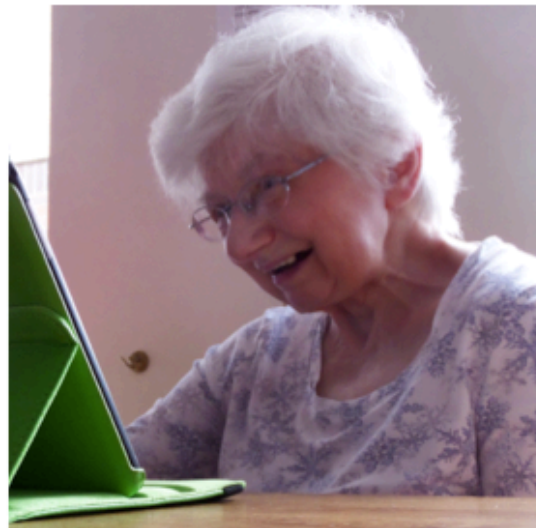
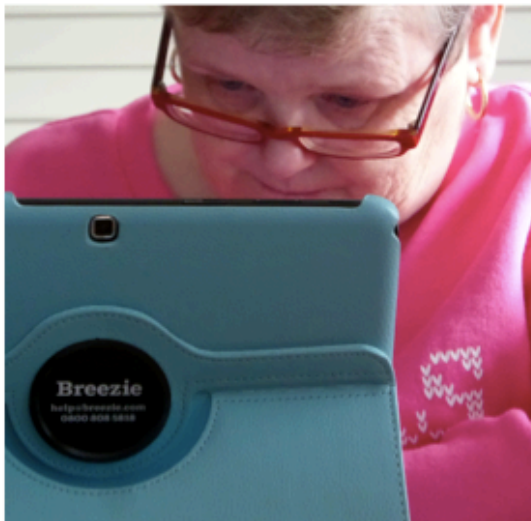




Best Practice Paper: Lessons from the 'Bridging the Digital Divide' Project



Background: Haven't we heard this all before?

The “Digital Divide” was first recognized as a major challenge over 20 years ago, but still, the problem has not gone away. Far from dying out with the older generation, the social, economic, and educational inequalities that are at its root cause persist, and affect individuals across their entire life course. Sadly, the digital divide has taken its place alongside other long-standing, stubborn inequalities. The problem, in fact, becomes increasingly acute as more and more essential parts of everyday life take place online and further exclude those who are not.

A few statistics¹:

Digital exclusion affects some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society. According to the BBC Media Literacy study, 21% of people can't use the web. 14% of people don't have Internet access at all, so 7% do have Internet access but don't use it in ways that benefit them day to day. So, who are these people?

- Those with literacy problems - 5% of the adult population do not have basic literacy skills (2.6 million people), making using the Internet a bigger problem for this group
- **Those in social housing - 37% of those who are digitally excluded are social housing tenants**
- Those on lower wages, or unemployed - 17% of people earning less than £20,000 never use the Internet, as opposed to 2% of people earning more than £40,000. 44% of people without basic digital skills are on lower wages or are unemployed
- **Those with disabilities - 33% of people with registered disabilities have never used the Internet. This is 54% of the total number of people who have never used the internet**
- Young people - 6% of people who lack digital skills are between 15 and 24 years. Only 27% of young people who are offline are in full-time employment.
- **Older people - over 53% of people who lack basic digital skills are aged over 65, and 69% are over 55**

Unlike tackling all of the world's ills however, working towards full digital inclusion is eminently achievable. Research from the Tinder Foundation shows exactly what it would take to achieve that goal.² With proper resourcing, it can be done, but we must target and tailor our efforts to meet the specific circumstances of the people who most need our help. We need to engage with them and empower them to contribute to the process.

¹ Yes, you have heard these before – here probably:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-digital-inclusion-strategy/government-digital-inclusion-strategy#people-who-are-digitally-excluded>

² It's £875 million by the way - “A Leading Digital Nation by 2020: Calculating the cost of delivering online skills for all.” Catherine MacDonald, Tinder Foundation, 2014

Project Overview

‘Bridging the Digital Divide’ aims to break down barriers to digital & social inclusion amongst Housing Association tenants and to support and develop tenants’ self-confidence, digital skills, access to online services, and further learning opportunities. It is a partnership project between Clanmil Housing Association, the Department for Finance and Personnel’s Digital Inclusion unit, and Supporting Communities Northern Ireland.

