



## Hexagon Housing: Digital Champions stepping up in the pandemic

### In a nutshell

Hexagon Housing Association, a social housing provider in south London, had been using digital skills trainers and more recently paid digital champions to help residents get online for several years. But about a fifth of their residents still remained offline, and when the pandemic hit, these residents were especially vulnerable. Hexagon quickly redesigned their digital inclusion service, using paid Digital Champions both to identify people at severe risk of exclusion and to give one-to-one remote support to help them access services online. Hexagon's Digital Champions are now an essential element of their community investment effort, supporting digital skills across Hexagon's financial, employment and wellbeing services.

### Recognising the challenge

"We see digital inclusion as essential for our residents to be able to participate in society. When Covid-19 hit, getting residents online became the number one cross-cutting priority for all the services we run in the Community Investment Team." Nicky Hazelwood, Community Investment Manager, Hexagon Housing Association

For Hexagon Housing Association, digital inclusion has been on the agenda for a decade. Hexagon do not see this work as primarily about channel shift for their business – moving residents' services to online channels – but rather a vital part of their community investment work, alongside financial inclusion, employment support and community wellbeing.

Until 2018, they had contracted external trainers to run structured digital skills courses for residents. According to Nicky "This worked pretty well for a few years and then we noticed numbers start to tail off. By this point we had around three-quarters of our residents online, and we felt that for the residents who had not come forward for training we would need to take a different approach."

### Planning a solution

The community support maxim 'trusted faces in local places' really rang true for Hexagon. They recognised that their most digitally excluded residents needed one-to-one support, consistently, from people they knew and trusted. But how to do this in an affordable and scalable way?

A timely opportunity to test out a new approach came in the form of One Digital, a national digital inclusion initiative which included a funded element for housing associations led by Clarion Housing Group. "We decided to try the Digital Champion approach, and to recruit residents we could train to help other residents get online" says Nicky.

Through the Clarion project, Hexagon were introduced to Digital Unite's specialist platform the Digital Champions Network. "On there we found all the resources we need to actually deliver a Digital Champion programme; the whole project management resource pack, the templates for

champion job descriptions, plus the dedicated online workshops Digital Unite ran, and the sense of being part of a community of like-minded organisations. It all really helped us” says Nicky.

With One Digital, Hexagon could test out how to run a sustainable champion programme, and in particular whether it was more effective to use volunteer Digital Champions, or to pay people to take on the role. Hexagon opted to recruit residents as bank workers, paying them to help fellow residents. “We have such a reservoir of skills within our resident communities and we wanted to tap into that, and of course it provided employment opportunities for residents” says Nicky.

The evidence Hexagon were able to gather about the effectiveness of using paid Digital Champions to drive digital inclusion helped them build a successful business case for investment internally once the One Digital funding period ended.

## **Rolling out the programme**

### **Recruitment and training**

Hexagon promoted the Digital Champion role through local communication channels like the residents’ magazine, and through word of mouth. The champions have a mix of backgrounds, some with pre-existing IT experience and others without. All are current or former residents, described by Michelle West-Allwood, Community Investment Officer in charge of digital inclusion, as “the gems who make the whole thing work”.

The principal qualities Hexagon look for in a champion are empathy and a willingness to learn: “We did not need people who were techy, we needed people who would care – empathy and support are what people lacking digital skills need first and foremost” says Nicky.

Digital champion Kam Newman was one of the recruits:

“My skills were very basic. I left school just as computers were coming in, so I identified with a lot of women in their 50s as that generation lacked that digital knowledge. Also with the older generation who have never had to have anything to do with computers. Because my knowledge was very limited, I thought I was in the best position to help others. I was really excited to show people that computers were not beyond their reach.”

Access to the training on the Digital Champions Network (DCN) is included as part of Hexagon’s contract with the champions. Project manager Michelle values the DCN training for her champions because of the range of topics covered, including things like helping people use the Universal Credit service and how to support learners remotely. Champions give good feedback on their learning experiences on the DCN:

“I had some IT skills already, but I was not sure I would be a good teacher. I did the DCN training on accessibility and I learnt a lot I did not know before, how you can help people. I really enjoyed it.” Hannah Ajibade, Hexagon Digital Champion

“When I started the role I did as much training on the DCN as I could. I would say I was doing 90% training and 10% working. I learnt so much. As my knowledge grew, so did my clientele”  
Kam

### **Champion activities**

When the pandemic hit, Hexagon had five active digital champions, who were immediately seconded to support community services directly. Hexagon began a screening process to identify the

most vulnerable residents in lockdown, so they could offer a programme of proactive support. This might include organising food supplies and ensuring medication needs were addressed, and it also included screening for digital access and skills needs. Around a third of the residents contacted at the start of the pandemic needed help with digital. Some needed the loan of a wifi dongle, tablet or a laptop, many needed a champion to help them get going.

