Good Practice Guide: Digital in the Community April 2023

DIGI COMM

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PURPOSE OF GUIDE

The Good Practice Guide has been designed to share learning from the Digi-Comm Project. It is intended to act as a guide for other community-based organisations and interested parties including commissioners about the issues they need to consider when implementing, managing and delivering similar community focused digital skills support projects.

The project was delivered by Sandwell Community Information and Participation Service (SCIPS) in partnership with St Albans Community Association. It was funded for 3 years from May 2020 by the Community Fund, through the Reaching Communities Fund.

This guide gives an overview of the different strands of the project from initial idea to how it was delivered and key learning. We have included case studies and sound bites from project beneficiaries. There is also a section on project management and the next steps.

The information should be read alongside the project evaluation reports, which provides detail around the reach, outcomes and the impacts of the project. The final report will be published at the end of May 2023.

The core of the Digi-Comm project was the provision of community-based training and support in basic digital skills and confidence to enable those most digitally excluded individuals and communities to have access to technology, get online and be digitally connected. This included the provision of training to staff and volunteers in community centres and settings to upskill them to sustainably deliver digital support in their own communities.

Within the project, there was also the provision of bespoke digital inclusion support packages for elderly, vulnerable and housebound residents, with the primary aim of enabling them to get connected and reduce isolation.

A tablet loan scheme formed a key part of the project in getting people and communities online and connected.

The Partnership

SCIPS

Sandwell Community Information and Participation Service (SCIPS) is an independent resident led charitable organisation established in 1994 in Sandwell. A small but highly experienced team provide skills and support that empower residents to feedback on and influence local services. SCIPS also support a network of Tenants and Residents Associations (TRA's) and are the Local Trusted Organisation for Hateley Cross Big Local.

St Albans

St Albans Community Association and registered charity was established in 1984 by residents to provide access to good quality and locally based advice, support and services for the local community.

Operating out of the former St Albans Church in the St Pauls ward in Smethwick, the team provide a range of trusted local community services including day care, lunch clubs, pre-school nursery provision and a range of other advocacy and older people community-based support services.

TABLET LOAN SCHEME

What was the idea or concept?

The project recognised that many residents would not have access to devices and/or the internet, and that providing this as part of the project would be essential to support their digital learning and development.

As the project was developed pre-COVID 19, there was little knowledge and understanding about lending schemes of this nature. The project did however take inspiration and learning from 100% Digital Leeds which was at the time running an iPad lending scheme.

The idea was that the Digi-Comm tablet lending scheme would run alongside the provision of digital skills and training support, and individuals would be able to access data enabled tablets for up to 12 weeks.

Individuals would be supported by the project team to explore sustainable options for purchasing or accessing their own devices and installation of broadband at the end of the lending period.

What did we do?

During the implementation phase, there was extensive research undertaken by the project team regarding the type of tablet that should be purchased, what security and tracking software would be needed and who the data provider should be.

The project purchased 20 Samsung S6 lite 4G data enabled tablets. This model was selected as they had the biggest screen available at the time. The preferred option was purchasing tablets through a provider as a bundle of hardware and data contract.

SCIPS took responsibility for setting up the tablets including installing the security and tracking software selected. Android was chosen in preference to Apple iPads primarily on a cost basis.

The project developed and implemented a tablet lending agreement, tablet loan database and training materials to support using the device.

The project commenced just as the COVID 19 pandemic hit. This meant the tablet loan scheme was even more essential to get those digitally excluded residents online and connected during the pandemic.

SCIPS applied to the Emergency COVID 19 Funding to extend the scheme and purchased an additional 30 data enabled tablets to get more people connected and online.

> "We developed training materials for use for the specific tablet we were lending so people could practice independently outside of the sessions. Stakeholders often asked if we could adapt it for other devices. Whilst we were flexible and adaptable in how we delivered, we were conscious not to spread resources too thin & stayed focused on getting project beneficiaries online and connected"
> - Project Manager

What did we learn?
Data enabled tablets were essential to the project. As the project started during the pandemic all support initially had to be given remotely.

Initial assessment at the start of the project indicated nearly half of the beneficiaries did not have access to a laptop, desktop computer or tablet, and 40% did not have a SMART phone. Additionally, 17% had no internet at home and the majority of those who did, used it to support digital TV's only. Also many of the centres where face to face training and support was given had no or very poor internet connectivity.

We learnt that our assumptions and concerns around tablets getting stolen, lost or damaged were unfounded. After 3 years of the project, only 1 out of 50 tablets were stolen.