The project has piloted the use of “Breezie” tablets – and is the first project of it’s kind in Northern Ireland as far as we know. Breezie is a tablet service aimed at older people, which removes the clutter, jargon and confusion from the Internet. It can do anything a standard tablet does, but strips it all back to intuitive, user-friendly basics.

Each participant’s new “Breezie” comes already set up and tailored for them based on a simple form that is filled in when they first join the project. It is ready to go out of the box with email, Skype, Facebook, and contacts already set up for each user. It also allows the project coordinator remote access to the tablet to add new content and applications as the project continues.

The learning is directed by both the project coordinator and by the groups involved. By tailoring the course to the interests of the people involved, the coordinator addresses one of the major barriers to learning, the lack of motivation or perceived relevance. Overall, the project does aim to teach all of the identified Basic Digital Skills³ required to safely use the Internet and access the benefits it can provide, but in a more flexible way than traditional computer skills courses.

Our Participants

This project targeted older people with some kind of disability living in housing associations, thus reaching participants who fit into at least three of the groups most likely to be digitally excluded noted in the statistics above.

As a pilot project, we worked with a limited number of participants. This has enabled us to really get to know each person and do some in depth case studies along the way.

We have worked with two different groups of Clanmil Housing residents:

- A group of 8 older people aged 60+ living at Gloonan House – an independent living accommodation in Ahoghill, Ballymena.

³ <http://www.go-on.co.uk/basic-digital-skills/>

- A group of 9 people aged 70+ at Mullan Mews – a supported housing scheme designed to meet the needs of people with dementia in Belfast.⁴

Participants were chosen by the Clanmil Scheme Coordinators based on their own estimation of who would get the most benefit from being involved in the pilot. Most of the people chosen had never used the Internet before or had done so in a very limited way.

The two groups had different abilities and different goals for their own involvement with the project, but the ethos of our approach – that everyone can and should reap the benefits of being online - remained the same.

Our Approach

We know from countless examples of past research, policy and practice that the digital divide is about four main things:

- Physical gaps in access and connectivity;
- The monetary cost of access to wifi and a computer;
- A lack of skills and the digital literacy needed to interpret, understand and effectively use the information presented online;
- The role of motivation, attitude and interests that make an individual want to go online.

Like other digital inclusion projects, we attempted to address each of these issues in our efforts. We immediately addressed the first two barriers by meeting in common areas of the housing schemes where Clanmil already provides Wi-Fi access and by providing new Breezie tablets to each participant. An experienced trainer was hired to deliver basic skills training and to guide the participants towards a better understanding of the how the Internet can be used. Our main focus, however, was on the importance of individual and community empowerment that we believe is the key to tackling the most intractable of the four barriers, namely a lack of motivation and a negative attitude.⁵

Building Communities of Learners

Using a community development approach, Bridging the Digital Divide created new pockets of social inclusion and communities of interest around the issue of learning more about the internet through the cultivation and support of the small tenant

⁴ Over the course of the project, the numbers have fallen to 5 at Gloonan House and 6 at Mullan Mews due to several deaths and one drop out. We hope to start another group with the extra tablets before the project winds down.

⁵ 82% of people who don't have the Internet at home say it's because they have no interest. (Tinder Foundation Infographic, 2014)

groups. Our findings reveal that one of the most successful outcomes of the project was the friendships that were formed and the support networks that were created both on and offline. Far from being a dehumanising experience (as some people fear the internet will be) our groups tell us they enjoyed making new connections, and strengthening old ones by engaging in new methods of communication.

For example, using email has enabled our participants to communicate with family members who have moved abroad. Learning to send and receive photos has allowed them to see their far-flung relatives and their children and grandchildren that they haven't seen in person in many years. Facebook has also proven to be a great hit amongst our participants allowing them to keep up with friends and family in a way that some of us take for granted – and they are getting some great feedback from the “younger generation” who are mightily impressed that they are using social media.

