Micro Funding
to enable
Digital Inclusion

Learning from Ageing Better in Birmingham

COMMUNITY FUND

AGEING BETTER IN BIRMINGHAM

bvsc the centre for voluntary action

About Ageing Better in Birmingham

"Put simply, we wanted Birmingham to become a better place in which to age."

Ageing Better in Birmingham works to reduce social isolation for people over 50. It aims to create a new movement for community action on ageing and isolation that harnesses active citizenship to reduce isolation and prevent it from happening in the future. Its approach emphasises mutual aid, community action, and preventative interventions. It is delivered in partnership with different organisations across the city and led by Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC). The programme is part of Ageing Better, a seven-year (2015-2022), programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund to explore creative ways for older people to be actively involved in their local communities and help to combat social isolation and loneliness.

The programme uses a methodology called Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) which focuses on the sustainable development of communities based on their strengths and potentials, their "assets". It encourages Birmingham's citizens to take an active role in connecting people in their local neighbourhoods. The programme has supported the creation of hundreds of Ageing Better Groups who together have engaged over 9,000 citizens of all ages across the city. Activities have ranged from bicycle clubs to coffee mornings, ballet and Bhangra dance classes to woodworking, and from to floristry to men's sheds and gardening.

Micro Funding to enable Digital Inclusion

During the initial phase of the Covid-19 crisis and the first countrywide lockdown, Ageing Better Groups paused all face-to-face activity. The programme's community development workers, or "Network Enablers", encouraged and supported groups to move activity online and utilise the transition fund to prevent social isolation. However, it soon became apparent that digital exclusion was an issue for members in some of the groups that were attempting to adapt activity to maintain social interaction during this challenging time.

To better understand groups' challenges when migrating online, we set up a test and learn project, trialling different approaches such as peer learning to increase digital access and skills amongst participants, and also gain a better understanding of what activities work well online.

Network Enablers identified groups who wanted to migrate online, or had already done so, and who had a cohort of digitally excluded members. They submitted applications to the Ageing Better Fund for up to £2,000. Eight groups spread across five Ageing Better Hubs received a combination of hardware and data. A digital consultant was resourced to provide advice on devices, platforms and set-up, and to offer troubleshooting support for groups to get online.

Each group agreed specific learning outcomes according to their circumstances. Network Enablers worked with each group's lead to gather feedback and write a case study. (See Appendix 1 for summary of funded groups.)

Common Issues

While each funded group was different, common issues cut across all investments:

- There were varied digital skills and ability levels. Some participants had no experience of using devices and lacked basic digital skills.
- Some participants were more confident with new technology than others, while some were not comfortable and felt uncertain about learning to use it.
- Some participants reported feelings of embarrassment about their lack of digital skills.
- COVID-19 restrictions had impacted social interaction, with increased feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and low mood.
- Differing COVID vulnerability levels meant some members were more likely to continue shielding when in-person activity was allowed, leading to potentially discordant group dynamics between those that could and couldn't meet in person.

What worked well?

Each group reported positive outcomes, with common themes emerging across all investments:
- Peer support from group members and/or younger family members was crucial to sustaining participation, especially for those who initially struggled to use new technology.
- Participants showed strong commitment to connecting online with peers, which helped motivate them to sustain participation and build the confidence to learn something new.
- Some groups reported members initiating self-learning to use devices, by reading instruction manuals and accessing online videos.
- Most groups are keen to explore how technology could be used to support future activity.
- Participants who were isolated during the lockdowns reported feeling more positive after connecting online.
- Once online, people report using the internet for other activities such as shopping, playing games, connecting with family, reading news and exercise classes etc.
- People who otherwise may never have gone online are now comfortable taking part in online activities.
- Some groups report attracting new members who could not have attended in-person meetings.

