

The New Everyday: Episode 1

Eileen Burbidge

Technology was always going to be a central part of our lives, but the pandemic created rapid digital change on a global scale.

It has supported us through times of social isolation, offered us new opportunities in the world of work and laid the foundations for a smarter public sector.

How do we keep up with the pace of change in the UK and capitalise on the positive momentum?

That's what we're here to discuss in this podcast series, The New Everyday, a podcast from Virgin Media Business.

To introduce myself, I'm Eileen Burbidge. I'm a venture capital investor, tech enthusiast, and a self-professed geek.

As a result, I'm really interested in how the power of digital can help build stronger communities and improve customer outcomes.

Recent findings from the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) in partnership with Virgin Media O2 Business found that the pandemic accelerated the use of technology by more than two years in every single region across the UK.

Eileen Burbidge

Today we'll be looking at this regional transformation and asking how we can make sure these new digital opportunities can benefit everyone.

On the podcast today I'm joined by three guests.

First, I'd like to extend a warm welcome to Professor Mark Gillan. Mark is the Digital Innovation Commissioner at Innovation City Belfast.

His team is driving investment in digital infrastructure, spearheading Northern Ireland's recovery from the pandemic, and particularly through jobs and skills development for local citizens.

Eileen Burbidge

Thanks so much for being here, Mark.

Mark Gillan

Thank you.

Eileen Burbidge

In addition, we've got Helen Milner, the Group Chief Executive at Good Things Foundation, a social change charity, helping people to improve their lives through digital. Good to see you.

Helen Milner

It's a pleasure.

Eileen Burbidge

Last but not least, we've got Phil Swan, Digital Director of the GMCA.

Eileen Burbidge

That's the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, which is made up of the 10 Greater Manchester councils and Mayor Andy Burnham.

Together they're tackling digital exclusion and turning Manchester into a digital powerhouse.

Phil Swan

Hi Eileen.

Eileen Burbidge

Hi there. Thanks Phil. It's great to have all three of you here just to dive in. Let me start with Helen.

You've had a 30-year career at digital projects, and you've received so many awards for all of your services to digital inclusion, including an OBE - congratulations - and have a brilliant view of how things have changed.

Eileen Burbidge

If you could just help us set the stage in very simple terms. What would you use to describe what digital inclusion actually is?

Helen Milner

Well obviously today, we're going to talk about equality. Digital inclusion is about people being able to enjoy the internet and to benefit from the internet. And there are three main barriers. People lack the skills and confidence to be able to use the internet. They lack a personal device that they can use, and they lack connectivity to be able to connect to the internet. If we can sort all those three out, then we'll be able to get everybody in the UK online.

Eileen Burbidge

And so, on that note, Phil and Mark, you've both been working to level up digital skills and services in each of your respective regions.

Maybe I can start with Phil. Why do you think this is so important, especially post-pandemic, what have you been seeing or doing? And then we'll move obviously also to Mark.

Phil Swan

There's this sense that being online used to be an advantage and it's absolutely a necessity now. You can't really take part in society fully, now, I don't think if you are digitally excluded and that's at a really fundamental level.

So, for example, 45% of our GP appointments at the moment are still online. Well for a lot of our particularly more vulnerable people who are seeing GPs regularly, that's a massive challenge if they're digitally excluded and we're seeing that across so many areas now.

So, the importance of digital inclusion, I don't think can really be overemphasized right now. I think Helen's articulated that fantastically.

We as a city region, want Greater Manchester to be a fantastic place for people to grow up, to get on and grow older. It spans right the way through education through work through later life. There's so many areas where digital inclusion touches on that.

I think one of the things that's so important in this is that it's not just a bolt on and it's something different and additional, it's got to be mainstreamed within the day-to-day of how we design and deliver services rather than it being something that's oh, well, those people aren't online, well never mind.

What we've seen through the pandemic and the acceleration of digitization of society is that polarization has increased.

Actually, if you were digitally excluded previously, you're probably even more digitally excluded now because that many more things are only available online or have shifted channel.

We see that in terms of the way the high Street's changed and so many other day-to-day facets of everyday life.

Eileen Burbidge

Understood. Mark, are you seeing the same thing then in Belfast?