We have also started a pen pal programme between the two schemes to give the participants a chance to practice their email and typing skills. Although they have never met in person, the two groups are having a great time getting to know each other and comparing notes about their new digital skills. They are even planning a get-together at the end of the project.

Learning new skills and, perhaps even more importantly, supporting each other to do so, has given the participants a sense of accomplishment and self-confidence.

“Before this project, I never used to come out of my room or join in, but now our group is like a family and I feel a lot better about myself.”

– Group member, Gloonan House

“I thought I'd never be able to manage this, but it's amazing how you can get on with it.”

– Group member, Mullan Mews

Initially, many people who have never gone online will often say they don't see any use to it and therefore don't want to try. After engaging in the project, our participants now recognise the benefits of learning to use the Internet, even if gaining all of the skills is still a work in progress. This is a key outcome in changing attitudes and its importance cannot be over estimated.

"I'm also learning to shop online, which could be very useful to me, especially if in the future if I'm not able to get out to the shops on my own."

-Group member, Gloonan House

For the group of women with dementia at Mullan Mews, playing music on YouTube has been one of the most popular activities. Music has a wonderful way of bringing back memories and a popular song from the right year can spark great conversations amongst the group. We figured out that several members of our group were probably frequenting the same dance halls of Belfast in the 50's. Having the ability to call up and share any song, video of the dancing, and the fashion of the time - as the discussion is taking place - has allowed the group to keep their interactions going in much more meaningful ways. The positive exchanges and feelings of camaraderie in the group have encouraged them to keep at it even if they might not remember everything from previous sessions.

"It's amazing, I can remember all the words to these old songs!"

- Group member, Mullan Mews

"I am going to master this. I am 80 years old but I am going to do it!"

- Group member, Mullan Mews

Once someone really understands what the Internet can offer them it's like a corner is turned, and they start really looking forward to making new discoveries and being able to do it on their own. In addition to gaining the essential digital skills, like communicating, finding information online, navigating a website, filling in web forms and so on, the Gloonan House group have also each found new ways that the internet is of interest to them, for example: playing games, making music playlists, keeping up with sports and news, making slideshows from photos, using UTV and iplayer, etc.

"I really like Spotify because I can play all the music that makes me feel good anytime I want to - for free!"

Group member, Gloonan House

“It’s very interesting, you have to keep at it. You don’t even know what you don’t know!”

- Group member, Mullan Mews

Although only a handful of people are taking part in each scheme, these small pockets of inclusion are having a knock-on effect on other tenants who are not participating, which is an unexpected, but most welcome, benefit of the work.

There is a lot of curiosity and talk about what [the group] are doing every Friday morning. Other tenants are asking them questions about what they can look up online. When the others see the likes of [our participants] they think, well if they can do it, so can I!

