

The background is a light blue gradient with a network of white dotted lines connecting various location pin icons. One pin in the bottom right corner is significantly larger and more prominent than the others.

Taking a Place-based Approach to Digital Inclusion

The Story So Far

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic **exacerbated the digital divide**, and refocused priorities on delivering workable solutions to digital exclusion. As a result of lockdowns, social distancing and the pivoting of services to online delivery, digitally excluded people are at greater risk than ever before. Although responses like **Connecting Scotland** have enabled over 60,000 people to get online, digital inclusion in Scotland remains a pertinent issue.

We know that 19% of people in Scotland **don't have any of the skills** they need to get online, and the older a person is, the **more likely they are** to be digitally excluded. People from **lower socio-economic classes**, with **lower educational attainment** and with a **disability or long-term health condition** are all less likely to be online too.

However, as digital becomes even more central to daily life, **people are upskilling and becoming more digitally engaged**. 1.5 million more people have started using the internet in the UK since 2020, and 67% of people said they would improve their skills if they knew where to find support.

We know people tend to seek support from services they trust, and that these services tend to be local to where people live. Therefore, SCVO were keen to explore a 'place-based' approach, working with local organisations across a range of places to provide joined-up support to the people in these communities who need it most. Our Place-based Digital Inclusion Programme is a test of concept. We have taken an agile approach, following the principles of the **Scottish Approach to Service Design**, working iteratively and in collaboration with a range of places to identify, understand and look to develop solutions to their digital exclusion issues.

Initial reflections and findings from the work so far have shown that our approach is effective. By taking a key role as critical friend and partner, SCVO has been able to establish meaningful relationships with local place leads which has helped to drive this work forward.



What is Place-based?



What is the place-based approach?

Place-based working is a model which understands that the combination of needs, assets and geography makes issues unique to an area. The increased interest in the use of place-based approaches in Scotland has its **roots in austerity** and the need to focus on creating effective, joined-up approaches that can accurately target and reduce inequalities.

In developing a place-based approach to digital inclusion, we have taken a definition published by **IRISS in 2015** as a starting point for our understanding of what it means in this context.

Place-based working is a person-centred, bottom-up approach used to meet the unique needs of people in one given location by working together to use the best available resources and collaborate to gain local knowledge and insight. By working collaboratively with the people who live and work locally, it aims to build a picture of the system from a local perspective, taking an asset-based approach that seeks to highlight the strengths, capacity and knowledge of all those involved.

At its heart, the place-based approach takes the view that citizens know their area and their needs best. Therefore, by putting them at the centre, this approach helps to create the most effective services and solutions, designed by the people using them and most importantly giving them a voice in defining a solution that works best for them. Taking a place-based approach means ensuring the planning, development and delivery of services empowers and enables people, through identifying assets in communities and working to join them up.

A key element of place-based working is the emphasis on partnership, collaboration and strengthening assets. Creating strong, meaningful partnerships and developing opportunities for collaboration supports enhanced outcomes through the sharing of resources, information and support to overcome common challenges specific to the place.

What is place-based digital inclusion?

Communities have always worked to provide solutions for local issues, and assets exist within every place that can be developed and strengthened to solve common problems. Rather than focus on what's missing, focusing on what exists can help to mobilise and galvanise groups into action.

The place-based approach has been applied to a broad range of different statutory and community-led agendas, including health, social care and regeneration. With momentum in public policy (COSLA and the Scottish Government adopted the **'Place Principle'** in 2019) and the COVID-19 pandemic prioritising the need for digital inclusion solutions, SCVO felt there was value in exploring how this approach could be utilised in the context of the digital divide.



Where are we working?