Mark Gillan

A very similar picture from a learning aspect from young kids in primary school through to secondary and university.

It's obviously key, having the capability, the tool sets, the hardware, to engage, and the pandemic has really highlighted that.

Through to way of life, just from the private side to working life.

As we move into a hybrid way of working and we're steadily opening up and face to face, it actually becomes even more important in the hybrid piece. Being able to engage with the people also on the face-to-face meetings. I would also say from the business side, from Northern Ireland where our productivity we're looking to continuously improve, and we have a very large cohort of small and medium enterprises, that digital inclusion is absolutely paramount to increasing productivity and diffusion of knowledge is key.

The understanding from the real highflyer end companies all the way down and that understanding of how to use the digital tools.

So it's a very exciting time, but it's really important that it's access for all. And we bring the whole nation along so that no matter where you are geographically, you're not excluded from this revolution.

Eileen Burbidge

It's clear that all three of you, you are unanimous that, we need to carry on with the sense of urgency and hopefully this conversation and other ones like it will help do that.

I'm also grateful that Mark, you mentioned digital working or hybrid working, for example.

I could use that as an opportunity just to refer back to the study and the research that I mentioned earlier on from CEBR. One of the areas that it talked about where that off the back of Covid-accelerated change in the area of hybrid working, the CEBR report said it could boost regional economies by as much as 33 and a third billion.

More than 33 billion pounds and earnings available for local consumption and that more than a million people across the UK are interested in relocating as a result of remote working. So, this will have real lasting impacts on your physical communities, your local communities.

Eileen Burbidge

And, again, Phil mentioned the high street and just how this is going to affect how we live and not just work every day. Right? So where do you start?

Helen Milner

One of the things that we've seen during the pandemic is 1.5 million more people did get online during the pandemic. Digital exclusion has decreased, but because it's narrowed it's deepened.

So, actually what we've seen is that people who had a little bit of digital skill now have a lot more, whereas the people who were absolutely left behind are still left behind, so there's still 10 million people in the UK who had very very basic or no digital skills whatsoever.

If you compare that to the fact, 65% of people video called for the first time during the pandemic. They are those people who had of skill pre pandemic and have learned that because they've been learning and working online.

And so that provides an opportunity for those people, but let's not forget that there is still this very large group of people who don't have those skills and haven't had those opportunities.

Eileen Burbidge

So you're really saying the same thing that Mark said, which is in a way that gap only got bigger. Even though it's so easy to think, oh, the pandemic has fuelled technology adoption, and we've seen so many more use cases of digital tools, we've actually exacerbated a problem in a way, right?

And like you said, it's gotten deeper. I remember when I did home learning with my children, I was really lucky because I've said I'm a bit of a nerd, we've got a lot of devices at home.

But it still took me a week to realise, oh, actually they will all need a device in order to get online, to join their Zoom calls. They will all now need headphones because we're actually in the same room. I don't have a separate room for each of these children. And, we need to make sure that we've got broadband that's going to support all of this and everyone being online at the same time.

And it did strike me that were incredibly fortunate where I was in my part of London, but that can't be the norm at all. So, now that the gap has gotten even bigger, how do we get that to narrow now? Is it through infrastructure? Is it access to device? It feels like it's more than just education and informing people. What practical things do you think we can do?

Mark Gillan

Yes. I was just going to say so, yes. I mean, obviously we're talking about in the private house situation, but I think also the similar situation in business as well, it's highlighted the need for access to fast, high quality secure communications.

That's something which as part of Belfast City regional deal, we're absolutely looking. It's the infrastructure laying down for that secure, high-speed wireless communications as well to ensure that, both from the individual side, but also from the business side, they're able to adapt and react as we progress in the modern way.

I think also one thing to say is it's not one size fits all. So, there has to be flexibility, in that not everything will remain remote. Even through the pandemic, businesses have been working obviously for manufacturing side face-to-face.

It's going to require a little bit of adjustment in terms of the next year or two, just in terms of this move to hybrid workspace.

I think that will bring with it some issues along the way, as opposed to everybody being remote, where everybody's in the same platform. Whereas when you're in a hybrid scenario, it causes actually some issues.

