

Bridging the Digital Divide – learning from Ageing Better

Introduction

Ageing Better is a test and learn programme. It is collecting information and insights from across 14 partnerships to identify learning that will be useful for other programmes and organisations delivering activities aimed at reducing social isolation in people aged 50+.

This report brings together information from across Ageing Better on bridging the digital divide. The aim of the paper is to share our Ageing Better learning together with ideas to help tackle the digital divide more widely during Covid-19.

Covid-19 is providing us all with an unprecedented set of circumstances. The digital world is supplying an important space and mechanism for people to connect and link to both experiences, opportunities and other people. But access to the digital world is far from universal. Data published by the ONS in September 2019 highlighted that while 93% of households have access to the internet, 24% of adults aged over 65 have not used the internet for the last three months.

Many Ageing Better programmes and delivery partners have worked hard to continue to deliver as many elements of their previous face-to-face offers as possible but in different ways. These include telephone support as well as digital offers. The impact of Covid-19 may be long lasting and considerable and for many people making the transition from being *offline* to being *online* would be enormously beneficial for a wide range of practical and social reasons.

However, there is a proportion of people aged 50+ who will never be able or want to access online content and as a result digitally delivered activities should only ever be one part of the offer to help reduce social isolation and loneliness.

At the end of this document we have also provided links to relevant key resources and copies of the guides and documents Ageing Better areas have produced to support people access different technologies.

Context

Whilst there is a proportion of the 50+ population who are comfortable with and have adopted technology to do the things they want to do, for many people aged 50+, however, access to the internet has not been a necessary component of a thriving life. Research by the Good Things Foundation, in partnership with the Centre for Ageing better clearly highlighted that '*digital is a means to an end, and older people can achieve these ends in other ways*'. We have also found that many Ageing

Better participants did not need to use digital technologies because they could achieve what they needed in other ways.

However, Covid-19 has reduced the number of things that were still possible to achieve without digital access. These include shopping on-line, paying without cash, access to information and government services, connecting with family and friends and engaging in hobbies and interests e.g. streaming of performances. For a larger number of people than before Covid-19, the ability to access resources online would improve their quality of life, the quality of the connections they can make as well as maintaining greater independence.

Across Ageing Better we have identified a wide range of factors which result in people aged 50+ being unwilling or unable to access digital content. There is no doubt that for a group of people either the cost of the equipment itself (smart phone, tablet or computer) and/or the on-going costs (internet or data packages) are unaffordable as a result of finances and poverty.

As with some of our other Ageing Better learning, however, cost can also be used or quoted as a mask for other issues. Ageing Better areas identified how people can think it is too late for them to join the digital age, that they can feel overwhelmed by the technical language and specifically about the choices of package or equipment available. We heard that people's digital confidence levels were also a very real issue with concerns that they would press a wrong button, do something wrong or feel they were asking stupid questions or indeed have no-one to ask. Additionally there are also high profile messages about the dangers of the internet and many people who are already unconfident have very real fears of being the victim of a scam by going online.

Ageing Better in Camden categorised four groups of people according to their interest in technology:

- People who can't afford technology but do have the skills. They were perhaps previously visiting the library to use a computer but now can't
- People who can't afford and who don't have the skills or have no interest in/or fear looking stupid or of scams
- People who can afford but who don't have the skills or have no interest/or fear looking stupid or of scams
- People who can afford but don't have the skills but are interested/keen in trying to use (we include here people who may be able to open an email but not make a video call etc., and so want or need to be upskilled)

This approach can be useful in helping to identify where people are on the digital skills/attitude spectrum and so can help organisations consider where to focus their resources and then design the appropriate response to these different groups.

This idea of a digital spectrum is also important as it demonstrates and allows organisations to recognise that people are at different points. Some may need support overcoming fears, and raising their confidence, others may need support in choosing devices, whilst others may feel they need to know and be able to access support from a friendly/trusted ear in case they get stuck.

Covid-19 presents both a unique challenge as well as an opportunity to encourage progression along the digital spectrum. This is because there is a growing group of people who weren't previously interested but the Covid-19 restrictions have provided an added incentive or need to get online. Use of technology is now an important component for some people in leading a thriving life or in maintaining their pre-

Covid-19 independence. But it is important to recognise that it is a spectrum and the pace, interest and motivation that people have to move along this spectrum will vary.

