

Supporting people over 50 to become digitally included: learning from Ageing Better Middlesbrough

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Over the past five years Ageing Better Middlesbrough has supported people over 50 to use technology more confidently to reduce loneliness and isolation as well as access important online services.

The motivation to learn digital skills and get online varies greatly. It could be losing an internet proxy, which may be a spouse who has died or family member who has moved away. Transitions such as retirement, bereavement, and worsening ill health can also turn being online from an optional extra to a vital lifeline.

COVID-19 and lockdown restrictions has increased the urgency around sustainable digital support for older people. Many people now have a need to access food shopping and health services (GP appointments and prescriptions) online and to stay in contact with family and friends over apps like Zoom and social media.

The National Lottery Community Fund have collated information across 14 Ageing Better partnerships around 'Bridging the Digital Divide'

<https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/documents/ageing-better/Ageing-Better-Bridging-the-digital-divide.pdf?mtime=20200622113654&focal=none>.

This report aims to share Ageing Better Middlesbrough's learning around supporting people over 50 to use digital devices and get online, both pre and during the COVID-19 crisis.

Our learning strongly indicates that there needs to be more flexible and relevant ways for people over 50 to learn digital skills. It is also crucial that the people who are at most risk of remaining digitally excluded have affordable access to devices and an internet connection, otherwise the 'new normal' risks further isolating people not digitally included.

Ageing Better Middlesbrough's digital inclusion offer is delivered by The Hope Foundation.



Bridging the digital divide

39% of people in Middlesbrough don't use the internet¹. How can we help those who don't have access?

Michelle Dawson - Ageing Better Middlesbrough Programme Manager

My grandma Doreen is 89 this year. Her and my grandad are surrounded by a supportive family who live close by. We drop off shopping for them, have socially distanced chats at the front door and in general they appear to be coping well with the pandemic.



My grandma is one of a growing number of older people who are digitally connected. In a time when the digital divide is dominating the discussion around loneliness, I wanted to find out how she feels about her journey to get online. *"Ooooh I don't know what I would do without it now,"* she said.

"I play scrabble with your mam and Facebook passes so much time, I read everything and it's all so interesting. Having it makes me feel connected to the rest of the world."

While this isn't evidence of a reduction in loneliness due to digital connection, it is a valuable insight into what my grandma sees as the main benefits to being able to scroll through Facebook – feeling connected, included and informed.



Ageing Better programmes across the country have been delivering digital support with older people for the last five years. In this time, we have learnt a lot about the barriers for older people to become digitally connected – as well as some of the motivators and enablers.

In many ways Grandma Doreen is a good case study for our key learning points. Firstly, she didn't want to get online. She said, *"I didn't want it. I said it wasn't for me. I didn't understand how it could help me."*

We know finding the right 'hook' for older people is key. Motivation to learn something new must be linked to the interests and personal needs of the individual. For my grandma, this was to do with missing out on family photos. We would show her photos on our phones all the time, and I think in the end she got fed up with me saying, *"oh, sorry you didn't see this sooner, but we posted them all on Facebook."*

That's when the role of someone with a trusted voice comes into play. For some older people this could be a telephone befriender, GP, neighbour, or friend. For Grandma, it was my dad. Along with the rest of us, he was persistent. We all convinced her to get a Wi-Fi connection and passed down a second-hand iPad to her. We then showed her how to use it.

But in line with our national learning, showing her how to use an iPad was not enough. What she needed was ongoing support to build her confidence. She had lots of help from my sister, who (prior to COVID-19) spent a lot of time in their house and was on hand to help when something unexpected popped up in the screen. The rest of the family solved problems over the phone or in person when she got stuck or the Wi-Fi box needed resetting.

We tried patiently (and sometimes not so patiently!) to talk her through how to find something on Facebook that she'd seen. *"It's there one minute and gone the next, I want to show your grandad that video you posted. Where has it gone?"* She said.

It has taken years for her to know how to navigate Facebook so she can share things or save content before it disappears off her timeline. For people who have spent a lifetime without the need for a computer, nothing is 'intuitive'. But we know that many older people don't have this kind of network around them. For them, this support can only come from patient, empathic staff or well-trained volunteers.

¹Blank, G. Graham, M & Calvino C, *Local Geographies of Digital Inequalities*, *Social Science Computer Review*, 2018, Vol 36(1) 82-102 (Date Accessed 19 May 2020)

Our local learning in Middlesbrough suggests that support should be device specific and at the pace of the individual. You might need to help the person solve the same problem repeatedly.