"It has been wonderful to have everyone's faces on individual screens; it's been the closest thing to normal we've had for a long time." **InteGreat Theatre**

"It took a while for us to understand how to use the devices. We ended up asking younger family members, like my son and some of the ladies' nephews and nieces, to help us. We just had no clue to begin with, and it was even harder for two of our visually impaired members. They struggled at the beginning, but the help from the family members made a huge difference." **Sar Ramz**

"It was heart-warming to see how proud members felt, to learn the names of the technical parts and how to switch the laptop on and off. Things we all take for granted nowadays." **Moseley Asian Music Makers**

"I want to thank you for the iPad. One of the things that have kept me both entertained and occupied during lockdown is a site called Happy Colour." **Yardley Ventures**

Challenges

Each group reported challenges, with some issues specific to groups and some common themes emerging across all interventions:

Common challenges

- Some groups reported that it was hard to keep participants engaged during social-only video calls, as conversation was limited because they hadn't done much or been able to go anywhere.
- Several groups reported technical issues when setting up new devices. The group leads often took a lead in troubleshooting, but due to their varying levels of technical knowledge they reported that this was time-consuming and frustrating. While Ageing Better provided support through an IT consultant, set-up delays impacted momentum and morale for some groups.

Group-specific challenges

- InteGreat Theatre reported that setting up IT for each session took about 1 hour, meaning extra time commitments were needed from group leads and volunteers.
- Moseley Asian Music Makers reported that some members who had not received new devices used older devices that did not always work well, leading to discordant online experiences.
- Calder IT Group reported that some participants in the older age range (70+) found it hard to get used to the new technology and dropped out of the pilot.

Case Study 1 : Moseley Asian Music Makers (MAMM)

Micro Investment Context

Moseley Asian Music Makers (MAMM) are a group of over 50s focused on performing South Asian music. Predominately comprising older people from South Asian backgrounds, the group was formed to provide a place for people to share cultural music, food, and conversation. The group has individuals with a range of disabilities and needs. Pre-pandemic, the group met weekly at a church in Moseley where members would come to perform or simply watch other members' performances. In response to lockdown MAMM had moved some activity online, hosting jam sessions via Zoom and a Facebook group. Members had varied levels of digital skills and ability, with some members already using devices and with access to the internet at home. However, ten members in total (mostly new members) were identified as digitally excluded, having no access to a device or the internet. The investment allowed the group to purchase devices, with the aim of being able to share sheet music and videos amongst more participants.
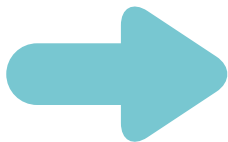
Learning Outcomes

With different levels of digital exclusion, we could see how different participants responded to digital upskilling and the ability to do music-based activity online.

Issues specific to MAMM

About 40 MAMM members indicated that they did not feel comfortable using technology, felt uncertain about how to use it, and were often embarrassed to admit this. The main issues identified by the group were:

1. Access to devices
2. Skills to use devices and internet

Approach to Upskilling
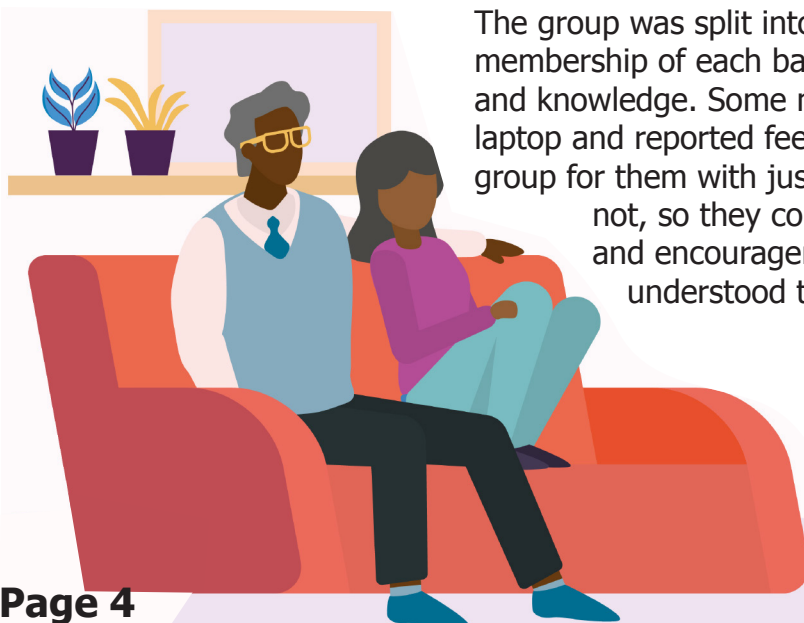
The group was split into several peer learning groups, with membership of each based on an assessment of IT skills and knowledge. Some members had no experience using a laptop and reported feeling embarrassed. We formed a small group for them with just 6 members, 3 experienced and 3 not, so they could receive intensive peer support to and encouragement, after two sessions, members understood the basics of using the new equipment.