Key Message: Many people aged 50+ have managed a thriving life without access to digital technologies. However, the ongoing shut down created by Covid-19 means that for some people the importance of being able to access these technologies has increased as a means to improve both the quality of their life and the quality of their connections. People will have different levels and combinations of income, motivation, confidence and skills and organisations need to recognise where people are in order to then target and focus resources appropriately.

Making the shift

Ageing Better learning from across the programme tells us how important adopting a person-centred approach is, i.e. where support happens at the pace of the individual. This applies equally in encouraging a shift from offline to online. The work needs to be approached with sensitivity and with a person-centred focus - so talking to an individual and finding out what they enjoy doing, want to achieve as well as what their concerns may be. Time may be needed to develop a relationship of trust in which to have these conversations.

Across all the Ageing Better learning, the key insight around encouraging someone to make any shift is the importance of first finding the “hook” or incentive that works for that individual. We have heard that this “digital hook” will be different for people but can include:

- The opportunity to undertake video calls and so the opportunity to see family and friends.
- Being able to do their own online shopping (&/or banking) as they are currently shielded and relying on food parcels.
- Engagement with local history or local interests which allow people to connect to others in their known environment.
- The opportunity to watch films or programmes and particularly for some groups, to do so in their first language.

In general terms the key focus when encouraging people to make a shift from offline to online needs to be about the benefits that being online will bring to that individual. Although not universal, we have heard social media use (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) and online banking are secondary reasons why people are willing to engage. WhatsApp, however, was consistently identified as a useful tool because of its capacity for video calling and messaging.

We also heard that the digital world can, for some people, just seem too big and so it was important to “chunk it down” into more relatable “bitesize” elements. In addition, we heard about the importance of providing or packaging the support in order for people to achieve the thing they had identified - sometimes that will mean using only a part of an App. This also includes offering people the opportunity to take small steps and without the expectation to do all things digital all at once.

People may also express fears and barriers that are masking the true reasons why they do not wish to move online. Taking the sensitive and person-centred approach can help unpick and understand what the real barriers are and then support the person through them.

Throughout the Ageing Better Programme, we have learnt how important the use of language is and the impact that the “wrong” terms can have. It is very easy to use a lot of jargon when talking about the online world and this can be very off-putting to people who already lack confidence or are nervous of appearing stupid. A suggestion is to not start conversations from the premise of learning how to use specific technology by name i.e. social media but to build instead upon the conversation with the individual and concentrating on the thing that they want to achieve. So talking about doing the grocery shop, or being able to see a grandchild etc., rather than Skype, downloading and access.

Ageing Better in Birmingham are working with their Age of Experience group to support them all to access Google Hangouts and have some social time together. Bristol Ageing Better Babbers group are now producing their regular radio programme from their own homes instead of a radio studio and have developed the new skills required to use new technology with support. Both Ageing Better areas are finding that this is working well because the groups are:

- Motivated - they are all keen to connect with each other and the task.
- Peer support - they are supporting each other to solve problems and work towards a common goal.
- Trusted group - they trust the people in the group and are happy to ask questions and learn together without the fear of looking stupid.

A further key feature as to why this approach is working is reciprocity and the value of peer support. This has also been a common finding from our wider Ageing Better research. People value the opportunity to support each other. We also heard that linking into this as a motivation can be helpful - so explaining that family would like to see the person could be a useful tactic in encouraging someone to try and use video-conferencing.

Key Message: Supporting someone to move from offline to online means understanding their motivations and fears and working to help them understand and realise the benefits *to them* of being online. It is important to work in a person-centred way and to move at the pace of the individual to achieve the thing they have identified. Try and avoid jargon and introduce technology through the hook of the activity or goal instead.

Practical help and support

Ageing Better has delivered a wide range of digital inclusion projects. Although much of this learning has been collected pre-Covid 19 through activities that encourage people aged 50+ to attend face to face groups, there is considerable learning from these approaches that is relevant. There are also a number of digital inclusion projects that have shifted their activities to telephone and online. Ageing Better areas have also looked at ways they can support people to access technology and we include the learning from this here.

All our insights from Ageing Better point to the need for ongoing, friendly and patient support. This needs to be available to help people with their use of technology but also to help them troubleshoot. We have identified three general areas for practical support in moving online:

- Initial packages or kit
- Bespoke support

- Guides and training

Initial packages or kit

For some people as discussed earlier, the cost of purchasing or using the technology is just not affordable and options will be needed to provide access to the initial package of kit.