Eileen Burbidge

Okay. You're talking about what you're doing in Belfast with respect to businesses and infrastructure, Phil, is it the same kind of emphasis and prioritization that you do in Manchester? Or how do you approach digital inclusion?

Phil Swan

Yeah, it is similar in many ways. I mean, coming back to your previous point though, as well about the regional dividend and that 33.3 billion, I mean, it is incredibly positive and it's encouraging people to work in different ways, bringing new people into employment that otherwise would have struggled to.

For example, we have a significant percent of population of greater Manchester who are underemployed as it were, particularly people who are disabled and who may struggle to get in and out of the city centre and the opportunity for that group of individuals and others to work in more flexible ways.

We know we're all, I mean, I have two girls in and out of school.

It's a lot more convenient being able to work in more hybrid ways, and I think lots of people are feeling that in fact, we have an issue today with my wife and I were both out at work and who looked after the tortoises.

So, and that's a problem we haven't had for 18 months. So, the reality, these things are sometimes quite prosaic, but for a lot of people it's incredibly important and real, and that cashes out in ways that I know we'll come onto, I'm sure too about the environment.

We worked out for the 400 people who haven't travelled in and out of Greater Manchester Combined Authority over the last mile for the first 18 months of the pandemic is equivalent to the distance to the moon and back.

So we're all incredibly mindful of the impact and the dividend, the environmental dividend, the potential opportunity around digital working in ways of that could cash out.

Coming back to Mark's point on what he was talking about just before connectivity is absolutely huge. We increasingly talk about digital connectivity as a fourth utility as a universal right.

I know Helen and Good Things Foundation have absolutely championed this for quite some time. And we're absolutely behind that.

We have universities, colleges, like UA92, University Academy 92 in Greater Manchester who have now said, right, well, if you're a student with us, you automatically get a PC and get connectivity.

We're just going to take away that issue.

That progressive thinking where organisations say, actually, this is just part of the offer we need to make. We'd love to see that approach be adopted across the university and college sector, for example, across the whole country.

Actually, if you're paying £9,700 a year for university education, you get a PC and you get connectivity as part of that, because actually you can't really do that. You can't take part as a student effectively unless it's built in.

Eileen Burbidge

No. So that's brilliant. We're talking about infrastructure and what you need to do for the local communities, but you're raising now this another point and a whole other area, which is, investment in skills and aside from the public infrastructure, or as you said, a fourth utility. Then getting individuals access to the skills and the training that they need. You've already signposted, but I'm going to turn it over to Helen, then. Can you tell us more about the Good Things Foundation digital inclusion programme please?

Helen Milner

We work with thousands of community organisations in the heart of communities right across the UK. So Across Greater Manchester and in Belfast as well. So, Phil and Mark hopefully know about those locally, and we work with them and in partnership because they can reach the people who are digitally excluded in those communities.

They are a trusted organisation and they can support them.

We also have a free online learning platform called Learn My Way.

That is the very basic level of digital skills. That's why we need the community centres because of course, if somebody is district excluded, they won't just go online and Google and find some courses from free courses.

It's all free online content. Pick and mix. Everything that we do for our community partners is all free. We work with organisations like Virgin Media O2 and JP Morgan, the Chase foundation, Google.org, to then pull together programmes to be able to deliver in partnership with those community organisations.

Helen Milner

During the pandemic we moved from not just being about skills and Learn My Way, the platform, but also about, supporting people with devices and with free data.

Because it's that combination that then, all of a sudden, became essential for somebody to be digitally included.

We've supported over 3.5 million people in the last 10 years with digital skills and we've supported 25,000 people with devices and with data and with skill support during the pandemic.

It feels like a really small number. And I think for me, it's really about how do we scale that up because 25,000 compared to, three and a half million is not terribly many.

The other thing that the community partners provide for us is that voice from the ground. So they are still saying to us that the need is critical,

And we've talked about infrastructure, but I also want to put the word affordability in there too, because the point is that at the moment, devices and data is not affordable.

So, we've found a model where we can provide free training and free support and free skills development for people in communities. If they're nearer one of the community partners who can provide that support. Now we have to make sure that we get free. That's where Good Things Foundation comes in or affordable sustainable solutions for the devices and for the data.