If the support is time limited or not responsive enough, the smallest of setbacks (like an unruly pop-up or request for system updates) can halt all digital activity in its tracks.

What about older people who don't want to be digitally connected? This is an interesting question for us as professionals working with lonely older people. Convincing Grandma that social media could help her feel more connected to people took a while, but we could be persuasive and insistent. We are family.

As professionals, striking the balance between supporting someone to understand the benefits of something whilst respecting their choices is part of the job. Our learning suggests that the best approach is to keep the idea of digital in the conversation, remind people that it's an option for them and that support is available.

In the world of older people and loneliness, Grandma is one of the lucky ones. Her and my grandad can afford their monthly Wi-Fi connection and have family close by to provide support, as well as second-hand devices.

For those older people living in poverty with no close family, there are greater barriers to becoming digitally included. Even with access to long term digital support provided by well trained staff and volunteers, the barrier of cost appears to have no real sustainable solution.

It feels overwhelmingly unfair that the people who could benefit the most from being able to remotely connect to other people during this time are the people most unlikely to be able to afford it. In Middlesbrough 39% of people don't use the internet²

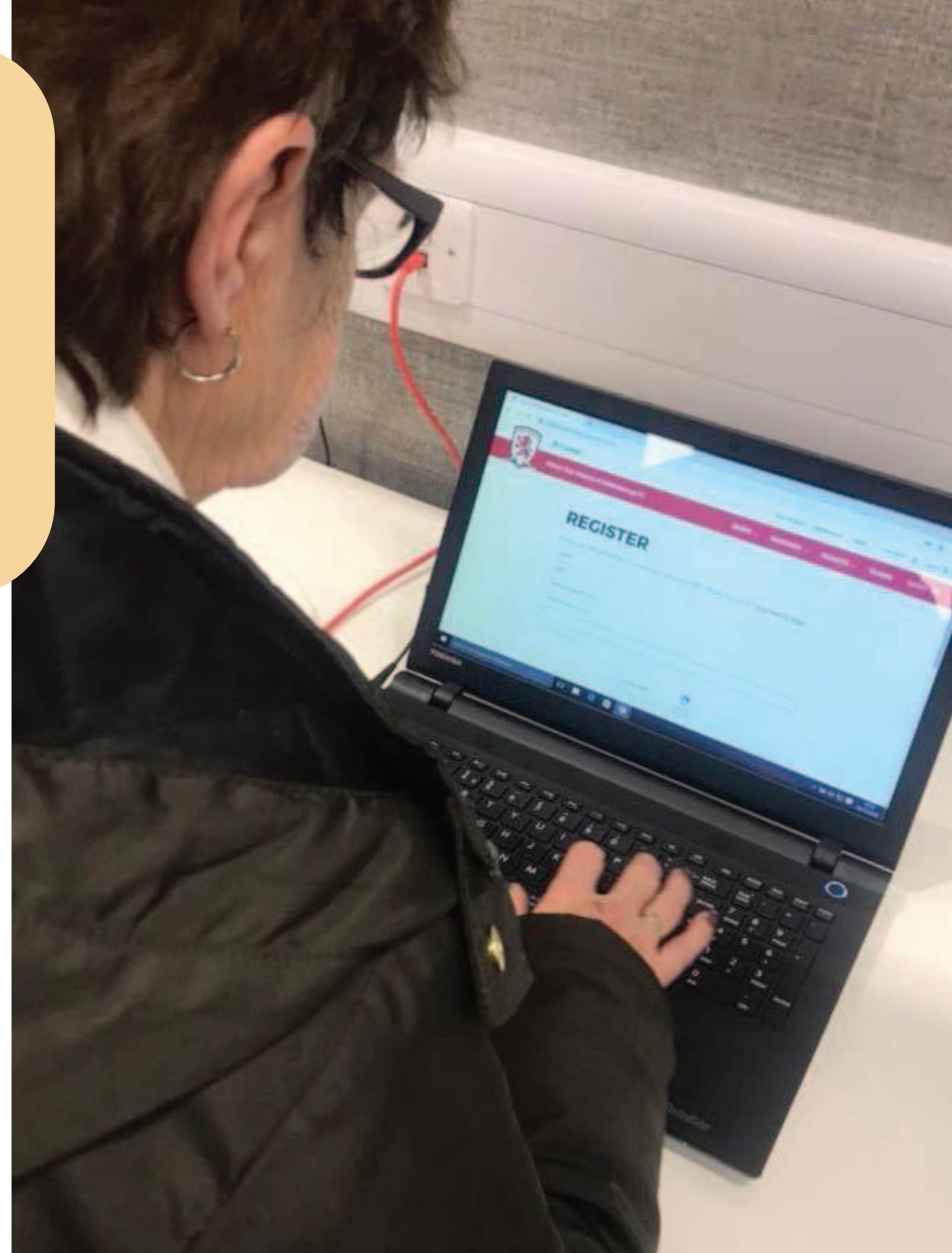
The recently released Lloyds Bank Consumer Digital Index³ describes the national picture:

- At a crucial time when digital can turn isolation into inclusion, only 7% of over 70's are likely to have the capability to shop and manage their money online.
- 77% of this age group have Very Low digital engagement. It is not just the elderly who are under-equipped though; 52% of those offline are between 60 and 70 years old, and 44% of those offline are under the age of 60. Often, it is the most vulnerable and disadvantaged who are the most likely to be digitally excluded.
- People with an impairment are 25% less likely to have the skills to access devices and get online by themselves
- 4-in-10 benefit claimants have Very Low digital engagement.

This makes me worried for our local communities. We find ourselves in a world where services including health and social care are scrambling to get their services and support online against a backdrop of an economic downturn that we know brings with it a wave of misery for the people already worst affected by inequality.

We are talking about a 'new normal' that we all need to adapt to. The old normal was already unfair for lots of people, so the new normal shouldn't be a place where people are even further excluded.

Whilst I know from my day to day job the difference the digital inclusion support provided by Ageing Better has made to people, I fear that we are just scraping the surface of an issue which is set to become the new health inequality.



² Blank, G. Graham, M & Calvino C, *Local Geographies of Digital Inequalities*, *Social Science Computer Review*, 2018, Vol 36(1) 82-102 (Date Accessed 19 May 2020)

³ <https://www.lloydsbank.com/banking-with-us/whats-happening/consumer-digital-index.html>

Supporting people over 50 in Middlesbrough

Our Digital Inclusion Officers and volunteers have so far supported over 300 people with 1-1 support at home or in a community setting.

74% of this group live alone, 66% have longstanding physical or mental health issues, and 65% were over 65. We know that for some people, 1-1 sessions are a crucial first step in raising confidence levels to begin to engage with wider support that is available in community settings.

Staff and volunteers have also delivered 120 Digital Inclusion Group Activities, including 66 Tea and Technology sessions with 248 people attending over 890 times. These sessions are an opportunity for people to get support from staff, volunteers, and each other with any device that they can bring with them to a community setting.

We know that for most people, support is ongoing or over several visits/sessions and therefore becomes a way to regularly socialise and meet new people.

Our staff and volunteers support people over 50 to...

...use technology to make life easier.

Using mobile devices (smart phones and tablets), smart TV's, laptops, and printers.

Making appointments and accessing vital services, particularly relating to health.

Accessing assistive technologies and digital services to support independent living.

Saving money by accessing the best and cheapest deals online and selling goods online.

...improve social connections and relationships.

Providing tools to keep in touch with family and friends such as tablets and Apps including Skype, Zoom and Facebook.

Getting people out and about to attend 1-1 or group support sessions.

Building strong relationships between staff, volunteers, and beneficiaries.

...keep themselves entertained and have fun.

Keeping the mind active and having fun by using online activities including games, puzzles, and e-books.

Accessing online learning opportunities.

Researching new information and community activities online.

Reminiscing, searching old photos and films, watching videos on You Tube.



Edie: learning new things in a group setting

Edie describes herself as a lifelong learner. She spent time in America but missed home and always had a goal to come back. She didn't know anyone when she arrived back in Middlesbrough and says Ageing Better has been a life saver.

Edie enjoys going to Tea & Technology sessions to learn something new each time. She retired two years ago and although she had used a computer at work, she didn't know how to do any of 'the simple things' like sorting photos and attaching them to emails. She goes to sessions at the Hope Foundation, which is easy to get to as she doesn't drive any more.

She has learnt how to access audio books for free, as she loves reading and how to use What's App to keep in touch with friends. She has also received help to connect to her printer and lots of useful apps, including Google maps and directions.

“Staff are really approachable and very calm. They make you do it for yourself, then you remember it...I wouldn't say I'm a Whiz Kid. That's why I keep going, to learn new stuff. It's just interesting.”

Brian: sensory loss and digital technology support

Brian has lived alone for 20 years after losing his wife. He has deteriorating vision and hearing, and problems with his hands. He has helpful neighbours and some family members close by who keep an eye on him, but he likes his own company.

