

## Smartphone Distribution Project

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The Smartphone Distribution Project, led by Horsforth Chaplaincy, supported by 100% Digital Leeds [1] and the INCLUDE+ Team [2], aimed to gather anecdotal evidence from volunteers at Horsforth Chaplaincy who work with and support asylum seekers and refugees in Leeds particularly in relation to questions of digital access and inclusion. When the project began, Horsforth Chaplaincy wanted to explore whether smartphone gifting *could* and *should* be part of their support provisions for asylum seekers and refugees. In 2024, Horsforth Chaplaincy received a Good Things Activation Grant [3] which they used to train volunteers to use the National Databank [4] and buy hardware such as chargers for use in their community sessions. The Good Things Activation Grant enabled Horsforth Chaplaincy to gift SIM cards within their regular support sessions in Home Office designated hotels.

[1] <https://digitalinclusionleeds.com/> [accessed 02.02.2025]

[2] <https://includeplus.org/people-2/> [accessed 02.02.2025]

[3] <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/discover/our-news/our-news-2024/new-grant-model> [accessed 02.02.2025]

[4] <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/our-services/national-databank> [accessed 02.02.2025]

Having received both the grant and the training from the Good Things Activation Grant in 2024, Horsforth Chaplaincy wanted to explore whether smartphone gifting could and should be part of their regular support activities. They felt that their 2024 smartphone distribution came about a bit ‘chaotically’ (to use one volunteer’s phrase) – as a convergence of a number of factors that Horsforth Chaplaincy was responding to:

**‘there seemed to be a lot more new people who needed SIM cards because they were new in the UK or new in the hotel. We received the activation grant. The Home Office processing changed - something that we didn't have control over. The whole dynamic of what we were doing seemed to be changing’ (volunteer, Horsforth chaplaincy April 2025)**

The INCLUDE+ exploratory project grant in 2025 was intended to enable some reflective space for the charity, and to explore *fair and respectful* ways to distribute smartphones. The small grant from INCLUDE+ enabled them to buy refurbished smartphones, gather anecdotal narratives from volunteers working for the charity, and provide some time for staff members at the Chaplaincy to reflect on learnings from the two grants.

The findings underpinning this report specifically relate to the experiences of Horsforth Chaplaincy volunteers, which, as detailed below, sit within a wider and longstanding network of organisations who also gift smartphones and devices in Leeds UK. The data underpinning this report comprises discussion transcripts with volunteers at Horsforth Chaplaincy Project as well as desk-based research into the wider national network of smartphone gifting in the UK 2025. It highlights the experiences of volunteers whose voices and stories underpin this report. Although this is a very specific perspective and context, then, one takeaway from the project is the extent to which volunteers are the backbone of support provision for asylum seekers and refugees, and one question to emerge from this project is how organisations and wider networks can improve existing support for them.

# 1. The Critical Need for Smartphones

A smartphone is an essential tool for asylum seekers and refugees for several reasons, not least of which are the requirements by the UK Home Office around asylum/refugee claims and processes. The Home Office requires a contact number for asylum seekers, and in 2022 the British Red Cross recommended that people seeking asylum, 'should have access to free and reliable internet and be able to obtain up-to-date digital devices such as smartphones' (2022:8). Free and reliable internet access could be offered through accommodation provision but the British Red Cross report found that 'access to the internet often depended on the type of accommodation that participants stayed in' (2022:6): an issue also discussed by the volunteers during this project. Free and reliable internet access in accommodation speaks to only one part of the issue: without a personal device access remains limited and individuals must rely on borrowing others' devices, which is both less reliable and less secure.

Asylum seekers and refugees need to be able to access healthcare as well as national and local information around asylum or immigration claim processes. As one volunteer told us, 'it's no good if people can't access digital resources, it means they can't read up on things and means they feel even more vulnerable' (24.04.25). The legal requirements for asylum or immigration processes also requires digital access not only in terms of accessing information *per se*, but also to be contactable by the relevant authorities, accept scheduled meetings and verify information.

**'it's no good if people can't access digital resources, it means they can't read up on things and means they feel even more vulnerable' (24.04.25).**

A smartphone is also important for wellbeing and for assuaging extreme loneliness and other mental health issues that may be exacerbated by the asylum and refugee status. A smartphone is also often the only means to contact family, to navigate new towns or cities, to seek medical or emergency services help. As the 2024 report from the Digital Inclusion Research Hub argues, 'those who reach the UK and begin the formal process of seeking asylum are likely to experience multiple barriers in using public services, accessing primary healthcare, building social connections, and furthering their education.' [5]

Given all the above, smartphones have been referred to as a 'lifeline' (Gillespie et al.2018) or a 'resource' (Merisalo and Jauhiainen 2019:691) 'as important as food and water' (ibid.) because of their centrality to security, safety, health, wellbeing and communication. For many, especially young asylum seekers discussed by volunteers in this project, it is the only way to contact family abroad, which is also vital for their mental health. One volunteer recounted the story of a young man from Afghanistan who was severely depressed and couldn't leave his room after his sister died, with his distress compounded by his inability to contact his family.