The level of security and tracking software installed on devices was not ultimately required when additional cost and time to manage the devices was taken into account.

Providing access to people that have never experienced or used devices, particularly older people, when combined with the right training and support will encourage them to remain connected after the project has finished.

"**I would definitely get one (a tablet)… it's not as big and bulky as a laptop and easy to use. Without having the tablet and training I wouldn't have had confidence to have tried on my own. I would have been too scared but I'm not scared now.**"

To get the maximum benefit from a tablet loan scheme it is essential to provide training and support where the individual is assessed as having very little or no confidence in using devices and/or getting online.

tip

DIGITAL SKILLS & CONFIDENCE SESSIONS

What was the idea or concept?
The original idea was to deliver weekly pre-entry level digital training and confidence building sessions/short courses from local community venues across Sandwell which focused on the basics of getting online (Click and Chat). Beneficiaries could also access sessions and support to establish and manage their own social media platform/network (DigiDiner).

The sessions would be delivered in small groups on a face to face basis with practice time built in, supported by the loan of tablets and with easy to follow handouts for reference.

What did we do?
Due to COVID 19 measures, most of the training in Year 1 of the project was delivered on a remote one to one basis, except for the older people strand which was delivered in people's homes where appropriate risk assessments and measures were in place. The priority was to get people online safely and utilise the tablet loan scheme for individuals to stay connected with their communities.

With the lifting of COVID 19 restrictions in Year 2 the project was able to pivot back to its original model and deliver basic digital training on both a face-to-face and group basis in a range of community settings. These settings included community centres, other local centres, residential care homes and on a one-to-one basis in peoples own homes. The focus remained on enabling people to get online safely and confidently and getting connected.

The project supported people on a one-to-one basis, through structured group training sessions and piloted new ad hoc sessions. The training activity continued to be supported/underpinned by the tablet loan scheme.

The ad hoc traiing sessions were in response to needs identified by both the community and stakeholders to support local people to access online services. This included learning how to use WhatsApp, Online Shopping (using real supermarket apps), My Sandwell (Council Online Portal) including additional sessions for how tenants could report a repair and report Anti-Social Behaviour.

What did we learn?
Digital training in the community for people who have little or no experience needs to be flexible and relevant. Beneficiaries valued being helped to do the things they needed and wanted to do rather than an overly structured and skills focused course.

Older beneficiaries of the project reported learning at a much slower pace and valued the flexibility in the training and practice sessions to support this. Often individuals had some awareness and digital technology skills, but they did not feel confident in using devices or going online without support. Previously help had been sought from family members but repeatedly people reported that they didn't want to be reliant on family. They also reported that the project gave them the time to learn, whereas family were often not patient or understanding with them.

Basic digital concepts, for example apps and search engines can be difficult concepts to grasp for people with no digital knowledge and skills and the best approach is to use simple language and everyday analogies to articulate these concepts.

It should also not be underestimated how difficult and challenging some beneficiaries found learning basic digital skills. We learnt that whilst to someone who regularly uses technology, the activities/skills being learnt may seem quite simple and straight forward, for someone with no previous experience it can be frightening and challenging.

We found that even where the individual self-assessed as having some previous computer experience and skills, this did not necessary translate to using a tablet or a SMART phone where their skill level was much lower.

We learnt that some things like online shopping and banking, reporting faults and making complaints online can be intimidating for even those who feel confident using technology and getting online.

Provision within the training for one-to-one support is essential for people to learn and build confidence quickly. This can be labour intensive and will impact on the level of staffing and volunteers needed to deliver sessions.

Practice time both during and in between sessions is vital to support embedding of knowledge and development of digital confidence. This was particularly relevant to some older beneficiaries who reported needing repetition of information and activity.

The structure of the support and training was effective in helping develop skills and confidence. Beneficiaries reported developing a range of skills learnt from participating in the project:
- Basics on how to use a tablet or computer.
- How to get online/connect to the internet.
- Setting up and using email.
- Browsing the internet to support hobbies and interests.
- Accessing online meeting technology.
- Accessing and using social media, like Zoom and Teams.
- Playing games.
- Online shopping.
- Internet security.

Operating from well-known community venues and centres supports engagement, enables trust and rapport to be built more quickly and supports people to learn. Beneficiaries valued the friendly informal atmosphere, and many beneficiaries developed new friendships and connections.

