



Digital Experts Programme Milton Keynes Digital Champion Project

The project objectives and targets

Milton Keynes Council in preparation for the introduction of Universal Credit under which the Government required benefit claimants to complete their forms online, identified a number of potential work streams to support those using this service. These included work on the following:

- Digital inclusion
- Financial inclusion
- Partnership working
- Triage – signposting.

Milton Keynes identified particular challenges in relation to the digital inclusion work stream based on their analysis of the local population. For example, local statistics showed that approximately 24 per cent of the working population is likely to be offline. In addition, although there has been an increase in the use of mobile devices, particularly smart phones, many of those remain offline because they are affected by one or all of the following barriers to inclusion:

- Financial
- Motivation and confidence
- Skills /education.

With the introduction of Universal Credit, which was a Government ‘Digital by Default’ programme, it would therefore be important that these barriers were addressed and consequently, this Digital Champions project has focused on digital inclusion.

Specifically, the council’s bid to the LGA Digital Experts programme sought funding to introduce and develop a network of digital champions to help those residents who don’t have the

necessary skills or the confidence to go online, get the support and practical assistance to do so. The Digital champions are volunteers who, with training, help others understand the benefits of being online and show them how to do a range of simple things that can make a huge difference to those who cannot or do not use the internet.

Digital champions can help with a range of online skills including:

- Teaching someone to use internet search engines such as Google
- Helping someone set up an email account
- Showing someone how to access council and DWP services online
- Explaining how easy shopping and banking online can be
- Setting someone up on Skype
- Helping someone research their family history or other hobby online.

To achieve its objectives, the council procured the services of an external provider, Digital Unite to set up and run the Digital Champions Network online. The Digital Champions Network uses an online platform which aims to create, develop and support digital champions (volunteers) in local communities to deliver peer-to-peer training.

Having contracted with Digital Unite, the council sought volunteers, officers and other interested parties to become digital champions. Digital Unite provided 50 licenses as part of the annual membership.

The potential savings from this project are difficult to estimate but clearly if more people are able to self-serve when claiming Universal Credit then they will require less assistance in the future and therefore will make less of a call on council staff resource. An indication of the potential savings can be seen from the BT's Get It Together¹ programme which found that there is a return on investment of £3.70 for every £1 spent on getting people digitally engaged.

Over the whole council there are further savings to be achieved by having people transacting with the council online. The figures, provided by SOCITM, for costs for contacting the council across the different channels, in local government are; 15 pence for handling a website enquiry; £2.83 for handling a telephone enquiry and £8.62 for handling a face-to-face enquiry. So helping more residents and businesses develop online skills would enable them carry out their business with the council online, reducing the need for telephone calls and face-to-face visits reducing costs for the council.

¹ <http://www.btplc.com/inclusion/GettingOnline/GetITtogether/index.htm>

For the customer there are also many other benefits. In 2014 BT commissioned Just Economics to produce an independent study entitled Valuing Digital Inclusion (<http://www.btplc.com/Purposefulbusiness/Connectivity/Beingonlineisgoodforsociety/>).

This report highlighted the following monetary values of being online. For someone using the internet for the first time the benefit was calculated at £1,064 per year and comes from a range of financial savings, including, being able to shop online, improved employment prospects, and being able to get better deals for utilities, etc. The report also found that this could increase to £3,568 per year when taking into account remote working and higher wages obtained with IT skills

The progress to date

The Digital Champion programme was initiated in March 2015 and was promoted on the council website and with partners at the Universal Credit stakeholders group. However, as a result of delays in getting the project started with Digital Unite, the portal was not live until the end of May 2015.

The Digital Champions network was then launched fully on 24 June 2015 to partner organisations and departments including:

- MIND MK
- Age UK Milton Keynes
- Spotlight Community Project
- Housing Associations to include:
 - Orbit
 - Guinness Partnership
- Citizens Advice (CAB)
- Internal departments:
 - Customer Services
 - Strengthening Families
- Neighbourhood Employment Programme (NEP) and
- Milton Keynes Jobcentre Plus (DWP).

Potential champions could register on the council website or by contacting the ConnectMK Service for an application form and then each registration would be vetted before access was granted to the Digital Champions platform.

Once accepted, each champion was given guidance on:

- Getting started
- How to set up sessions
- Identifying end users
- Online training for champions
- Administration (e.g. reporting statistics and progress).

The champions were then responsible for identifying local residents or businesses, from their community circles, who needed help to get online. The council would also refer any residents or businesses who contacted ConnectMK to a champion located in their area.

The resident / business needing assistance to get online would get support tailored to their specific needs and build on their existing internet skills rather than completing longer formal courses where much of the content may not be well aligned with their current competency level or needs.

By the end of 2015 the project had recruited 18 champions and they had completed the 'train the trainers' course preparing them to recruit and train local residents / businesses who needed assistance to get online.