Digital connectivity is a critical lifeline especially for refugees and asylum seekers. It is essential for contacting family; accessing legal and government services; being accessible and contactable by legal and government services; keeping abreast of asylum and immigration claims; maintaining mental wellbeing.

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[5] <https://www.digitalinclusionuk.org/research/asylum-seekers-refugees-and-digital-exclusion-in-the-uk> [accessed 5.2.2026]

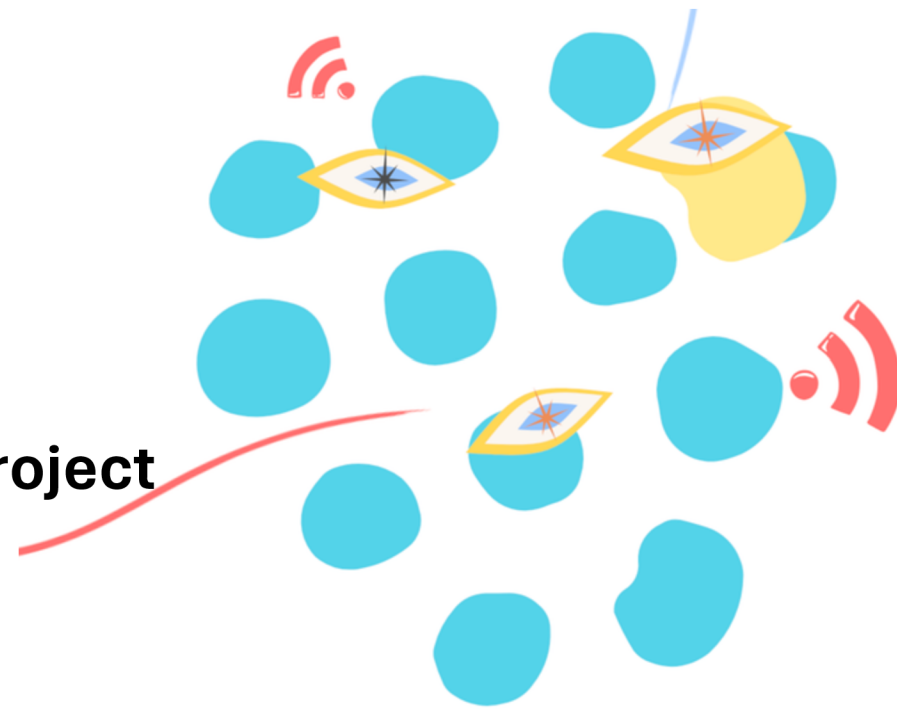
## 2. Wider Context for the Project

### Devices

The Home Office does not distribute smartphones to refugee or asylum seekers yet the increasing digitisation of services means that everyday life increasingly requires digital access.[6] In the UK, as the [Digital Inclusion Action Plan](#) notes, access to refurbished devices for digital excluded demographics has been ‘led’ by the third sector most notably the Good Things Foundation and the Digital Poverty Alliance, as well as community and place based digital inclusion hubs.[7] In Leeds, gifting and reconditioning schemes are used alongside [leveraging social value offers from businesses](#), and directing external funding such as [Multiply](#) and [UK Shared Prosperity Fund](#) to VCSE organisations to buy devices to gift to their service users.

[6] <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/policy-and-research/research-and-evidence/research-2024/digital-nation> [accessed 05.02.2026]

[7] <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/digital-inclusion-action-plan-first-steps/digital-inclusion-action-plan-first-steps#chapter-4---our-approach-and-guiding-principles> [accessed 05.02.2026]

