

RESILIENCE AMIDST CRISIS

Lessons from how the MiFriendly Cities project
adapted to the Covid-19 pandemic

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MIGRATIONWORK CIC



Masks made by Pandendere Community Sewing group, Social Innovator



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This briefing provides insight for coordinators of large-scale projects affected by crisis and for policy makers who want to understand the positive role that migrant communities, grassroots organisations and similar mixed partnerships can play in crisis.

The paper looks at how the MiFriendly Cities project was affected by, and how it responded and adapted to the Covid-19 pandemic, drawing key learnings about innovation and resilience. This complex, multi-partner project not only survived, but in fact adapted astonishingly, providing a critical resource and serving the communities in which it was embedded. Here, we will look at 'how'.

Detailed case study: The MiFriendly Cities project

The MiFriendly Cities partnership, made up of eleven project partners including three city councils, was awarded £3.7m of co-funding in 2017 by the EU's Urban Innovative Actions [UIA] fund (part of the European Regional Development Fund) to explore programmes and activities to help make Coventry, Birmingham and Wolverhampton more 'migrant friendly'.

At the peak of service delivery and activities, the MiFriendly Cities project was affected in an unprecedented way by the Covid-19 pandemic. The interim event had taken place in November 2019 and the interim report was published. Many activities were entering a key delivery phase. On 23rd March 2020, the UK began its first national lockdown to try and tackle the spread of the Covid-19 virus, and the population was asked to 'Stay at home. Protect the National Health Service. Save lives', greatly curtailing social and commercial activity.

The MiFriendly Cities project was, like all of society, impacted significantly by the pandemic. Projects were halted as venues closed and in person contact was prevented. Without immediate intervention many activities could have floundered. Yet, soon after the lockdown, the project was able to assess the impact to programmes, provide support and resources, and benefit from the resilience and adaptability of its participants, to not only continue to deliver services, but help take on the fight to the pandemic in practical and inspiring ways. Our collaboration with partners and individuals representing communities whose voices are often not heard gave us an opportunity to understand the impact of the pandemic from these communities and organisations' perspectives. This MiFriendly Cities experience and community-based perspective was drawn upon to inform local pandemic response initiatives, such as a local resilience fund lead by the local Combined authority [1].

[1] <https://www.wmca.org.uk/news/west-midlands-seeks-11m-to-support-huge-community-effort-during-lockdown/>

1. Immediate impact of lockdown

The immediate impact of the lockdown included:

- All on site facilities and venues were closed (for example library-based Share My Language activity had to stop)
- Face to face training, like the Furniture Factory initiative, was cancelled
- Skills and support sessions which relied on trust being built up over time, like our employment drop-in sessions and citizen rights legal advice, were no longer possible
- Many of the social innovations and enterprises which were just launching or barely off the ground, were halted.

Project partners faced significant day to day change and re-organisation:

- Business Continuity plans (BCP) were initiated
- Teams and departments were re-organised, for example, City council staff were seconded to support frontline pandemic-focused areas, and roles and priorities changed overnight
- Working from home was a new reality, with many needing time to create a home working set up that was fit for purpose, sometimes with limited resources and IT support
- Front-line services required immediate delivery plan changes at a time when there was an increased demand for their services
- Many projects, contracts and initiatives faced immediate closure and cancellation
- There was an increase in staff illness, absence and bereavement leave.

Project participants were also profoundly affected. Many migrants who had been working, and supporting their families were suddenly without jobs and income or unable to return to their home country (i.e. students). At the same time they could not access public funds due to the conditions of their right to remain in the UK or their undocumented status.

Many faced a higher risk of negative impact from the virus and were vulnerable to its socioeconomic impact. Susceptibility to the virus among black, Asian and other minority ethnic groups was found to be higher than other groups, and for those living in deprived areas [2]. In addition, many of our participants were frontline workers, in hospitals, and as carers – putting their health, and their families, at further risk. Participants were also more likely to face digital exclusion and potentially difficulties accessing accurate information about the virus in their first language.

[2]https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/908434/Disparities_in_the_risk_and_outcomes_of_COVID_August_2020_update.pdf

2. Management and communications

To manage and mitigate this risk, the first area of focus was our communications, and as lockdown was announced the project issued a series of key messages, mainly via email, to project partners, participants and stakeholders. The safety of all people involved and benefitting from the project was the first priority, and the project needed to share what courses and programmes were closed or postponed, and establish how best to adapt and deliver services.