DIGITAL SKILLS & CONFIDENCE SESSIONS

"The course gives you the time and patience to learn. When I ask family to help, they often go too fast for me and get impatient."

"Even though I already had a basic understanding, every session I learnt something new. The sessions have made me feel more confident."

"I have learnt lots and it's been very beneficial. The best bit was learning about the different apps available. I wasn't doing much with my tablet before, but this has opened up a whole new world to me".

"The internet security session was the best. I've learnt more about passwords and can now check to see if websites are secure before using them. I feel more confident doing things online now"

"The project has enabled me to meet people and I am using WhatsApp more to communicate"

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You have to be prepared to be adaptable and flexible in your training delivery in order to meet the different needs of the group both in terms of how they learn but also what they want to learn.

Support of this nature is intensive. Small group sizes and additional staff or volunteer support are essential for those groups with beneficiaries who have little or no digital experience, skills or confidence.

Case Study: T is an active resident who regularly participates in tenant and resident engagement across Sandwell including Local Authority scrutiny work. He had little experience with digital technology prior to the project and struggled to use basic functions like receiving documentation via email.

During the COVID 19 pandemic, the project provided T with a data enabled tablet (on loan); face to face training on how to use the tablet, getting online and accessing online meetings; and ongoing help and support to get online. During initial face to face training, it was identified that an existing health problem, affecting T's cognitive/motor skills made using the tablet challenging. T struggled to keep up with his peers. Progress was slow and T became more and more frustrated, which intensified when we had to move to telephone support following a second lockdown. Telephone support made determining what T was seeing on his screen and what he should have been seeing extremely difficult. However, through consistent and regular support over several weeks, we were able to establish the amount of finger pressure being applied to the tablet was causing issues and we were able to rectify/resolve.

T can now access board meetings and task and finish groups with the local authority successfully using both Zoom and Teams. He has maintained his dedication to learn by working with his grandson to further improve his digital skills and confidence. He is also using his new skills to engage with his family online something he would never have done before.

Case Study: A is retired but tries to stay active. She heard about the Digi-Comm sessions through her local community centre where she accesses fitness classes.

"I have a tablet and a laptop at home, but I can't use the touch pad on the laptop. My family tried to get me more online during the pandemic as I was shielding. They tried to get me on WhatsApp and do online banking during COVID.

My family do try to help me when I get stuck, but they've got no patience and really, they haven't got the time. I've wanted to learn more for a while so when I heard about the Digi-Comm course through the centre I thought it would be ideal.

I've found the whole thing beneficial, and I've learnt lots. The internet security session was good. I don't online shop, but I feel more confident to do this in the future. I also didn't realise about all the apps you can use on the tablet. Before the course I wasn't really doing much with my tablet – just using it for reading and games, now I'm going to investigate the different things I can do.
The course notes have been good, but I've been making my own notes as a reminder of what I need to do. My confidence has improved.

There are still some things I'm not keen on, like Facebook and the like but I've learnt how to do a video call on WhatsApp! I'd like to carry on with my learning."

Case Study: C had very low digital skills and confidence. Although she has Apple devices and the internet at home her husband was always the one that sorted everything out. He now has Parkinson and can't do what he used to. She didn't feel confident at all with the technology, particularly when things go wrong and when she heard about Digi-Comm thought it could help her improve her skills and confidence.

"I've enjoyed the training and learnt a lot. I feel much more confident now going on the internet and emailing. They have taken time to explain things in detail. You can ask any question, and no one makes you feel silly. Family has no patience so I prefer being able to ask here."

"I still haven't done online shopping. But that's a personal preference, I like to do it in person and look at the dates, but I know I could if I needed. I'm on Whatsapp now because of the course. I'd never heard of it before. I still like playing games on my tablet. I don't go on Facebook; I don't like it. One of the things I would still like help with is how to use the digital TV – its feels complicated but I understand really, it's just a big computer. I feel more confident though and would highly recommend the course"

OLDER PEOPLE SUPPORT PACKAGES

What was the idea or concept?
The development of a service that specifically supported elderly and vulnerable residents in their own home or supported living environment to become better digitally connected and improve their overall general quality of life.

Beneficiaries would undertake bespoke training for up to 12 weeks tailored to their individual needs and interests to get online and where needed access the tablet loan scheme.

What did we do?
Bespoke digital training sessions and support was delivered to older people, both in their own homes and at the centre with each package tailored to individuals interests and needs.

Delivery included supporting individuals to sustainably get connected at home once the tablet loan scheme has finished.