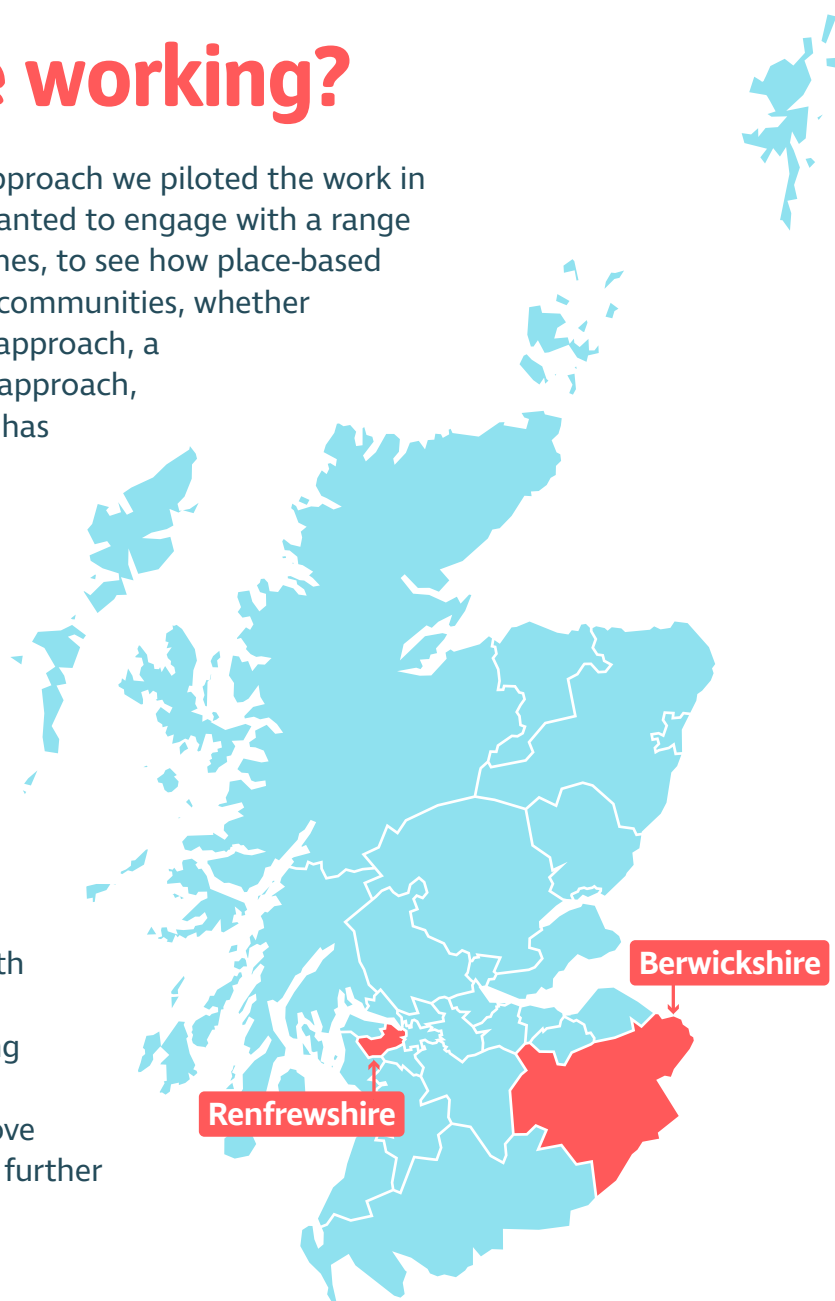
When considering a place-based approach we piloted the work in two 'places' across Scotland. We wanted to engage with a range of different locations and approaches, to see how place-based approaches might fit within these communities, whether it was from a local authority-wide approach, a smaller self-organised community approach, rural area, or an urban area. SCVO has pre-existing relationships with the areas chosen for this work, all of whom expressed an interest in looking at different ways to tackle digital exclusion locally.

Renfrewshire

We are working alongside Renfrewshire Council, principally their Digital Policy Lead, Diane Webb. Renfrewshire is recognised as a digitally progressive region with a strong track record of delivering digital inclusion work. A pre-existing relationship between SCVO and Renfrewshire has enabled us to move quickly, and as a result our work is further progressed here.