Eileen Burbidge

Amazing. I don't know, you say they are small numbers, but I think they're really commendable. I think you're right though, working with more partners, whether it's community partners or others is what's going to help get that to scale.

Now you talked about some of the programmes and actually earlier Phil talked about working with universities as well, but isn't it the case, Phil, that you've also done a programme targeted at silver surfers, for example, up in Manchester. Can you talk about that and what you think the impact there will be?

Phil Swan

There are so many hyper-local programs, voluntary community sector led activities and programs instigated by each of the local authorities across the country and we certainly see it in greater Manchester.

And one of them is an initiative in soft called Tech and Tea, which is just legendary, frankly.

We had a really good meeting with the Mayor. And about 50 people from our broader public sector in Greater Manchester.

And a guy called Bernard. This is the kind of human angle to this really, because you can look at the stats, but it's the human dimensions that just really make it sink in.

A guy called Bernard who's in his eighties, talked with help from the guys at Tech and Tea about what kind of impact getting online during the pandemic had made for him.

It literally had given him a purpose in life. Again, he in his own words had given up, he said, 'I don't see anyone'.

The social isolation, we haven't really touched on that, but the social isolation and loneliness was just crushing him, crushing his spirit.

He was the most absolutely fabulous guy talking about how he'd engaged with Tech and Tea. He'd heard about it. He thought, 'Well, I'll give this a crack' - in his own words.

He did an initial programme over four and five weeks and thought, 'Well, this is amazing'. And then started to almost come out of his shell again through this process.

And then he became a trainer. He'd done it for six months. He thought this is making a huge difference.

He could see all these older people coming online. He thought I need to get involved in this.

He's gone through the training process and now he convinced the groups and he said, 'these people who come online, they haven't spoken to anyone for six months, some of them, and had a meaningful conversation'.

He said, 'At the end of them, you can't shut them up! We do an hour, and you can't shut them up'.

He says, it's creating new communities where there weren't any, and bringing people back into the community, who were just cut off, and really really struggling.

That human angle to this is just absolutely... I mean the whole room was in tears. It was extraordinary, including the mayor.

Eileen Burbidge

I can imagine. Yeah.

Phil Swan

It brought it home in a way that, I mean Helen your example of the three and a half million people. It's just...but when you bring it down to Bernard and his life, he's trying to do...

Helen Milner

And Phil, you didn't mention in Greater Manchester you've got the famous fish and chip shop.

So, in Stockport there's a fish and chip shop and coffee shop. That's a partner starting point. That's a partner with Good Things Foundation and they do absolutely amazing work and they helped an amazing woman called Mabel.

She hasn't gone on to help others yet, but Mabel got a tablet and free data from us and support from starting point. She saw, physically saw, her daughter in Australia for the first time in 25 years. Her GP actually said it improved her health, having this social contact improved her health.

Eileen Burbidge

I don't think it's overstating it to say that it's life changing.

We talk about digital inclusion, as was said earlier, it seemed like a benefit or an added benefit. Now it's clearly a necessity and it's clearly going to change lives and therefore change communities, form new communities and societies.

We've talked about now how you approach that both socially, but as well as now, individually in these human stories, I think are hugely important.

The Bernards, the Mabels and that's why 10,000 of those really is a big number. I don't think that's a small number, but, Mark, given the sense of urgency for all of this, how do you balance the investment that you make from a public sector point of view in physical infrastructure, which we've talked about and how important that is versus skills building or, the social impact on individuals as well? How do you end up being able to address both? And where's that balance?

Mark Gillan

I mean, on the skills side, I was going to say that actually, what we're seeing is a cohort of young people who see the opportunity.

Within Belfast we have a world leading centre in cybersecurity and actually that underpins a significant activity within Northern Ireland, around the digital domain where there's a real high concentration on the cyber aspect of it.

We're seeing cohorts coming in, not just through the traditional university route, but through...I was just at the Met College in Belfast, just coming on to this podcast, and the fantastic work they're doing on courses to bring young people through and create a career in this and develop that skillset, which is fundamentally important for the growth of the businesses.

