



# Stockton-on-Tees

## BOROUGH COUNCIL

### Digital Experts Programme

### Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council volunteering case study<sup>1</sup>

#### The issue and context

A major piece of research in to *Loneliness in Stockton-on-Tees*,<sup>2</sup> carried out in 2012, highlighted that despite the extensive efforts of the borough council and its partners, which include a well-established and active Over 50's Assembly<sup>3</sup> and Synergy (the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise consortium lead), lack of awareness and information about the opportunities available in the area remains a key barrier to helping local people engage with preventative services.

This is a particular concern because:

- Although there has been a real improvement in the health of the population in the last decade, people in the area remain less active and eat less healthily than the national average
- The Care Act 2014 places additional requirements on local authorities to ensure the provision of services which help to prevent, delay or reduce the development of care and support needs
- The 2012 loneliness survey found that respondents who were not involved in volunteer work or community organizations were more likely to be lonely than those who were involved.

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<sup>1</sup> This report was developed and written by the LGA. The narrative is such that the report outlines the informal discussions which took place with volunteers and council officers. Therefore, the context of the report reflects the conversational style. For further information on this project, please contact Zoe Flood, whose details can be found at the end of the case study.

<sup>2</sup> Loneliness in Stockton-on-Tees, 2012 <http://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/blog/partnership-work-across-england/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.stockton.gov.uk/adult-services/support-for-older-people/over-50s-assembly/>

The borough and its partners remain keen therefore to find new ways of helping people who are isolated and potentially in need of support to find the information they require.

## The project objectives and targets

The aim of the project was to invest in digital technology and support (including the purchase of tablet computers, training in digital skills, and systems development to ensure mobile applications work effectively) to enable volunteer members of the Over 50's Assembly to become community health and care advocates and guides.

The council and its partners identified four key objectives:

- To promote the range of preventative services in the area through using mobile technology, using volunteers to engage with those in 'hard to reach' groups such as vulnerable older people (people housebound, single person households and so on)
- To highlight the accessibility of the Stockton Information Directory, an online directory of services for adults in the borough – later extended also to cover the Stockton Welfare Advice Network website
- To promote online booking of opportunities and support
- To identify and track service development where there are identified needs but gaps in the support currently available.

The expected outcomes were an increased take-up of current services and an expanded network of community volunteers, as well as greater digital competence and confidence, an enhanced quality of life and reduced social isolation among vulnerable older people. A key element of the project was to build upon current community-based training and support projects such as Silver Surfers and subsequently to foster closer links with the customer service centre and libraries.

Specific targets for the project included:

- To develop up to 30 members of the Over 50's Assembly as 'digital experts' to go out into their communities
- Through this group, to support up to 100 vulnerable older people who were not currently engaging with services through existing routes to access opportunities and/or develop an online social network
- To improve the digital skills and competence of 50 people who had presented for a community care assessment but had been judged ineligible, thereby enabling them to maximize their existing support network.

The council anticipated being able to track efficiency savings by:

- Analysing the cost savings made by the volunteer programme in relation to the costs of the current structure of advice and guidance on available support (the Stockton Navigator Programme)
- Comparing the additional time that the 50 people presenting for a community care assessment were able to stay independent compared to the average and assessing the savings in relation to the average cost of a care package
- Monitoring the instances where a vulnerable older person, with support from a volunteer, was able to find and book support independently, rather than going through the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector referral network where a management fee is paid by the council.

The anticipated timetable for the project was from April 2015 to December 2015, with monitoring of client take-up and a review of impact taking place between October 2015 and February 2016.



## The approach and progress to date

A formal project discussion took place at the end of March 2015, followed by the initial meeting of a Digital Experts Steering Group in April. The group included a range of volunteers from the Over 50's Assembly as well as representatives from the borough and Age UK and was chaired by an active volunteer who was a former councillor. Steering group meetings were held on a regular bi-monthly cycle.

At an early stage, the group identified that engagement with wider partners and existing projects was critical to their success. A brief project résumé (an A4 page) was prepared and discussed to ensure the project activity linked into the wider VCSE economy and that partners engaged with the project's objectives and did not see it as a threat or an isolated short-term initiative. The team also developed terms of reference, a job description for the volunteers and an introductory script for them to use when engaging with residents.

