

Digital Loaning Schemes

BCF Sharing our Learning series

Overview

During the COVID 19 pandemic, we faced an unprecedented challenge, both for us as charities delivering support, and for our participants who were unable to access services face-to-face.

We deliver a range of holistic, person-centred support and specialist services. We empower those who face barriers to reach their goals by facilitating access to crisis support, raising aspirations, building confidence and self-esteem, and supporting them into education, training, employment and self-employment. When we were told that we would be entering lock-down, we knew that our participants would still need this service, so had to figure out how we could continue to deliver this whilst ensuring we complied with the safety guidance. We also knew that our participants would be particularly vulnerable during lock-down, as a high proportion of them had little to no digital devices and internet, meaning they would be excluded from accessing other services and support that were moving online.

During this time we had to change how we deliver, so that we could still support people. We also had to figure out how to help those who couldn't just go online and take part in virtual meetings, or use online services, either because they didn't have the digital devices, or the ability to use them, or both. As a direct result of this a number of our partners began digital loan schemes.

This pre-dated our partnership and so for many of them, they had to build these from scratch and without access to the shared knowledge and resources we now have as a partnership. These schemes have been very successful and have had a huge positive impact on those they support, but they were not without their challenges, especially in the early stages. It's not simply about providing the devices, people also need to be given help and support to use them.

Whilst we are now moving out of lock-down we don't see these schemes ending as the world becomes increasingly digitalised. For anyone working with people who are marginalised or elderly, there will be a need to provide this type of support on an ongoing basis. We have learnt a number of things during the last year and half, which we want to share with others who may be thinking of starting a digital loaning scheme to help them ensure these are successful.



What we delivered

Just Straight Talk

JST supported people that were either isolated or had no other access to IT, by providing digital equipment and giving them the skills to use it, to become digitally involved and included. This also meant that we could continue to support people, keeping them both protected & connected. We provided digital devices, alongside 'how to guides' and skills and confidence sessions to enable people to use devices appropriately and accordingly. We also supported other local community groups that could no longer meet in face-to-face settings, providing digital skills training. We established a digital loan scheme for carers across the Dudley Borough, working with Dudley MBC/Public Health. 'Digi Dudley' is an 18 month project which provides both a loan scheme of equipment (Wi-Fi and non-Wi-Fi enabled) and a bank of buddies (volunteers) to work alongside the beneficiary to provide IT confidence, skills and training, to help them access the host of services and benefits that the internet provides. 'Digi Dudley' is primarily for isolated carers aged 45+ and the older age population of non-working age.

Bilston Resource Centre

During the lockdowns we worked with City of Wolverhampton Council to loan chrome books to users who do not have access to computers. However, since our premises re-opened with covid social distancing measures in place we have identified learners prefer attending the centre, in particular those who do not have internet access from home and those who do who need assistance, but we continue to loan devices to community groups that require IT equipment for their service users and provide them with digital support.

Black Country Housing Group

BCHG have recently launched a laptop gifting scheme through partnership with Sandwell Council and Re-PC, a company that physically cleans, data cleanses and PAT tests all machines. So far, we have had a number of devices, which have gone to support vulnerable groups and individuals, including 20 devices ear-marked to benefit young people living in care in Sandwell. These devices help to create 'IT suites' in supported living accommodations, where we also provide on-going support to the young people who live there, with all aspects of independent living skills. This supports them in preparing for when they leave care, so these devices are a fantastic asset to support their journey to independence in job search, accommodation search, setting up bank accounts, budgeting etc.

TLC College

We are part of the Wolves Online Device & Connectivity Lending Scheme and support people by providing digital devices with free internet for fixed periods of up to 90 days. We have also provided tablets and smart phones with mobile Wi-Fi and data sim cards for a number of learners to keep, enabling them to access support and learning online during the lockdowns. We are involved in delivering '100% Digitally Included Wolves Capacity Building', supporting voluntary sector organisations with IT support needs.

SWEDA

During lockdown we trialled digital loaning with some existing equipment and loaned it out to our participants who were struggling with isolation at home. We had great feedback and will be extending the project. With funding, we have recently purchased some tablets and a laptop and are working with people to build their digital skills and to provide them with devices they can use at home.

Challenges

Safeguarding and web filtering

One of the major challenges our partners faced in running a Digital Lending scheme was around safeguarding and web filtering. As the lender of the devices, they were accountable for ensuring people were unable to use these devices in an unsafe way. This meant web filtering, safe full reset & reuse of the equipment as well as Mobile Device Management (MDM). We have a duty of care to safeguard the person using the device, and anyone else that may use the equipment thereafter.

Partners had different levels of familiarity with this, but most felt in hindsight that they were not fully aware of what this involved, the time required to manage this, and the costs associated with ensuring the right software and systems were in place.

Skills needed

Many existing staff didn't have the depth of knowledge required to deliver digital support at more than a basic level, and partners sometimes needed to employ someone who had more advanced skills. However, we found it challenging to find people with the diverse skills needed, as the role requires someone experienced in IT, training delivery and supporting older people and those from marginalized groups to access and use digital devices.

PAT Testing

If you give someone something brand new then you don't need to do this, but if you loan a device previously used, then the device needs PAT testing prior to loaning and each time it is loaned out. Typically, electrical devices we use in house are tested annually, so we were unaware of this need, and hadn't considered the costs or time associated in doing this in our planning stages.

Software and connectivity

Some of the challenges experienced are the restrictions on the devices in terms of software available. For example some devices do not have Microsoft office. Another issue was that some centres and service users did not have access to Wi-Fi, which proved difficult for those learners who needed to job search. However, we countered this by supplying wifi for some devices, which are being utilised.

People with little to no experience using digital devices

Simply providing a digital device wasn't enough to help people, as we found many people didn't know the basics, and were unable to use the devices for accessing services. This presented the circular problem during lock-down that the only way for them to learn how to use digital devices was online, and the only way to get online was for them to know how to use digital devices.

Underestimating what's involved

The time and costs of setting up the digital lending schemes were universally underestimated. Partners had to spend a lot of time doing their research and joined online forums, attending stakeholder meetings and meeting with other loan scheme organisations up and down the country to establish pitfalls and best practice models.

Recommendations

- Ensure you have fully costed into the budget forecast the cost for web content filtering, Wi-Fi connectivity and full MDM services from the providers.
- Research your devices fully and involve yourself with other loan scheme set ups, joining forums and other groups.
- Work in partnership with local councils and gain their support. They have been vital in the success of our digital loaning schemes.
- Use it as an opportunity to build a good rapport with other community groups and help them, reaching new communities you are not already engaged with.
- Be clear what is required from the learner and base your procurement process for devices and software on these needs, not on cost. The cheapest devices may not meet with people's real-life needs.
- Have clear agreements in place with people loaning devices. Have a register in place identifying who the devices have been loaned to and maintain regular contact with service users. Be prepared to spend a lot of time supporting people in setting up and using their devices, and know you will likely need to chase people to get them back when the loan period elapses.
- 3rd party loaning devices from other organisations (such as local authority), may reduce issues around web-filtering, safeguarding and appropriate installation of software, but will require you to comply with any procedures, processes and reporting requirements they have in place – you'll need to balance the pros and cons of this carefully.
- If you are able to purchase the devices yourselves it is worth considering the cost to benefit ratio of the difference between operating a digital loaning scheme or simply donating the devices to those in need. With the additional requirements for loaning schemes it may be more cost effective to just donate devices.

For more information or an informal conversation about Black Country Futures and what it means to be a partner please contact:

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