Next, partners regrouped to assess the impact to the project. To do this, Coventry City Council (CCC), as project lead, issued a spreadsheet tool to capture the impact of the lockdown measures on services and projects. This was a critical step and enabled CCC to get control of a situation that could have derailed the whole project.

Subsequently, within a week of the lockdown beginning, the project lead had a complete picture of the likely impact across the project, by partner, by activity and by deliverable. This information was critical in managing the processes of restarting services and programmes, and formed the basis of the submission to the UIA requesting a project extension.

As the crisis escalated, the project continued to review its response, and in the Committee meeting in April 2020 (made up of key partners), we included an agenda item covering Covid 19 Business Continuity planning, implications and way forward, with UIA representatives dialing in.

Once the partner feedback had been reviewed, it was an opportunity for the project to share the current risks and opportunities, and to identify where the project may need to postpone its' activities.

Opportunities

There are some areas of the project that become especially important during the Covid-19 crisis, which the Project is looking to provide additional support for:

- Health Champions (and their role in sharing key messages into migrant communities)
- Some social enterprise innovations (eg Ake's social innovation project providing employment law and rights advice)
- MediaLab participants encouraged and supported to give voice to the experience of their community under Covid-19
- New support 'Networks' like the Social Innovation group being established

Impact on Partnership

Despite the impacts on not-for-profits in the UK, especially on funding, the partnership is holding up well. Impacts include:

- Illness of senior and other staff
- Impact of Covid-19 operations across the City Councils (redeployment etc)
- Ways of working - working from home, Zoom etc and lack of face-to-face engagement
- Funding considerations



Some activities and courses cannot be delivered in their agreed format and thus need postponement of delay, these include:

- Some social enterprises and innovation (particularly where activity was heavily predicated on face-to-face) eg. World Cafe
- Furniture 'Home Makeovers'
- Personal impact of Covid-19 is preventing some participants from being able to deliver (they have the illness or family with it)
- Review extensions to some projects and likely timescales required

Where possible, the project activities and course have been reviewing how they are delivered, with many elements moving to online/virtual platforms:

- Many courses and activities have moved to video conferencing and online (eg. SML Rhyme Time on Facebook; MediaLab)
- Others are moving content and instruction to suit online platforms (eg Furniture Upcycling)
- Others (like the Final Event) are being planned on the basis of 'digital first'
- Some activities were already 'online' in nature and can continue as planned, eg. Sound Boards

Impact on Partnership

Project adaption

With this insight and the open-mindedness of the UIA regarding how the project might adapt and reframe deliverables, a project extension was agreed in September 2020, with a new end date of May 2021.

Communications: guiding social innovation projects

The project was also focused on supporting the 30 social enterprises and innovations that were underway – many of whom could no longer run their service under the new lockdown measures. The social innovation projects were due to kickstart their activities just as the pandemic began, having recently received their funding. Many of their plans involved group activities, meetings and events which were then impossible to deliver. To support them at a critical time, published advice from McKinsey management consultancy about how to manage a business in this new context was shared, and participants encouraged to manage their response to the pandemic.

The social innovation projects were then supported by their MigrationWork mentors to adapt their plans and make projects ‘virtual’. Initially, an estimated one third of projects expected to be able to adapt to an online context, but with ongoing support and a series of online training sessions, 12 of the 13 projects that were due to start at the beginning of lockdown effectively adapted their projects.

3. Project responses:

Despite the challenges, the project was uniquely placed to serve our communities through this difficult period - many of the services addressed issues of social isolation, health, improved access to benefits and services, and offered community support – and therefore became even more relevant. Partner organisations had built trust with local communities, and had fostered relationships and networks between project participants. The project bridged gaps between city councils and migrant communities, and had trained, funded and mobilised a diverse range of talented migrants and leaders, investing in key areas of social action, who were ‘ready to go’ when the pandemic took hold. This section will explore ways in which the project responded to the pandemic: by adapting delivery; through opportunities for project growth; through creating and donating materials; and through using new, digital platforms.