By early July, a range of volunteers had been recruited with more coming through. By September six iPads had been purchased and configured; one Samsung tablet had been acquired; and the volunteers had been through Apple-accredited training. Also in this month, formal meetings were held with the volunteer group to share new information 'packs', which brought together their job description and script as well as leaflets on resources such as the Stockton Information Directory. An initial discussion was held with the Mobile Library as this was seen to offer a way of reaching some of the most isolated communities in the borough.

*Asked 'what was in it for them' the volunteers uniformly expressed their commitment to helping people and making a contribution to the area. Some had direct personal experience of feeling isolated and alone, for instance as a result of bereavement.*

From early in the project, the council found that engagement with wider partners was particularly valuable. Stockton District Advice and Information Service (SDAIS) had been looking at how to extend their services into the community. The steering group therefore agreed to work in partnership with them to promote the use and understanding of the Stockton Welfare Advice Network website as part of the project, complementing the continuing focus on the Stockton Information Directory.

During the autumn of 2015, volunteers participated in a series of events to promote the opportunities that access to mobile technology can offer. These included:

- A stand in partnership with Age UK at an Older People's Day event (October)
- An Over 50's Group meeting (October)
- A coffee morning at the Dementia Hub (November)
- An Age UK 'Try it' Tuesday Group (November)

- A Silver Surfers Computer Group (November)
- A range of visits to sheltered accommodation (December).

Other engagements included a session in the Department for Work and Pension's local offices. Meanwhile, the council publicised the project through its local residents' magazine, at local events and conferences and via the library service, generating a number of enquiries about possible engagements.

## The outcome – successes and challenges

The project activities involved in recruiting and training an initial cohort of volunteers and engaging with a range of older people are complete, with the focus now on the day-to-day tasks of extending the number of volunteers and promoting their activities.

Over the period April to December 2015, 20 volunteers came forward, of whom 9 now form a core group. Based on their training and subsequent engagement with the public, the volunteers are estimated to have invested around 200 hours of their time during this period.

The target of engaging with at least 100 vulnerable older people has also been met. Of these, around half were older adults who had little or no experience of going online. After their initial session, around 20 of these older adults felt comfortable and confident in using the technology. However, it was felt that follow-up sessions would be beneficial, providing an opportunity for the volunteers to revisit those older people who did not fully engage with the technology at the first encounter.

This second element of the project therefore proved more time-consuming than initially anticipated and the borough recognises that it has some further work to do to develop the third strand of the project focused on engaging with people who have presented for a community care assessment.

Nevertheless, a new model of service delivery (the Multi-Disciplinary Service), which was soft-launched in the borough in October 2015, has been helping to identify people who may be supported before they need a Care Act eligibility assessment. By December, over 52 people had been referred to Stockton District Advice and Information Service, while details of the work of the digital expert volunteers and the sessions available had been communicated to them.

Assessing the project against its broader ambitions to promote greater digital confidence and competence amongst older residents is also challenging. However, interviews with the volunteers and the borough project team highlight instances where residents have been able to make small but significant leaps forward.

*Mr X has a disabled wife and their current accommodation is unsuitable. He was unwilling to leave his wife alone while he visited the local housing office to complete the application forms for sheltered accommodation. By being shown how to go online he is now in a position to fill in the forms electronically.*

*Mr Y looked at the Stockton Information Directory (SID) and Stockton Welfare Advice Network (SWAN) websites and found that Care Call, a preventative service, could support him in the home, particularly in instances where he fell. As he was concerned about his finances, he searched the SWAN website for benefits that could help him meet the costs of the installation.*

As for financial impact of the project, in calculating potential savings the borough has assumed that each volunteer gives 45 minutes of support per client. When the cost of the social care officer support involved in coordinating the project, arranging meetings and liaising with groups (estimated at 2 hours per month at an hourly rate of £15.00) is included, this gives a total cost for the volunteers of £360.