Insights

1. Group members had different levels of digital skills and knowledge. As some members had had no prior dealings with a laptop and were quite embarrassed, we felt that members needed to be grouped with people with similar levels of knowledge and ability, rather than mixing levels. Practice and pair work would help to speed up learning.
2. Having access to younger family members who were tech-savvy was as important to upskilling as peer networks.
3. Technology opens considerable possibilities for MAMM activities in the mid and long term.
4. As not all the group had devices, and devices were allocated to those who needed them the most, the rest of the members were left with old devices that did not work as fast, leading to differing online group experiences.

Conclusions

The pandemic presented real challenges for many MAMM members, and they found the new devices useful for keeping in contact, when for some, a landline connection had once been their only source of communication.

Although the investment enabled new ways for members to keep connected with peers, the group leads report they have hit a plateau in terms of the activities they can offer, given that the internet connection isn't always reliable for all members and they are not able to rehearse together as a team, impacting on their confidence. With varying levels of IT skills, it was a slow process to get the whole group online.

It was a big time commitment for the group leads and more capable group members to organise outside IT support, get support from younger family members, coordinate skills assessments and manage peer learning sessions. However, despite encountering difficulties along the way, the group report being positively impacted by the investment.

Case Study 2: Aqua Babes

Micro Investment Context
Aqua Babes are a swimming group who met regularly pre-pandemic in North East Birmingham. Unable to meet for swimming due to the COVID-related pool closure, or to meet in any other context due to isolating/shielding, members reported increased feelings of loneliness and isolation. During the initial crisis period, members relied on traditional support services such as telephone buddying, and were sent wellbeing packs by Compass Support. The group were keen to find ways to reconnect with each other.

The group wanted to get online to host activities such as online quizzes, and to socially connect with others in the group and check in on one another to improve wellbeing. While some members with basic smartphone experience had started communicating via WhatsApp, five group members were identified as very digitally excluded, having no device, internet access or digital skills. The group reported that most members could not afford to upgrade phones or take out contracts for tablets. The investment consisted of tablets and data.
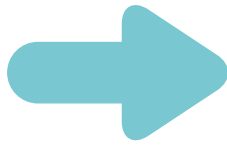
Learning Outcome

How informal approaches to learning digital skills could work in a community setting.

Issues specific to Aqua Babes

The group lead and another group member acting as peer educators were unsure how to set up tablets and therefore were not confident to teach the others. As some members had no digital experience, this made the initial set-up challenging.

Approach to Upskilling

Due to difficulties setting up devices, an in-person training session was held, and a set of printed 'how to' guides produced for individuals to take home with them. During the session, tablets were set up and made internet-ready with Skype downloaded. For those that had zero IT knowledge, the session helped them with basics such as using devices, sending emails, accessing apps etc.

While members were motivated to learn how to connect digitally, many lacked the confidence to use the devices, and the training session built the participants' skills and confidence enough to enable the group leads to take over as peer educators.

Insights

1. It was difficult to keep people engaged during the video calls. Participants had little to talk about as they were often isolated/shielding. To maintain interest the group started running quizzes, which helped focus attention.
2. Some members struggled with low mood and did not always want to interact every week via group video calls. However, they reported using tablets to access internet services and also to check in with people one-to-one and connect with family members etc.
3. Getting online has kept people busy, with members reporting a variety of activities, from playing games to undertaking research for a book.

Conclusions

Getting online has been very beneficial and almost a lifeline for some participants, enabling members to connect with each other and engage in other activity that has benefited their wellbeing during lockdowns. Having the tablets has also been a way for people to keep busy.