We're seeing a real dynamic change in the marketplace.

The skills sort of pipeline is key. That's of fundamental importance, and certainly from Innovation City Belfast, that's something we absolutely want champion.

Mark Gillan

Infrastructure is required for sure.

But likewise, there's a very equal balance on the skills pipeline.

And these are skills which will set the career path for those people coming through in a really good way moving forward. It had been a very sought after skillset.

Eileen Burbidge

Yeah, for sure. You're highlighting the fact that this is a long-term investment, isn't it? And it's a strategy in the community.

I think just to call out some more research that came out of that CEBR report, it actually cited the fact that Covid-accelerated technology adoption by almost three years in the Northwest and almost four years, 3.7 years in Northern Ireland.

At the same time though, I think there've been reports that there's kind of a brain drain happening in Northern Ireland. Right. So, Mark, what do you think about, talents or skills and people going for university and not returning? How do you think what you do can actually try and reverse that trend?

Mark Gillan

Well, we're working on exactly that at the moment.

To give an example of the impact of Covid. I was involved, previous to this role, I was Chief Technology Officer of innovate UK. I was also overlooking the Covid response for innovate.

And my background is in Formula One. I've run a couple of race engineering teams in F1.

When Covid hit and the ventilator challenge was kicked off in the UK, I helped working, with the seven UK F1 teams to create project Pitlane.

And there we used the F1's digital expertise to fast-track ventilator design from start to finish in three and a half weeks, a process that would typically take three years, working with the regulators.

The reason I highlight that is: This is exactly what we're trying to do in Northern Ireland, where we're actually trying to create a new digital twin centre.

We go from idea for a product or service in the digital domain. We are not creating any physical prototypes and we're making that product or the surface in a very quick, sustainable manner.

We're working with a regulator along that to fast track that just like we did with the ventilator challenge with the F1 teams.

And that becomes the magnet to attract the talent back, in that people see this transformative way to develop product or services, and they want to be part of that.

That's something which, we're looking at investing the Belfast regional city deal, at £ in the city deal funding wisely, but also looking at a bold vision on central funding too.

I think it's, very exciting possibilities.

But we have to create the magnet where people want to work in there that you got and want to be part of this new dynamic, working environment.

Eileen Burbidge

Of course, did you have to build up the pipeline and then the compelling reason for that to draw them back? Don't you? And I guess I want to come back to something that Helen then mentioned as well about affordability, which is part of that pipeline development.

So, you talked about how expensive devices and data are. Can you talk about, you've done some work, I think, with the National Data Bank project? Right. Can you explain how that tries to address, I guess, data poverty?

Helen Milner

Yeah. The National Data Bank was started up by Virgin Media O2, and then given to Good Things Foundation. So it was a really terrific project.

It's providing free mobile data, SIMs and connectivity to excluded people.

So there's, a platform, a gateway. As I said, we worked with thousands of organisations all across the country and they will be able to access that data.

We're a pilot stage at the moment and we're going to be scaling up in January.

People all over the country will be able to access millions and millions of pounds worth of free data for them to be able to get the data that they need.

Of course, we need to think about sustainability. I mean the National Data Bank is going to be there for at least three years. We're talking to lots of other partners as well. That's really exciting to plug that gap.

But we need to make sure that those people don't just get six months or 12 months of free connectivity, that they're actually on that pathway towards being able to afford it permanently.

The great news about going through the network is they also get the support with skills. We also have device projects and programmes running as well.

We're just about to start the discovery phase of a large-scale refurb program.

We want businesses to donate, devices to us, and then we'll, organise the refurbishment of those and get those out alongside that data because often people need both of those things at the same.

Eileen Burbidge

It's so tremendous how the Good Things Foundation is such a catalyst, but to your point, you need to have ongoing sustainability and scalability of these initiatives. Don't you? And sorry. Phil, did you want to come in on something that we just spoke about earlier?

Phil Swan

Yeah. If I could do. I think that the point in the conversation about brain drain talent and skills was a really interesting one.

We've got some stats in the last couple of weeks about the, about job adverts in Greater Manchester, looking at the previous 12 months.

