and researched within 'Ask' and 'Research'. Reconnect's three core projects work towards improving wellbeing across a range of aspects including digital. 'Share' aims to share the findings of these projects and services with other organisations to help create positive social change for a wider range of communities. Finally the second tier of the model brings all of this together to allow People Know How to affect systems change on a national level.

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