



Think Digital Programme

Evaluation of Phase 1 (2020)

Report by Sarah Alden, Ilona Haslewood, Imogen Blood, Shelly Dulson

Executive summary

1. Introduction

This Executive Summary provides an overview of the evaluation of phase 1 of Age UK's Think Digital Programme, carried out by Imogen Blood and Associates between June and December 2020¹. Funded by Santander, the Think Digital Programme sought to engage, inspire, and support people aged 50 and over, to develop their digital skills. Age UK worked with five local Age UK and Age Cymru partners (Age Cymru Dyfed, Age Cymru Gwent, Age UK Blackburn with Darwen, Age UK Leicester Shire & Rutland, and Age UK South Lakeland). Each partner employed a Digital Coordinator to offer training and support to Digital Champions, as well as to oversee the delivery of the local programme. The role of the Digital Champions (both volunteers and employees) was to motivate and inspire older people to make the most of digital technology, and to support them to develop basic digital skills through group or one-to-one sessions.

To best meet the digital skills needs of older people, the model was originally designed to include key components that enhance older people's experience and increase the likelihood of them continuing to use their digital skills: co-design, peer support, trusted support providers, flexibility, a service without jargon and delivered at the right pace, appropriate regard for accessibility, and the provision of ongoing support. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the delivery model was redesigned to a mainly remote model, however the programme's overarching aims remained the same, despite the restrictions.

2. Methodology

Due to the shift in delivery model towards remote support, the evaluation extended its original focus on outcomes for older people to incorporate understanding of the processes, and the roles and experiences of the staff and volunteers involved in the programme. Consequently, it included two components: (1) assessing the effectiveness of the revised delivery model; and (2) capturing learning from how the projects adapted to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Therefore, the evaluation report unpicks the ways in which a remote delivery model is run in practice and identifies the factors that lead to good outcomes, for whom and how.

The evaluation began with a rapid evidence review and a face-to-face workshop (held prior to the pandemic) with local partners. This was then followed by a series of interviews, both with staff and Digital Champions, as well as older people themselves.

1. At the time of writing, Santander has confirmed extension funding for a second phase of the programme, which began on 1st December 2020 and will continue until 31st May 2021.



3. Findings

3.1. Working with Digital Champions:

- a.** In some cases, volunteer recruitment was impacted by COVID-19 and took longer due to staffing issues or delays in DBS checks or references.
- b.** Some Digital Champions chose not to continue with remote volunteering. Main reasons were: lack of confidence, additional time pressures and not feeling comfortable talking on the phone.
- c.** On the other hand, the flexibility of the remote model suited some volunteers well (e.g. those with severe mental health conditions, such as agoraphobia).
- d.** The remote delivery requires Digital Champions to have particular personal qualities (e.g. patience and calmness) and skills (e.g. working knowledge of various digital devices).
- e.** Remote delivery required local partners to consider and provide a range of resources (such as easy to follow guidelines) and technology-based resources (such as Remote Viewer), which were driven by ongoing needs of Digital Champions and participants.

3.2. Working with older people:

- a.** The pandemic forced partners to deploy new promotional approaches, such as delivering leaflets door to door; advertising via posters in public areas, or through social media (to friends and family of older people).
- b.** As a result, partners recruited participants who would probably not have previously approached this service, such as ‘younger’ older people (in their early 50s, and people who would find it difficult to access drop-in services due to mental health conditions or practical barriers, such as lack of transport in rural areas).
- c.** For some older people, remote support was only felt to be possible due to the lending and setting up of devices.
- d.** Matching a Digital Champion with a participant was seen as crucial to the success of the service, not only based on interests but also based on device(s) they had.
- e.** Offering remote digital support in a climate where other local services had either reduced or stopped, was seen by local partners as a unique ‘selling point’.
- f.** On the flipside, some of the external referrals had greater levels of non-digital related needs, and this had time and resource implications.
- g.** An important factor in delivering the digital support remotely was to reassess the numbers of older people that the service could realistically support, to account for the longer period of time that was required per each individual.
- h.** Utilising written resources so participants could practice in between sessions was an important part of supporting older people’s learning journeys.

