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c o l l e c t i v e

Introduction

Over the last month, Mhor has worked with families and practitioners to explore the way in which digital inequality impacts on wider networks of support, and on families in particular. What was clear is that families are holding a *lot*… care, fear, admin, hope…and digital is threaded through all of it. Below is a thematic analysis and an insight-led set of recommendations, written to keep family voices at the centre and aligned with the ethos of Digital Lifelines.

Sources used

Data was gathered through group work and interviews involving approximately 35 people, using semi-structured questions. Data was scribed, not recorded, and participants were permitted to edit anything they felt uncomfortable with.

Key themes from the data

Digital inequality is a family-level, systemic pressure, not an individual deficit

One of our first insights is that care work is digitally heavy and an additional burden for folk to carry**.** Families describe "managing three people and keeping everyone safe" and "organising digital admin" across education, health, housing, benefits, and support services. Digital tasks are now core to caring.

People told us that inequality shows up in multiple ways (and broadly in line with the 'five pillars' of digital inclusion)

1. **Devices and data:** "Not having devices", "the person I care for has the knowledge, but not the equipment".The issue of data and stable connection also came up
2. **Systems** "housing system can make things worse".
3. **Skills and confidence:** "A bit nervous… I lack confidence but want to explore more", "we need to start with the absolute basics".
4. **Literacy and accessibility:** Literacy issues, inaccessible forms, and phone-only access make systems "too much".

Furthermore, what is clear is the emotional impact on families: Lack of skills and access creates anxiety, overwhelm, and a sense of failure in the caring role: "Managing all the systems… can take over", "supporting others can be overwhelming".

Insight: Digital inequality is experienced as a threat to being a "good enough" carer, not just a technology gap, or a skills failure. Any intervention needs to validate that

emotional load and recognise that people are often being let down by systems being 'done to them'.

Safety, anonymity, and trust are non-negotiables

This theme was highlighted across the data and is particularly essential when we know the high levels of societal (and self) stigma experienced by families supporting loved ones living through addiction.

- **Need for safe, endorsed spaces:** Families want "sound information and a safe space", "Harm reduction resources in a safe space", and places that are clearly *endorsed* so they know they're safe to use and to signpost loved ones to.
- **Anonymity matters:** "Facilitators might need to know who joins the sessions but participants don't - I can be anonymous". People need to be able to join support in the way that is most comfortable for them, and where they feel in control of their environment and identity.
- **Fear of things turning in online spaces:** There's awareness that online spaces can quickly become unsafe or hostile without clear boundaries and trauma-informed moderation.

Insight: Trust, anonymity, and non-stigmatising framing are as important as functionality. Families will not use tools that feel exposing, judgmental, or "othering".

Digital admin overload and fragmented systems

As noted above, family members are often carrying huge burdens of digital admin, working their way through complex, fragmented systems, some related specifically to harm reduction (ADP sites; By My Side, CA, were all given as examples) but many related to family life, education, employment and education with examples such as school platforms, housing bidding, council tax, statutory formsNHS, Near Me and emails. Families articulate some clear challenges in these spaces such as "Repeating the same thing every time" and "using phones only is really challenging… complicated forms and lots of writing". Email overload contributes to this feeling "I probably have thousands in my inbox", "emails and all the information can be overwhelming".

The combination of fragmented services and the labour of digital means that families want clear support: "having it all accessible and together" and "a one stop shop".

Insight: The problem is not just access to systems, but the cumulative burden of navigating many unjoined systems while in crisis.

Mixed feelings about the internet: lifeline, risk, and possibility

Unsurprisingly, and in line with the broader population, there are mixed feelings about the internet in families. Many fol expressed curiosity and self-directed learning: "I love being able to do my own research in my own time", "I'm inquisitive and I can get information and

advice quickly". For those who can't or don't want to access local support, "digital can be so important and a lifeline".

Families also acknowledged that digital might also be the first step into support: "Digital can sometimes be the first step", especially when shame, stigma, or geography are barriers.

However, many also reflected feelings of anxiety and nervousness**:** "A bit nervous", "mixed… I'd like to be more confident", "it can be such a big step to engage at all". These feelings are heightened in the wider context of their caring role.

Insight: Families are not anti-digital; they are cautious, overloaded, and keen for support that feels safe, paced, and relational.

What's working now: everyday tools and emerging supports

- **Everyday platforms:** WhatsApp, Facebook groups, email, Zoom/Teams, Google search.
- **Health and support tools:** NHS Inform/111, Near Me, Penumbra, Hollieguard, CA, AA, NA, By My Side, Breaking Free Online. SFAAD came up repeatedly here.
- **Joy and headspace:** YouTube (meditation/relaxation), podcasts, playlists, "feel good playlist", online meditation and free resources.