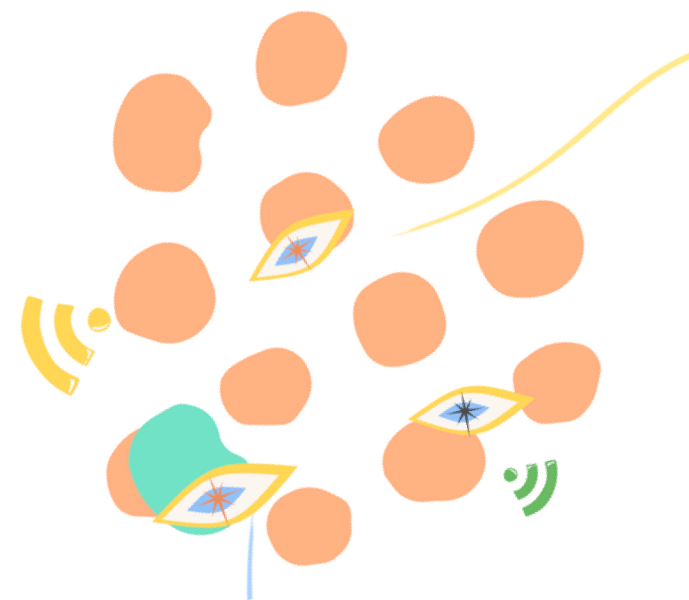


To give a brief example of the gifting and reconditioning schemes at the time of the project took place in 2025: Programmes like [Community Calling](#) created through a partnership between Virgin Media O2 and Hubbub collect unwanted smartphones to distribute once they are refurbished; while the [tech lending programme](#) of Hubbub uses a lending model to enable digital connectivity and delivers digital skills workshops and training within temporary accommodation. Non-profits like [Solidaritech](#) (who Horsforth Chaplaincy worked with for this project) and [Reconome](#) reconditioned devices for redistribution.[8] Smaller organisations (like Horsforth Chaplaincy) have also gifted smartphones on more ad hoc basis. In 2024, Horsforth Chaplaincy received the Jo Cox Award at the [Leeds Councils Compassionate City Awards Ceremony](#) in recognition of the work the charity does in support of asylum seekers and refugees. Their support activities take place within Home Office designated accommodation and include advocacy, help in accessing services, English language classes, clothing distribution (to name a few). In 2024, Horsforth Chaplaincy also received a Good Things Activation Grant which was used to train volunteers to use the databank and buy hardware such as chargers for use in their community sessions [see following section]. In 2025, they received an [INCLUDE+ exploratory project grant](#) to explore fair and respectful ways to distribute smartphones. Other organisations such as [Linking Leeds](#) and [St Annes Resources Centre](#) are also part of a wider referral process, connecting people to organisations who might have phones and/or SIM cards to distribute.

[8] See also <https://recono.me/insights/reconome-good-things-foundation-press-release/> [accessed 05.02.2026]

## SIM Cards

The other half of the equation in terms of access and digital inclusion relates to SIM cards. At a national level, the [National Databank](#), managed by the Good Things Foundation, provides a structured source of data connectivity through the [National Digital Inclusion Network](#). Working with Virgin Media 02, Vodafone and Three who donate SIM cards for mobile phones, the National Databank distributes SIM cards to organisations that are part of their National Digital Inclusion Network. Those organisations can register to join the Databank to issue free SIM cards to their communities. Nationally, over 3,500 organisations are part of the Databank. In Leeds, organisations like [Leeds Refugee Forum](#), [Refugee Education Training Advice Service](#) [RETAS], and [Leeds Libraries](#) are registered with the Databank and gift free SIM cards. Asylum seekers and refugees need SIM cards and smartphones to access asylum and immigration processes and be contactable by the Home Office.



For Horsforth Chaplaincy to gift personal useable devices then, they needed devices *and* SIM cards (and chargers and plugs). The INCLUDE+ grant enabled the purchasing of reconditioned phones, charges and plugs, whilst the SIM cards came from the National Databank. As discussed above, although Horsforth Chaplaincy engages in other support work for asylum seekers and refugees and there is an established network for device distribution through organisations like Leeds Refugee Forum, Refugee Education Training Advice Service, and Leeds Libraries. Horsforth Chaplaincy were responding to what they perceived as a growing need not only because of the changing contexts outlined in the quote in the introduction, but also because of growing need they identified within the support sessions they ran at Home Office hotels with refugee and asylum seekers:

**'there are people for example who come every week to one of our sessions to ask for a phone or if a phone has arrived' (April 2025).**