Originally planned as a peer learning project, the group needed extra support to set up devices and get online. This initial support gave members the confidence to use their tablets and they have continued to learn through a process of self-learning and peer support.
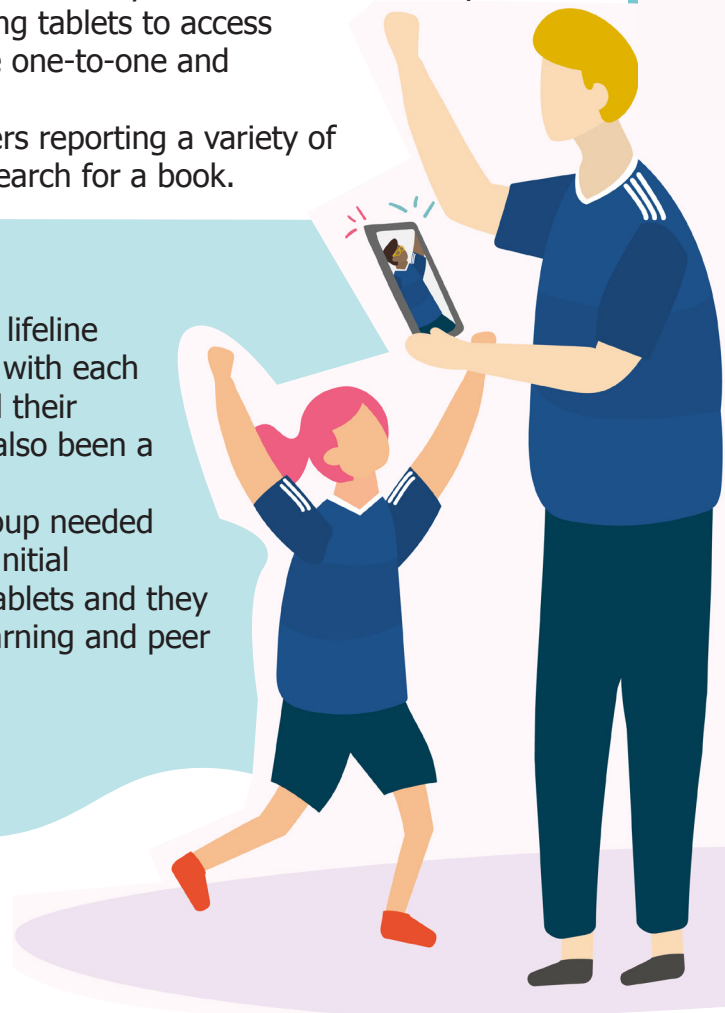
Digital Pilot Conclusions

The opportunity to get online and continue meeting was welcomed by participating groups and their members, with interventions encouraging people who were digitally excluded and may have lacked confidence or motivation to use technology to connect to others.

Positive outcomes were apparent for individuals across all interventions, with the projects offering groups a focus and shared learning activity during the lockdowns. Network Enablers also report that participants have taken the opportunity to use the equipment for activities beyond group meetings.

Key learning

* Offering advice on the hardware needs of groups was essential to the interventions' success. This assessment was helpful, given the lack of IT skills amongst participants and the plethora of products on the market.
* Peer support was critical to sustaining participation. It was both an intentional part of the design of several pilots (via group members) and also delivered informally through family and friends when available.
* Both having an activity to focus on and facilitation are essential to keep online sessions fresh and hold people's attention – some purely social groups reported difficulty sustaining conversation and interest.
* The incentive of participating in an activity and connecting with groups they were part of was an excellent motivator to get participants online.
* Small-scale investment and support offered through the pilot have provided access to the internet for broader activity and online services.
* Groups report that they will consider using technology when designing and delivering future activity, which they might not have considered before.

There were common challenges across all pilots, which caused stress and frustration to group leads and participants. Many participants struggled with basic IT skills and could have benefited from more structured and intensive training on devices. Peer learning and support were critical to sustaining participation but were not always the most appropriate way to deliver tech support and troubleshooting due to the varying IT skills among participants. The digital consultant noted that learning about and using IT "is an ongoing process, and unless people can access support when they need it, as they learn more and want to do more online, they can lose that confidence and become frustrated".

Causes of digital exclusion amongst participants fell into several, often cross-cutting, categories:

* Lack of suitable IT equipment
* Internet access (broadband/data)
* Skills, confidence, and motivation
* Financial hardship

Recommendations for the Ageing Better Fund

Based on this digital pilot's experiences and feedback, any investment in devices and data would benefit from increased investment in intensive IT support and sustained skills development.

As Ageing Better in Birmingham is in its final year it is unlikely that it could allocate the required investment to routinely offer investment in devices and data. However, other schemes exist to address digital exclusion, and it would be better to link groups to specialist providers. When deciding where to invest the limited Ageing Better Fund resources, it is also essential to consider the impact of mass vaccination and likely reduced demand for digital-only activity.

