

Reducing loneliness through digital connections: Case study of the Digital Angels project

Case Study Summary

Research shows that while the proportion is increasing, older people are still less likely to use the internet than their younger counterparts. The Digital Angels project (DA), run by Age UK Leeds across South Leeds, supports people to get online and network with others, through one to one and group sessions in a range of community settings. This case study considers the extent to which DA has helped to reduce loneliness and promote community engagement.

DA was found to have led to reduced loneliness and increased wellbeing, through enabling social contact (using online and face to face settings), helping people to link to their hobbies and interests, maintain fitness and increase independence.

Findings showed the importance of helping participants to explore their interests, rather than trying to sell the project from a digital perspective. DA proved useful not just for new users, but also those who have used a computer before to improve their skills, or be re-enabled to use equipment due to developing a health condition. To ensure people who struggled to get outside could benefit, the project team felt that running a digital inclusion project that was not classroom based, such as DA, was particularly important.

As well as positive outcomes for participants, Digital Angels has led to the development of new partnerships across South Leeds, this in turn has helped to build capacity and help promote sustainability.

A challenge was that in some residential communal areas, Wi-Fi was not available for people to use, this meant residents could not go online between visits from the team. Maintaining partnerships with other organisations if a key contact was relied upon was also referred to, as was ensuring appropriate matches between volunteers and participants for one to one support. A key challenge for participants was a lack of confidence due to fearing the unknown, or of becoming victim to online scams (though ongoing support from volunteers was able to mitigate this); cost was also a factor for some. Another issue concerned balancing the social benefits of holding group sessions with ensuring participants were encouraged to get online.

Learning and recommendations

Lack of online facilities can be a hindrance to using ICT in communal accommodation settings, the project team acknowledged this and it is felt that the local authority should consider these factors when developing digital inclusion strategies.

Where community venues are used, there is a need to ensure that staff teams, and not just individual staff members, are committed to helping achieve project aims. Other suggestions include ensuring senior management are involved, and producing an agreement in writing, that all staff (across both organisations) could refer to.

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Overview

The Digital Angels project (DA), run by Age UK Leeds, supports people to get online and network with others, through one to one and group sessions in a range of community settings. This case study found that DA has led to reduced loneliness and increased wellbeing, through enabling social contact, helping people to link to their hobbies and interests, maintain fitness and increase independence. Findings showed the importance of helping participants to explore their interests, rather than trying to sell the project from a digital perspective. The project proved useful for new users and to help improve skills, or be re-enabled to use equipment due to developing a health condition. It has also led to the development of new partnerships across South Leeds, helping to build capacity and promote sustainability. Challenges included a lack of WI-FI access for those who live in communal residential housing, maintaining partnerships due to staff contacts leaving organisations, lack of confidence, cost, and appropriate matching of volunteers to participants where one to one support was provided. This case study identified the need for the local authority to ensure those in communal residential settings are included in digital inclusion strategies. Other suggestions include ensuring partnerships developed are cemented at early stages, such as through ensuring senior management are involved, and producing an agreement in writing, that all staff (across both organisations) could refer to.

Introduction

The Digital Angels project, run by Age UK Leeds, is funded through the Time to Shine (TTS) programme, which aims to reduce social isolation and loneliness amongst older people in Leeds. TTS is supported by The Big Lottery funded Ageing Better programme, which operates in 14 areas across England. Paid project workers and volunteers help people over 50 who are isolated through ill health, bereavement, caring, living alone, or living in residential accommodation. The project offers a mix of one to one sessions, which includes eight weekly visits from a volunteer in a person's home, and group sessions in a range of settings.

The project 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. Based on monitoring data 500 people have been involved with Digital Angels, this includes 149 people who have benefitted from one to one help, and 191 who have received support outside of the home. Of a total of 40 volunteers, over half (21) are over 50. The project is supported by an operations manager and two part time project workers.