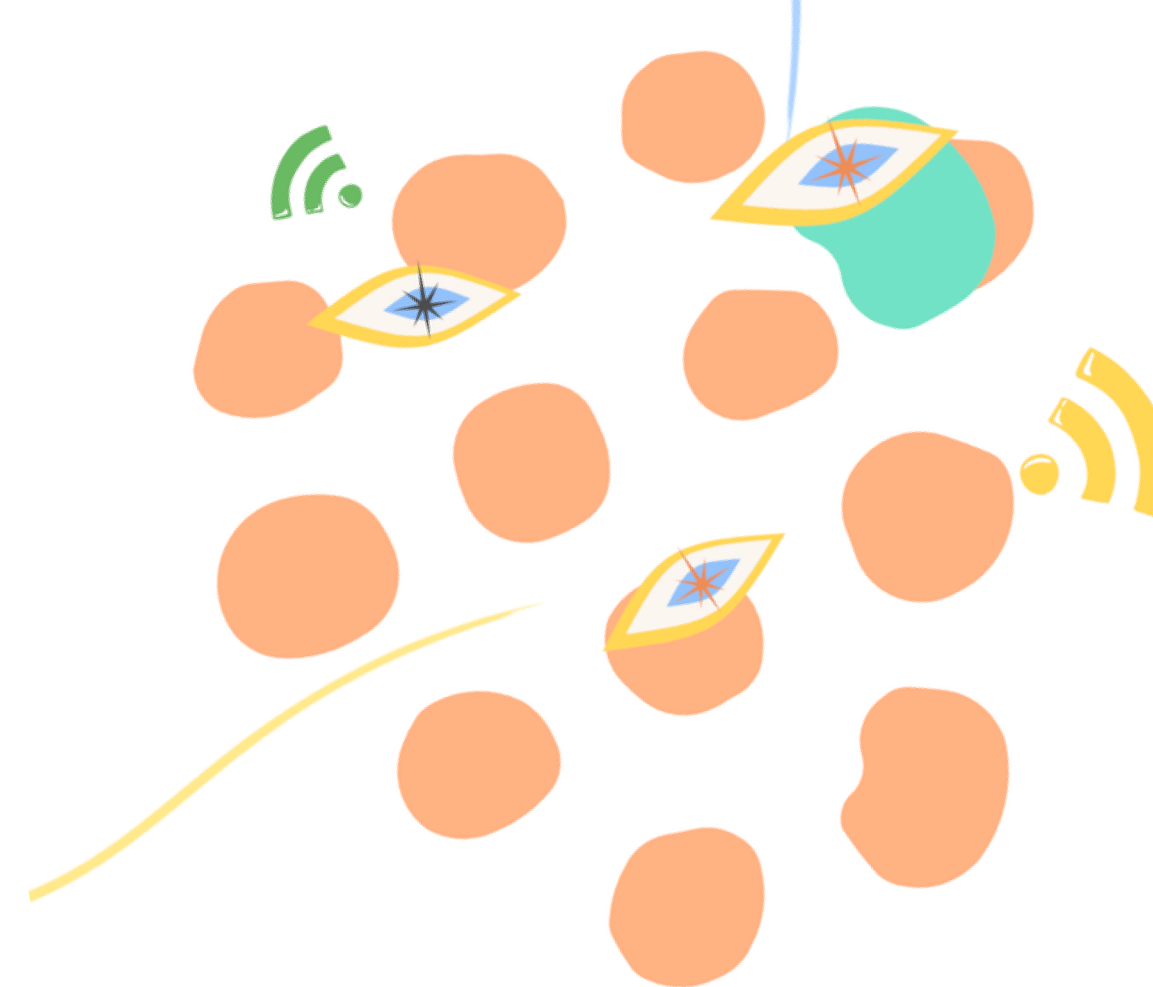
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### 3. Rationale for Project

As suggested above, the rationale for this project came from what Horsforth chaplaincy perceived as a growing need. The volunteers talked about the context for this project including an awareness of heightened anxiety that asylum seekers experience – in part and as they expressed - because of levels of uncertainty around accommodation, asylum or immigration processes, as well as the changes the [Home Office](#) began to implement during the projects distribution phase: all this produced what the volunteers felt were ‘more layers of anxiety’ (Interview with Volunteer, April 2025) for asylum seekers and refugees, which the organisation was seeking to respond to.

Indeed, the volunteers talked about a growing ‘now or never’ anxiety where people felt that any resource needed to be immediately taken up because it might not be there the following week. They also talked about how poor WiFi in the Home Office accommodation was rapidly depleting SIM data for their communities and creating what they referred to as a ‘cycle’ of data poverty and increased dependency especially on the SIM distribution processes [interview with Volunteer, April 2025]. As suggested earlier, one of the questions this project asked was whether Horsforth Chaplaincy should and could distribute smartphones, which felt like an urgent question given the wider context the volunteers discussed. It is important at this point to note that these contexts came from on the ground experiences within the sessions led by Horsforth Chaplaincy in the period before the project started: they contributed towards motivations and rationale for the INCLUDE+ project but should not necessarily be taken as accurate accounts of Leeds or UK wide scenarios. As the project coordinator told us, there were a number of issues all contributing to the project:

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**‘we felt there might be a missed opportunity in terms of what we could support here especially given that there seemed to be such a clear need at the start of the project’ [Project coordinator, Horsforth Chaplaincy January 2025]**

