



Mencap: making a step-change in digital skills support

In a nutshell

Prior to the pandemic, Mencap – the leading charity supporting people with learning disability – was not particularly focused on digital services. But when lockdown reduced face-to-face services, Mencap’s local partner organisations had an urgent need to reconfigure their delivery models. Emergency funding from government, and a partnership with Digital Unite, combined to overcome previous blockers around organisational capabilities and safeguarding for clients. Tailored training for Champions – including people with learning disabilities – together with a roll-out of kit and connectivity, has led to dozens of local organisations using digital devices to open up whole new worlds for more than a thousand of their customers with learning disabilities.

Recognising the challenge

Mencap as an organisation had been aware for some time that digital exclusion was an issue for people with learning disabilities. But digital technology is not its core business, and managers were not confident they could provide digital skills support to the 300+ local partner organisations who provide support for people with learning disabilities. However, the pandemic forced a rethink.

“When the pandemic came, we were getting the message loud and clear from our network partners that people with learning disabilities were really losing out in not having access to digital technology.” Ruth Owens, Senior Programme Manager, National Mencap

Planning a solution

Mencap was successful in getting government Covid Recovery funding early in the pandemic and then faced a challenge in finding ways to use the funds at speed. A swift dialogue and consultation exercise with a hundred of their local partners revealed that supporting staff and volunteers to become digital champions was a clear need. Mencap knew of Digital Unite through other charity networks, and felt their outcomes-focused approach was the right fit:

“Digital Unite’s focus is on skills support. We had tablets being sent out but there is no point at all in providing kit without giving people the confidence to help others to use it and keep using it. It would end up being locked in a cupboard.” Sally Whitehead, national Project Manager for Let’s Get Digital

Digital Unite also had prior experience of working with people with learning disabilities, and familiarity with the voluntary sector context:

“Many people working in our sector are intimidated by technology, or concerned about online safety, but Digital Unite communicate in the right tone. They made the whole topic of digital inclusion approachable and relevant for everyone. They helped us jump through the hoops with the commissioning and funders too.” Ruth

For Kate Buttrick at Heart of England Mencap, the partnership with Digital Unite was a great opportunity to upskill staff:

“We are good at supporting our customers from the care perspective, but this initiative is about training and mentoring skills combined with digital knowledge. We needed Digital Unite’s learning platform to help our staff get the confidence to be Digital Champions for our customers.” Kate Buttrick, Programme Manager and Project Lead, Heart of England Mencap

Rolling out the programme

Recruitment and training

The aim is to recruit 100 Mencap local partners over the life of the Let’s Get Digital project, and more than seventy have already signed up. An initial diagnostic helped the national team understand the specific needs of each partner organisation, as well as providing the partner with details about what was expected of them. National Mencap stipulated that each organisation commit to training at least two Digital Champions, including one peer enabler i.e. a person with learning disabilities. Beyond that, the types of support offered and the desired outcomes are very much left to the local partner to decide.

It has been “the right project at the right time” says Kate at Heart of England Mencap:

“We usually support customers on a one-to-three ratio, and we knew once the pandemic lockdown came we would not be able to do that without using digital technology. We were already using MS Teams for regular socials with our customers, but we wanted to expand what we could offer people.”

Each participating organisation gets £2k seed funding to spend on devices and/or infrastructure for the organisation such as improved broadband connections, plus an equipment bursary which is used to purchase equipment directly for the customers with learning disabilities.

Champions are generally recruited from existing staff or volunteers. Heart of England Mencap recruited eight staff across various service settings – residential, respite, supported living and complex needs.

All the local Mencap partners get access to the Digital Champions Network (DCN) learning platform for their aspiring Digital Champions:

“We introduce the DCN at the very beginning, to give Champions a skills and confidence boost before they move into the device set-up phase, which is actually a challenging bit of the whole process.” Sally

The national team are not prescriptive about what training the local Champions do – this is determined by local priorities and capacities. Both national Mencap, and local delivery partners if they wish, are able to view and download reports on their respective Champions' use of DCN resources.