Ageing Better Middlesbrough have been able to purchase a small number of tablets. These come equipped with data (and so don't require on-going internet contracts), relevant apps and training which people can access through the device. The device is dropped off at a person's home and then telephone support is provided to help them access it. There is also an ongoing support line they can access.

Some people, however, are able to afford to purchase but really do not know how or what to get. There is a role here for a trusted individual/supplier to provide a selection of products that will cover a range of services and requirements and which are pre-loaded and ready to go. This, for some people would also help with the challenge around the huge variety of technology that is present in the marketplace and knowing what is right for them.

Bespoke Support

We know that as well as people getting kit for the first time, there is also a group of people who have a smartphone, tablet or laptop but have either never used it or have lost the confidence or skills they need to use them. Bristol Ageing Better gained some insights from their delivery that one of the reasons people who are socially isolated don't use technology is because they have no one to ask for support if they get stuck.

This group of people need some support to get them started and to help them make initial use of the technology. We would also include here people who can maybe undertake one or two limited elements such as email but not on-line shopping or video calling and so need support and confidence to extend their digital range. The number one piece of learning across all digital inclusion work is the need for support from a person who not only has knowledge, but also importantly the patience combined with good listening skills. Patience is required not only when providing support but also in being able to work at the pace of the person being supported. It is about providing the support which allows the person to be able to use the piece of technology to do the thing that they had identified they wanted to do.

Ageing Better Middlesbrough told us that they had found it worked well to provide a structure where they provide an introduction to the technology, then an opportunity for people to have a go themselves, before providing a further opportunity to ask questions and gain support. This may need to be repeated several times to help people slowly move along the digital spectrum.

Age Better in Sheffield also highlighted how the support can help teach people new to technology some of the digital etiquette. This includes helping people know about the likely response time is and not to expect an instant response to messaging.

Throughout Ageing Better we have identified the value of peer support in a wide range of situations and this also holds true in helping people access technology. The role and impact of peer support can be varied. It can include that of trusted ambassador role, sharing information about an app, service or activity that may be useful or enjoyable and can in turn help motivate someone to access technology. Peer support can also play an important role in communicating why they might like

to use technology. It can also allow people to speak to someone ‘like them’ and so helping people feel more comfortable asking questions which they may feel are “stupid” but which can in turn help them move forward with their own understanding.

Guides & training

There is also a role for “how to guides” with screenshots and clear guidance. These are useful for people who are confident and want to try something new as well as useful reminders for people. Knowing they are available can also boost people’s confidence to use technology.

Ageing Better learning also points to the need for a mixed economy of learning. This includes sessions people can access for themselves at their own pace and in their own time, visual guides that provide step by step pointers of what to do as well as telephone support.

One ongoing challenge is the huge variety of technology that is present on the marketplace and the practical differences between Android and Apple interfaces. Wherever possible, we have heard that it is important for people during training etc., to use their own devices but that the support has a ‘mirror’ device that means they can then easily follow the steps and the person providing the support can more easily diagnose the problem.

Key Message: Providing someone with digital support requires patience and a recognition that the pace at which someone progresses with the technology will vary considerably. Wherever possible it is valuable to provide support using a mirrored device and access to digital technology can be promoted by using pre-loaded tablets together with support.

Specific role of Digital Connector

Across all our Ageing Better learning we have highlighted the importance of working with people in a holistic person-centred way. The first connection for people who are socially isolated is often through a *connector role*. This connector role is critical to the relationship building phase and helps ensure the frequency, type and content of support is then tailored to their needs.

We feel this learning is particularly relevant when considering the digital divide. We know from our learning that bridging the digital divide means working in a person-centred way and at the pace, frequency and style that suits the individual. Our learning points to the value of a *digital connector*.

In the current Covid-19 situation there is an added need and opportunity for this role and function. Many people who are accessing telephone support services for assistance could benefit from being given the opportunity and support to increase their access to technology and online services. This digital connector role can be delivered by staff or volunteers, but there is also a particular value in provision of peer support.

Our insight and learning is that the digital connector function has a specific role helping people identify where they are on the “digital spectrum”. Part of this involves understanding the “push & pull” to go from offline to online and helping to identify the specific “digital hook” for that individual. However, it also involves exploring more about the barriers to going online for the person.

In many cases this will require specific training. Digital connectors would ideally

need to have some technological know-how, but more importantly have patience, good listening skills and the ability to communicate and talk through actions in easy to understand steps. They would also be able to communicate without jargon or technical language and to explore what the person might want to achieve by going online and being prepared to revisit this with people as well as providing the tailored support to do so.