We were pretty surprised because we thought the biggest advertised sector would be in healthcare and the like, but it is in IT. In digital services.

We had 40,000 roles advertised in Greater Manchester in the last 12 months in IT roles.

More than 10% of all adverts were for digital roles, which is just extraordinary.

The number of undergrads joining the University of Manchester's Computer Science programs come from 280 to 600 in one year, and you need three As to get in now. It's the most applied for university in the country and we're hanging onto more than 50% of our undergrads when they leave.

I think there is a - and this isn't anti London thing by any means because London is such a global engine for innovation and entrepreneurship. But for a lot of young people, they are looking for an alternative and London isn't always the answer now, which is great to see.

And for Belfast, for Greater Manchester, for our big city regions around the UK, it feels that there's a real revival going on.

The digital industries as Mark has alluded to already, and the work that's going on in Northern Ireland in cyberspace...we have, a similarly quite a powerful, strong cyber community now as GCHQ based in the city region.

But how areas like Belfast and Greater Manchester work together now are as important as how Greater Manchester and London work together, for example.

I think there's just some amazing opportunities, as we look ahead over the next five to ten years, and we kind of rephrase our society in a slightly different way coming out of a pandemic.

Eileen Burbidge

Yeah, no, for sure. I think what you're talking about is it's a redistribution, isn't it? You were expecting more open jobs and caring, and social care. Actually, it's in IT.

We need to actually start redistributing where resources are going, where the skills are. And it is part of all of this levelling up.

I'm sorry. Mark. Were you going to say something?

Mark Gillan

Yeah. I think Phil hit the nail on the head.

Collaboration is key and not one place can be centre of excellence for everything. If this pandemic has taught us anything, it is that we need to collaborate and we have the ability to do that, to work in ways that we never thought were possible.

Going back to that ventilator challenge, we had, if you can get all seven F1 teams in Red Bull's facility, all working together with seven different race shirts...there's no better, no more competitive people in that. It's a highlight that, we can collaborate, we need to develop things at pace.

And, if we're going to see this actually through to fruition, we need to work together, from a regional perspective and work to each other's strengths.

Eileen Burbidge

I think I want to come back to a theme which every one of you has spoken about and we've already started to develop, but just to come back to it again on collaboration.

Because I love what both Mark and Phil said with respect to collaboration across the regions.

But then also Helen picked up on the fact that we not only can rely on the public sector and to collaborate across regions. We also have to have collaboration between the public sector and the private sector.

And the reason why I really loved Mark's example of the F1 teams coming together is because that is a perfect example of how the private sector can lean in, how it can contribute and how it can be involved with everything we're talking about with respect to levelling up, but also improving the infrastructure, access, affordability, and all of that.

So, Phil, what do you think, what do you ask from businesses in Manchester or maybe the businesses in London about coming into Manchester, being involved?

Phil Swan

The collaboration is right at the heart of what we do.

The digital inclusion action network, which Helen is a part of which the mayor set up following his election this year is about 25 organisations working together, including public and private, voluntary and academia.

But it also sits almost at the heart of a wider digital inclusion taskforce in the city region, which is about 150 different people from a whole variety of different organisations, which was basically set up in the early days of the pandemic.

When, as Helen described really well, the challenge around digital inclusion was just coming at it as thick and fast.

And, and the scale of the challenge is such that it doesn't sit in any one organisation's gift to tackle that challenge is such a huge response.

You need a systemic response. And you're not going to do that with a handful of organisations, you're going to do it with maybe 150. Even then, Helen's talked about the partnerships that they have with thousands. You have to work at scale.

I think coming back to the point around innovation earlier, we are a relatively small nation globally. Now, if you look at China, you look at the US you look at Russia and you look at how we compete at a national level. We don't have the same resources that some of these countries have, but we can out innovate other parts of the world.

But we will only out-innovate other parts of the world if we work together. We collaborate in ways that draw together, our asset in clusters, like Belfast, like, greater Manchester, like, London, and so on, and find new ways of collaborating, which act as force multipliers in the areas, which are real strategic priorities for us as a city region.

And we bring investment into that. We bring partnerships into that, and that involves a whole variety of different perspectives, so that we're not going to bring a group think mentality.