Berwickshire

Berwickshire is a locality within the Scottish Borders Council region. We are working alongside Berwickshire Association for Voluntary Services' (Bavs) CEO Juliana Amaral. Bavs is a component of the Scottish Borders TSI Partnership. A group of invested people from a range of organisations has been established in Berwickshire, and we are working to identify key objectives and outcomes.



Renfrewshire



Background / Context

Renfrewshire is a local authority area in the west of Scotland and covers a range of large and small towns, including Paisley, Johnstone, Howwood, Bishopton and Elderslie. It has a population of around 179,390 and is the 10th largest local authority area by population in Scotland. There are a number of areas of high deprivation, with 15% of children living in absolute poverty. Renfrewshire has a 20% attainment gap in literacy between the most and least deprived and throughout the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic saw an increase **of 80%** in Universal Credit applications.



However, Renfrewshire is also the first local authority to be recognised as **making 'excellent progress'** in reducing the poverty-related attainment gap and continues to outperform national averages in decreasing this. There are 80 accredited Living Wage employers across the area, and the **Council has invested significantly** in anti-poverty initiatives.

Renfrewshire Council has historically been a leader in digital inclusion. The Council have recognised the importance of upskilling by providing voluntary 'DigiTeers' via library services. Additionally, there is a strong emphasis on connectivity: CityFibre have invested in a 700km network to provide reliable gigabit speed connectivity, initially reaching 75% of properties. Digital participation work is further supported by 'DigiRen' – a digital inclusion network of 35 organisations sharing knowledge and expertise chaired by a partnership of the TSI and Local Authority.

SCVO has a strong relationship with Renfrewshire Council, via prior partnership activity and working together on Connecting Scotland, in particular with their Digital Policy Lead Diane Webb. Diane has been our primary contact and local lead throughout this process.

A key element of the Policy Lead role is progressing the 'Digital Citizen' workstream, which aims to 'empower our citizens, increase digital skills, confidence and participation and promote digital public services and digital partnerships'. Therefore, we collectively identified that our Place-based Digital Inclusion programme would fit with their 'Digital Citizen' workstream, and a partnership approach would be most effective in progressing this.



What did we do?

The 'Discover' stage

In order to build on existing knowledge and understand the context of digital inclusion in Renfrewshire, the agreed approach was to replicate the partnership model of DigiRen and form a group comprised of local organisations and individuals who are passionate about supporting people in their communities to improve digital inclusion. This cross-sector group, 'Citizen Voice', brought members together every six weeks for co-production on key issues, project updates and to encourage open discussion and collaboration.

Chaired by Diane Webb, the group has been vital in providing frontline knowledge to inform plans. To do this, SCVO facilitated sessions that identified key themes, issues and assets to address and utilise in the development of a pilot project for Renfrewshire.

Through an iterative and agile process, the group has evolved and grown to include organisations across the voluntary sector, Renfrewshire Council, housing associations and the health and social care partnership. We wanted to ensure we had a range of voices across the group to ensure the needs of the place were well represented. It has been important to identify and address any gaps in input, and to continually ask 'who is missing' from the conversation. In doing so, the group represents a broad cross-section of services.

What's gone well and what will we keep doing?

Part of our session focused on celebrating the group's successes over the pandemic. Here is some of the participants' feedback from the session:



- Increased access in society for those with disabilities as wider acceptance of digital working/participation
- Being able to **keep in touch** with community members
- More community members **engaging** that would not normally attend the project
- NEF Funding to try new things
- Lowering community isolation and loneliness through zoom, teams, focus groups
- Sharing best practice cross business/cross organisations
- Connecting Scotland – Digital Champion support
- Making sure learners set up a **phone option for password resets** – helps with strong passwords
- Ability to have **online meetings**
- Active communities are **keeping connected to community members** with volunteers by telephone to check in with people
- People **adopting technology quicker** than they would have in the past and trying out new things
- Keeping in touch** - people were keen to keep connected even though there was some barriers
- Numbers of people attending sessions went up when went online. Their was an increase each month.
- Funding for **Active Communities**
- Improvement in digital skills (for some)
- Learning towards a goal – group quizzes online or creative writing – seeing the social aspect and making it fun
- Can **engage** more widely more easily online
- Speed of **digital innovation**
- Increased access to discussions (for many but not all)
- Critical conversations happening with those who have low interest previously
- Online sessions are still high in numbers even though things are opening back up
- Greater productivity reduced travel time and shared production of docs
- More community members **engaging** that would not normally attend the project
- Introduction of **Office 365** making our work seamless
- Finding **distance learning methods** which work universally
- Loan2Learn project – laptop lending

Our facilitated meetings and follow-up survey captured several emerging themes across digital participation in Renfrewshire.

There is a lack of reliable access to the internet.

There are a lack of resources:

- Human
- Financial
- Physical

The approach to supporting people online needs to be refined

- Online fatigue is an issue
- The persistence of fear / culture of resistance
- Better communication, sharing information, marketing and asset mapping is required
- Accessibility and accessibility design is an issue.

Who is responsible for this?

The 'Define' stage

Defining priorities for action was the responsibility of the Citizen Voice group. By taking their input and presenting it back to them, we were able to clearly articulate areas of work. It was clear that understanding how digital inclusion work could be co-ordinated to address the issues outlined was key.

Secondary to this, there was a persistent concern around a lack of resource bank or 'directory' for digital inclusion support in Renfrewshire. To address this, a smaller co-production group was formed to look at potential solutions.

Developing a pilot model for place-based digital inclusion work in Renfrewshire took into consideration various ongoing influences including: funding from Renfrewshire Council, partnership opportunities with Library Services, input from the Citizen Voice group, the priorities outlined by the group and available assets and resources within the place.

SCVO and Renfrewshire Council therefore initially proposed a model which placed a Digital Champion Co-ordinator at the heart, supported by a digital champion network, housed in a range of 'community hubs' around the place.

The 'Digital Citizen' workstream was awarded funding from the Council Social Renewal Plan to set up a Digital Champion Network in partnership with Libraries, which will help to build evidence around our approach.



The 'Develop' stage

It was clear from our work with Citizen Voice that this model should pilot a new way of working for digital inclusion, principally a 'blended approach' which would provide a mix of face-to-face and remote support, as well as group work and one-to-one support. The facilitated conversations with the group outlined a range of considerations, including 'Zoom fatigue', disengagement of service users from remote support, and a desire to return to face-to-face delivery.



We also need to consider that some people will always prefer face-to-face or other means – we need to sell the benefit of digital, but not force it.

Renfrewshire participant

The role of the newly funded Digital Champion Co-ordinator will be to co-ordinate the support required across the place, as well as recruit, train and develop a network of Digital Champions. The Digital Champion Co-ordinator will be crucial in 'building a digital ecosystem' for Renfrewshire. Having a paid Digital Champion Co-ordinator to manage digital inclusion support across the place will be invaluable in easing some of the identified capacity issues.

In developing the pilot idea, we also recognised the importance of identifying a specific place to test the work. Johnstone was chosen as the location of our first pilot mainly due to a mixture of existing assets and identified needs, in addition to the number of partnership opportunities and potential for collaboration going forward.

As part of the 'Develop' stage, it became clear during our conversations with the Citizen Voice group that Digital Champions needed to be involved in the service design process, and we will be supporting Citizen Voice to form a co-production group to lead on this work in early 2022.