## What the project did:

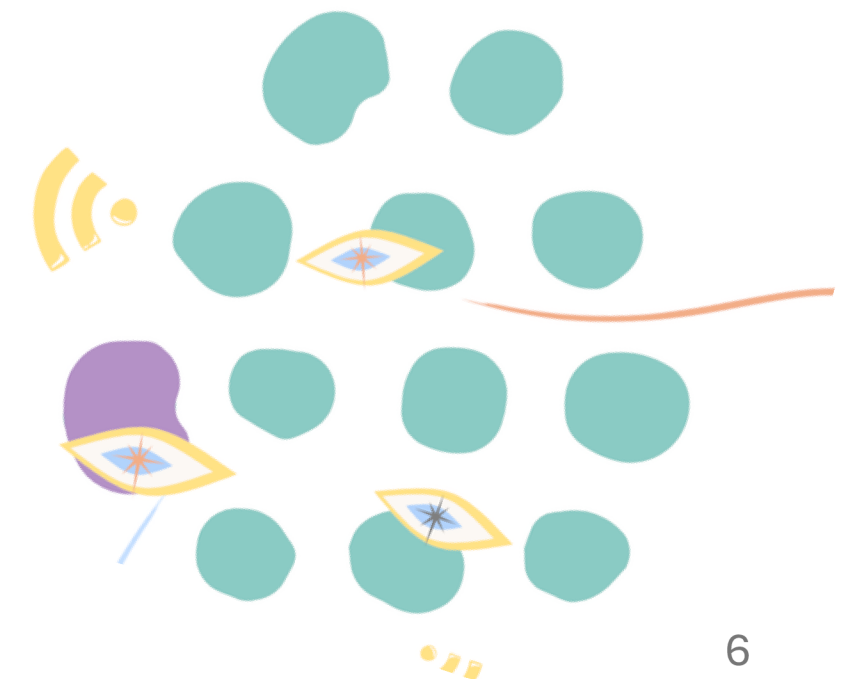
The project ran over a series of 9 months from February to November 2025 with an intense 3 month period of smartphone distribution [May-July 2025] which coincided with the UK government announcement of wider changes to the [immigration process](#). [9] At the very end of the project, the UK government issued another [white paper](#) specifically engaging with asylum processes which this project did not actively engage with because it was released in the final days of this project.[10]

Smartphone distribution took place within the regular established sessions Horsforth Chaplaincy ran at designated Home Office accommodation. The volunteers already supporting those sessions were approached for this project and agreed to participate in both the smartphone gifting and the project itself. They were interviewed before and after each session to gather both their hopes, worries and intentions as well as their reflections and perceptions of the sessions with regard to the distribution of the phones. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and shared with the INCLUDE+ team for transcription and analysis.

[9]<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6821f334ced319d02c906103/restoring-control-over-the-immigration-system-web-optimised.pdf> [accessed 05.02.2026]

[10] See also <https://righttoremain.org.uk/breaking-down-the-governments-new-asylum-proposals/> [accessed 4.02.2026]

In addition to this, representatives from the INCLUDE+ team, Horsforth Chaplaincy and 100% Digital Leeds met fortnightly online during the distribution phase and monthly throughout the rest of the project. The aim with these meetings during the distribution phase was to reflect, discuss and troubleshoot any issues that emerged. In this way, lived and logistical issues were noted, discussed and responded to and the conversation included for example: discussions pertaining to the difficulty in sourcing reconditioned phones, emergent repair issues, pressures the volunteers were feeling, planning around the physical layout and format of the support sessions, connections to other organisations who could offer advice or support. These were invaluable for both the support by 100% Digital Leeds to Horsforth Chaplaincy, and to contextualise what was happening within the discrete sessions led by Horsforth Chaplaincy in terms of noting similar or connective issues elsewhere.



## 4. Learnings from On-the-Ground Distribution

The volunteers at Horsforth Chaplaincy discussed many issues which they faced during the distribution phase of the project. For the purposes of this report, six key issues have been highlighted because they point to wider issues around the importance of wider relational structures and how important shared good practice is for enabling and supporting digital inclusion.

1. A central issue to emerge was the importance of relationships and communication with other organisations in Leeds, UK who were involved in smartphone and SIM card distribution. These organisations included Mears,[11] (the organisation who had the tender during the project for assessing and supporting accommodation needs of refugees and asylum seekers in Leeds, UK), Leeds Refugee Forum, PAFRAS and Leeds Libraries. Connection and communication became a key mechanism of shared knowledge and good practice. An initial central issue for Horsforth Chaplaincy for example, related to how to make decisions on who received gifted phones, and communication with Mears became central to this process:

**‘Mears are regularly going round and checking that they've got an active mobile number. So that's one way of knowing who doesn't have a phone. So I go through the list we have with [name] from Mears.’ [interview with volunteer 24.04.25].**

This highlights not only the importance of support structures to share information and good practice; it also points to the active systems already in place in Leeds, UK and how the expertise can be drawn on to support and sustain more emergent practices. The work of 100% Digital Leeds was invaluable here as a connecting mechanism between organisations, but the examples from volunteers also point to more informal connections that enable necessary rapid and responsive decision making and support during this project.