Insight: Families are already using mainstream tools as informal lifelines. New offers should build around these habits, not replace them.

We also asked what families wish existed to allow us to ask for better. Here's the wish list.

- **One-stop, family-centred hubs:**

   "ADP website: everything linked with a simple layout", "For Families BY Families".

   A bespoke app for families with "instant support and wellbeing care and tips".

- **24/7, anonymous, human-feeling support:**

   "A phoneline or space… anytime they need it which is anonymous and instant".

   "A bot that suits my needs" (but still with safety and trust).

- **Practical enablers including** Ways to access bills/direct debits in prison; full access to useful platforms that are currently blocked; Short introductory sessions for popular apps.
- **Spaces of hope and joy:**

"An online space for fun and empowerment, with positivity and hope".

"A space that someone can go to wish… and gain support to fulfil that wish".

Insight: Families want more than crisis information—they want spaces that hold hope, fun, and imagination alongside practical support.

Recommendations for Digital Lifelines and partners

1. Co-design a "For Families, By Families" digital hub or support those emerging

- **One-stop navigation:**
  Action: Develop a simple, mobile-first hub that brings together:
    - Local and national support (ADP, third sector, peer groups).
    - Endorsed recovery/harm reduction resources (e.g. Breaking Free, By My Side).
    - Clear "where to start" pathways for different situations (early worry, crisis, post-crisis).
- **Family voice at the centre:**
  Action: Involve family members as co-designers, testers, and visible contributors (e.g. quotes, podcasts, playlists curated by families).
- **Accessibility and basics:**
  Action: Design for low literacy, phone-only use, and "absolute basics" (plain language, step-by-step guides, short videos).

2. Build parallel digital skills and confidence offers for families

- **Same training as staff, adapted:**
  Action: Where staff receive digital or harm reduction training, create a family-facing version (content, language, examples) so families "get the same training and information that staff get".
- **Micro-learning formats:**
  Action: Short, low-pressure sessions and resources:
    - 10–15 minute videos on "how to join a Zoom safely", "how to use WhatsApp groups safely", "how to use Near Me".
    - Printable/phone-friendly checklists for online forms, email management, and password strategies.
- **Relational delivery:**
  Action: Offer small, facilitated online groups where families can "practice" (e.g. joining a call, sharing screens) in a non-judgemental space.

3. Reduce digital admin burden and advocate for trauma-aware systems

- **Navigation and "admin support":**
  Action: Pilot a "digital admin buddy" model where workers or trained peers:
    - Sit alongside families (online or in person) to complete key forms.
    - Help organise email inboxes and set up simple systems (folders, filters).
- **System-level advocacy:**
  Action: Use these insights to influence:
    - Housing, education, and statutory services to simplify forms, reduce repetition, and ensure phone compatibility.
    - Platform design (e.g. local authority sites, ADP pages) to prioritise clarity over complexity.
- **Google and search visibility:**
  Action: Work with partners to improve search engine optimisation so that safe, endorsed family resources appear when people search in crisis.

4. Design and hold trauma-informed, anonymous digital spaces

- **Clear "rules of the space":** Co-create community agreements with families (e.g. confidentiality, non-judgement, language, boundaries) and make them visible in all digital spaces.
- **Anonymity options:** Allow pseudonyms, camera-off participation, and flexible disclosure. Make it explicit that anonymity is welcome, not suspicious.
- **Moderation and safeguarding:** Train facilitators in trauma-informed online moderation, including:
    - Responding to distress.
    - Managing conflict or difficult dynamics.
    - Signposting safely when risk is disclosed.

5. Support parents and carers with digital safety for children and young people

- **Practical, non-blaming guidance:** Create resources that:
    - Explain common platforms and risks in plain language.
    - Offer scripts and ideas for conversations with children.
    - Show how to use safety settings and reporting tools.
- **Family-focused sessions:** Run joint sessions where parents and young people can learn together, with space for parents to ask "basic" questions without shame.

6. Embed joy, hope, and creativity into digital offers

- **Joyful content:** There was a definite ask to focus on joy, empathy, hope and fun, and so an action is to curate and share:
    - Feel-good playlists.
    - Guided relaxation and meditation links.
    - Podcasts made with and by families (including one on digital, as suggested).

- **"Make a wish" and micro-hope:** Explore a simple "wish" feature or process where families can name something they hope for (big or small) and be supported to move towards it—digitally or offline.
- **Celebrate small wins:** Build in ways to notice and celebrate steps like joining a first online group, completing a form, or setting up a new app

Closing reflection

Across both datasets, families are clear: digital can be a lifeline, but only if it is safe, simple, and shared with them, not done to them. Families here are asking for partnership, not perfection; for spaces where their experience is trusted, their time is respected, and their care work is seen.