Response 1 - Adapting delivery

Central England Law Centre legal health checks

For MiFC, CELC provides families and individuals legal advice to understand and enact their rights, navigate the immigration system and enable access to health and welfare services and support. They also focus on raising awareness with schools and other settings of the right to citizenship for young people from a migrant background and routes to obtaining advice and support around this. CELC adapted their offering in response to the health crisis in two main ways.

Firstly, their outreach work in schools had to stop when lockdown measures forced schools to close, so CELC took the initiative by contacting over 500 schools across the West Midlands to share specially adapted online content about citizenship that they could share with school staff, students and families. This work led to a joint online outreach event with Birmingham City Council, where CELC presented citizenship advice to over 40 professionals from NGOs, public bodies and schools.

Secondly, it became clear very quickly through contact with schools, partners and clients that issues like citizenship were being superseded during the pandemic by more pressing issues as some migrants struggled to cope with the economic hardship of the lockdown. For example, people faced issues extending their visas, accessing public funds when they could not work due to conditions of their immigration status, some people were unable to return home as planned (students) or were separated from family overseas.

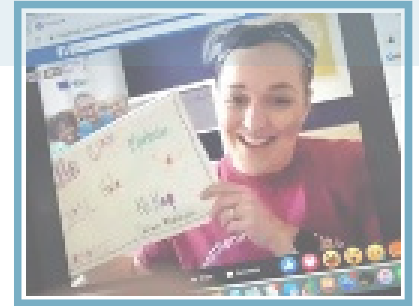
To ensure those on the frontline could help migrants in this situation (including schools, local authority and MiFCities partners), CELC produced special Covid-19 information packs that explained how migrants could successfully navigate new regulations and legal processes brought in by the Government to deal with COVID-19. It was clear that good legal advice and information could unlock some difficult situations so the team shifted to doing more advocacy and widening their client fact-finding form to focus more quickly on the needs of migrants to stay safe and well, and to manage extremely challenging economic situations. To enable easy access to advice and to put clients at ease during legal health check and advocacy sessions, the team used Skype and WhatsApp, often in evenings and weekends, to fit in with client needs.

Share My Language

Share My Language (SML) typically brings people from different communities together in a physical space, to share in culture and language exchange in informal environments. However, this needed to be adapted so that participants could stay home and stay safe.

MiFriendly Cities staff were concerned about the blurred work-life boundaries for many carers of young children in the West Midlands, given that most were suddenly required to work from home. To help support these families, Share My Language Rhymetime live streaming sessions were trialed via Facebook Live. These sessions traditionally took place in libraries across the region, introducing young children and their carers to new languages and cultures through greetings and nursery rhymes. As a result, these new digital sessions were designed to be 30 minutes of fun-filled activities for children aged 0-5 years old, giving adults a much-needed break from organising engaging at-home activities. The online sessions followed weekly themes, such as child-friendly mental health awareness, and coronavirus regulations explained via storytelling. They also continued to encourage language exchange, saying hellos and goodbyes in a variety of ways.

Another SML funded project, 'Stories of Hope and Home', uses the art of storytelling to engage and connect asylum seekers and refugees. Its pre-existing WhatsApp group chat for participants was invaluable in connecting people during lockdown, with 15 active members. To ensure participants could continue to access sessions, they used budget to buy participants data packages so they could continue to use Zoom and other platforms, ensuring none of the group faced further isolation during lockdown. Given the negative impact of digital exclusion, and the fact that asylum seeker accommodation never includes wifi as a utility, we would argue that funding data packages is a key recommendation to enable inclusion in future projects.



Response 2 - Opportunities for growth

Some projects and programmes became especially important and relevant during the pandemic, with both participants and project partners seizing the moment to grow influence and help communities around them.

Health Champions

The MiFriendly Cities project developed a Community Health Champions programme specific to migrants and refugees [3], through which individual Health Champions were trained and accredited to engage with their local communities, to signpost health services and advocate for people when they meet health professionals. This network became invaluable during the pandemic.