Background

Though figures show internet use among older people is increasing, this group are still far less likely to use the internet than their younger counterparts, with over four million people over 65 having never used the internet (Age UK 2016). Research has showed that people who do not use the internet are more likely to feel isolated from others *often*. Conversely, people who said they did use the internet were more likely to say they *hardly ever or never* felt isolated (International Longevity Centre UK, 2012). This is particularly so for those who

are less mobile, where the Internet can improve wellbeing through invoking a *sense of community* through connecting with likeminded people online (ActiveAge, 2010; Chaskin et al. 2001).

This case study considers the extent to which Digital Angels is effective at **reducing social isolation and loneliness** of older people through using ICT as a tool to connect with others. It considers the extent to which the project has helped to increase participants' **confidence in engaging in their communities (both physical and online)**. It also examines how Digital Angels is leading to longer term change, though developing relationships with relevant stakeholders.

Methods

The following methods were used to collect data for this case study; information was gathered from March to July 2018:

- Review of documents, including publicity materials, monitoring information and 10 *case studies* (these are short template forms, which project workers complete to draw attention to a particular aspect of the project).
- Analysis of baseline (completed by 61 participants) and follow up survey data.
- A focus group consisting of 3 volunteers and 2 participants
- Two telephone interviews (baseline and follow up) with the Operations Manager
- A telephone interview with a Project Worker

Key Findings

Marketing the project from a digital perspective was less effective for some groups

It was pointed out that as the primary aim of Digital Angels is to reduce isolation, it is necessary to consider how to achieve this through enabling people to try ICT in the first place. The project manager felt it was important to think about the initial *hook*:

If [the staff and volunteers ask] are you interested in computers, [the participants] may say no, but if you say 'what is your interest', is it music, you can go on YouTube and hear your favourite song, also if [someone is] struggling with shopping, tell them about how [the internet] can help (Staff Team)

This was evident in a session run in a care home, where residents initially said they were not interested. By the end of the two-hour session the initially reticent residents had used the tablets to connect to the Internet and look at websites that offered information of interest. Two were subsequently paired with volunteers so that further support could be offered.

Digital support is not just useful for new users

Some participants had previously used a computer but were not aware of the different ways that they could use it. For example, some struggled to use technology independently:

Some of the residents have technology...but keep away from it until relatives come to help them (Staff Team)

Other examples included those who stopped using technology as their ability to do so had been hindered due to a disability or long-term health condition.

Non-use of ICT is not necessarily a choice

It is not necessarily lack of confidence that may prevent an older person going online. For example, one participant, 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 facilities that can be accessed, such as a tablet, or Wi-Fi connection.

Wider factors can impact on sustainability

With regard to sheltered and residential care, Digital Angels was keen to encourage face to face interaction within an ICT learning space. However, some of the communal areas visited did not have Wi-Fi set up, though when questioned, some residents said they would like to see it introduced. In these cases, sessions could still be run (using a device known as Mi-Fi), but this nevertheless meant participants would not be able to access the internet in the communal ways the rest of time. Affordability is another consideration, and is explored later.

What has worked well?

Loneliness was reduced through increasing social contact

Of the participants who completed a survey at baseline and follow up, just under half reported reduced loneliness. Some participants referred to feeling happier because they could communicate with family electronically, rather than just face to face or by telephone. Volunteers and participants who took part in a focus group mentioned how it had led to increased interaction:

When you introduce them to things like email, they use [it] to interact with family, which they wouldn't do ordinarily (Volunteer)

Through the support of a Digital Angel trainer, a participant explained how they used the internet to keep in regular touch with distant relatives, going online every day, as she puts it:

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 and I now have more contact (Participant)

One volunteer pointed out that for group sessions, some attended to meet others, and viewed the ICT training as a conduit to this:

I found people who turn up for groups were doing it more for social than technical reasons, some didn't turn the machines on... they really appreciated getting out of the house (Volunteer)

