Age UK South Lakeland: Digital skills and later life

Background

Age UK South Lakeland
https://www.ageuk.org.uk/southlakeland/ are an independent third sector organisation based in Kendal in Cumbria. They offer a range of services to local people aged 50 and over to improve their wellbeing and promote independence and choice.

The organisation covers a large rural area, so outreach work – including delivering directly in local villages and in people's home – is a key element of their approach.

Age UK South Lakeland's motivation for engaging with digital inclusion

- The migration of key public services online – in particular access to GP services, Universal Credit, council services such as Blue Badge, and social housing – impacts disproportionately on older people. This is compounded in a rural area with poor public transport, where physical access to services is harder. Age UK South Lakeland know that some older people risk being 'left behind' as they lack the skills and knowledge to use digital technology.
- Social isolation is also a significant risk for older people, and Age UK South Lakeland believe digital technology can help people get more connected to community, family and friends.
- In addition, the organisation is completing a major digital transformation, rolling out a bespoke digital hub which records all service activities and outcomes measures, and also incorporates a multi-agency referral system that can be accessed by local NHS, social care and other third sector agencies. This internal change process has highlighted the need for all staff and volunteers to have the essential skills to engage with digital technology themselves and help others to do so.

Aims of Age UK South Lakeland's project

The project aimed to support older people to engage with digital technologies in order to improve their wellbeing, in particular to increase their social connectedness and to improve their access to services.

Age UK South Lakeland's Digital Champions

The organisation has a long-established volunteer programme and Digital Champions (known in this project as IT Volunteers) are recruited through this system. A monthly recruitment drive through a range of local networks picks up recruits who are interviewed by the volunteer co-ordinator. Suitable candidates are then given a standard Age UK volunteer induction, which includes mental health awareness and safeguarding. Those interested in the IT role are given access to the Digital Champions Network (see below). They also receive Digital Champion training from the One Digital project co-ordinator, including in the use of tablets where required, as these are the devices offered to beneficiaries through their loan scheme. The project co-ordinator also attends the volunteer's first support session as a mentor.

Staff in client-facing roles – such as information, advice and guidance or those carrying out assessments – have also received Digital Champion training to help them identify older people needing digital support. All new staff now have Digital Champion training as part of their induction.

The project's IT Volunteers are mostly retired, many with either a teaching or an IT background. The retention rate for IT Volunteers is high, with 22 recruited for the project (some new, some existing volunteers) and 20 remaining active throughout, with high levels of commitment to the role.

Ongoing support for the IT Volunteers is from the Project Co-ordinator, who considers this one of the key aspects of their job, freeing the IT volunteers to focus on supporting older people. All IT Volunteers commit to a minimum one drop-in a month, with many doing up to 14 hours a month of drop-ins and home visits.

Age UK South Lakeland's beneficiaries

Beneficiaries are identified through two main routes:

- Self-referral; older people who see adverts for the digital support service in their local paper or shops or hear about it through word of mouth
- Referrals from triage; whenever people are referred by third parties, such as GPs or social services or friends and family, they are assessed by case officers as to their needs and preferences, including their use of and interest in digital technology.

Clients fall broadly into two categories:

- 60 to 70-year-olds, who are aware of most services going online and fearful of falling behind, and hence feel some pressure to engage with new technology
- 80 to 90-year-olds who tend to see digital technology as optional, something that is of potential interest rather than a pressure.

The project has helped over a thousand older people, of whom:

- 41% are aged 70+
- 33% live alone
- 28% are either living with some disability or are housebound
- 31% are living with at least one long-term health condition.

Project activities

Support is delivered by the IT Volunteers through a mix of drop-ins and home visits. Drop-in sessions are approximately monthly in local libraries, some have taken place in GP surgeries, and also at the Age UK centre in Kendal. These might be in groups or one-to-one, depending on demand. A large proportion of support is provided one-to-one in people's homes, usually up to six visits of varying frequency according to the client's circumstances.

The advice given is wide-ranging, typically including:

- technical queries around devices and WiFi access

- support with online shopping
- help with using the internet to connect with families and friends (e.g. email, messaging apps, videoconferencing such as Skype).

The project also runs a tablet loan scheme. People can borrow a tablet for up to three months and the IT volunteers help them to set it up, including providing a Mifi connection if required.

