

Brighton & Hove City Council Library Service: Digital skills and access for all



Background

Brighton & Hove City Council Library Service <https://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/content/leisure-and-libraries/libraries> has one central and 14 local libraries serving local communities. The libraries offer includes free access to computers and WiFi, and volunteers from the 'Library Connect' service help customers access the digital facilities on site.

Brighton & Hove City Council (BHCC) are also a lead partner in the Digital Brighton & Hove network facilitated by Citizens Online, a local cross-sector partnership promoting digital inclusion across the city <https://www.citizensonline.org.uk/digitalbrightonhove/>.

BHCC Library Service's motivation for engaging with digital inclusion

There are diverse policy, economic, social and technology drivers for library services to provide essential digital skills support:

- Statutory duties and standards require libraries to provide equal access for everyone in a Universal Offer. This includes 'having the resources and skills to deliver digital activities and training to the public, especially to individuals with limited digital capacity'.¹
- Library resources are severely constrained, including staff shortages; shifting transactions online wherever possible reduces pressure on staff, but assistance needs to be available to ensure equality of access is maintained.
- Libraries have a longstanding link to literacy; digital literacy – being able to use information safely and to judge the trustworthiness of information in the digital realm – is now vital for society.
- Libraries are moving into e-books, lower cost than print as losses are less and storage is not an issue. Assistance is needed to ensure everyone can use the e-books service.
- Baseline research and the experience of library staff shows that not all customers have the digital skills needed to make full use of the library services.

Aims of BHCC Library Service's project

The aim of the BHCC Library Service digital inclusion offer is to provide digital skills support to library customers, including but not limited to help with accessing library services.

BHCC Library Service's Digital Champions

All 34 Library Officers have the capacity to use digital services and the aptitude to help others included in their job descriptions, as these are regarded as essential skills for library staff. Staff can then opt to specialise in digital support, and all staff receive training which includes Digital Champions Network courses (see below), specific training on online library services such as e-books, and training in Universal Credit online applications.

¹ <https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/page/universal-offers-0>

The Library Connect service is staffed by volunteer Digital Champions who are recruited via local channels including a city-wide online platform Volunteer Plus. Volunteers do not necessarily have any IT background, though some do, but they need an aptitude for helping people. Many are retired, and some students from local universities also apply. Potential volunteers are interviewed by the Digital Co-ordinator, and then shadow another volunteer running a support session. If they are keen to pursue the role, they are assigned their own sessions in their local library or where a slot is available, and monitored and supported by staff.

Volunteers are offered (optional) training through the Digital Champions Network. They get guidance from library staff on maintaining boundaries with customers and dealing with confidential tasks such as online banking. There is a six-monthly forum, co-convened by the library staff and a local digital inclusion charity, where Library Connect volunteers can meet other Digital Champions, hear about resources available to them in their role, and receive further training.

BHCC Library Service's beneficiaries

Beneficiaries of the library's digital support are members of the public, often but not always older people, accessing library services on site. Beneficiaries primarily self-identify, by asking staff for help. Beneficiary needs fall broadly into help accessing digital services – for example council services – and help with information seeking, which might be for leisure or for study/work purposes.

The range of digital skills of the beneficiaries is very varied, some people having almost no experience and needing help with foundation skills, and others being quite expert digital users who need help with specific or specialist queries.

The reduction of local services means libraries are also serving more disadvantaged groups including homeless people, people with special needs, people using the library as a safe place for them and their children. This in turn drives a need for assisted digital services.

Project activities

The staff Digital Champions we spoke to deal with high numbers of digital skills queries, around ten a day, most often related to using library services such as initial log-on, printing and scanning. Where the problem can be easily resolved, staff usually deal with it themselves, and only refer on to the Library Connect volunteers for a bookable session if the query is complex and the staff have other demands on their time, or if a beneficiary asks for a one-to-one session.

The one-to-one support sessions run by Library Connect volunteers are booked in advance and typically last around 45-60 minutes. Sessions might make use of the library computers, or they might use the beneficiary's own device. Beneficiaries can attend up to 8 sessions.

Typical queries include:

- scanning and printing documents such as passports
- using e-books services on e-readers, tablets and smartphones

- accessing council services such as Blue Badge or housing services
- accessing online newspaper and magazine services such as RB Digital and Which?

The Library Connect service scales up and down according to the availability of volunteers. Volunteer hours are recorded via the Volunteer Plus management platform.

The use of the Digital Champions Network

Both library staff and Library Connect volunteers are encouraged to use the DCN course and resources. The project staff see it as repository of tried and tested resources which the Library service does not have the capacity to create itself.

Project outcomes

Outcomes for beneficiaries

Beneficiaries we spoke to who had received additional support from a Library Connect volunteer found the advice effective for resolving specific problems which required more in-depth help, and felt they were able to get more out of the library services as a result of the volunteer's help.

Outcomes for Digital Champions

The staff we spoke to felt the Digital Champion role and training had helped them to increase their own digital skills, and their confidence in supporting others.

Volunteer Digital Champions spoke of the satisfaction gained from helping others in their local community, particularly in regard to using online services safely: "It's citizen advice – it's a moral thing. I don't like to see people being swindled."

Outcomes for BHCC Library Service

- Digital inclusion work is central to the library service and part of its statutory mission. As a result of the Library Connect service, Brighton and Hove libraries service has increased capacity to help local people access online services, which eases pressure on library staff.
- The library service's contribution to the Digital Brighton and Hove network has enabled the service to be community focused and networked. Local people talk of 'my library', and library services are a central part of the multi-agency partnership which seeks to deliver a joined-up approach to digital inclusion in the locality.
- Participation in this local partnership network has elicited interest across the City Council as an example of community working, especially with third sector organisations, to increase the effectiveness of service delivery.

Legacy and next steps

Managers stress that digital inclusion is central to the Library offer, and the work will continue as a core service: "You can't have libraries without digital... Our aim is to keep the skills of staff and volunteers up to date and then hope that over time there will be more resources to increase the offer we can make to customers. If we close services, just like if we

close libraries, they won't open up again. We need to keep things going, so we have a system to reinvest in."

A recruitment drive via the newly embedded Volunteer Plus platform aims to increase the numbers of Library Connect volunteers. The team are aware that there are likely to be significant numbers of digitally excluded people who cannot attend sessions at libraries, and are considering starting a 'Library Connect at Home' service, whereby volunteers would undertake home visits.

Top takeaways from BHCC Library Service One Digital project

- ✓ A super-local service – 95% of Brighton and Hove's population live within 1 mile of a library – available 7 days a week
- ✓ Baselineing of the demographic and digital exclusion profiles of the local population, combined with mapping of existing services, encouraged optimal use of the available local resources
- ✓ Library devices on-site and the provision of free WiFi mean the barrier of access to kit and connectivity is overcome
- ✓ The careful introduction of a volunteer-based service as an adjunct to existing staff services ensures that staff do not see the Library Connect service as a threat but as added value to their own customer service work
- ✓ Staff with high awareness and expertise in digital skills support work in concert with volunteers who supplement and extend the capacity and capability of the staff support
- ✓ Networking with other local services, council and third sector, enabled a joined-up, community-focused approach.

Brighton and Hove City Council Library Service's Digital Champion project was undertaken as part of the national One Digital programme, who funded this case study.