He has received help to switch electricity supplier and has learnt how to email his daughter and godson, who live in other areas of the country, using a tablet he got for free when he purchased home insurance.

Brian went to a Tea & Technology session which was in a crowded café and he couldn't cope due to the noise being amplified through his hearing aids, so he has mainly had home visits since then. He attended one of the Digital Discovery afternoons at the Town Hall and came back with an audio weighing machine which has been a blessing, as he loves to cook.

He is in the middle of enrolling with the UK Blind Veteran's Association and when he gets some visual aids and equipment from them, he's counting on the Digital Inclusion Officers to help him learn how to use them.

“I'm amazed at the patience he's [Digital Inclusion Officer] displayed. He has kept me in contact with the world. I used to use the phone to keep in touch but with a tablet, I can have a little thought and tap it out in seconds..... When he comes we sit down and have a bit of a chat, but I don't ask him too, I don't expect it.”

Barbara: keeping entertained at home and getting out of the house

Barbara classes herself as a technophobe and she never knows what to do when things go wrong on her phone or Kindle. She suffers from anxiety and depression, has poor mobility, and feels very isolated as she has no family and friends close by.

She's had help to set up her smart TV, digital TV box and speakers, as well as series links for her favourite programmes, Emmerdale and Coronation Street. She can now use her Kindle to play games such as backgammon and word-searches. She also now shops online as she can't do a full shop around the supermarket with her walking frame.

She struggles in groups or busy places, so she has benefitted from 1-1 support at the Hope Foundation in the centre of town. She enjoys meeting the Digital Inclusion Officer as she says it's nice to see someone face to face.

“I'm a bit funny with crowds of people I don't know, so I'd rather get support one to one as I feel more comfortable. If he [Digital Inclusion Officer] wasn't around, I'd be stuck. I see him regularly as every now and then something will happen and I think I've broken it or I've gone in to something and I don't know how to get out of it.”

Joan: online shopping and keeping in touch with family

Joan heard about Digital Support when Ageing Better staff came to the women's group she attended at the Salvation Army. She'd been given her son's old i-Pad a while ago but had no idea how to use it.

She's received help for a range of things, including how to do her online shopping with Iceland when she had a knee replacement and how to sell items on e-bay. Digital technology has helped her keep in touch with family in America and the south east of England. She plays a game called Word Chums on her i-Pad each day with her family and uses the game to message them whilst keeping her brain active.

“Technology comes to the younger ones a lot easier. I could ask my son to help me but he has no patience at all. David [Digital Inclusion Officer] is very patient. He is good company and he enjoys my baking too.”

Supporting people over 50: what we know works



Person-centred and flexible

Our Digital Inclusion Officers and volunteers use a person-centred approach that is tailored to meet the needs of each individual. Understanding the motivation for people to get online is central to being able to provide support that is meaningful and relevant to them. It could be playing games on an i-Pad, skyping family, or buying groceries online. It's good practice to start off with one or two simple things that people are really motivated to learn and build from there.

Accessible support options in a range of venues

We provide 1-1 support in the home where an individual cannot access a community setting due to confidence, anxiety, or mobility. We also offer 1-1 support in the community for people who can get out and about. Our Tea & Technology sessions offer support in a group setting and are held in convenient locations across the town. People can call the Digital Inclusion Officer with queries at any time and they know that he will always call them back.

Device specific support

It's important that people can learn to do things on their device. Whether that's a particular model of smart phone, tablet, or computer, it makes things so much easier when someone can learn on the device they will be using at home. We encourage people to bring their own devices to 1-1 and group support sessions.

An informal approach

The informal relationship between staff or volunteer and the learner is at the centre of the support we offer. People need to feel that staff and volunteers are approachable and if friendships form between everyone involved, that's great. Group sessions are relaxed and open to all ability levels. Being able to enjoy the social side of learning is as important as the technology side of things.

Step by step learning at the right pace

Too much information too soon can be scary and off-putting. Staff and volunteers find out what it is individuals want to learn and delivers step by step support to build confidence and knowledge. They only explain the things someone needs to know to complete the task, rather than explain the jargon behind it. This avoids overcomplicating or confusing things. Staff and volunteers are happy to repeat things as many times as needed.

Ongoing and intensive

We provide support that is non time limited and, in some cases, long term. People may attend Tea & Technology sessions every time they happen, and bring a new issue or problem with them each time. Others forget things and need a reminder of how to do something. Building the confidence of older people to use technology takes time. Some older people enjoy learning new things each time they come, it keeps their mind active.

