



The issue and context

Reading is a town of contrasts. While arguably it is the IT capital of England, there are also areas with high rates of digital exclusion – especially in the South Reading area of Whitley, which has pockets with particularly high levels of deprivation. National research shows that one of the key groups likely to be digitally excluded is those on low incomes.

In Reading, as nationally, certain residents lack the digital skills, motivation or facilities to use the internet or access public services online. These groups include older people, people in social housing, those with disabilities and those on low incomes. Today, computer skills are essential for work, but have become increasingly important for other areas of life as well – including for the council which is seeking to encourage more residents to access services and information online in order to improve the customer experience and to enhance communication and participation, as well as reduce its own operational costs.

For example, online access to bank accounts, benefit applications, housing and job offers can help mitigate financial exclusion. Access, and the confidence to use digital tools, can provide greater opportunities for consumer choice and job search. Social networks and other forms of digital communication (e.g. emails, skype, chat programmes) help tackle social isolation and loneliness. Social networks also function as community platforms that provide mutual help and support. The ability to tackle problems and find help online could then lead to more independence.

The overarching context for the volunteering scheme is the council's Digital Strategy – which aims to encourage more people to do their council business online. More than £50 million savings have already been made by the council since 2010, with more savings necessary in the future. Savings in excess of £500,000 a year are being made across the council's customer service operations, underpinned by channel shift and the implementation of new digital technologies, including the council's website. The digital volunteering scheme is expected to support the delivery of these savings.

The project objectives and targets

The digital volunteering pilot scheme, located initially at Reading Central Library, aimed to recruit at least 10 digital champions to provide support to people using the public access IT at set times, to help them with their own devices (tablets and laptops) and to provide short training sessions, as appropriate. The scheme's ultimate aim is to help break down some of

the barriers to accessing the internet and digital services, and consequently increase digital inclusion.

By working with partners, such as Reading College and University of Reading, to recruit and co-ordinate volunteer Digital Champions, the project aimed to reach out from the initial base at Reading Central Library to engage the key target groups in their locality. The intention is to support key excluded, less mobile groups (including older people, people with disabilities and those on low incomes) in their local neighbourhoods by offering sessions at venues and around activities they already attend.

The scheme is also reducing pressure on library staff who currently lack the capacity to effectively deal with all ICT inquiries while working on libraries duties.

The original timetable for the project was for recruitment and training of volunteers to take place from January 2015 to March 2015, with a launch of the volunteering scheme at Reading Central library in April 2015 being followed by launch of outreach projects in local communities over subsequent months.

The approach and progress to date

Reading Borough Council began scoping the project in October 2014, when the senior policy officer was tasked with progressing digital inclusion in support of the council's overarching digital strategy. At an early stage, the council recognised that engaging with partners would be critical to the project's success – and reached out to a number of partners including Reading Voluntary Action (RVA), Reading University, Reading College, Jobcentre Plus, Launchpad and Age UK, to form a steering group and begin to explore approaches that may work in the borough.

The steering group began to scope a project focused on recruiting ten volunteers to be Digital Champions at Reading Central Library. Reading Voluntary Action then took the lead on the scheme and started to recruit volunteers via their website and newsletters.

The attraction of LGA funding enabled the project to continue for the whole of 2015/16 and to extend into other community venues. By the end of April 2015, 11 volunteers had been recruited and trained. This included basic safeguarding training to ensure that the advice they give does not fall into the category of regulated activity under the Disclosure and Barring Service if they are working with vulnerable adults, and informal on-the-job technical training, often provided by fellow volunteers. Many volunteers have found the opportunity to learn from their peers valuable. There was an initial 'soft' launch of the scheme on 7 April 2015, when drop-in IT support sessions for members of the public began running three times weekly.

The scheme continued to recruit a body of volunteers during May, and took advantage of the opening of the new community hub in the Central Library building on 10 June for its formal launch, with volunteers on hand to promote the scheme. By then the scheme had recruited and trained 17 volunteers.

Recruiting a volunteer co-ordinator enabled the scheme to reach beyond the Central Library, and Reading chose to focus on existing groups that would provide a ready supply of the scheme's target customers. The scheme launched drop-in sessions at the Sangam Lunch Club in East Reading in July 2015, which is aimed at older Asian people – but is also popular with a wide range of ages and backgrounds. Two of the volunteers for the lunch club are Hindi speakers.

On 5 October volunteers began running weekly drop-in sessions at Battle Library, in the heart of the Oxford Road area of West Reading, which has generally high levels of deprivation and a transient population from many cultures. The project also began providing two volunteers to support an existing fortnightly silver-surfer session at Trinity Place – a sheltered housing unit for the over-55s. Participants learn a wide range of skills, including Excel spreadsheets, digital photography and online shopping as well as basic computer use.

