

**STORIES OF CHANGE FROM THE  
CONNECTED COMMUNITIES  
INCLUSIVE BROADBAND PROJECT**

Research Evaluation of a Universal  
Basic Services Experiment

**January 2021**





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## RESEARCH EVALUATION OF A UNIVERSAL BASIC SERVICES EXPERIMENT

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

This report provides a qualitative research evaluation of the first phase of the Connected Communities Inclusive Broadband project launched in June 2020 by Poplar Housing and Regeneration Community Association (HARCA) in partnership with LETTA Trust Schools, Tower Hamlets Council, East End Community Foundation, and Internet provider Community Fibre. The project will run for two years, targeting 100-200 low-income households in Poplar, Tower Hamlets London borough. Each household family participating in the project is being provided with free broadband Internet connection, a Google Chromebook digital device, and basic information and communications technology (ICT) training and support. The objective is to scale the project up to 1,000 (Phase 2) and 10,000 (Phase 3) households in the medium to long term.

The Institute for Global Prosperity (IGP) at UCL was invited to support Poplar HARCA to research and evaluate the impacts of the first phase of the project. The objective of the research was to collect 'stories of change' through personal accounts exploring the expectations and short-term impacts of the project.

The findings of this research are intended for both policy, academic and wider public audiences, and will serve to build evidence for a system of [Universal](#)

[Basic Services \(UBS\)](#), a radical, yet feasible and sustainable policy framework proposal developed by IGP's [Social Prosperity Network \(SPN\)](#) and which aims to support households across the country based on a re-designed welfare system for the 21st century. Based on the principles of collective responsibility and shared needs, the UBS proposal aims to provide sufficient, quality, and free public services at the point of use to all residents across seven areas: health care, education, transport, internet access and communication, housing, childcare and adult social care and legal services.

This study, and the SPN, are part of IGP's [Prosperity Co-Lab \(ProCol\) UK](#) initiative whose work is focused on rethinking prosperity and the future of the welfare state through citizen-led research and cross-sectoral collaborations. Through its ProCol UK team, the IGP is currently working with partners in London (Camden and Tower Hamlets), Liverpool City Region, and Leeds to develop a UBS Community of Practice for knowledge and best practice exchange on best models of UBS-type experimentations.

## BACKGROUND

- Digital exclusion in the UK encompasses a series of entrenched gender, intergenerational, ethnic, socio-economic, and geographical inequalities in terms of Internet access and digital skills. The disparate experiences of the lockdown during Covid-19 have exacerbated these inequalities and prompted renewed political dialogue about the importance of universal access to critical services, such as digital infrastructures and digital training and literacy across the population.
- In this context, a system of Universal Basic Services (UBS) can be critical not just in reducing the everyday costs of living, thereby helping to tackle poverty and inequalities, but also by supporting and creating the capacities and capabilities that allow people to participate fully in society.
- UBS is a radical, yet feasible and sustainable policy framework proposal developed at the Institute for Global Prosperity (IGP) at UCL which aims to support households across the country based on a re-designed welfare system for the 21st century.
- The uncertainty and disproportionate impacts of Covid-19 have highlighted the critical importance of local public services in supporting people and communities through lockdown.
- Within this context, housing associations and social housing providers, have quickly moved to provide essential support for families and vulnerable individuals. In the UK through rapid and impactful local UBS-type initiatives. The role of housing associations is critical as they are uniquely positioned to design and deliver holistic, meaningful, and effective UBS experiments because of their long-term role in local asset ownership and management and direct relationship with tenants and communities. The Connected Communities Inclusive Broadband Project is one of such initiatives.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Findings from the research show the project is having rapid and important beneficial impacts on participating household families in four key areas:
  - *Home Schooling and Learning opportunities;*
  - *Work and Employability opportunities;*
  - *Physical and Mental Health Wellbeing and Behaviours;*
  - *Time and Costs Savings.*

- The findings also highlight further improvement is required in three areas:
  - *Online Access to and Management of Basic Services and Utilities;*
  - *Information and Communications Technology Skills and Internet Safety;*
  - *Overall Broadband Connectivity and Project Performance;*

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The opportunities presented by UBS experiments in Digital Inclusion within the housing sector, such as the Connected Communities Inclusive Broadband project, are very promising for improving the quality of life and wellbeing of communities.

**We recommend accelerating and scaling up the learnings and impacts of local Digital Inclusion initiatives and other UBS-type experiments is crucial for the redesign of a welfare state for the 21st century aimed at supporting people's livelihoods security, tackling poverty and structural inequality, and building back better in a post Covid-19 world. This can be done by:**

- Identifying a target population to better quantify and understand the dimension of digital exclusion at the borough and local authority level by, for example, using citizen led research methods such as IGP's [Prosperity Index](#);
- Working in partnership to narrow the existent 'Digital Divide' through integrated approaches within the housing and other sectors;
- Learning from and supporting existing Digital Inclusion initiatives and other UBS-type experiments;
- Developing a UBS Community of Practice through cross-sectoral multi-stakeholder collaborations and leadership to design, delivery and evaluate alternative, rapid and impactful UBS experiments through different modes of delivery.

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