3.3. Digital Champions' experience with the programme:

- a. To effectively deliver and sustain a personalised digital inclusion service, it is necessary to consider the preferences and needs of Digital Champions.
- b. Moving forward, it may become more difficult to recruit remote Digital Champions, due to a combination of people having less time once COVID restrictions are eased and a perception that it offers less opportunity to socialise with others. Equally, the remote offer can potentially increase the pool of volunteers, by reducing barriers related to location, work, caring responsibilities, availability of transport or disability.
- c. Several Digital Champions said they did not feel they needed formal training but, on reflection, most felt that they would have benefitted from training specifically around the skills needed to deliver remote support.
- d. Regular support for Digital Champions was crucial to identify any issues, such as the volunteers' emotional support when supporting older people with more complex needs.
- e. Digital Champions reported several challenges with supporting older people remotely, mainly around complexity of older people's needs (beyond digital skills), longer amount of time needed to support older people, technological-based barriers, and lack of visual cues.
- f. While all Digital Champions found remote delivery challenging at times, key positive outcomes included: increase in confidence and employability, and flexibility to volunteer when you cannot do it face to face.



“One [Digital Champion] wanted to volunteer last year but he can't drive and wouldn't feel comfortable with group work. But when we offered remote delivery, he contacted us straight away...it has built his confidence...”

Project Coordinator

3.4. Older people's experience with the adapted model and the impact it had on them:

- a.** One of the successes of the remote delivery was the diverse range of older people it was able to reach and support, including a large proportion of people who would have found it difficult to access face-to-face sessions.
- b.** Older people were diverse in the digital skills they had possessed. The equipment people had access to also varied.
- c.** Older people's motivations to learn new or improve existing digital skills were driven by various factors. The pandemic played a major role in many people seeking digital solutions to overcome various everyday barriers.
- d.** Fears, lack of confidence and suspicion associated with digital came into play for many people, and these shaped the support required from Digital Champions.
- e.** Older people's learning journeys were affected by how familiar they had already been with digital. Generally, the beginners found it hardest to learn through remote instruction.
- f.** Most of the older people who participated in the evaluation said they had a positive learning journey.
- g.** Older people praised the staff and volunteers for their patience and tenacity, being spoken to as a 'human being', willingness to help, giving encouragement, following up with further information, flexibility of the support, and having access to a trustworthy, helpful, and knowledgeable person if they got stuck.
- h.** Some of the participants reported a positive impact, sometimes already after a small number of sessions. For others, it took longer to achieve what they wanted and there might have been pauses and setbacks. Many interviewees highlighted that the biggest difference the support had made to them was in gaining confidence around using digital. Others pointed out feeling more connected and feeling useful again. Learning how to work with digital gave some of the interviewees a sense of achievement and self-sufficiency.



"I can't believe what I have done in such a short time considering I knew nothing in July of this year."

73 years old, beneficiary

"Using this service has completely opened up my life. I have done things I would never have been able to do if this service hadn't been available to me."

62 years old, beneficiary



4. Recommendations

The evaluation has highlighted positive impacts for older people and a huge amount of practical learning regarding the delivery of digital support remotely, all of which results in the following recommendations for future project design and delivery:

- a.** Draw on lived and volunteer experience to allow space for older people and Digital Champions to generate new ideas for working together.
- b.** Value a local approach which can flex in different areas. Build on this at national level by exploring partnerships with national partners or developing further resources.
- c.** Utilise the Age UK brand, which is recognised and trusted by older people and indicates the value of provision of a wide range of services and wrap-around support (both digital and non-digital).
- d.** Continue with a hybrid approach in the future, to enable the provision of remote and in-person support, facilitating access to services for older people who could or would not be able to access traditional groups or volunteering opportunities.
- e.** Develop additional training and learning resources, to support further roll-out of remote delivery, whilst building on existing learning from local areas.
- f.** Consider the more intense support requirements when setting Key Performance Indicators for local areas, including the additional time needed to deliver a remote service.
- g.** Invest in the wellbeing and support of Digital Champions, so that they are not left alone to handle challenging issues that may arise.
- h.** Provide devices as part of future programmes, along with one-to-one support, to support older people's continued learning.
- i.** Test the remote model with specific groups who face additional access barriers, resulting from disability, physical or mental health challenges, and/or language barriers.

For more information about the Think Digital Programme and its evaluation, please contact servicesdigital@ageuk.org.uk or visit www.ageuk.org.uk