In January 2016 the council stepped up the work to motivate the champions to increase their level of activity with residents and businesses who needed assistance to get online. The council also launched a series of twice-weekly drop-in training sessions at the ConnectMK office. Nine events for local residents and businesses have also been held in conjunction with external partners and 12 other events have been proposed ranging from a two-hour drop-in session to stands at fun day events over the Easter period.

Training has taken place in eight of the ten geographical areas identified for support under this project, where limited skills and financial exclusion are at the highest. These have been hosted in a range of facilities from local community centres to coffee shops and sheltered housing complexes. As well as this, between February and March 2016, the council promoted the digital champion support to another two resident associations

By the end of April 2016 the project had recruited 24 champions, two of whom dropped out. By June 2016, 100 local residents and businesses had completed the minimum of one module with 35 per cent of them completing at least two skill modules.

The most popular skill areas for training and support were:

- Creating and using emails

- Internet safety
- Online banking.

The council has also now incorporated a basic skills offering into their 'Rent to Own' equipment service collections. This means that when a client comes in to collect equipment and sign a contract, the council identifies any training needs and books them into one of the drop-in sessions for support. The incorporation of this basic skill assessment has identified a number of residents and businesses using this service that would benefit from assistance to get online. However, the council has also found that this is a lot of information for the resident/business to take on board in one hit and as a result many potential clients have failed to arrive for their support sessions.

The outcome – challenges and key learning points

The project operated for one year and delivered a number of benefits.

The key improvement is that over 100 residents and businesses underwent the training from the Digital Champions and hence their skills and confidence have improved. As a result, they are now benefitting from being able to use the internet. To this end the primary aim of the project was met for these individuals.

The council was particularly encouraged with these residents and business wanting support to use online banking services, as they commissioned the Digital Champion service in particular to help support those using the online Universal Credit service – (it was one top three skills modules accessed).

Universal Credit was designed so that the recipient would be responsible for paying their rent and managing their finances independently. Enabling them to monitor their bank account and manage their income is vital to reducing the impact of the change to a single monthly payment.

The council has not been able to provide an estimate of the financial saving as a result of this project.

Overall the Digital Unite platform was found to be an excellent resource however; the council decided that it would not continue their contract beyond the initial year funded under the Digital Expert's programme.

The key challenges for this project included:

Volunteer management

The basic objective of the project was to use volunteers to operate as digital champions within their community. However, whilst the Digital Experts programme covered the cost of utilising the Digital Unite platform and the license for 50 users for one year, the effort needed to recruit and manage a large number of volunteers was not covered by this funding and the council found this to require more resources than they had anticipated.

Recruiting volunteers for this type of activity is not a one-off action. The volunteers need to be actively recruited, supported, motivated, involved, managed, monitored and ultimately replaced when they move on to other things. This activity requires ongoing resources to provide the necessary information, monitoring and training. Such help is potentially available via the National Council for Voluntary Organisations:

<https://knowhownonprofit.org/people/volunteers/keeping>

“Whilst we were encouraged by the interest and take up of the Digital Unite portal we have learned that this project is not dissimilar to most digital inclusion initiatives, it needs a significant level of hand-holding and in the long term would only be sustainable if a dedicated support resource was available.”

Lisa Bailey, Operations Manager for ConnectMK

Volunteer performance

Each of the digital champions was asked to recruit and begin training 10 residents / businesses that needed help to get online by the end of February and, although many of the individual volunteers worked hard, this proved to be overly ambitious and the average was 6 users per champion.

The bid assumed that the ease of use of the platform would make it attractive to the champions for reporting and feeding back on their progress. However, those that excelled in training were often less good at the administration and vice versa. As a result, the champions were inconsistent in completing their administration tasks and a considerable amount of council staff time was spent chasing data and motivating them to complete their administration work online.

Clients

The identification of potential residents or businesses who needed support to get online was not straight forward, as those that are digitally excluded are not always active in asking for

support, i.e. they are either unaware of the benefits or not particularly interested or are fearful of going online.

Furthermore, the difficulty of dealing with this target client group was underestimated. Potential clients that had the interest, the opportunity, the confidence and the natural aptitude to go online were probably already doing so, leaving this project to engage with those who required the most encouragement and who were typically difficult to involve.

Those who are identified as digitally excluded are also statistically most likely to be socially excluded, i.e. are on low incomes, have difficulty making ends meet and as such are hard to involve in continual engagement.

A clash of initiatives

This timing for this project also coincided with Digital Unite's national launch of a partnership with Age UK and this impacted on the take-up of this Digital Expert project, run by Milton Keynes Council, as many of the organisations involved at this local level began accessing the programme as part of national agenda.

Where next?

The council decided to terminate its membership of the portal in May 2016 and there are no plans to renew the membership. However, the council will continue to offer an element of the end-user training at the ConnectMK office on a drop-in or request basis. Several champions have expressed interest in continuing to support these sessions.

Contact for further information

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