This pilot model for place-based digital inclusion in Renfrewshire has grown over time and is demonstrated in the graphic below. It highlights the extent of the work between Renfrewshire Council, SCVO and the Citizen Voice group:

Digital Citizen Pilot 1 – Renfrewshire 2022



*These include libraries, AC Station 7 Hub, RAMH, Linstone HA, Community Learning and Development, The Promise, Neighbourhood Hub, Engage etc

Co-design opportunities so far:

-  **Asset Map Directory**
-  **Device Recycling**
-  **Digital Champion Network**
-  **Kickstart Digital Champions**

The pilot model was presented to the group at the last Citizen Voice meeting of 2021, where attendees were asked to review and comment on the plan. [The graphic on p12](#) is a word cloud capturing feedback from the group.

Feedback from the Citizen Voice group

SCVO and Renfrewshire Council presented the pilot to the group and asked them to provide feedback via Menti. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive.

We asked "What are your thoughts in a word?":



Berwickshire



Background / Context

Berwickshire is a locality within the Scottish Borders local authority area. It has a population of 20,945, 26% of whom are over the age of 65. There are two main towns in the locality: Eyemouth and Duns. The rest of the area is composed of villages with populations below 2000. It is a rural area – 83% of people in live settlements with populations below 500 people.

A considerable issue in Berwickshire is **access deprivation** – 41% of residents live in areas within the most access deprived in all of Scotland, compared to 27% in the wider Scottish Borders area. In Berwickshire's most deprived areas, 22% of people are low-income or unemployed.



Digital exclusion in Berwickshire is slightly worse than the Scottish Borders average: **15.2% of residents** didn't use the internet or emails in 2016. In some areas across Berwickshire, up to 30% of residents cannot access broadband speeds of at least 2Mb/s.

However, as in many rural areas, community spirit is strong and 62% of locals are engaged in voluntary work, higher than the Scottish Borders average. Berwickshire is served by a number of community groups, co-ordinated and supported by Berwickshire Association for Voluntary Service (Bavs). Bavs is a component of the Scottish Borders TSI Partnership.

The Third Sector Interface (TSI) in Scottish Borders is a partnership model composed of **four individual organisations**, each taking responsibility for their own strand of work. This has not been a frictionless way to operate, with some co-ordination issues particularly relating to cohesive policy in partnership with the local authority.

Berwickshire, as a place, differs from Renfrewshire in a number of ways. Principally, it is a much more rural area which presents issues in providing and accessing digital inclusion support. In order for us to understand how place impacts digital inclusion, we reached out to South of Scotland Enterprise and Berwickshire TSI Bavs for an initial scoping meeting. We identified that there was sufficient capacity and ambition to test new approaches, and we agreed to establish it as a test site for this programme.

What did we do?

Following a similar process as was implemented in Renfrewshire, SCVO and Bavs met with a group of key stakeholders who had formed a digital inclusion working group across the place. This included representatives from local housing associations, Live Borders (the arms-length leisure and culture body of Scottish Borders Council) and local voluntary sector organisations. With the consent of the groups, Bavs' CEO Juliana Amaral became the key contact and place lead.

The 'Discover' stage

Based on our learning in Renfrewshire, we understood that forming a local group of people and organisations engaged with providing services to support digital inclusion was key in beginning to understand the specific issues around the place.

After the working group was formed, SCVO facilitated the first group session following the format of our initial Renfrewshire activity: a retrospective, problem-scoping and 'wishlist'.

Further analysis of the responses and follow-up with the group is required to obtain a full understanding of the state of digital exclusion in Berwickshire, but clear themes are emerging around lack of access to reliable connectivity (mostly due to the rural nature of the area) and limited capacity to provide support as digital champions.



What's gone wrong?

As part of our session in Berwickshire, we asked the group to identify what they thought the barriers or issues around digital inclusion in their area were.