- Scheme Coordinator, Gloonan House

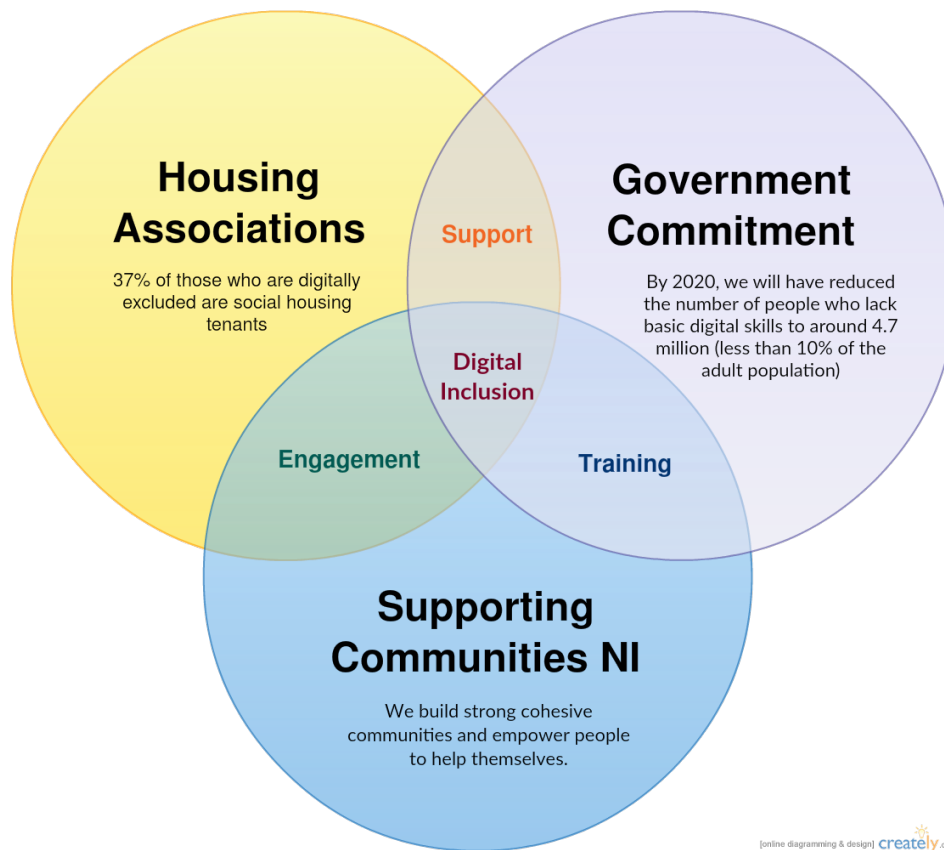
We are also seeing family members getting involved and using the tablets to help them communicate with their relatives in person, not just over email and Facebook. One of our case studies shows how going online together to look at videos and websites has given families a new way to relate to each other.

It improves family relationships. [Her son] is able to share his interests with her and feel that she gets it because they are doing it together. It really improves the quality of communication between them and gives them something in common.

- Scheme Coordinator, Gloonan House

Nothing in Isolation - Partnership Works

Creating and supporting communities of any kind requires forming good partnerships. Bridging the Digital Divide worked well because it had a solid partnership behind it and very committed and involved key players from each. The diagram below shows how SCNI, Clanmil, and DFP’s interests and expertise overlap and interact to create a synergistic outcome.



Although this was just a small pilot involving only a limited number of participants, the structures are now in place to replicate the work on a larger scale, but much of the success must be attributed to the dedication and enthusiasm of the people involved. Both schemes had attempted some digital inclusion programmes in the past, but agreed that it took the more intense involvement with SCNI's Project Coordinator to make such a significant impact.

BITC did do some stuff with the Internet with us but it's not on par with what we have now. They didn't do any social connections or emailing with relatives. I wouldn't have done it either. I wouldn't have touched Facebook without your backing.

- Scheme Coordinator, Mullan Mews

A typical 10-12 week digital skills course is not long enough for the relationships and bonds to form amongst the participants that we have seen emerge as a result of this longer and more intensive approach. After nearly 6 months of weekly sessions the two groups are very well established and in a position to continue meeting regularly when the project finishes, with continued support from the scheme coordinators and from one another.

Working with Clanmil Housing Association

Housing Associations are well especially well placed to intervene in this issue; they are currently housing around 37% of the digitally excluded population. They can and should be providing Internet access as an essential part of their housing service. Clanmil have lead on this by providing Wi-Fi and shared tenants computers in their common rooms across Northern Ireland and are committed to furthering digital inclusion amongst their tenants.

The two housing scheme coordinators who worked with us on this project have been tremendous assets. They both have done everything in their power to ensure the project is successful. They have also been great first hand observers and reporters of the changes they see happening as a result of the work. The interviews they gave as part of the case study work has given us a deeper understanding of the challenges each of our participants are overcoming by being part of this pilot and real insight into the ways they are benefitting on a personal level.⁶

“Our group values being included in the way the world functions now. Keeping up and feeling that you are a part of the world, and to know what emails and Facebook, etc. are. You are never too old to learn something new. As our next generation come along we are going to have to be prepared for more digitally able tenants. There are no older people now because we are all engaged with technology. Everything is achievable even for people with dementia.”

– Scheme Coordinator, Mullan Mews

“For me, seeing something that has such a positive effect on them - it’s very easy in this job to see barriers, but when you find a way to overcome them it has a great effect on me. It gives me confidence to try other new things with them. I always tell my colleagues how fantastic this project this is, my tenants are getting so much from it. It’s bigger than you realise!”