By the end of 2015 the scheme had recruited over 40 volunteers – and began leveraging this resource pool to support partnership working. The Get Online Reading Project supplied volunteers for the South Reading Digital Inclusion Project - a partnership aiming to deliver drop-in support sessions at locations around the Whitley area. The first of these sessions was with Barclays Digital Eagles <http://www.barclays.co.uk/DigitalEagles/P1242671738729> at Whitley Library, with the theme 'Computing for Christmas', giving advice on online shopping and using computer resources to make Christmas cards.

From early 2016 the scheme was running drop-in sessions at the Whitley Community Café in south Reading – a key area for the scheme as it represents the largest area of the town with above average levels of deprivation.

The scheme has been publicised by the project website – go-reading.org – which lists the times and venues where the scheme runs sessions. It may seem paradoxical to promote a digital inclusion project via a website, but many of the attendees will have found out about the drop-in session from friends and family accessing the site. The scheme is also promoted using leaflets at local libraries and other community venues and colourful pop-up banners to attract attention during sessions.

The volunteer co-ordinator continues to grow the pool of volunteers and seek sites and opportunities to run drop-in sessions.

The outcome - successes and challenges

The outcomes of the project include:

- 43 volunteers recruited over the period April to December 2015
- The drop-in sessions at the Central Library have received in the region of 1,000 contacts, averaging 60-80 per week. RVA estimate that this equates to up to 200 unique visitors, as some people are repeat visitors. One resident has dropped in more than 20 times
- In addition to these, the project has also supported approximately 60 unique visitors in their out-reach sites
- The volunteers now support drop-in sessions at seven further sites:
 - Battle Library
 - Whitley Library
 - Trinity Place sheltered housing
 - The Sangam Lunch Club
 - The Indian Community Centre
 - Whitley Community Café
 - Amersham Road Community Centre.

The project has been successful in expanding the number of digital volunteers, and in extending its reach beyond the Central Library. However, it is more difficult to assess the impact on digital confidence and competence, as the drop-in sessions are informal without baselining or tracking of users. Volunteers are invited to complete a questionnaire after each session, including an informal assessment of the customer's confidence before and after the session on the topics covered, ranging from 1 (not at all confident) to 5 (very confident). Where possible this is done with the customer. The average score rose from 1.95 (before a session) to 3.40 (after) for the 125 sessions where scores were recorded in 2015. Two customer stories indicate the project's potential to have a great impact on individual's lives:

- One visitor to the drop-in sessions at the central library was an out-of-work former HGV driver who had moved to the area to support his ailing father. This had led to him being unable to work and falling into financial difficulties. At the drop-in session, the volunteer showed him how to use a browser and a search engine to look for jobs, to look for re-training and to access financial advice online. The individual visited several times, and by the final session was able to do all these things.
- Another success story was two friends who, when they first appeared at the drop-in session in the Central Library, had never used a computer before. They became repeat visitors, and both purchased tablet computers and later laptops. One of the two friends who visited the drop-in sessions regularly has since found employment.

The purpose of the pilot was to recruit 10 digital volunteers, and the financial benefits of the continuing project can be seen in the value of volunteer time:

- Average volunteer hours per week were about 20 at the start of the project (April 2015), rising to 48 as of February 2016, with an average of 32 over the year. It is estimated that 1600 volunteer hours will have been given to the project in the year 2015/16.
- Using the London Living Wage of £9.40 per hour as a proxy, this equates to over £15,000 in service time.
- Were the number of hours currently volunteered to continue over the forthcoming 12 months, the value of that time would amount to over £22,500 over the course of the year.

The availability and reliability of wi-fi and equipment has occasionally been an issue, although wi-fi across the library network has recently been upgraded and can now accommodate the number of users bringing in their own devices. Likewise, working with partners also creates a dependency: for example, sessions at the Trinity Place sheltered housing scheme have had to be postponed in early 2016 due to building work.

Key learning points

- Volunteers have enabled Reading to offer support that would otherwise not have been possible, and to scale up the scheme. However, the project did learn that there was a poor geographical correlation between opportunities and volunteers, and they have begun seeking volunteers from the communities they are seeking to support (such as South Reading, where three local volunteers have so far been recruited).
- Working with partners and offering drop-in sessions at popular venues and around popular activities (such as the lunch club) has helped them reach the target groups and generate demand. However, in some cases, suitable venues with a training room available – such as Reading YMCA – were in upmarket suburban areas where there was less need for the scheme.
- Success begets success – having seen the success of the Central Library drop-in sessions the organisers of the South Reading scheme approached Get Online Reading, which now supports their work in Whitley with volunteers and promotion.
- Demonstrating progress, including financial savings, is more straightforward where solid baseline information exists. Projects seeking to achieve similar goals might consider how they can collect baseline data on the skills and confidence of visitors to their drop-in sessions – without this getting in the way of providing support.

Next steps

The pilot scheme's objective was to recruit 10 Digital Champions, and to launch drop-in sessions at Reading Central Library. As of February 2016, the scheme has recruited over 40, and the main thrust of their work going forward is to seek more partners and venues that will offer them opportunities to work with their target customer groups

Contact for further information

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