So that we challenge ourselves and we think differently. That's just so critical for us as in a city in greater Manchester city region.

If we want to play on a global scale, we've got 2.8 million people. It's not really that many people to be honest, but if we can innovate differently by collaborating differently and creating a system within which we work together and collaborate differently and work with other parts of the UK national organisations in that way I think we've got a real fighting chance.

Collaboration couldn't be more critical actually. It's something we actually are pretty good at in the UK, which is a real strength.

Eileen Burbidge

I couldn't agree more. I mean, that's what I often say when people ask me about, investing here in the UK versus in the US I think in the US you have really disparate ecosystems.

You've got the New York or the East Coast ecosystem, and then you have San Francisco Bay Area or Silicon Valley.

I really think one of the strengths of the UK is the collaboration between all the regions and all the different hubs. We're closer culturally, but also physically in terms of transportation and the whole thing. It's just a strength we need to flex even more. Okay.

Mark Gillan

I think there's been a lot of lessons learned from Covid-19 on the collaborations that actually were forced for us as a nation to react to it.

We mustn't forget them. I think there is a danger that some of those, the potential is very easy to go back to type and to undo the good work that we do. I think there really is a need for us to not forget what has been learned and to ensure that those collaborations, that, to be honest, some of them would never have happened without, standing up and reacting to the pandemic.

Ventilator - I talked about F1 teams, but we also had Rolls Royce, and Ford.

You had people literally in a two-person workshop sitting in Ford's offices, or Airbus' doing ventilators and different devices. They would've never gotten in the door, pre pandemic in that way of working.

It's super important that we learn those lessons and we don't forget the ability to fast-track highly regulated devices, products, et cetera, wider afield. That is something which we just need to make sure is done and done in a systemic way.

Eileen Burbidge

Oh, no. I mean, I don't think you could have said it better.

I actually think that's why Virgin Media Business has pulled together this series, right.

This podcast series is because, as you say, there was a forcing function from the pandemic, which has helped and accelerated so much as the research has shown.

But what do we need to do now to make sure that carries on and continues, for positive end?

Maybe to round that out, I want to come back to Helen to see if she would have any specific calls to action of businesses and business leaders in terms of how to forward, all of this work? Or what resources would you encourage business leaders to look at or consider either of yours or others in order to help inform themselves and to get more engaged?

Helen Milner

Business leaders, my ask is, 'Partner with us'.

You're talking about collaboration. It's like, we're the biggest digital inclusion charity in the UK, and probably one of the biggest in the world and therefore, back to innovating, we've done a lot of that innovation. And we still have a really big hill to climb.

One of my worries, and I think it's, Mark it's like you're saying that there was a lot of new ways of working, but also new realisations, but I'm worried like you are that will all slip back.

Collaborate with us and come with an open mind, come to have a conversation, don't come to say, oh, we've got X, can you take it off our hands?

The other one is, I'm also on the board of FutureDotNow. That's a coalition of businesses working to upskill employees.

92% of businesses say they want a basic level of digital skills from their employees. Actually, being in that coalition, there's a playbook, there's resources, there's a directory.

So, I would say, I would point business leaders at FutureDotNow. Join the coalition. It's free. It's a really great place to come together, but also to think about how we want to act together. That's very much focused on their own employees, because I think quite often businesses look outwards to say, so what can I do out in the world rather than looking inwards? So who do I have?

Even if you're, a high knowledge business, you still have cleaners. I mean, they probably aren't paid by you, but you could talk to the people who have those contracts to say, how could we make sure that everybody who works directly or indirectly for us, has those basic digital skills.

And then on resources obviously FutureDotNow, and I mentioned Learn My Way. Learn My Way is a free online learning resource. Absolutely 100% free. We've designed it and co-created it with people with very low digital skills.

We've refined that over the years. I would just urge anybody who wants to get some basic digital skills in front of their employees that Learn My Way is a really easy way to start because it's free and it's out there. You can just point people at it.

Eileen Burbidge

Amazing. So that's [FutureDotNow](#). Also of course, the websites for [Learn My Way](#) and the [Good Things Foundation](#). Right?

Thank you so much.