- Capacity to support people
- We could do with **mapping digital champions** so we can all call on someone
- Letting people know there are **devices available** and they can be **supported**
- Lack of **digital buddies**
- A lot of older adults who **don't like change** or don't want to go online
- Lack of staff willingness** to get involved
- Lack of knowledge** on where it is
- People don't realise** what they can do online and how much is available once they are online
- Lack of confidence**
- Fear of internet** full stop
- Funding to employ a **dedicated team member** to support digital inclusion
- Lack of knowledge about **what device to buy**
- As **fuel bill increases**, connectivity will become less of a priority
- Funding** for staff support and for devices
- Fear of internet security**
- Lack of confidence** in attempting to learn about digital
- Lack of an overall **digital inclusion strategy**
- Confidence in the technology** to back you up when you're trying to teach someone eg. wifi fails etc
- Lack of training and support** for people with little or no digital skills
- Cost** and ability to access good connectivity
- Need to develop a **coordinated approach**

It is clear, however, that partnership and collaboration is strongly recognised as an asset in Berwickshire – there is a stated willingness to work together to achieve goals.

What have we learned so far?

COVID-19 fundamentally altered most aspects of our society – we have to be prepared to meet the challenges of ‘post-pandemic’ Scotland. Developing a place-based approach to digital inclusion has enabled SCVO to understand how the landscape is changing, and the impact this is having on changemakers working to combat digital exclusion.

Our programme is ongoing, but the last nine months have been invaluable in helping us to adapt and evolve how we ‘do’ digital inclusion in a fast-changing landscape. We know that some of these lessons may be reactionary and not reflective of long-term action. Instead, the lessons we present here should be taken as a record of what we know right now.

As interim learning, these lessons do come with the caveat that more evidence and analysis may be required.

What have we learned about how we ‘do’ place-based digital inclusion?

Having a local contact, who is passionate about the work, is essential to drive it forward.

Place-based activity by its nature needs to be driven by the place. The importance of a local lead who is passionate about the work, has the appropriate networks and the capacity to make change happen has proven itself to be effective in Renfrewshire and Berwickshire. Local contacts employed by the Council or TSIs have offered insight and networks that SCVO would otherwise not have access to and developing this work further will depend on their co-operation. However, being local isn’t enough – passion, capacity and the ambition to drive change are equally important in ensuring that progress is made.

It is important that someone plays the role of ‘critical friend’ and is a neutral third-party in the development of place-based plans.

The role of SCVO has been highlighted by both Renfrewshire and Berwickshire as being essential in moving work forward. It has enabled them to share thinking and ideas and receive honest and informed feedback. The critical friend allows for a greater diversity of experience and can challenge thinking at a local level by external facilitation of discussion, bringing across shared learning and supporting understanding of ‘what works’. The national profile of SCVO has also been an important influence in this work – our existing networks and awareness of work in other areas can help us to ‘join the dots’ and help to strengthen partnerships by bringing key players together to achieve specific goals.

It furthermore supports capacity and workload issues faced by local leads. Our local lead in Renfrewshire, Diane Webb, has sole responsibility within her role at the Council for driving this work forward.

I just feel so lucky to have [SCVO] to support me and give me that sounding board. True collaboration all the way... there is no way this pilot would have shaped up this way without all of our input.

Diane Webb, Renfrewshire Council

Having a national partner on board can add value and raise the profile of local work, build esteem and capacity, and enable us to understand the broader picture of what's happening across Scotland.

Meaningful partnership working is essential in ensuring buy-in, support and participation from a range of stakeholders.

Place-based work emphasises the importance of partnership and collaboration as a means of reducing silo working and improving local outcomes. In areas where partnership is a clearly outlined priority, we have seen progression and positive movement. The Citizen Voice group in Renfrewshire is an important example of dedicated commitment to collaboration – sharing information and resources has enabled quick action.

Some areas initially engaged in this programme haven't progressed, in part due to a lack of meaningful partnership working or willingness to collaborate and share success. A key lesson here is that digital inclusion isn't the responsibility of one organisation, rather the responsibility has to be shared among an engaged and interested audience.

We don't work in isolation. We want to do with people, and not for people.