Being persistent and available

It may take some people a while to develop the motivation and confidence to start learning digital skills. They may start attending group sessions like Tea and Technology more for the tea and social side of things, and that's okay. Staff and volunteers have to be readily available when people begin to show willingness and motivation to get more involved. Striking the balance between supporting someone to understand the benefits of the digital world, whilst respecting their choices is part of the job.



Finding an approach that works

Our approach has evolved over time:

- We now encourage older people to get out of the house and attend 1-1's in a community setting. This is a useful way of making people feel less lonely and isolated.
- These small group digital meet ups promote peer to peer learning and knowing that others are struggling with the same issues provides reassurance.
- We increased the number of Tea & Technology sessions meaning we could provide more regular support in a wider range of community venues across Middlesbrough. Sessions were developed to focus on user led topics such as online shopping and appointments.
- We initially called our volunteers Digital Champions, but they later became Digital Helpers as this was less formal. Digital Helpers were recruited to provide peer to peer learning.

The limitations of what we do

- There is not enough digital inclusion capacity within services across Middlesbrough, particularly 1:1 support. Our project receives referrals from other organisations, as they do not always have the capacity to support the digital inclusion needs of older people.
- Where support is available there are often long waiting lists, especially if people require 1-1 support or home visits.
- People who come to us as Ageing Better members often don't know that there are other digital support services out there.
- Not everyone has access to or can afford a device. During COVID-19 we purchased 4G-enabled tablets and distributed them to the people who urgently needed a device to get online.
- Getting a Wi-Fi connection can also be costly and tie people into a long-term contract. During COVID-19 we provided people with pre-paid Wi-Fi enabled dongles, however this, nor purchasing new tablets for people, are sustainable solutions.



Adapting to COVID-19 and supporting the local response

The Coronavirus crisis has created conditions in which some older people are newly motivated to get online. We have purchased 4G enabled digital devices and given these to local older people who are motivated to get digitally connected, but are unable to afford it.

Devices are pre-programmed with apps specific to individual needs, so people can get started as quickly as possible. Examples of the pre-programmed apps include Gmail, Google Classroom, Zoom/Skype, WhatsApp, YouTube, BBC News website, NHS website. There is also a link to the person's GP website and pharmacy website links for repeat prescriptions. For people looking for work,

the team add on the Universal Credit app, National Careers Service, North East Jobs, Indeed website links. Games apps are added for some individuals who enjoy games or as a useful way of learning how to use the device.

We then support people via phone or video calls to learn how to use the devices and are on hand with any issues that people come across.

Our Digital Inclusions Officers are supported by 12 Digital Helpers who have been matched with beneficiaries to provide ongoing support where needed.

Enid's story...

“ Having the tablet has been a great thing. I have a brother and sister living in Australia, and for the first time I have been able to see pictures of them and their homes and watch some lovely videos. The tablet has also allowed me to join in with church services and prayer meetings. Maintaining this connection has been so important to me during the lock down period. I've also enjoyed watching some really interesting art sessions, and plan to try out some of the techniques I have learned. ”

Martha's story...

“ It's been brilliant, I have done my first ever online shop and that's been fantastic. I don't have to rely on others and can maintain my independence. I can keep in touch with family, especially my grandchildren in Manchester, through WhatsApp video calling and I can send and receive photos, which is so lovely. The advice and support to help me learn has been marvellous. Having everything set up on the tablet has been so good, I couldn't have managed to do all that on my own. Receiving the tablet has kept me going, it's been an absolute lifeline. ”

Sonia (Digital Volunteer) supporting Martha and Enid

It has been lovely to share the learning journey of both ladies. I have heard all the wonderful stories of their achievements and the joy and pride they have felt with each one. Maintaining contact with their loved ones has meant so much to them, and

both tell me how much this has helped with the loneliness of lock down. Both ladies tell me how much they want to continue to build on their IT learning and are excited about all the new things they will be able to do in the future.



John (Digital Volunteer) supporting James

James has come on leaps and bounds and is really chuffed with himself. He took the tablet out on Sunday to Cod Beck [a local reservoir] and used WhatsApp to contact his son using video to show him the area. I've installed some games apps on his tablet and we're moving onto responding and constructing emails next week.

He is always full of thanks but I keep telling him it's a two-way street. I get just as much out of it as he

does. We spent a few hours on the phone, just generally putting the world to rights, and navigating some simple websites. He knows how to enter web addresses now. He has given his friend his email address so we can access a website for his old war photos, and meeting events.