Enhancing digital skills led to increased wellbeing

For the 17 participants who responded to a survey question which measured wellbeing, 59% recorded an improved score. Volunteers, staff and participants provided several examples of the ways in which wellbeing was improved, through helping people to link to their hobbies and interests, including: two participants who were able to search archives to explore family history, and the history of Leeds. A keen gardener was able to learn new skills on gardening websites. A wheelchair user said how being supported to go online had helped

to maintain upper body strength through engaging with online exercise videos. A volunteer referred to a participant whose wellbeing was increased through listening to his favourite music:

He was interested in a Jazz singer from the 40s, so I showed him how to go on to YouTube, type in her name, up came her albums, we put the speakers on, that he had never used before, and off he went, he was absolutely elated (Volunteer)

Another referred to people in a care home setting who might not get outside being enabled to engage with the outside world:

Helping people to get out of the place they are in, if they are in a care home, you can show them how to travel the world on google maps, they are getting out of their environment, even if it is virtual (Volunteer)

Digital Angels increased confidence through fostering independence

Digital Angels worked with people leaving hospital, accessing dementia cafes, and living in care homes, the aim being to help them live independently through utilising ICT skills such as online food shopping:

A socially isolated gentlemen, he couldn't go out, he had fears around online shopping, through the use of a volunteer, he [learned] how to remain safe online, reassured, he could do online shopping, it was a real lifeline (Staff Team)

Another way in which participants had been helped was through being re-enabled to use technology following a health problem, such as a participant with sight loss:

I was shown [how to use] a large key keyboard, and larger screen...I am interested in digital photography, so helped use computer for that 'I now have thousands of pictures'... it's just practice, once you can master it, it can give you a lot of confidence (Participant)

Another was able to continue enjoying his hobby despite a physical condition meaning that typing was difficult:

You have got a microphone you can talk into, he didn't know about that, but because he is a bit arthritic in his hands, it really helped him, so [he] could use via voice details on singers like Frank Sinatra (Volunteer)

A mixed model approach ensures wider reach

Digital Angels is a good example of a two-tiered skills building project, whereby one to one support is offered to those who may be reluctant to attend a group-based setting:

The model we run, of getting volunteers to build someone's confidence and teach them skills, it has got real value, quite often people run groups and activities, things that are happening, but it is getting someone the skills or confidence to go there (Staff Team)

Digital Angels model led to greater capacity building

Age UK have developed 15 new partnerships through the work on Digital Angels, including a range of health-based organisations, as well as those in the social care, local authority and

third sector. This was assisted by running regular drop-in sessions, as well as one off activities such as *Techy Tea Parties*. These are held in community venues, which include tea and cake, along with support to get online. As well as working with local organisations to run the parties, organisations such as local libraries also attended.

Development of partnerships and building capacity help promote sustainability. A care home where sessions were held subsequently purchased an iPad for residents to use, thus encouraging residents to get online outside of project support. This type of outcome is promising, as it has the potential to change the culture of participating care homes, through recognising the value of offering ICT to residents. As the project team pointed out, having ICT facilities on show in communal areas can also encourage others to give it a go.

Barriers and Challenges

Need to ensure sufficient lead in time in some settings

Project staff and volunteers referred to unanticipated issues at times causing delays, this was felt to be exacerbated as it was the first time the organisation had run this type of project:

We had to do a lot of groundwork initially, as we didn't have a similar project...we had to think of Wi-Fi access...we had to think of enabling people to get access to broadband, also types of equipment to purchase, it needed a lot of technical thinking (Staff Team)

Ensuring buy in across staff teams

The project team referred to problems maintaining partnerships with other organisations if they relied on a key contact, with examples of how the relationship would break down when staff members left. It was felt that key learning from this was to ensure that staff teams, and not just individual staff members, were committed to helping achieve the project aims. Other suggestions included ensuring senior management were involved, and producing an agreement in writing, that all staff (across both organisations) could refer to.

Matching volunteers to participants

Digital Angels successfully engaged male volunteers. While this finding is positive, particularly as research shows that men are often less likely to engage, many participants were women, and preferred a woman to support them. The project also successfully engaged Punjabi and Urdu speaking participants, but this also presented a challenge, as some required a volunteer to support them in their first language. Due to these issues, Digital Angels carried out some targeted recruitment, for example stating in advertising materials that they were particularly interested in women able to speak community languages.