The spectrum of learning available through the DCN means that there is something of relevance and interest for most Champions no matter what their level of knowledge and expertise:

“All our local network partners are very different – from micro volunteer groups to quite large charities – and we want them to use the DCN according to their own priorities. The way Digital Unite have set it up makes it flexible and people can choose their own way through the learning.” Ruth

The bite-sized nature of the DCN resources is also critical in Mencap's view:

“Time constraints are probably the biggest barrier for local partners getting involved. We need bite-sized resources, particularly for some of the smaller partner organisations, where staff are taking on the Champion role on top of all the things they already do.” Sally

The DCN courses are complemented by a series of webinars, jointly run by the national Mencap team and Digital Unite. These cover the key topics of how to help people with learning disabilities get the most out of digital, and how to support customers remotely when face-to-face help is not an option. Safeguarding, a critical topic for those supporting people with learning disabilities, was also covered in the interactive webinars:

“We got really good engagement with the webinars we ran jointly with Digital Unite. Digital Unite helped us set them up and run them, and of course because they were remote we got a great mix of participants from right across the UK.” Ruth

As part of their commitment to digital inclusion for people with learning disabilities, Digital Unite have been working with learning disability tech specialists the Rix Centre to develop Aspire, a learning platform specifically for peer enablers. “That is pretty unique” says Sally:

“Some people with learning disabilities are able to use the DCN without any trouble, but to have some additional learning on Aspire which specifically designed for them is great. It is well thought-through, the way you can repeat bits if you need to, the integration of the audio.” Sally

Champion activities

The great majority of Digital Champion support on the Mencap programme is done using tablets. The tablet devices – supplied through an arrangement with the Good Things Foundation – are first customised for each user. They are set up with a Wi-Fi connection and an email address, plus the Zoom video-calling app. In addition, Champions often install software that matches the personal interests of the individual they are supporting, for example bingo games, football apps or music apps.

The Digital Champions then mentor the customers to start using the tablets for whatever it is that they want to do:

“Support includes a whole range of tasks, from video-calling to online shopping, watching YouTube videos, participating in our social sessions on MS Teams. In the socials we do all sorts of things like quizzes, exercise classes, general catching up with how each other is doing.” Kate

At Heart of England Mencap, Digital Champions work with customers on huge variety of activities, whether in group sessions or one-to-one:

“John loves wordsearches and solitaire, Peter absolutely loves puzzle games like popping balloons, and maths quizzes. Also virtual tours of London, and Warsaw, because he is from Poland. Matt watches New Year’s Eve fireworks and music videos. Another of my customers has trouble communicating and a very short attention span, but he can really focus on the Match of the Day or Dad’s Army theme tunes. They all need to use headphones, or you get a lot of noise!” Liz

“Paul loves to look up anything to do with Birmingham City football club, and I help Wayne to look at healthy eating plans for his diabetes. Bill also uses the tablet to look up meal plans because he is trying to lose weight.” Beverley

“One of my customers calls his tablet ‘the music tablet’ because he just loves to watch music videos on YouTube. Lizzie loves to cook and looks up recipes online, and she also uses the tablet to help with her spelling and writing. Other people like to watch the news online, and I help people to shop online too.” Laura

Champions also help each other out with practical advice and troubleshooting. Local partners have Facebook and WhatsApp groups for Champions, and the national Mencap team run a Facebook page where different partners come together to share learning, to which Digital Unite is also an active contributor.

The Impacts

The numbers so far

- 73 participating organisations to date (target of 100 by March 2022)
- 156 Digital Champions registered
- more than 1000 customers supported to date.

The outcomes

Mencap are seeing beneficial **organisational** outcomes at both a national and local level. According to Ruth in the national office, the Let’s Get Digital project has been a game-changer:

“When we first started our IT department was unsure about the project and why it was not being led by them, given it was ‘digital’. But now they completely see the

value and the complementary nature of the work, that you need the engagement and skills support alongside the technical implementation, so much so that they have come to us to add the skills support element for a project they are seeking funding for.”

The project has been popular with local partners, says Ruth. Mencap is a federated organisation and cannot mandate what local partners do:

“Sometimes getting local partners on board is hard but this project has been so popular: the need was clear, the solution Digital Unite have helped us deliver is holistic, and it is flexible enough that partners can use it to achieve the outcomes that are right for their particular circumstances.”

Local partner Heart of England Mencap echoes this, seeing Let’s Get Digital as making a clear contribution to their strategic aim to be a strong and agile organisation. In addition to improving direct support services, having an identified group of digitally aware staff has organisational benefits says programme manager Kate:

“The Champions help us test and roll out new products and services coming onstream as part of our digital transformation programme. They feedback about implementation issues and they also support other staff to get the best out of digital technology.”

Mencap **Digital Champions** improved their own skills as well as the quality and range of support they could offer customers:

“My skills have changed in terms of finding the right way to support people, I am learning how to teach and show people and to go at their pace.” Beverley

“I have learned about things like using the microphone to search instead of the keypad, changing the colour of the keypad, things that help our customers to use the tablet which I had not needed to know for myself. Also helping people on a level that they can understand.” Laura

Champions report feeling more autonomy during the pandemic, as digital delivery meant they could keep supporting their customers remotely, as well as being a motivation to deliver support in a new way. Coaching and mentoring skills have also been developed: “It’s one thing to know how to do something on a digital device, it is quite another to help someone else to do it” says Kate at Heat of England Mencap.