- Scheme Coordinator, Gloonan House

⁶ See case study report – available from SCNI.

Working with the Department of Finance & Personnel/Go ON NI

As the funding partner with a remit for digital inclusion, the Digital Inclusion Unit of DFP has been more than just the bank for this project. The staff there have taken a very hands on approach, offering practical support by linking us up with other organisations that can feed into our work such as PRONI, Barclay's Digital Eagles, Advice NI, The Alzheimer's Society, and Business in the Community. They have promoted our project far and wide and helped us with the process of developing monitoring and evaluation tools.

Of course, the money was a great help too! We recognise that government can not bear the full financial burden of digital inclusion, but there is a commitment from government to ensure it's citizens are able to access their services and information online as their Digital Transformation Strategy is rolled out. We hope that DFP will continue to play a role in supporting projects like this one.

"This is a must because of the way the government is going and the way technology is going. There will be no such thing as ringing up and making an appointment. I'm pleased that we've had this opportunity because it's the way the future is going."

- Group member, Gloonan House

Sustainability

We are already seeing the lasting effects of introducing the Breezie tablets and getting people thinking about using the Internet more in their day-to-day lives. Both of our participating schemes have already used the computers to contribute to other activities at the houses and the scheme coordinators tell us they can definitely see incorporating them into future events.

The project recommends that the participants be allowed to keep their tablets to ensure they continue to be able to communicate with friends and family online, further develop their new skills with volunteers and each other's help, and indeed contribute to the future group work of their housing schemes.⁷ Buying every digitally excluded person in Northern Ireland a tablet may not be a sustainable plan, but once an existing mobile device has been highly customised to an individual it would be cruel to take it away. Many housing schemes do provide a shared tenants computer, but for the less confident beginner, getting used to your own device can really play a part in building your confidence. (Plus it remembers all your passwords!)

⁷ A final decision on this matter has not been made by DFP as yet.

We have also discovered that many older people's families have already bought their relatives laptops and tablets but have not had the time to show them how to use it. The cost of a personal device is not the main stumbling block for many people but certainly remains an issue. Housing Associations and their tenants could harness the power of numbers to buy in bulk thus reducing the cost of each tablet.

In terms of continuing an organised "class" time to bring groups together, we have found that there are many people wanting to volunteer their time. The corporate social responsibility programmes at large companies like BT allow their employees time out to volunteer. An hour a week from someone who is up to date on all the fun new apps is all that's needed to keep a group like Gloonan House going.

In a place like Mullan Mews, where there are significantly more carers on site, support staff are already getting the Breezies out to look up music, recipes, take photos of events and more. For people with dementia, the project is less about learning a new skill, and more about enjoying new ways of interacting with the world.⁸

Direction for the Future

Funding for adult education in Northern Ireland is becoming increasingly scarce as the "austerity" cuts kick in. The recent loss of vital adult educational organisations such as the WEA, and the staff and course cuts at FHE colleges, have made it harder for even the most motivated student to find affordable computer training let alone someone who doesn't think the Internet is for them because they are "too old and too stupid" or just don't realise the importance of being online.

It is clear to us that digital inclusion is much more of a social and economic issue than it is a technical one. In fact, we believe it should be considered a human right and treated with the same urgency and importance. Better technology in the form of easy to use tablet computers and specialised software have made it possible for just about anyone to get online with the tap of a finger. New improvements and advances in software are constantly making the Internet more accessible for people of varying abilities. The issue now is our obligation to assist those who are the most unlikely to get online by themselves as well as our commitment to find effective ways to reach and engage with them.

The task of helping people get online is falling increasingly to the community and voluntary sector, where money can go a lot further and where we have expertise in reaching those who are deemed "hard to reach". But, the community sector cannot do it alone; solutions require collaboration across technical and social research, between education and social policy, between industry, community, and the public sector.

⁸ The Mullan Mews group definitely have acquired some new skills even if they don't think they have! There is more information about that to come in a final project report.

More Information

A full project report will be produced at the conclusion of the pilot early in 2016. For more information, photos, and videos of the Bridging the Digital Divide, check out SCNI's website and our project's Facebook page or contact us:

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