I have a feeling he is going to get a lot out of the service. He certainly enjoys the phone calls, as it's the only interaction with someone he gets all week.



Laura Gooderham (Digital Inclusion Officer) supporting Karen

Karen only got her tablet last Wednesday but by Friday she was taking part in ABM's Zoom bingo. This was a fantastic achievement she had never used a tablet before. There is only one computer in her house which is her husband's and she is not allowed to use it. She had to ask him to do anything online, which was frustrating for her. Now she has the independence to go online herself. She wants to be able to video call family and friends and be able to order groceries on the Morrison's App. She has now been assigned a Digital Volunteer who will help her achieve all she wants to.

David Thomas (Digital Inclusion Officer) supporting Albert

Albert received support from the Ageing Better Middlesbrough's Community Development team to help setup a men's social/games group in Coulby Newham. The group was just starting to take off when the Coronavirus struck. Albert lost contact with other members of the group.

I started supporting Albert after another Ageing Better Project Officer referred him to me for digital support. I delivered him a tablet and supported him initially with a few phone calls to help him get started on WhatsApp and access his emails.

He has really enjoyed using the tablet and has now managed to connect with 5 members of his social

group on WhatsApp. They regularly chat over messages and video call each other. It has made a massive difference to them all, being able to stay in touch and support each other through the lock down. He has also been engaging with Google Classroom, downloading the puzzle games, leaving comments, and keeping fit with Jennifer's chair exercises.

He has now been assigned a Digital Volunteer who calls him once a week. During her first call she helped him join a Zoom meeting for the first time.



The future and sustainability: Let's work together to get basic digital access for Middlesbrough residents

Sue Kearney, CEO at The Hope Foundation

Digital connectivity and access to the internet are social justice and social inclusion issues. COVID-19 has demonstrated the basic lack of access for many Middlesbrough residents, leading to loneliness and isolation at this time. The move towards digital services means that local people are increasingly disadvantaged due to one or all of the following:

Lack of digital skills

There needs to be ongoing, flexible, and relevant ways for people to learn the skills they need for their daily lives, and work (if appropriate). At The Hope Foundation we currently do this through taught courses, online classroom, and drop-in support. This needs to be better planned across Middlesbrough, accessible to all ages, ethnicities, and abilities, and delivered across a wide range of partners and access points. The type of support available needs to be more varied, ranging from taught group classes to 1:1 sessions, Tea and Technology sessions, remote sessions, and fun collaborations, such as online bingo. There also needs to be targeted skills delivery to suit the needs of individuals.

Having the right kit/devices

People need to have access to devices, especially the most excluded. We have been providing new tablets to residents through Ageing Better Middlesbrough and the DevicesDotNow partnership⁴, but this is not sustainable. This could be achieved through using recycled kit and we are piloting a small digital amnesty project to collect unwanted but useable phones, tablets, and computers. This is good for the environment and would provide a free or low-cost alternative. Businesses and projects could donate kit they are no longer using, which could be distributed by other partners such as carers groups, domestic violence support groups, or organisations supporting those economically inactive, who identify a specific need.

Data and connectivity

There is a real need to get digital connectivity into the most vulnerable households at low cost. We have been doing this through Ageing Better Middlesbrough and The Hope Foundation during lock down as best we can, but there is a need for a sustainable and long-term solution. Hartlepower⁵ is looking at the possibility of setting up their own community hotspot with a community broadband offer. This could be replicated in Middlesbrough. In the shorter term, there is a need for other ways to purchase and donate data. Contract costs remain an issue for the poorest people.

Moving forward together

Digital access and connectivity are key to addressing need in Middlesbrough. We see the development of the Boho zone⁶ (the commercial quarter for the town's digital media, digital technology and creative sectors), and the potential for Middlesbrough to become a digital capital, and yet our residents do not have basic access to skills, devices and connectivity.

We know that to make solutions sustainable, digital support needs to be delivered through existing organisations providing suitable support on a long term basis. I am keen to see collaborative action across the Tees Valley but especially in Middlesbrough, across all sectors.

In 2020 it should be a basic right to have equal access to the digital world. At The Hope Foundation we would like to see each of the above areas addressed and want to be part of the solutions.



⁴ <https://futuresdotnow.uk/devicesdotnow/>

⁵ <https://hartlepower.co.uk/>

⁶ <https://www.middlesbrough.gov.uk/business/find-premises/boho-zone>

Get in touch

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