Number of people accessing the support	Cost of volunteers	Cost of advice through the council	Estimated savings
104	£360	£1560	£1200

The cost of giving the same advice through the council has been calculated by using the Wellbeing Facilitator and Health Navigator staff as a comparator, with an assumed hourly cost of £20.00.

Stockton’s analysis of the clients who participated in the training indicates that approximately 20 per cent of the people who attended felt more able to take advantage of opportunities online, in terms of being more technically able, knowing where they can access computers and having a better understanding of the advice and support available via the SID and SWAN websites. This suggests there are likely to be continuing financial benefits to the council from potential clients being confident to take advantage of signposting to relevant information.

The project has not been without its practical challenges. For instance, synchronising the recruitment of volunteers with the purchase and configuring of equipment, so that volunteers can be trained and get going as quickly as possible, is no easy task. Yet a delay can lead to some volunteers losing interest.

Many of the volunteers, although retired, lead extremely busy lives, so scheduling their engagements with the different groups needs to be done well in advance (and the groups reminded near the time that the volunteers are booked to come!). Where a visit is made to an individual resident’s own home, for safety reasons two volunteers need to be present, adding a further complication to any timetabling.

## Key learning points

- Volunteers are at the heart of such an initiative. At the outset it is valuable to make an assessment of their digital skills. They then need to be nurtured, supported and imbued with confidence. For instance, the project found that general training on iPads was too abstract and therefore ineffective. Much more successful was one-to-one training for the volunteers on the Stockton Information Directory and Stockton Welfare Advice Network websites which they could actually use in their visits to different groups. The project team also devised scenarios that the volunteers could work through at home, giving them confidence that they would be able to respond to typical residents' queries.
- It is also important to think carefully about the different capabilities of the residents. Some may have no experience of computers whatsoever; others may have been given a computer by their family but be unable to use it; yet others may be competent on a laptop but lack the motor skills to use a touch-screen device.

*One resident had been given a computer by her family but did not understand what to do when she was asked for a password.*

- The project team found it was valuable to set residents' expectations in advance of the volunteers' visits (for instance, to stress that they were not able to fix hardware problems). Not only did this give residents an opportunity to think about the sorts of questions they might ask, it also helped to allay the volunteers' anxieties about their role and ICT competence.

*"When you go out to different groups, you're often competing with other activities. So make the sessions fun. A quiz where teams had to look up the answers using Google was really great". A Digital Experts volunteer*

- Even where a resident decides they do not want to use a piece of ICT equipment, there is a value in alerting them to the support available online, as they can then ask for help from friends or family. The project underlined just how unaware many people are of well-established local schemes, such as Stockton's 'handyperson' service or the ICT courses run by the borough's learning and skills department.
- A partnership approach is likely to be most effective, with different partners bringing different skills and access to different client groups. It is worth spending some time at the outset of a project scanning for existing initiatives already underway that can then be supported and/or complemented with council activity.
- As always, evidence of progress, including financial savings, is easier to demonstrate where solid baseline information exists. Spending time at the outset on gathering relevant data will provide a more robust basis for analysing the success of a project. Some survey work may also be required after interventions have taken place.

## Next steps

The project team are now exploring a number of ways in which the project can be extended:

- Following further discussions with the Mobile Library service, it has been agreed that volunteers will be allowed space on the bus, enabling the project to reach some of the most isolated people in the area.
- The steering group is also keen to work closely with the council's fixed library service and contact centres as venues for further engagement with residents.

*"Don't forget you can be active but still be lonely. If we can get people online, at least they can pursue their interests when they are home on their own in the evening." A Digital Experts volunteer*

- In late 2015 a meeting with the Project Lead of the North of Tees Dementia Collaborative and the Dementia Development Manager highlighted that a number of agencies were already piloting work using touch screen technology with older people, including those with dementia, in both the Stockton and Hartlepool localities. A representative of the Digital Experts steering group now participates in a multi-agency Touch Screen Technology Group which brings together the different partners and projects.

*As part of the Touch Screen Technology Group, the team is hoping to collaborate in a scheme where Police cadets visit older people in care homes. They believe that the combination of an older volunteer and younger cadet will be particularly powerful.*

## Contact for further information

For further information on this project, please contact:

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