Monitoring of the project activities includes recording numbers of people supported overall, as well as their demographic data, existing internet access and levels of confidence in using the internet at the start of the intervention. Most of the people who receive digital support also have a record on the organisation's online management platform, Compass eHub. This includes a structured and holistic assessment of each client's situation, needs and preferences, including for example social connectedness, physical health and mood. The assessments are revisited after interventions, in order to provide a measure of impacts.

The use of the Digital Champions Network

Age UK National Office facilitated access to the Digital Champions Network (DCN) online platform as part of their funding and support offer to Age UK South Lakeland. All IT volunteers were offered the chance to register as learners on the DCN, but it was not compulsory. The project co-ordinator made use of resources such as handouts for learners on essential digital tasks such as setting up emails. Some IT volunteers use the DCN monitoring tools to keep a tally of the clients helped and the types of skills supported.

Project outcomes

Outcomes for beneficiaries

The project supported beneficiaries effectively by offering a range of support led by what people wanted to learn. Loaning tablets to people who needed them encouraged initial engagement, giving people the opportunity to become familiar with a device they could use in their own time. Some of the recipients of loaned tablets had requested to purchase the device at the end of the project period, and others had been spurred to purchase a device (usually a tablet) themselves.

The project co-ordinator reported a social benefit for people attending the drop-ins, which could help in reducing isolation. Those who received support at home tended to be those with the least experience and confidence:

> "I feel I have got over the most important hurdle, because I had this enormous build-up of fear about technology."

The client-led approach, finding out what people's interests or needs are and then supporting them to achieve their goals, suited the beneficiaries we spoke to:

"The [IT Volunteer] went at the pace that I could enjoy. I did not feel under any pressure; I did not feel bombarded with too much stuff. I feel really happy about it because I have the email, and I can browse for anything I need."

All the beneficiaries we spoke to were more convinced at the end of the intervention than they had been at the start that the internet can make their lives easier, and would strongly recommend the project to family and friends.

Outcomes for Digital Champions

The Digital Champions (IT volunteers) we spoke to were positive with the difference they felt their support was making to older people; it gave them a sense of satisfaction: "I have enjoyed it and feel it is useful to the community." And also of occupation: "It has given me something interesting to do."

They were particularly positive about the benefits of the one-to-one sessions at home, feeling that this was the most effective way to support older people.

The IT volunteers' confidence in their own digital skills had also increased, both as a result of helping older people and learning from project staff and other volunteers.

Outcomes for Age UK South Lakeland

- As a result of this project, the organisation now has digital inclusion embedded into their initial assessment of clients, meaning that it is part of a holistic package of support.
- There is greater awareness amongst staff and volunteers of the benefits of digital inclusion for older people.
- An experienced and dedicated cohort of IT volunteers created as part of the project means there is greater capacity to support older people with their essential digital skills.

Legacy and next steps

The outcomes described above provide a strong legacy of the project and a driver for continuing the service. Managers told us:

"We think we are in a strong position to continue to offer the services, because it has become so embedded in our assessment and referral systems, and because all staff now have the awareness around it."

The organisation would like to secure further funds for dedicated co-ordination of the IT Volunteers, and also to enable the continuation of the home visits, which are resource-intensive but which staff and volunteers consider to be the most effective and appropriate way to deliver support to their particular demographic.

Top takeaways from Age UK South Lakeland's One Digital project

- ✓ Training all client-facing staff as Digital Champions made the support offered to clients consistent and holistic, as well as more sustainable

- ✓ Thorough assessment by case officers of beneficiary needs, including digital support needs, so that digital is seen as part of a holistic package of support whenever anyone engages with the organisation
- ✓ The matching of IT volunteers with clients, approached in a similar way to a befriending service to maximise the chances of positive outcomes, from a known and trusted local service
- ✓ The highly motivated group of volunteers, many retired, who remain committed to the DC role and bring a range of previous experience and skills to the role
- ✓ A tablet loan scheme to address the problems of access to kit at the same time as supporting skills and encouraging motivation and enabling self-directed learning
- ✓ Flexible drop-in sessions held at known venues in the local community to encourage and maintain client's independent digital capabilities
- ✓ One-to-one client-led support including home visits and including the set-up of devices in people's homes where required.