Telephone befriending has a considerable role as a route into having these conversations. In common with the person-centred approach it is important to recognise people may not be in the right 'place' to consider technology and may be dismissive of the offer or support when it is first raised. However, as the duration of the lock down persists, it may be appropriate to raise the opportunity at different times and as the relationship builds.

The telephone befriender's role may also include elements of those of a digital connector but they may also simply signpost to a someone with the digital skills and patience. We are also aware that a large number of people have as a result of Covid-19 volunteered for a range of activities and that of digital connector (with the right training and support) could be an important addition to the volunteer role portfolio.

Key Message: Telephone befriending can be used to introduce people to the opportunities of being digital but this should be done when it is appropriate and if the appropriate digital support is available. There is a developing important role of Digital Connector which can cover a range of work going from peer support or advocate for technology, identifying the barriers and then accessing the appropriate support.

Bridging the divide

We are all aware of the huge impact Covid-19 is having on people across the country. We don't know what the "new normal" will look like or how long people will be required to be socially distant or isolated. Digital technologies can be part of the mix to help people stay connected with friends and family through this difficult period and to help them access and connect to the things they love and enjoy.

As identified in the introduction, there will be a significant number of people for whom digital technology will not be something they either wish to engage with or are able to access. This group must not be ignored and so there will be an important and required on-going place for telephone support as well as paper-based information.

However, as the shutdown progresses there are more people who may be motivated to get online or may be more willing to consider the benefits. Our learning from across Ageing Better points to the following process that may help people get online and then to support them in that process. Some people may need all levels of support, others may need just one element of it. What matters is understanding where someone is on the digital spectrum and then providing that tailored support.

Digital Connectors - encouraging use

Using routes, like telephone befriending to raise awareness of the potential for digital technologies and the role it can play in improving quality of life and helping people stay connected. It can also include using peer volunteers who advocate for the use of technology and encourage and support people to take the first steps and help signpost people to more formal support if they get stuck. They could be an existing team of telephone befrienders or community connectors who gently encourage or support people with a slight interest to take the first step.

Getting the kit - overcoming practical barriers

For some people cost is a real and significant barrier. Where possible providing people with pre-loaded tablets with some data already provided can help overcome this barrier. But for others it is the choice that is overwhelming, providing people with information on the different technology options that are available and signposting them to the type of technology that will work best for them from a trusted third party supplier could help them overcome that.

Providing ongoing support - making it happen

Providing a patient, supportive person who will guide someone through the use of technology and who is available should someone get stuck. This does not need to be a paid role and there is considerable scope for volunteers to take on this role. It can be made available at set times of the day or be part of a regular check in process. It could also be undertaken over the phone or online. But it is available to encourage the ongoing use of technology, build confidence or to provide reassurance when things go wrong.

Summary

One piece of learning from across Ageing Better is the need to support people to make the first steps out of social isolation and loneliness. This principle can also be applied to digital technologies. People may be reluctant, nervous or think it is not for them. This attitude will not change overnight or through one phone call. But as we have learned from Ageing Better there is also a role for encouraging, identifying the “hook”, showcasing the benefits and being there to provide support when the time is right. People may not want to engage now but that doesn’t mean they won’t want to in a week or a month. Our learning from Ageing Better suggests it is important to keep the value of digital technologies in people’s minds and to help them when their interest is piqued.

Further information

- Leeds have created recent blogs on using the internet and phones <https://timetoshineleeds.org/blog>
- East Lindsey (T.E.D.) - [How to Guides](#)
- Greater Manchester - Literature review [Use of information and Communication Technologies to support social connections for older people](#)
- Age Better in Sheffield - [Smart Phones Smart Friends](#)
- Bristol Ageing Better - [Using technology to reach and engage with people aged 50+](#)
- Ageing Better in Birmingham - Maintaining Social Connections
- Good Things Foundation & Centre for Ageing Better report - I am connected:

new approaches to supporting people in later life

- Good Things Foundation's DevicesDotNow project. You can apply for devices on this form to be used for the most vulnerable and isolated members of the community. [Form](#)
- [Learn My Way](#), a website offering free online courses to develop digital skills and learn how to use the internet.
- Tool showing the GP practices where fewer people have registered for online services together with age information. There are, however, many reasons why people may not register for online services. [Citizens online](#)

More detail on our wider insights from across the Programme to date together with an overview summary of our learning to date are available at [Ageing Better](#)