The project has also fostered a learning culture:

“The Champions get together and share challenges and tips, they review new apps and report back to group on them. Because we work across a number of sites some of the Champions have never met each other and so there is improved staff networking and mutual support coming out of the project too.” Kate

Alongside new skills and confidence, being a Digital Champion can bring a sense of identity:

“Without doubt there has been an increase in confidence of for the Digital Champions. For Champions with learning disabilities especially, the recognition of their achievements is so important, it can’t be over-estimated. The badges, the recognition by others that they are a Champion, it gives people a purpose and an identity.” Sally

For Mencap **customers**, the advent of Digital Champions has opened up new worlds:

“I have learnt how to connect to the internet, I do YouTube, games, colouring in, music quizzes, singing and dancing. I could not do anything before and now use the tablet happily every day. I’ve enjoyed it. I would definitely recommend getting help from a Digital Champion.” Elizabeth, customer at Heart of England Mencap

“I’d say get a tablet so you can see all your friends on it and learn to use the internet!” Brian, customer at Heart of England Mencap

“I like to learn my letters [with the tablet] I like the new writing skills, and I like to learn to do recipes.” Becky, customer at Heart of England Mencap

Champions and project staff echo this:

“The results for our customers have been brilliant. Things like seeing people engage with children’s TV they used to watch, the delight they get from seeing them again. Giving people new-found independence by enabling them to do online shopping, helping people communicate, including with family overseas they may never have seen before. Also, and this is very important, families get the reassurance that their loved one is safe online.” Kate

“Things that for us are normal, for customers can be amazing new things to explore. Especially during lockdown when they did not have the chance to go out or do the things they used to do... When you see all the new things that customers can learn, it can mean the world and the magic of life for the people we help. It is so gratifying.”
Laura

The lessons learned

A range of factors contributed to the success of Mencap’s Let’s Get Digital project

1. A consultative approach. Preparatory dialogue with local partners and assessment of their priorities led to a flexible and devolved project
2. A holistic approach. Supporting kit supply and infrastructure upgrades as well as digital skills support meant that all the critical elements to enable digital participation came together in one project
3. Focusing on scalability. “The Champion model means we reach so many more people than we ever could with external tutors or a classroom approach. It makes it good value for money” (Ruth)

4. Recognising the Champion role. Recognition, whether formal (e.g. staff pay increases), or informal (e.g. hoodies with 'Digital Champion' logos) boosts recruitment and enhances a sense of identity and purpose for Champions
5. Keeping training simple. "The DCN training is not intimidating and anyone can do it, so it builds the Champions' confidence at the outset" (Ruth)
6. Reinforcing learning through multiple channels. Jointly delivered webinars backed up the initial learning done on the DCN, addressed Champions' concerns in real time and fostered a sense of community between partner organisations and individual champions.
7. Supporting peer learning. Encouraging Champions to share practical tips, often through pre-existing channels such as Facebook or WhatsApp, builds up a store of specialist knowledge as well as enhancing Champions' sense of purpose and recognition of the role.

Looking ahead

Emma Weston, Digital Unite Chief Executive, says:

"Watching this project unfurl and blossom into an exemplar Digital Champions initiative has been a joy! Right from inception the characteristics of consultation and engagement have been embedded in Mencap's approach and this has meant that everybody has had a stake in the project's deliverables and ultimately its success. They also paid keen attention to the value of connectivity and communication, again between and amongst all stakeholders. Digital Champions are supported to support each other, and the use of multi-channel messaging to raise awareness as well as celebrate successes – of Champions and of their end learners – has meant that the project has been vibrant and visible. The net result, more and greater digital inclusion and skills for all! Long may it continue."

Sally at national Mencap:

"We are evolving this project all the time, and the focus now is on future sustainability and embedding into the local community. We would like the legacy of this project to be Mencap hubs in the local community, with our local partners helping others in the community with their digital skills, and people with learning disabilities actively contributing in the community as Digital Champions."

Many thanks to the following people for contributing their time and insights for this case study:
The Mencap managers: Ruth Owens, Sally Whitehead, Kate Buttrick
The Digital Champions: Laura Alaguna, Liz (name changed), Beverley Bromwich
The customers: Elizabeth, Brian and Becky
All the customers at Heart of England Mencap who are mentioned elsewhere in this case study, whose names have been changed.