

Poplar HARCA: Digital skills and employment



Background

Poplar HARCA <https://www.poplarharca.co.uk/> are a social housing provider in the borough of Tower Hamlets in East London. They have 10k homes in the Poplar area of the borough, and ambitious plans for expansion and regeneration.

Poplar HARCA's motivation for engaging with digital inclusion

There were several drivers for Poplar HARCA to engage with digital inclusion:

- Local policy: the London Borough of Tower Hamlets mission to be 'paperless'
- Organisational channel shift: to encourage their residents to transact with them online via the Poplar HARCA residents' portal
- Community inclusion: to improve social inclusion in their locality by improving levels of digital participation, which previous research had shown to be low
- Resident employability: to contribute to the aims of their employment support service by helping clients acquire the essential digital skills needed to find and secure a job.

Aims of Poplar HARCA's project

Poplar HARCA had previously run a project where staff delivered basic IT skills support for residents. The One Digital project aimed to build on that experience by recruiting volunteer Digital Champions to provide essential digital skills support to clients of their employment support service, and as a result improving their ability to find and secure work.

Poplar HARCA's Digital Champions

The project team recruited volunteer Digital Champions from the local area through their existing volunteer programme, with a volunteer co-ordinator conducting initial screening interviews.

Recruits were of working age, and the aim was to provide the volunteers with transferrable skills that would help them into future employment. The team wanted to ensure that volunteers were strongly motivated and would be committed to the Champion role. Some of the recruits had previous experience as trainers, some had IT expertise, but the main criteria were enthusiasm for helping people and willingness to commit to the role. Twenty-one people were recruited of whom 15 became regularly active Digital Champions.

Initial training was through an induction day run by the project team, followed by online learning via the Digital Champions Network (see below). Recruits then shadowed team members and other Digital Champions as they delivered support session for clients, before going on to take charge of sessions themselves.

Poplar HARCA's beneficiaries

Beneficiaries were identified primarily through the Poplar HARCA employment support service, and some other local services. They were a mix of working ages, from young mothers to people over 50, including long-term unemployed. A large proportion were from BAME communities, and many did not have English as their first language.

Initial screening of beneficiaries was done by the employment advisors from the employment support service, using an online digital skills screening tool provided by Clarion Futures. The employment advisors developed a plan with the client about what digital skills they needed help with, which then got passed on to the Digital Champion as part of the referral.

Project activities

Weekly digital skills support sessions were run on a group basis in Poplar HARCA community centre's IT suites, with several Digital Champions at each session so that intensive support could be given where needed. Clients generally attended five sessions in total, usually with the same Digital Champions throughout. Volunteer Champions also provided one-to-one sessions for some beneficiaries.

The focus of the sessions was on skills support related to job-seeking. The sessions were delivered using laptops and desktops (i.e. devices with keyboards rather than touchscreens), the most relevant technology for the workplace.

The most common digital skills supported were:

- Foundation digital skills such as setting up an email account and printing documents
- Essentials skills for seeking work, in particular how to create a CV, how to use the internet to look for work
- Workplace information processing skills such as using Microsoft Office software (word processing, spreadsheets etc.)

Clients who needed help with language skills were given sessions that combined basic English language skills support with digital skills and/or were referred to Poplar HARCA's ESOL support services.

The use of the Digital Champions Network

The project team made the completion of the Digital Champions Network 'Digital Champion Essentials' course mandatory for their volunteer Digital Champions, and encouraged them to do additional courses, thereby earning Digital Badges to enhance their CVs. Project staff also made use of the DCN for specialist guidance on topics like supporting learners with disabilities, and resources such as templates for recruitment flyers. The reporting tools on the DCN – tallies of learners helped and records of skills supported – were also used alongside in-house monitoring tools.

Project outcomes

Outcomes for beneficiaries

The beneficiaries we spoke to all said they would recommend the Digital Champion approach to others, valuing in particular the personalised nature of the support:

“It’s a gentle way of doing it, you are not stressed, you are learning at your own pace. I could call on... one-to-one support.”

They said the support had increased their digital confidence, and made them more aware of the benefits of digital participation – particularly in relation to job-seeking.

Digital Champions and project staff pointed to particularly positive outcomes for those who has been complete digital beginners, for those who needed ESOL support, and for those who otherwise were unable to access digital devices. The support the project gave beneficiaries – while not sufficient in itself to secure employment – definitely contributed to this outcome for some people:

“We had one lady whose first language was not English who came to the Employment Support service unable to use the internet or to create a CV. By the end of the project she had secured a job at Primark which she applied for online.”

Outcomes for Digital Champions

Digital Champions experienced a range of positive impacts as a result of their role:

- the satisfaction of sharing knowledge and helping others
- increased self-confidence, especially for example if ill-health or other circumstances had been a challenge
- increased social interaction, particularly through building working relationships with other Champions
- development of key employment skills including team-working and problem-solving
- work opportunities provided by the project – several volunteer Champions have become paid ‘bank’ (i.e. session) workers for Poplar HARCA, continuing to deliver digital skills support.

Outcomes for Poplar HARCA

Project staff reported a number of benefits for the wider organisation:

- increased capability for the employment service, as employment advisors could refer clients on for dedicated digital skills support
- increased capacity for the employment service as some Champions have been retained as bank workers
- contributing to the KPIs of the employment support service by helping clients find and secure work using their improved digital skills
- offering a more integrated support service for clients overall.

Legacy and next steps

Learning from the One Digital project has reinforced the relevance of digital inclusion and in particular essential digital skills support across the whole range of community support programmes Poplar HARCA delivers. The team went on to further digital inclusion work using the Champion model as a key aspect of delivery.

Top takeaways from Poplar HARCA's One Digital project

- ✓ An effective volunteer recruitment service was already in place, and helped the swift set up of an efficient recruitment and training process for Digital Champions
- ✓ The project integrated well into the existing employment support offer: employment advisors could see the benefits, and were happy to screen and refer clients
- ✓ The Digital Champion role can be effectively presented as a way to boost CVs for job-seekers, particularly those with an interest in digitally related employment
- ✓ A light-touch screening tool enabled employment advisors to systematically and quickly identify digital skills needs amongst their clients
- ✓ Because the beneficiaries had a common objective of finding work, group skills support sessions worked well, fostering peer support and mutual self-help
- ✓ A high ratio of Digital Champions to learners during group sessions, and the availability of one-to-one sessions where required, meant that beneficiaries with varying needs could be given appropriate levels of support
- ✓ DCs with previous experience of language teaching could create combined ESOL/digital skills sessions, which were effective for learners who might otherwise have been difficult to engage.

Poplar Harca's Digital Champion project was undertaken as part of the national One Digital programme, who funded this case study.