In response to the pandemic, both Birmingham City Council (BCC) and Coventry City Council organised online 'Covid-19 briefings', aimed at delivering key public health messages to migrant communities, community champions, and Health Champions. These were led by representatives from Public Health England, who were anxious to reach out to marginalised communities that were more likely to suffer adversely from the virus and in whose communities myths and misconceptions about the virus were commonplace. These meetings were a chance for Health Champions to discuss their roles and the concerns of their communities, and to ask questions directly to Public Health professionals. There was also an exchange of key messages aimed at stopping the spread of Covid-19, such as clarification of symptoms and how and when to socially isolate, how to seek health advice, how to access the support available during the crisis such as food parcels, and how to volunteer to support the vulnerable such as befriending via the telephone.

[3] 2020: Mudyarabikwa, Oliver, Regmi, Krishna, Ouillon, Sinead, & Simmonds, Raymond. (2020). Opportunities and Challenges in Designing a Public Health Knowledge and Skills Curriculum for Refugee and Migrant Community Health Champions in the West Midlands, England (UK). *Pedagogy in Health Promotion*, 237337992095017

Orphee, an asylum seeker from the Congo and a trained Health Champion on the programme, noticed the increasing value of the role during the pandemic. “My referrals and other interactions have tripled, or more, since lockdown. We are busy and I hope there is more structure and support for HCs to come.”

Indeed, Health Champions continue to play an important part in tackling the pandemic, latterly supporting the vaccine roll out in their communities. With the success of the partnership with Public Health, the Health Champions programme is set to continue after the MiFC project concludes. Coventry Refugee and Migrant Centre (CRMC) and our Legacy Coordinator have sourced new funding to provide Coventry with a Health Champion Coordinator, which, alongside their Advisory Group, will support Health Champions and ensure structure and management of the role in the future.

Furniture Factory

The Furniture Factory arranged ‘home makeovers’ for people leaving the ‘Everyone In’ programme, which enabled homeless people to be housed in hotels and hostels during the lockdown. Those who were moved on to flats often lacked furniture. The factory trained local volunteers, including migrants and refugees, to repair and build furniture, which was donated and disused. This was then distributed to people in need of furnishings. The project was a great success, tackling environmental concerns, skills development, social isolation, and furnishing empty homes. The project was run by City of Wolverhampton Council and a consortium of organisations lead by the African Caribbean Community Initiative (ACCI).

Spring Action Cleaning

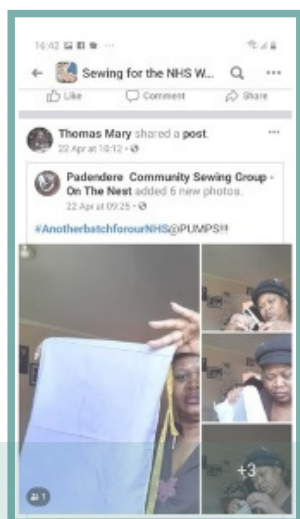
For Spring Action Cleaning, a social enterprise supporting refugees and migrants, the pandemic could have threatened their viability. Instead, they have been at the forefront of helping Coventry’s communities to recover from the pandemic. Spring Action Cleaning provides refugees and migrants with experience working as cleaners, helping to deliver a professional service to the local community.

During lockdown, the company was supported all staff thanks to the Government's furlough scheme, which enabled them to pay 100% of their wages (80% through the furlough scheme and 20% through CRMC’s reserves), despite not being able to operate due to social distancing measures. Furthermore, in response to the pandemic, the social enterprise introduced 13 of its cleaners to the Government’s Infection Control Guidelines and provided Cross Contamination training via The British Institute of Cleaning Science (BICS). This training opportunity covered the best techniques to prevent the spread of infection, at a minimum risk to the cleaner themselves. As a result, the enterprise won new clients during lockdown and continues to grow.

Response 3 – Creating and donating resources

MiFriendly Cities has utilised the project's equipment to keep front line workers safe. FabLab Coventry used its 3D printing machinery, previously used to train migrants, to create parts of personal protective equipment (PPE) for key workers. Furthermore, PPE originally purchased for use in Wolverhampton's MiFriendly Cities Pop-Up Furniture Factory was donated to those in greater need.

Social innovation projects funded through MiFriendly Cities have also been directly fighting coronavirus, by delivering food to those who need it and creating homemade PPE equipment. Mary Thomas, born in Zimbabwe and proud resident of Wolverhampton for nearly 20 years, was awarded grant funding for her 'Padendere Community Sewing Group' in 2019. Mary wanted to give women in her local area a place to learn, gain skills and share their stories in confidence. Whilst the Covid-19 crisis stopped the group from meeting in-person, it didn't stop Mary's drive to invest in her community, running online meetings, making and teaching others to make face masks and donating these to front-line workers.