Juliana Amaral, Berwickshire Association for Voluntary Service (Bavs)

Taking a place-based approach to digital champion networks may result in improved outcomes and better joined-up working.

It has become clear that local people understand local need and have a better understanding of local assets – this is one of the key principles of place-based working. There is a desire, for example in Berwickshire, to understand the scale of, and map, Digital Champion activity to connect citizens with the right support. Digital Champion networks at a local level could help to build capacity and enable better sharing of information as well as offer more meaningful signposting. There is an increased appetite for this model across places in Scotland, and we anticipate that it could provide better peer support as well as creating a local community of practice.

 **Being iterative, agile, flexible and responsive enables a quicker pace of working and supports better outcomes.**

We recognised early that this work needed to build critical mass in the places we worked in, and in order to do that we needed to work in an action-focused and agile way, as demonstrated in Renfrewshire. This enabled us to avoid ‘talking shops’ within the context of the Citizen Voice meetings. Engagement rates, as a result, have been high throughout the process. It also enabled the setting up of ‘co-production groups’, developing a working model within two sessions, and securing the appropriate funds to take it forward. In other areas, where the result of meetings wasn’t action, momentum quickly tapered off.

 **Digital Champions are facing a capacity issue and potential burnout.**

Over the course of the pandemic, Digital Champions became an exhausted resource. Connecting Scotland alone mobilised over 3000 (and growing) Digital Champions across Scotland. Many services made a full pivot to online delivery and the existing ‘embedded’ approach meant that workloads for some people acting as Digital Champions on top of day jobs became unfeasible.

With the new Digital Champion Coordinator role being funded for two years as part of the Renfrewshire pilot, we hope to be able to measure how additional resource may benefit digital inclusion across the place.

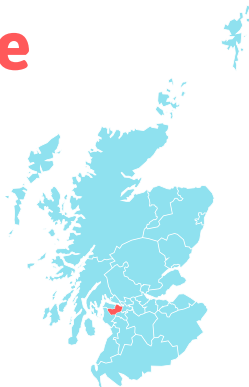
We need to better understand the Digital Champion experience through engagement, and work towards building a more sustainable model. Our work in Renfrewshire will prove invaluable in facilitating this, as we work with Digital Champions through co-production groups. This will require further evidence and investigation, but a clear picture is being built across Scotland that capacity for Digital Champions is an issue.



Next Steps

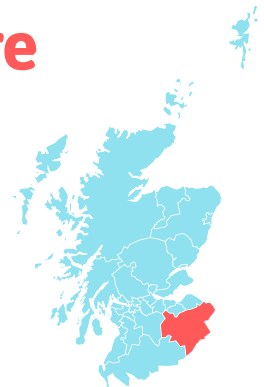
Our Place-based Digital Inclusion programme is an ongoing piece of work. This report has summarised and drawn interim lessons from the past nine months. As we move forward, we will continue to work in the areas we've discussed in this report. Some next steps include:

Renfrewshire



- ✓ Creating a **Digital Champion co-production group**, in order to hold focus groups with Digital Champions across the place
- ✓ Holding the first meeting of the **Resource Mapping co-production group**
- ✓ **Writing and presenting a manifesto** stating the purpose and desired outcomes of the work in Renfrewshire to the Citizen Voice group
- ✓ Beginning the recruitment process for the **Digital Champion Coordinator** and **Kickstart-funded posts**
- ✓ Working on the **pilot model** and setting out **timescales** for the launch

Berwickshire



- ✓ Pulling together the **key themes** from the first meeting to begin to **'Identify the Problem'**
- ✓ Arrange the **next meeting of the place-based group** and presenting back the above themes
- ✓ Thinking about **who's around the table** in this place and bringing in anyone we may have missed
- ✓ **Introducing our place lead from Renfrewshire** to the Berwickshire group to facilitate shared learning and create momentum

We also hope to expand the scope of our work to incorporate new places throughout 2022.



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