Balancing remit of the project with reducing isolation

While it is undoubtedly positive that people enjoyed attending group sessions to socialise with others, the volunteers interviewed felt it was important that people were also encouraged to get online, feeling that it was almost a duty to impart their knowledge (all volunteers in the group had recently retired):

The internet is one of the most wonderful things ever, for people not to use it is criminal, and I wanted to get that across to people. The most frustrating part to me, being honest, is

people coming, turning up, they don't have the internet at home, they are not going to use it for at least a week (Volunteer)

Supporting the most isolated

As with the TTS programme overall, reaching the most isolated who are not already linked in with the organisation was challenging:

How do you get to those people, there are tower blocks...you can't get into, older people live in these, how do we get to those people. We try putting up posters in GP [waiting rooms], libraries, but if housebound [its] a real difficulty (Staff Team)

To ensure that particularly isolated, or housebound older people are reached, the project team felt that running a digital inclusion project that was not classroom based, was particularly important.

Some lack confidence due to fear of the unknown

Focus group participants, staff and volunteers provided many examples of older people avoiding the internet due to fears around identity theft, and scams:

I think what puts you off is the scams that you hear, I must admit I am a bit terrified of having all my information [online] (Participant)

Volunteers felt that this was due to a fear of the unknown, which can be mitigated, particularly with targeted one to one support, as a participant put it:

[The] project worker is very patient, its constant practice that helps you. I can get in touch with the project worker if I am not sure of something (Participant)

Though participants referred to a helpful booklet produced by Age UK, the comment above suggests the need for ongoing support, outside of the eight week period offered.

Ensuring the outcomes can be sustained long-term

Individuals who reside in care settings may struggle to get online unless Wi-Fi access is improved. To ensure use is sustained and developed in care settings the staff need to be on board, such as the earlier example of care home staff purchasing iPad's for residents use.

There also needs to be some thought around older people who are not engaging with technology outside of the support sessions. For some participants, it seemed that ongoing support would be necessary, which is not sustainable without some sort of funding to support it. Indeed, volunteers pointed out the need for paid staff to ensure the project runs smoothly. While Age UK has secured future funding to run a digital inclusion project across Leeds (see below), it may nevertheless struggle to resource ongoing support, where it is needed.

A related consideration is cost. One volunteer said that tablets can now be bought fairly cheaply. Yet participants pointed out that technology needed replacing relatively frequently, which some older people may be reluctant to do:

I am from a generation of expecting things to last...so there is a reluctance perhaps to replace it (Participant)

Purchasing even the most inexpensive tablet may not be possible for people living on a limited income, where other necessary purchases may be prioritised rather than getting online.

Learning and recommendations

The findings show how engaging online can support people to not only reduce their social isolation and loneliness through linking to others online, but also through face to face engagement during group sessions. It also improved wellbeing through enabling people to engage with hobbies and other interests in an accessible way. The support offered by staff and volunteers helped those with a range of limited health condition access support to help them live more independently. Again, this can have a positive impact on wellbeing, as well as potentially reducing the need for costly health and social care interventions in the long term.

This case study identified that wider barriers can be a hindrance to using ICT in care or sheltered accommodation settings, suggesting this group are in some cases excluded from getting online. The project team acknowledged this and felt that facilities such as Wi-Fi should perhaps be looked at more strategically by the local authority (i.e. Leeds City Council), where steps are taken to ensure that, in line with the local authority's digital inclusion strategy, care home providers work to ensure communal areas are digital friendly.

Perhaps one of the issues is that older people, particularly the *oldest old* are less likely to be viewed as a group who can benefit from getting online. Through partnerships with organisations across South Leeds, Digital Angels has been able to raise awareness, though we would suggest a need for a wider awareness raising initiative with local organisations across Leeds. As Age UK have secured further funding to work with older people across Leeds to support them to get online, this is promising, and TTS would benefit from tracing the ongoing impact of this targeted online support over time.

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