The older person strand also engaged with local supported living accommodation and care homes, as well as delivering support to groups of older people at St Albans Community Centre as part of the day services provision.

St Albans Community Association levered additional funding to invest in a range of interactive large screen digital equipment for the centre and have used this technology to enrich activities for older people.

What did we learn?
To engage this beneficiary group, the approach, support and training has to be hyper-relevant and link to their interests and specific needs.

Playing games, for example sudoku, crosswords, brain games on tablets can be a 'hook' to getting older people engaged and interested in using the technology. Making the interventions fun, social and interactive experience supported engagement and learning.

Patience and time were key to successful delivery. Recognising that what can feel like small steps and progress for some are major achievements for others.

One to one sessions were ultimately more effective for this group than group sessions, particularly where people had additional needs.

Understanding that digital is not for everyone is key. Invariably some beneficiaries after receiving initial support decided it was not for them.

There were tangible health and wellbeing benefits for this group from getting online and connected - with many beneficiaries and their families reporting improvements.

> **"One lady had no initial interest in getting online or even the point of it. But after she realised she could use the internet like a library to find out more about different breeds of cats we couldn't get her off it! "** – Project worker

The experience has to be truly user-led to be effective. Find out what people's interests are and what they like doing in their spare time to find the hook to get them engaged in digital learning and activities.

Case Study: J was part of the older person support package. After an initial discussion she said she would like to borrow a tablet as she had previously owned one, but it had been broken some time ago and was never replaced.

J had a lot of health problems and has poor mental health and has been known to self-harm in the past. She is also not able to read or write and wanted the tablet to watch films/programs, listen to music and communicate with family.

She borrowed a tablet for one week. There was an immediate positive change in her mood and she told us she was much happier because she had something to occupy herself with now. Her family were so amazed by the change that they immediately invested in a new tablet for her, and the loan tablet was returned to benefit another older person.

" "**Within a week of having the tablet we could see the difference to mum's mood**" – Family member whose elderly mother had loaned a tablet

Prior to the pandemic M attended day services at St Albans Community Centre. She was referred to the project when she told us she had an old laptop at home but did not know how to use it. She was keen to learn how to get online and do things like online shopping. As M was already receiving day services support at home from St Albans Community Association, all risk assessments were in place to enable Digi-Comm to be delivered in the home.

Through weekly sessions over several months M learnt how to get online safely and was supported to do a whole range of things to improve her day-to-day life including learning how to:
- Do her weekly food shop online.
- Learn to shop online safely.
- Use Skype so she could continue to meet with her volunteer befriender on a face to face basis, albeit virtually.
- Set up a new and online banking account as post office accounts will be closed at the end of this year and state pension payments must be changed to a new account.
- Access games, which has helped to keep her occupied when her husband was hospitalised, as well as being great for 'brain-training'.
- Use the internet to get news updates and weather forecasts.

She says one of the benefits of online shopping has been reduced tiredness from physical shopping, feeling safer during the pandemic and she has saved money as she doesn't "pick up rubbish" she doesn't need. Online shopping has made other parts of her life easier. She purchased online:
- A new lightweight vacuum cleaner as she can no longer manage her heavy existing one due to her medical conditions.
- Magnifying specs so that herself and her husband can read better.
- Long handled nail clippers so that they can cut their nails more easily as both herself and her husband struggle to bend.