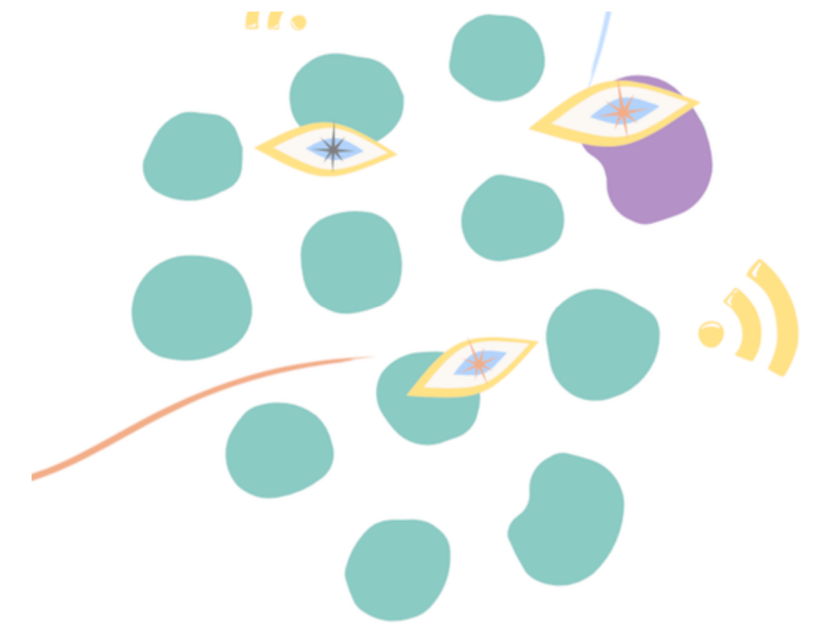
[11] <https://www.mearsgroup.co.uk/case-studies/mears-housing-solutions>  
[accessed 9.2.2026]

2. The volunteers also discussed the challenges around securing refurbished smartphones that the organisation experienced especially when their request for smartphones was in addition to more established processes within Leeds. For this project Horsforth Chaplaincy secured their own refurbished phones to distribute as this was part of the grant allocation. But sourcing phones outside the already established routes [see section 1] used across Leeds meant much additional labour. For example, the volunteers at Horsforth Chaplaincy talked about having to physically go to locations around the city to pick up the phones in their own time and therefore the supply depended on their own mobility capacities. As one volunteer told us:

**‘it depends when my colleague can get out to Bradford to pick these phones up. And we need to pick them up. Its quite a way out.’ [20.05.25]**

By comparison with the previous point then, the difficulties the volunteers experienced in sourcing refurbished smartphones also suggests there is a careful balance in the logistics of emergent work especially when there are preexisting processes and systems that newcomers navigate or work around.

3. Third, the volunteers also reflected on the Wifi provision in the home office accommodation in which the sessions were located and in which their community stayed. This was significant for both the sessions themselves for example troubleshooting the phones, and in relation to the amount of data used through phone use. The poorer the WiFi, the more data needed to be used on the phones: the shorter the SIM cards lasted. The volunteers expressed a lot of frustration about the quality and speed of WiFi, which directs us to consider how important a holistic approach is to digital inclusion. In this instance, for example, digital inclusion includes consideration not only WiFi accessibility, but also signal strength and who shoulders the cost of provision and in what ways. If we only focus on the gifting of the technical object of a smartphone, we also miss the many infrastructural issues that enable digital inclusion such as SIM cards, chargers, plugs, free and accessible WiFi across locales; repair work on all the above if elements become damaged.



4. The volunteers also talked about the speed in which the people they worked with physically moved and were moved through and throughout both Leeds and the UK, and the impact this had on both their ability to support them and the levels of stress and anxiety within the communities they were trying to support. As suggested in the previous section, the volunteers felt that the uncertainty and speed of change created a particular environment which they called 'now or never'. As one volunteer told us, the asylum seekers and refugees are 'in a huge state of flux and uncertainty' (20.04.25) which increased levels of anxiety within and across the support sessions. As another volunteer told us:

**'the fact that they're being moved on so quickly and they're being moved on without sufficient warning, produces such a huge amount of layers of anxiety' (interview with volunteer 25.04.25)**

There are two related points to make here. The first is to resonate the work cited in section 1 and in particular Merisolo et al. (2019) and Gillespie et al. (2018) who discuss how vital a smartphone is not only for accessing crucial and timely information but also for *wellbeing*. The volunteers in this project also recognised how vital a smartphone was for assuaging some of the anxiety that refugees and asylum seekers experienced and that, they felt, was exacerbated because of recent contextual issues (discussed in section 2).

5. The second point to make is that the levels of anxiety the volunteers witnessed fed into the weight of burden they felt around making individual decisions around who should receive a device. They spent a considerable time trying to work out fair and empathetic decision-making processes, drawing on the information other organisations within Leeds used to ascertain need. But ultimately, the volunteers at Horsforth Chaplaincy felt that making such a decision was too difficult: it put the volunteers in a problematic position which they understood in the context of exacerbating or diminishing the levels of distress and anxiety of the community they were trying to support. They found this untenable and this position created an incredible sense of guilt and inadequacy when the need for smartphones and SIM cards seemed always greater than their provision.