Mary has also been delivering food to at-risk families. As Mary says, "At a time like this we cannot let a virus break down community, we must come together more than ever to continue learning from each other's culture". She has also used her Health Champion training to share important information within her group about the virus.

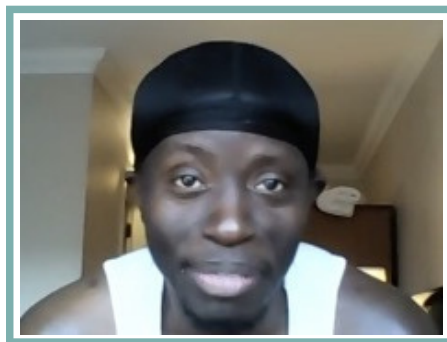
During MiFC, some participants became ill as they couldn't afford or find culturally appropriate food. Last Mafuba, a Citizen Social Scientist, cooked and shared culturally appropriate food to overcome this.

Response 4 - Embracing digital and improving access

With the move to online platforms, many activities have benefited from being able to reach wider audiences. Removing the requirement for physical presence has given people with access to digital technology and broadband more flexibility to attend sessions. Participants and programmes have also embraced new platforms and tools:

- Health Champions produced videos recording health advice in seven different languages and released these during Refugee Week in June 2020
- The MiFC Citizen Social Scientist course, run by Coventry University, attracted over 150 applicants when the project was run online in Jan 2021 – ten times more than when the course was organized with a physical presence requirement. 75 applicants have gone on to attend the course, delivering innovative research projects, with many supporting MiFC by helping with its project evaluation tasks

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- Joshua, who runs a social innovation project called Emerald Book Club, was amazed at how many people he could reach when he started using Facebook for his Gratitude Hour sessions. “This blows me away”, he said. “On the Facebook page I was shocked. The statistics said I reached over 2000 people. I think because people are stuck at home. A lady from Coventry tuned in, some from South Asia, some from Africa.”



- African French Speaking Community Support produced videos and delivered online debates and discussion in community languages to encourage voter registration and voting in elections, and address distrust of state information about the Covid-19 vaccine
- The project’s ‘mobile exhibition’ was adapted to be ‘digital first’, sharing photography, poetry, art and reflection on what our cities mean to people from migrant backgrounds. It sourced a new ‘gallery’ online platform to create the experience of walking through a gallery space, and the exhibition was launched by Maokwo, another social innovation project, at our Final Event in March 2021. This platform is now providing other communities, artists and exhibitions with a space to show their work in a challenging environment, and also enabled us to reach audiences beyond our region.



The ‘My City’ exhibition, free from physical space requirements, utilises an electronic visitors’ book and encourages new content to be sent in from residents.

- The project's final event was also adapted to the Zoom online platform, enabling MiFC to reach an international audience of 135 attendees, and creating unique online content in webinar format which delegates could access on the day, and that will help create a deep resource from the project, now on MiFC's [YouTube channel](#), explaining key programmes and learnings
- The project's summary film, encapsulating three years of activity, shifted focus from in-person interviews and talking heads to online 'recordings'. Migrant Voice, creators of the 25-minute film, turned a negative into a positive, being able to conduct over 40 online interviews and include many voices of participants, which in 'normal' circumstances would not have been achieved
- Migrant Voice's 'newsroom/Media Lab' participants collaborated to produce the excellent '[Beyond](#)' e-magazine, using an engaging and high quality online format to publish inspiring stories of black heritage, culture and endeavour during Black History Month in October 2020



- CARAG (Social innovators) were able to present their housing project (the first project housing destitute migrants led by destitute migrants themselves in the UK) at many UK wide events, which would have been impossible to attend in 'normal' circumstances when physical attendance was required.

Key lessons for other projects

In times of a crisis, how can large-scale projects manage their response?