M's digital skills and confidence have increased significantly, although she still gets frustrated from time to time when her medical condition makes it difficult for her to remember things. There have been wider benefits including improved mental and physical wellbeing, M feeling better connected to family and friends, which has led to reductions in loneliness and isolation.
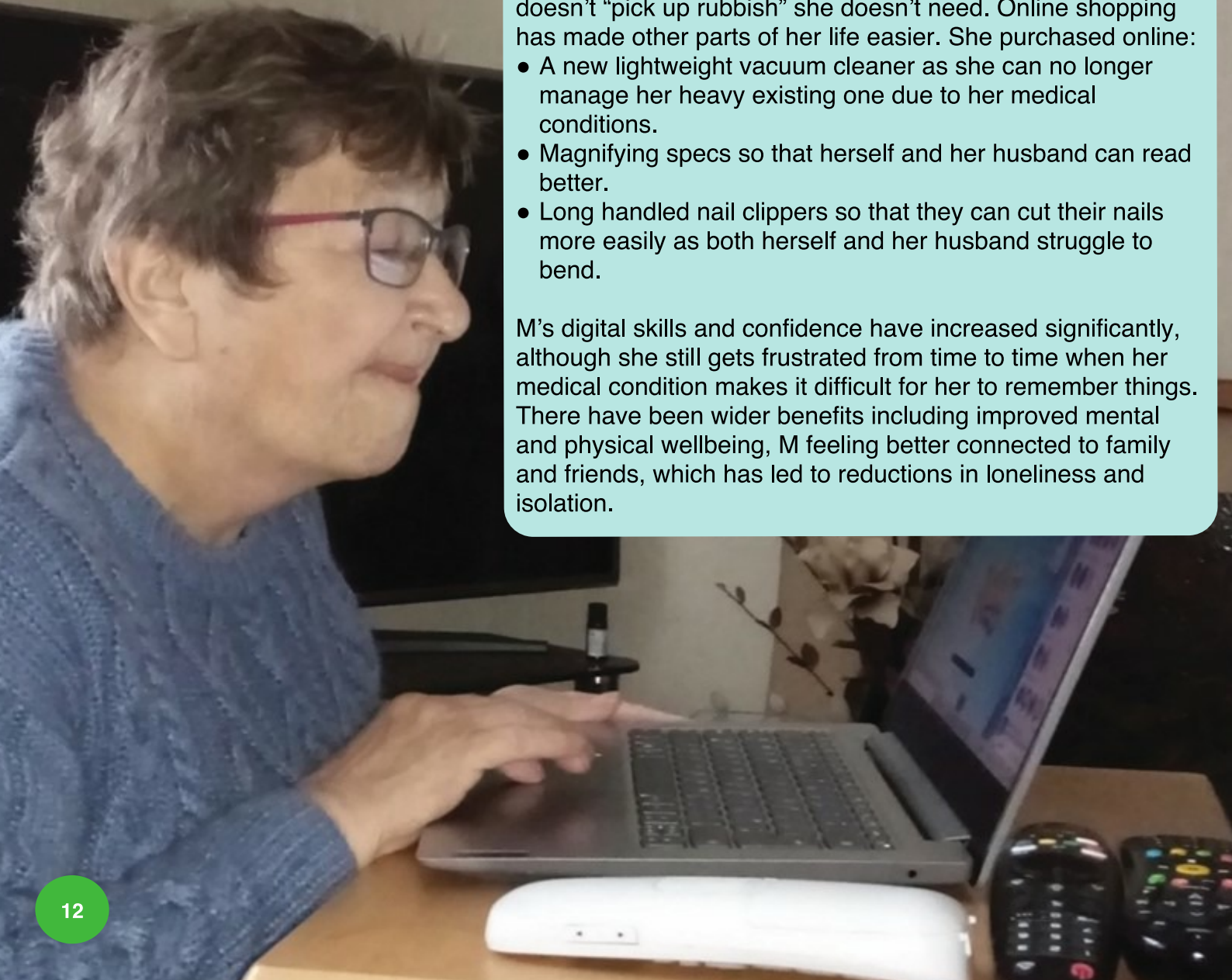
What was the idea or concept?
The project would work with established community centres and spaces in order to provide support, training and advice to enable that centre to be a digital hub for groups and communities in the local area.

Volunteers would be trained and supported to deliver the basic digital training to sustainably deliver support in their own communities going forward.

What did we do?
When COVID 19 restrictions were lifted, the project started running pilots with established centres in Cradley Heath and Wednesbury to develop capacity in the community and develop a digital hub in their area. This was subsequently rolled out to other centres across the 6 towns in Sandwell including independent living spaces and care homes who were engaged as part of the older people support package strand.

Initial assessment of each centre's digital infrastructure, skills and confidence was undertaken.

The centres supported recruitment of beneficiaries for the digital skills training sessions and identified volunteers who would take part in the train the trainer programme, shadowing project staff delivering the digital training sessions as part of their development.

What did we learn?
Even within community facilities having the data enabled tablets available for the training was essential. For example, one centre had no Broadband facilities at all and in others centres the Wi-Fi signal was unstable and frequently dropped out.

The programme was not intended or designed to be delivered by 'qualified IT tutors' but by community champions who could sustainably integrate digital skills and confidence into existing community settings. However, an unforeseen challenge in the train the trainer model was the low level of confidence centre staff and volunteers had in their own digital skills.

The project learnt that the initial assessment process was vital and that future delivery of this element would invariably require more resources and support structures to improve infrastructure and skills; ensuring lasting impact in centres.