**‘Our approach has been needs led. But it is exhausting as an adult who's volunteering to manage it. I think we're either giving them an unrealistic expectation and building false hope or adding to the layers of anxiety they already have.’ (interview with volunteer May 2025).**

6. Ultimately the volunteers felt that in-person gifting during drop-in sessions fundamentally altered the relationship between volunteers and the people they support, shifting the dynamic from one of welcome and emotional support to a transactional and often stressful "provider-recipient" model. They felt this disrupted their core mission:

**'it changed our relationships...and that's not what we want actually' (April 2025).**



## 5. Evolving Best Practice and Project Conclusions for Horsforth Chaplaincy

This project made vital steps in answering whether Horsforth Chaplaincy *could* and *should* distribute smartphones as part of its support work for asylum seekers and refugees. It clearly highlighted the emotional, informational and labour-intensive responsibilities of such work through the live and hands on case study that the project enabled. It therefore enabled Horsforth Chaplaincy to better realise what gifting smartphones would entail if the practice was taken up as a more established element of their support work.

The second aim for the project was for Horsforth Chaplaincy to explore *fair and respectful* ways to distribute smartphones, and the project also made inroads here: In the end, even though the volunteers felt ‘happy’ and ‘satisfied’ (interview with volunteer 20.05.25) to be able to support refugees and asylum seekers and meet their needs; they also ultimately felt that any distribution of smartphones that involved volunteers ranking ‘needs,’ created huge inequities for the communities they supported. Moreover, they found that making decisions about ‘eligibility’ for smartphones was a huge responsibility that, even with the support of the existing organisations within Leeds like Leeds Refugee Forum, Mears, Leeds Libraries and 100% Digital Leeds, the volunteers found hugely problematic and unsettling. One volunteer told us that she felt the role [of distributing phones] changed how the refugee and asylum seekers saw her, and she felt this was problematic because it meant she didn’t feel like she could properly support them. Some of the volunteers described how other volunteers were stepping away from volunteering: ‘people were feeling they no longer wanted to come to the group, to volunteer’ (interview with volunteer May 2025, because of the difficult position they felt they were in.

In response to these reactions, the volunteers talked at some length about an ideal process that distributed smartphones as a matter of course and not based on assessment of need. This was clearly a response to the emotional burden of decision making discussed in section 4 but nevertheless resonates with the recommendations of the [2023 British Red Cross Report](#) and the [2024 Digital Inclusion Research Hub](#) report discussed in section 1.

The three points below represent the views of the volunteers at Horsforth Chaplaincy who developed a clear preference for a new model of distribution within their own organisation:

**Move Away from Direct Gifting for the charity:** The group concluded ultimately that they should not be primary distributors of smartphones, as it compromises their core supportive mission. In response to the initial question of whether Horsforth Chaplaincy could and should distribute smartphones then, the case study enabled them to understand that while they *could* distribute smartphones especially by building on connections with other established organisations and networks in Leeds UK, they *shouldn’t* do this as it compromised their core mission.

## 6. Conclusion

In keeping with both the British Red Cross (2022) and Digital Inclusion Research Hub (2024) reports, this project has demonstrated to the Horsforth Chaplaincy volunteers the critical importance of smartphones for asylum seekers and refugees that enables access to legal processes, healthcare, social connection, and emotional wellbeing. Horsforth Chaplaincy's experience highlights both the urgency of digital access for asylum seekers and refugees, and the complex, emotionally demanding realities of frontline distribution work. While volunteers were motivated by compassion and a desire to respond to immediate need, the project revealed that smartphone gifting generates a huge emotional, labour and information burden on volunteers and risks altering the supportive, relational nature of their work.

The project also underlined the importance of coordinated, networked approaches to digital inclusion. [12] Leeds, UK has a longstanding digital inclusion ecosystem which has been highlighted as best practice by the Local Government Association and other leading experts in the field of digital inclusion. It was clear from the volunteers at Horsforth Chaplaincy how vital this ecosystem was in sharing good practice and advice, in supporting their work and helping troubleshoot issues when they arose.