- A ‘people-focused’ response based on safety and well-being should inform all adaptation
- Two-way communication:
 - Communicate clear messages out quickly as first priority
 - Gather insight to assess impact from across a partnership second
 - This two-way communication enables clear decision making and effective action
- Look for key risks and opportunities
- Be as flexible as possible to try to find new ways of delivering (funders too!) Refer to open source advice and guidance about how to manage the crisis, such as voluntary service councils.
- If possible, find additional investment and support for participant-led and grassroots activities: such groups are best place to understand issues their communities face; how best to respond; and are often more agile to adapt and respond compared to larger bureaucracies.

What needs to be considered when ‘going digital’?

- Digitisation of a project can widen access for some participants, and lead to creative innovation. Online events enable people to join from across a wider geographical area, and remove travel obstacles. This for some people reduces isolation and increases opportunities for meetings and socialising via project activities.
 - Virtual meetings via Teams and Zoom save time and increase efficiency for project partners.
 - However, for others, digital exclusion can prevent people from participating in online activities. Tackling digital exclusion requires investment and understanding: budget flexibility and knowledge of participant’s individual circumstances is crucial for maintaining and supporting their engagement
 - Funding data packages or hardware is key for enabling inclusion of many groups, including asylum seekers who live in accommodation without WIFI
 - WhatsApp can be a useful tool for connecting participants, building networks, and keeping in touch with wide groups of people all at once.
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How can future projects be better prepared for crises?

- Could funders build online and remote working 'resilience' into their bid documents?
- Digital activities could be tested alongside 'in-person' activities, to test impact, turnout, and to enable open-ness to both options.
- Allow flexibility in budgets to divert spend and adapt to change – for example costs around online equipment, broadband access and microphones
- Deepen understanding about preferred communications channels used by migrant communities – who does WhatsApp include and exclude?
- Could funders offer more Business Continuity Planning support in times of crisis to their funded projects? Not all projects will have know-how about implementing rapid adaptation.
- Could funders be more fluid in the funding of grassroots (often non-legal entities), individuals and community groups who have proved to be more informed, active, fluid and flexible in times of crisis?

This paper was written by [MigrationWork CIC](#), one of eleven project partners involved in the MiFriendly Cities project. MigrationWork lead on the project communications; authored two series' of briefing papers about innovative approaches; ran three international Sounding Board discussions; delivered the Social Innovation programme, training and supporting 16 migrant-led social innovation projects in the region; and developed the [Network of Migrant Innovators](#).

To find out more about [MiFriendly Cities](#), see our [resources](#) and [social media](#)

Appendix 1. The project in numbers:

West Midlands:

- 2.8m people
- 1000's of migrants and refugees in the region
- 3 city councils
- One combined authority (WMCA)

Project Team:

- 3 city councils (BCC, CCC, CWC)
- 6 NGOs
- One academic institution – Coventry Uni
- One corporate partner

We've delivered...

6,000+ health messages
 253 legal rights checks, advice and signposting
 4 Know your rights guides in 9 Community languages
 394 Share my Language community activities
 106+ home makeovers
 12+ repair cafes
 1,000+ of up-cycled furniture items
 114 apprenticeships and job opportunities
 639 English language classes
 Citizenship rights presentations to 500+ schools
 3 Stakeholder forums with 100s of attendees
 Briefing papers shared across Europe
 1,000s of tweets and posts
 A new online art exhibition

We've reached...

500+ participants
 10,000+ people
 1,000s of migrants
 100s of community service providers
 Councils and authorities across UK and Europe
 Regional funders
 50 regional and national journalists
 100s of NGOs and charities
 1,000s of local residents
 250+ employers

We've built...

A new shared community space
 Relationships between 11 Partner organisations
 Greater understanding of migrant issues
 A 'Network' of social innovation projects and leaders
 Resilience and support structures
 Connections between cities
 A Chapel of Many 'chair sculpture'
 New furniture from old
 A reputation - finalist in the Innovation in Politics Awards 2020

We've supported...

32 social projects with seed funding and advice
 36+ language inspired workshops
 The RISING Global Peace Forum
 Coventry Welcomes City Festival
 The fight against Covid 19 with PPE, child-care support and community activities

We've trained....

61 Health Champions
 80 Citizen Social Scientists
 162 Citizen journalists
 78 with DIY skills and qualifications
 131 with digital qualifications
 40+ social entrepreneurs
 100+ maker and 3D modelling skills