Then, so Mark and Phil, respectively for Belfast and Greater Manchester, where would you want to point people to business leaders? If they want to learn more, they want to work on collaboration, get more involved, engaged, and support.

Mark Gillan

From Belfast perspective, [Innovation City Belfast](#), and to reach out directly to myself.

Eileen Burbidge

Amazing, thank you.

Phil Swan

For [Greater Manchester's](#) perspective in terms of business asks, I mean, Virgin Media O2 have actually shown the way in terms of one particular area of working that is, it is an absolute benchmark for the rest of the city region now, and that's around social value.

As we procure, we put a very high weighting on the social value of a bid.

We recently bid for a £30million project, which Virgin won.

But the social value that they've delivered through that on the back of that has been enormous and is growing. It's generated about an £11million return so far, through the activity. In that it's underpinned it a great deal of our digital inclusion work, for example, free connectivity out to community centres and a whole variety of things.

Thousands of volunteer hours working in communities, doing things.

That was just one project.

Organisations like Virgin Media O2 have real potential through social value related activities that link into our core priorities like this, and can make an absolutely enormous difference.

Where I think we can help is by articulating some of the challenges very specifically.

Phil Swan

So, for example, within digital inclusion, we have a particular focus on under 25s over 75s and disabled people and helping them get online.

We can chunk that up as well. Because we can say, for example, say, well actually we have 4,000 care leavers a year in greater Manchester. And they typically all come out of care and all need digital connectivity.

Right. Will a company or two, three companies just deal with that problem.

We'll partner with you, and we'll help manage it.

Similarly, we will work with our housing organisations. We have, really good relationships, across housing organisations, and we have specific challenges with connectivity in our housing.

By being more specific around some of these challenges, I think it's easier for some of the industry sector to say, yeah, I can do that. We can do that.

That feels like an achievable thing, that we can get behind and then we've got something to collectively celebrate.

I think sometimes the way we frame the asks is really important in this.

But undoubtedly, we're not going to deliver our ambitions on our own. We have to be working together in new and innovative ways.

There is a real sense that businesses want to do that more than ever. Their staff want to see businesses delivering in those ways and feel it's part of the corporate values of the organisations they work with, which is, which is tremendous really,

Eileen Burbidge

I think that's a perfect wrap-up of things. I mean, I would love to keep going. I've got so many more questions for each of the three of you based on all of the work that you do, but just to leave on that note about collaboration, that emphasis of it, and maybe refining the ask and making sure that we don't lose the momentum that we got as a result of the pandemic.

We're talking about ages; we're talking about socioeconomic classes and how much can be left behind if we don't continue to focus on inclusion.

I love all the human stories too. So thank you so very much.

I hope that everyone listening has enjoyed it as much as I have. This has been a really uplifting conversation. It really gives me a lot of energy and hope and optimism for where we could go with everything.

Thank you so much, Helen, for joining me. I really love all of the work that you're doing at the Good Things Foundation and appreciate all the examples in your call to action for business leaders. Thank you.

Phil Swan

That's a pleasure. Great to be here. Hopefully people get in touch.

Eileen Burbidge

Oh, I'm sure they will. Thank you so much, Phil, for everything that you're doing and with the mayor and all the groups in Manchester and for bringing in the stories of Bernard and everything else.

Phil Swan

Thank you very much.

Eileen Burbidge

Last but not least, thank you so much, Mark. I love that you've invited people to get in touch with you directly. I hope you don't get too inundated with requests or emails, but it'll come from a good place. Hopefully we'll see that brain drain reversing up in Belfast, but all the great work that you do, we'll see that come out results in spades. Thank you so much.

Mark Gillan

Thank you. Really enjoyed myself.

Eileen Burbidge

I hope everyone listening has enjoyed this conversation as much as I have.

If you have, please hit subscribe so you can stay up to date on upcoming episodes.

If you want more information on the research, as well as how technology is transforming, how we live and work for the better search for Virgin Media Business CEBR online.

For more on inclusivity and building a fair workforce through digital change, check out our next episode - More access to more work for more people - where we look at how technology is offering opportunities to millions of people previously locked out of work.

Until then, this is Eileen Burbidge. Thanks so much for listening.