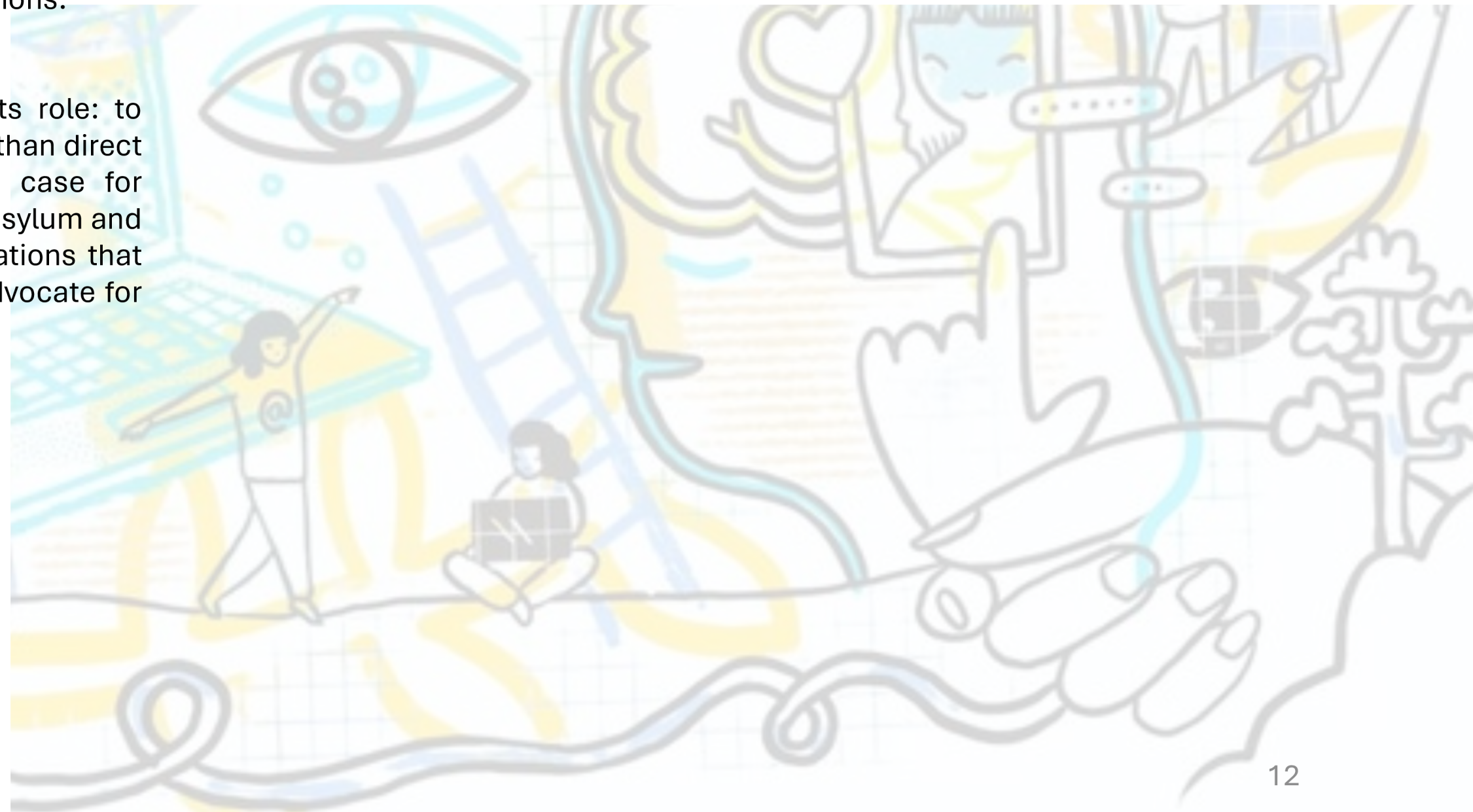
[12]<https://digitalinclusionleeds.com/our-work/key-initiatives/community-based-model> [accessed 04.02.2015]

**Adopt a Referral and Signposting Model:** Their preferred approach following this project was to continue to act as a referral point, signposting individuals to a dedicated distribution hub like Leeds Refugee Forum. This decision was difficult because for the volunteers, stepping back from smartphone distribution felt like a withdrawal of support ('none of this is exactly ideal' as one volunteer remarked towards the end of the distribution phase June 2025). Ultimately, the volunteers felt they should, where possible, ensure residents have access to smartphones to reduce their vulnerability, but that direct distribution should be handled by other organisations.

**Distribute as a matter of course, not based on assessment of 'need':** The ideal scenario the volunteers discussed is one where distribution of a smart device is the default and need is assumed rather than decided based on additional criteria to asylum or immigration status. The project showed the volunteers how 'life-changing' (to reiterate one volunteers comment April 2025) a smartphone was for asylum seekers and in response to this recognition, they advocated for a distribution process that by default, gifted smartphones to asylum seekers and refugees.

The project also pointed to how, and in keeping with the recommendations of other organisations discussed throughout this report, effective digital inclusion requires not only devices, and SIM cards, but also reliable and affordable WiFi, charging infrastructures, repair pathways, and clear referral systems. The emotional toll of making decisions about eligibility, especially in the contexts of scarcity and distress that asylum seekers and refugees experience; reinforces the importance of holistic and systemic solutions.

As a result of this project, Horsforth Chaplaincy has clarified its role: to support access through referral, advocacy, and partnership, rather than direct device distribution. More broadly, the project strengthens the case for smartphone access to be treated as a standard entitlement within asylum and refugee support systems and resonates wider policy recommendations that recognise the critical need for digital inclusion and continues to advocate for systemic solutions that enable and support this.



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