

Reducing loneliness through digital inclusion: exploring what works through a case study of Age UK led projects

Introduction

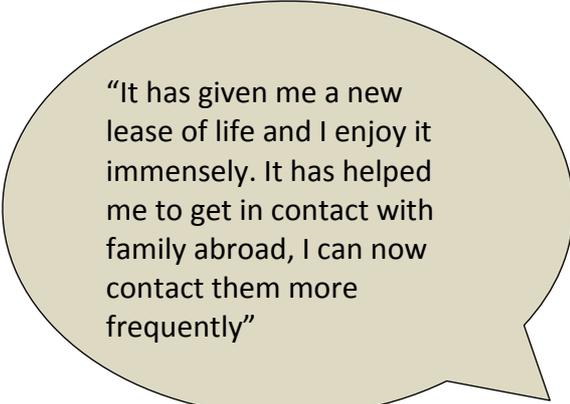
Though figures show internet use among older people is increasing, this group are still less likely to use the internet than their younger counterparts, with nearly four million people over 65 having never used the internet (Age UK 2018). Research also highlights that people who do not use the internet are more likely to feel isolated from others; this is particularly so for those who are less mobile, where the Internet can improve well-being through invoking a sense of community through connecting with likeminded people online (ActiveAge, 2010; Chaskin et al. 2001).

What are some the Age UK led digital inclusion projects?

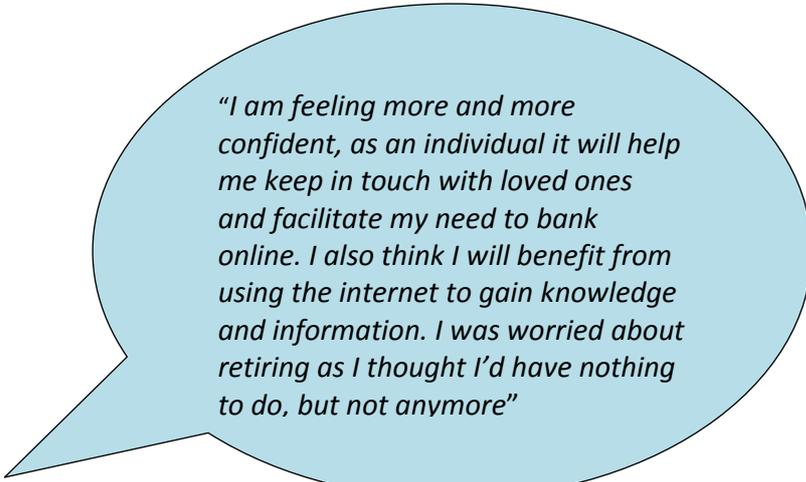
The Age UK network has run a variety of different digital inclusion projects over many years, including one-to-one support; classroom based services; one-off drop-in or larger community awareness sessions; and intergenerational projects. In recent years a common thread began to develop in the delivery of digital inclusion projects as illustrated by the [Digital Angels project](#) (led by Age UK Leeds and funded through the **Time to Shine** programme) and the [One Digital project](#) (part led by Age UK National and funded by the Big Lottery Fund). **Digital Angels supports people to get online as well as helping them to network in their local communities**, such as through running digital tea parties in community centres and libraries. Currently, 614 older people have been involved. **Digital Champions**, as part of One Digital Project, **are people trained and supported to inspire others to get online**, and currently 8,241 older people have been reached.

What have we learned?

Being digitally included can help older people stay connected with family and friends, and find activities and support to participate, helping them **remain socially connected** with people who have similar interests and outlook in life.



“It has given me a new lease of life and I enjoy it immensely. It has helped me to get in contact with family abroad, I can now contact them more frequently”



“I am feeling more and more confident, as an individual it will help me keep in touch with loved ones and facilitate my need to bank online. I also think I will benefit from using the internet to gain knowledge and information. I was worried about retiring as I thought I’d have nothing to do, but not anymore”

Helping participants explore their interests, rather than focussing on the project from a digital perspective, is more successful at engaging older people. People want to know specific things at particular times and not simply be told that technology can help them with certain issues which may be of no interest or use them personally.

If you ask 'are you interested in computers' participants may say 'no'. But if you say 'what are you interested in' or tell them about [the internet], that can help."

"He was interested in a Jazz singer from the 40s, so I showed him how to go on to YouTube... we put the speakers on, that he had never used before, and off he went, he was absolutely elated."

Building a positive experience is crucial for older people who are nervous about, or new, to technology. Some older people have had some kind of technological device that they felt they should become better at using, and some others are complete novices. For this latter group of people, it is important that any interaction with technology is a positive experience.

Providing tailored support by patient and friendly staff is important. One-to-one sessions are beneficial to provide tailored support, and community events such as drop-in sessions can facilitate this. Yet this is not always practical, and in some settings, such as care homes, the use of more advanced technology such as **digital reality devices** can play a helpful role. Digital reality devices can simulate vision, hearing, touch and smell to give people an experience of doing something that they cannot actually take part in physically.

It is not necessarily a lack of confidence that may prevent an older person going online. For example, one person, a widow who lived alone, wanted support to go online, but could not find anyone to offer it. It may also be due to a **lack of access to equipment** such as a tablet or Wi-Fi connection, or the **cost** of these could be prohibitive.

Summary

Whilst it may not be of interest to all older people, improving digital inclusion may provide one way to support those who are, or may be at risk of being lonely. Digital inclusion can help people to maintain or build new social connections, which in turn can help someone to maintain their independence and improve their well-being. Some key learning points for providing digital inclusion services are:

- Tailor the support to the older person, **focussing on their interests, how they wish to learn, and making it a fun and positive experience.**
- **Availability and cost of ICT equipment** needs to be factored in when thinking about the resources needed to run a digital inclusion project, alongside the ability of older people to continue using it during and beyond the period of support.
- The importance of **being friendly, patient and flexible** is important in supporting older people who may be nervous in, or new to, the use of technology.
- Using technology not yet considered the norm such as **digital reality devices** can be helpful in engaging such people.

About the authors

This article was written by Care Connect (a research and innovation hub at the University of Sheffield) and Age UK. For further information, email a.wigfield@sheffield.ac.uk or evaluation@ageuk.org.uk

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