The champion's first task was usually to set the person up with a new device, either over the phone or using WhatsApp video-calling. This is often one of the most difficult hurdles to do remotely, and Hexagon have recently started to use TeamViewer – which allows the champion to remotely control the learner's device – to make this stage less daunting for nervous learners. Security issues are always carefully considered: "I was cautious about TeamViewer. The champions had researched it and they felt it was the right solution, but I did a very thorough risk assessment as I needed to know we had all the right safeguards in place" says Nicky.

Once set up, the nature of the support is led by the learner. Most commonly it is online shopping, dealing with GPs online, setting up and accessing Universal Credit, communicating with friends and family. For those looking for work, the tasks supported tend to be online job searching, doing job interviews online, and basic workplace software:

"Some of the people I help missed out on computers at school, but now it is all digital, even if you want to work in a restaurant you need to know how to use a digital device to take people's orders." Hannah

The training learners receive includes access to Learn My Way, a free basic digital skills learning platform which the residents can access at any time independently, but the champions emphasise the personalised nature of the support they offer being a vital part of its success: "Each person has different knowledge and different capacity and different needs. If they are all in a group it is not easy to help them in the right way" says Hannah, and Kam agrees "tailored one-to-one support is much better".

Michelle relies on regular communication with her champions to manage the service efficiently:

"The champions give me feedback about how it is going, they are the experts on the ground and I rely on them to understand the residents' needs and make suggestions about how we can improve the service. They also swap learning and ask questions of each other. They have a lot of experience between them and if someone comes across an issue or a problem the chances are that someone else will be able to help."

## **The Impacts**

### **The numbers**

- Between April 2020 and August 2021, Digital Champions supported 118 residents
- At any given time, five active champions are helping between 20 and 30 residents
- Individual champions typically deliver 25 to 50 hours of support per month
- Support usually lasts a couple of months, but can be shorter or longer according to need
- There are typically around 30 people on the waiting list for Digital Champion support.

## The outcomes

Hexagon's digital inclusion work results in positive outcomes for the organisation, the champions, and for residents.

Hexagon's fleet-footed response to the pandemic as an **organisation** has accelerated the move towards the integration of digital inclusion into all aspects of its service delivery. According to Michelle: "The pandemic has emphasised even more the need to make our online services as accessible as possible, and to help people to use them. I think there is now greater awareness of the importance and social value of making sure our residents are digitally included."

This means that rather than being a standalone service, digital inclusion is now recognised as a cross-cutting essential element for employment support, financial inclusion and wellbeing support, and a Digital Champion is linked to each of the service areas within the community investment programme.

Moreover, the digital champions have now become an invaluable resource for Hexagon, feeding back on residents' needs to the community investment programme. Hexagon's own in-house IT transformation programme also stands to benefit; there are plans for Digital Champions to act as informed testers for new digital services, gather feedback from residents, and then support them to adapt to digital ways of transacting with the organisation.

The enforced switch to remote support has also paid efficiency dividends for Hexagon. Their Digital Champion service is no longer constrained by geographical limitations, and travel costs are reduced or eliminated, meaning more residents can be supported.

The **champions** themselves speak of many benefits to the role. These include learning new knowledge and skills, including increased digital knowledge but also soft skills such as active listening and mentoring: "I have really learnt to be patient, to deal with different types of people, to repeat things as often as is needed and not to rush" says Hannah.

For Kam, the personal confidence boost has been life-changing:

"The change has been dramatic. I had not worked for years because of depression and anxiety, so I was so nervous about applying for this job. But because of my religious activity I was used to talking to people, and that was a skill I had – talking to strangers. So now I have realised there is niche on the job market for people like me, and that it can be done remotely. It's turned my life around, from thinking I had lost touch with the world of work forever to not only being back but at the cutting edge!"

But achieving outcomes for the **residents** is what really motivates the champions: "In just one year I have seen learners get jobs, I have had learners who said 'I will never do this' overcome their fears about technology" says Hannah. Kam recalls one woman in her 80s who needed help and who really struggled with using digital communication channels:

"She kept saying I should give up on her but I said no, we'll get there. At the end of her sessions she went back to her the NHS volunteering she had previously been doing. Her colleagues could not believe her IT skills! She can do things they can't do."