The Ageing Better Fund could have a role in supporting groups who want to adopt technology in the future, and to connect digitally excluded members to that activity by smaller scale and limited investment in devices, data and subscriptions, by:

◇ Providing equipment and data specifically for group leads if this supports them to manage the group's online activity.
◇ Providing groups with a limited number of devices to be used by members on a time-limited trial basis. Groups would manage equipment, and members should commit to acquiring their own equipment once they have the skills and confidence to connect digitally.
◇ Signposting to or funding digital skills classes/workshops for group leads, and funding skills-based workshops for groups that identify a desire to move to more online activity.
◇ Providing groups with short-term funding for subscriptions to Zoom and other digital platforms, for groups to experiment with online activity. Groups should then self-fund or use free alternatives once comfortable with online formats.

Glossary

1. Ageing Better Groups
Local people in Birmingham are supported to create Ageing Better Groups that re-engage people over 50 with their local community. These are mostly autonomous, self-organising groups of people who wanted to do good in their local community by bringing people together. To support them, Ageing Better in Birmingham funded community-based staff called Network Enablers.

2. Network Enablers
Network Enablers at five Hubs advised and supported Ageing Better Networks. They offered a local grassroots presence to Ageing Better and a friendly face so that people in Birmingham who wanted to start a project or activity had support. They helped groups set up and organise in a way that meant they could keep going for years to come. Ageing Better Hubs Network Enablers were based at five Ageing Better Hubs: a City Wide Ageing Better Hub to ensure an offer throughout the city, plus four priority-area Ageing Better Hubs supporting four priority groups/localities where the risks of isolation were identified as being greatest. These were older LGBT people, older carers, outer-city Tyburn, and inner-city Sparkbrook.

3. Ageing Better Fund
The Ageing Better Fund supports citizens of all ages who have an idea they think will help isolated people over 50 in Birmingham. The fund can help pay for initial costs and expenses up to £2,000 for activities that increase community cohesion, change lives and involve people over 50 in the decision-making.

4. Micro Funding
Small grants typically targeting groups who cannot access traditional grant funding Digitally Excluded Unable to access the internet and/or having low levels of digital literacy. Active Citizens People who take an active role in the community

www.ageingbetterinbirmingham.co.uk

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Appendices

Summary of Micro Investments

1. Calder Friends - IT Group Based at a sheltered scheme, the group could not meet face-to-face during the lockdown. Members reported feeling lonely and isolated. It was determined that five digitally excluded members would benefit from devices to enable them to participate in Zoom meetings.

2. Moseley Asian Music Makers - A group of over 50s, predominantly from the South Asian community, who share cultural music, food and conversation. The group migrated activity online, hosting jam sessions via Zoom and Facebook, but identified some digitally excluded members. This investment explored how participants with different digital access levels and skills could participate in music-based activity online.

3. The Sar Ramz Cooking Club - Providing recipes, tutorials, and social support in Edgbaston. The group continued to connect during lockdown using WhatsApp to share videos. They identified seven digitally excluded members who wanted to participate in online activities. The group wanted to understand how a collective objective - the creation of a recipe book - could encourage group members to learn new digital skills.

4. Yardley Ventures - An arts and crafts group based in Stechford, Yardley Ventures initially posted out activity packs and used phone/WhatsApp to connect members during the lockdown. They wanted to experiment with creative apps as a tool to enable group participation. They identified nine digitally excluded members and wanted to explore how participating in group activity could motivate people to learn digital skills.

5. InteGreat Theatre - An intergenerational drama group for both deaf and hearing people, which includes participants from LGBTQ+, ethnic minority and disabled communities. The group continued meeting via Zoom and Facebook, but technical issues led to exclusion for some members needing BSL interpretation. They wanted to provide better access for those with disabilities, focusing on the deaf and hard of hearing.

6. Aqua Babes - Digital Friends Online While unable to physically meet for regular swimming, the Castle Vale based social group wanted to host social activities online such as games and quizzes. Some of the members had more digital skills than others, and they planned to create an IT buddy/peer learning system. Five group members had no devices, internet access or online skills.

7. A peer learning project funded through the Sparkbrook Hub was delayed due to the impact of COVID-19 on participants, and is not included in this evaluation report.