> **"I would have considered myself digitally confident until I started the train the trainer course. I've learnt lots of things every week. I use a computer at work but will definitely be getting my own tablet."** - Community centre worker & Train the Trainer beneficiary

Do your research and an initial assessment prior to delivering training in a new centre or space - don't make assumptions about the digital infrastructure or skill base in place.

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PROJECT MANAGEMENT

What was the idea or concept?
The project would be managed on a day to day basis by an experienced project co-ordinator at SCIPS, with oversight and support from both organisations CEOs and monitoring officers.

The training activities would be delivered/supported by co-ordinators in both organisations and supported by a small team of frontline workers who were experienced in community engagement and development.

The core project team would meet regularly and an external evaluator would be appointed to provide independent review and feedback to the project.

What did we do?
The project partnership and delivery team met on a very regular and structured basis, with strong communication and working together happening in between formal meetings. This not only supported strong and effective project and performance management but the ongoing development and delivery of the project.

Project staff supported each other across both strands and organisations to ensure joined up delivery. This included referrals from the group training sessions to the one to one support delivered through the older people support packages project team, as well as group delivery support from other project staff to support capacity and knowledge sharing.

The evaluator attended and observed the majority of project partnership meetings and observed many collaborative interactions between the two partners, as part of the wider framework of evaluation.

The project developed key strategic relationships and partnerships, including with the Local Authority and Communities In Sync during the project. This ensured that digital inclusion not only remained high on the agenda locally but was joined up and cohesive when opportunities arose.

SCIPS levered additional funding from the Local Authority to support digital infrastructure development for a number of community centres and hubs they were working with through the project.

During the final year of the project, several development workshops and away days were held involving project management, delivery team, key stakeholders and the evaluator to explore what had been learnt and what further needs existed in the digital inclusion space in Sandwell.

What did we learn?
A strong and joined up partnership supports effective management and delivery of the project.

Project delivery teams working closely together not only supports capacity but allows cross transfer of ideas and knowledge which improves delivery for beneficiaries.

Ongoing and embedded evaluation enables projects to be responsive to changing needs; evolving and developing over the lifetime of the project.

Developing relationships with key local stakeholders and disseminating the work of the project widely has the potential to unlock further opportunities and lever additional support for local communities.

*"**Having evaluated many partnership projects over the years, I have found this project to be an exemplar in joined up working which has not only supported the project to be effectively managed and delivered but supported increased knowledge and learning across both organisations.**"* – Project Evaluator

Good communication is key to effective project management and delivery, particularly in a partnership project. Establish good structures for regular, consistent and open communication from the start of the project.

DIGI-COMM POWER UP

You will see from our project evaluation and progress reports that a lot has been achieved during the 3-year Digi-Comm project and tangible improvements made to the digital access, skills and confidence of those beneficiaries engaging with the project. However, through our project evaluation and development work we also recognised that this was just the tip of the iceberg and that there continued to be significant need in this space.

Our research and data showed there was still deep-rooted digital exclusion amongst the communities our project targets. A new 3 year project, named Digi-Comm Power Up will work with digitally excluded and disadvantaged residents including elderly people living at home and in supported accommodation, social housing tenants/residents, and people/families living in neighbourhoods which experience high levels of deprivation, poverty and low levels of connectivity.

Digi-Comm Power Up builds on the learning from the Digi-Comm project. It has been shaped by feedback from and consultation with the community including stakeholders as to where further need exists and the best approach to tackle these issues. It is an ambitious project which scales up the work of Digi-Comm, taking the very best parts and delivering to more residents and communities across Sandwell.

The project will:
- Deliver pre-entry digital skills training and confidence building sessions which focus on the basics of getting online for people who may well have never even touched a tablet, or a smartphone and may never have been online/on the internet or accessed it independently.

- Provide access to digital devices for the training and run a tablet loan scheme with existing and recycled equipment.

- Deliver digital skills sessions specifically designed to enable residents to get online confidently to access local health, housing and welfare services. As more public services become digital by default, there is a growing need to support our communities who risk further marginalisation and permanent exclusion to do this.

- Capacity build groups, community and supportive living centres to help them develop their own sustainable digital support offer to their communities. It will roll out the 'train the trainer' programme for community-based staff/volunteers from groups and centres, alongside providing ongoing support through digital audits/assessment, advice, guidance and signposting to resources. The legacy will be a network of locally rooted and embedded digital champions and trainers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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A special mention to project beneficiaries who shared their experiences of the project and how it supported them in the development of their digital access, skills and confidence.

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