Hexagon's skill surveys, conducted at the start and end of training, show a marked improvement in resident confidence in their ability to undertake digital tasks, with uplifts in foundation skills such as using a keyboard, mouse or touchscreen, and essential skills such as online shopping, videocalling and accessing services such as GPs online.

Comments from Hexagon residents who received support in basic digital skills included:

“[I am] more aware and confident in what I am doing on the internet and safer... I have ordered food from Tesco and [applied] online for the Covid vaccine.”

“I feel I have learned a lot. I want to keep on with Learn My Way on my own and the [digital champion] will ring me every month. I know I can get in touch with any questions I may have. I have the confidence to carry on learning on my own. I enjoyed the sessions and my teacher was good at explaining things.”

Hexagon residents who got support to use digital to look for work described similar benefits:

“I have learnt how to use spreadsheets and Quick Assist. I now have more knowledge of how to use Microsoft [Office software]. My tutor was very friendly, helpful and supportive in my online lessons in a way I could understand.”

“The [support] gave me access, skills, motivation and confidence to access the opportunities of the Internet, using tablet, smartphone and laptop. Learn My Way has enlightened me [with a] knowledge of basics computer skills. Also, this six weeks with my Digital Champion an amazing woman, so generous with her time, always ready to [help with] any task/questions I asked, enlightened and inspired me a lot about computers as a beginner.”

## The lessons learned

A number of key factors contributed to the success of Hexagon’s digital inclusion work during the pandemic:

1. Tapping into talent already on hand. Hexagon champions are all residents or former residents: “We have such a reservoir of skills in our residents – why would we not want to use that?” (Nicky)
2. Utilising the power of peer support. Hexagon champions, as residents or former residents, have shared experience with the people they are supporting: “Empathy is much more important than being a techy expert” (Kam)
3. Providing intensive support for anxious learners: “We knew we needed to give intensive, consistent, one-to-one support from people our residents knew and trusted” (Nicky)
4. Recognising champions as experts. “My champions know what is happening on the ground, understand residents’ needs, give me the feedback I need to keep improving the service” (Michelle)
5. Sustaining champions’ own learning. Hexagon Digital Champions have an active community of practice, delivered simply through WhatsApp: “They share a lot and benefit from each other’s knowledge and experience” (Michelle)
6. Integrating digital screening. Those in need of digital support are identified on first contact with any of Hexagon’s support services. “We plan to continue this across all our services, with a champion directly linked to each community service we provide.” (Nicky)
7. Working closely with technical colleagues. “Our head of IT is very aware of how important accessibility is, and how we need to support our residents, and our staff, to keep improving their digital skills if we are to transform our services.” (Nicky)

8. Recognising that just being online is not always enough. “Some of our learners may be able to use smartphones, but for job-seeking you need to use a tablet or a laptop, and not everyone of working age has those skills.” (Nicky)
9. Celebrating achievements. “Our celebration event for Digital Champions means the benefits of the support they give to people are recognised, and we can all hear how much they gain from the satisfaction of giving something back.” (Nicky)

Despite being through such a testing period with the pandemic, Nicky reflects on how Hexagon’s response to the Covid-19 crisis has pushed them in some positive ways:

“We will be continuing with a hybrid approach to staff working and to service delivery, with more staff working from home than before the pandemic and more residents’ services offered online. The digital champions have become an essential part of making this work, and this is now recognised across the organisation and at senior levels.” Nicky

According to Emma Weston, Digital Unite Chief Executive:

“What’s inspiring about Hexagon’s experience is the way they have embedded their DC model into the heart of the organisation, allowing it to flex and evolve so that it now underpins so much more than ‘just’ the development of widespread digital skills. Here’s a living breathing model nurturing residents, volunteers and staff, delivering benefits to the whole organisation alongside cost savings and service delivery efficiencies. The focus on celebration and on democracy – everyone can contribute ideas, participate and contribute, be heard – makes it a robust and creative model and far more likely to be sustainable.”

## Looking ahead

Emma is excited to see where Hexagon take their programme next:

“For me, there are inklings of new collaborative approaches to service design and perhaps also extending the Digital Champion model to other forms of championing, building on and out from Digital Championing as the core; health championing, environmental championing and so on.”

Nicky sees Champions as central to the future flourishing of Hexagon’s online communities:

“Digital communities can have a crucial role to play in reducing social isolation. Digital Champions are the key to helping these emerging communities grow.”

Many thanks to the following people for contributing their time and insights for this case study: The Hexagon managers: Nicky Hazelwood, Michelle West-Allwood The Hexagon Digital Champions: Hannah Abijade, Kam Newman
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