



Doing digital inclusion with the most excluded: People with Learning Disabilities



Good Things
Foundation

TalkTalk

Good Things Foundation ran a project in partnership with TalkTalk focused on helping people to get started and stay safe online. 23 Digital Inclusion Hubs tried out new activities in order to reach people who are among the most digitally excluded in the UK. People over 65, those on low incomes, and disabled people make up a large segment of the population who remain digitally excluded and therefore unable to benefit fully from all the opportunities that the internet and technology can provide.

Hubs worked hard to reach these excluded learners. When we evaluated the project, we spoke to a number of Hubs to capture their experiences. This research has enabled us to produce three informal guides to doing digital inclusion with highly digitally excluded people. Each guide is about working with a different excluded audience. This one focuses on engaging people with learning disabilities. It is intended for small organisations who want to do more work to reach the most digitally excluded people in the UK.

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Why is important to engage people with learning disabilities in digital inclusion?

- A significant number of people with learning disabilities are using digital devices: recent Of-com data confirms that 61% of people with learning disabilities use a smartphone. However, this rate is still below levels of use by non-disabled audiences.
- Many people with learning disabilities miss out on the life-enriching experiences that the internet can provide because their carers, support workers or families think they are too vulnerable to the dangers that the internet can present and therefore restrict their access and usage.
- In contrast, people with learning disabilities themselves value how using the internet can help them express an alternative identity and pursue opportunities that would otherwise be hard to access. The internet can help people with learning disabilities stay in touch with friends, learn new things, and access a wide range of entertainment - just as it can for anyone.
- Digital inclusion activities with a particular focus on online safety can address the concerns of those close to learners while ensuring that learners can benefit from the internet. Embedding safe online behaviours into learning can help learners and carers alike feel confident that they are aware of the benefits and risks of being online.



What have Digital Inclusion Hubs learnt about doing digital inclusion with people with learning disabilities?

Where to begin:

- **Start by talking to people with learning disabilities and people they trust.**

Most hubs taking part in the project didn't commonly have learners with learning disabilities attending their venue. They contacted a range of local services working with people with learning disabilities in order to build relationships with them.

If you are looking to do the same, try the following:

- Contact your local social services and ask for a list of providers of support services for people with learning disabilities.
- Conduct an online search for local self-advocacy groups or charitable organisations supporting people with learning disabilities in your city or county.

- **Ask learners about their current digital experience.**

Before delivering a set workshop or class, hubs spent time understanding what devices and activities their potential learners already accessed. Like other digitally excluded groups, many people with learning disabilities are not wholly digitally excluded, but simply lack a full range of digital skills. Hubs spoke to learners about the things they would like to be able to do online and using which devices. If multiple learners expressed interest in particular activities, they built these into a priority list to cover first, before exploring more individual interests one-to-one.

[Learn My Way](#) topics cover a range of devices, digital skills levels, and online activities, so browse them and establish which of these are most interesting to learners.

"I was happy to search on the internet for information on local groups, BBC news and local papers. But I have concerns with internet banking, where there are potential risks about what other people might find out about you. I worried about the security aspect."

- **Michael, a learner from Northamptonshire, on how he felt at the start of a digital training course.**

- Work hard to develop an understanding of the communication needs of learners. This will inform what session formats are appropriate for which individuals. Some learners are able to work very independently - for example, making their way through a topic on Learn My Way on their own - while others may appreciate walking through learning material in small trusted groups, discussing and asking questions along the way. Others may need interpretive help from a personal assistant.

When working with people with learning disabilities, you may need to plan and run several sessions on the same topic, or work with some learners one-to-one.



Learning Materials

- **Printed handouts can particularly help learners who struggle to remember all the steps towards completing an activity, or find it hard to recall what they have previously learnt.**

Hubs created hard copies of guidance for learners to keep with their devices, so they always had a reference point in case they needed it. Hard copies with memorable pictures and prompts are more immediately available than content buried away in the middle of an online course. If you do produce handouts, see the Useful Resources section at the end of this guide to help you put together information in the most accessible way.

- Another way to understand how well learners have understood and remembered an activity is to ask them about the quiz questions in Learn My Way topics. If learners find them consistently difficult, it may indicate that they have particular trouble with memory recall and would benefit from a recap or hard copy handouts.

- **Your existing digital inclusion learning materials may be appropriate for some learners, but not for others.**

After talking to learners and the people who support them, hubs had a better understanding of the information formats that different learners can best use. Although Good Things Foundation have worked hard to make the online safety topics on Learn My Way accessible, some of the language can rely on terms that learners don't understand. Hubs found it useful to prepare in advance simple definitions or metaphors for important online safety terms - such as phishing, scams, or trolling. One hub decided to test a range of pictures and metaphors with learners to see which were most instinctively understood, and therefore most suitable for building into future materials.

- **When first starting to cover a topic, it can be fruitful to leave the devices alone for a while.**

Staff at hubs found that a good way to ease into a topic was to invite a small group of learners to share what they've heard already about a subject, and encourage them to ask any questions they have about it. Talking together in the round about experiences and worries, and writing down issues on a flipchart to address later in the course material was a common approach that seemed to work well.



Tutor-Learner Relationships:

- **Patience and observation skills on the part of the tutor and volunteers are particularly important.**

Hubs told us that learners could be especially reluctant to admit that they don't understand something being covered in class, and wouldn't always ask for help when they need it. This means that tutors generally needed additional **support from volunteers** to properly track how learners were getting on.

Some learners don't always find it easy to admit the limits of their skills, so they can appear very capable even when they are missing key areas of knowledge. For this reason, observation skills are key in this setting, as well as the patience to cover subjects clearly. Clarity and patience are particularly important when covering what is and isn't safe online.

"I've been to IT sessions before, but this is the best one. And [the tutor] is so informative. He doesn't shout or yell if you're late, he just takes you to where everybody else is at. And I really love him to bits. Other IT tutors were rushing me into doing something, whereas with Norman it's, "Right, you've gotta do this, and then you do that to get there," and I find it so much easier to learn from him, doing it that way."

- Siobhan, Learner at Wirral Mencap

- **As a tutor, emphasise your own mistakes as a user of digital devices.**

This can help remove some of learners' fear of admitting problems or asking silly questions. It can be powerful to acknowledge that we are all constantly learning how best to use digital technology, and that things go wrong even for the 'experts'.

"When [learners] saw that I couldn't use the technology on that day because something went wrong, everybody suddenly started telling their stories of not being able to do things. And it became a really, really good session, because it was much more interactive, and much more equal, [...] it wasn't like somebody doing a show and teach session, it was like a very equal group discussion. Everybody was laughing about, "Oh, I tried to sign up for this and it all went wrong!" and much more of a sharing session. And, I think, much more useful for the people there."

- Tutor at an Online Centre

- **When some learners start to feel more confident in what they have learnt, invite them to support newer learners.**

Staff discovered that advanced learners could build their confidence even more by helping and guiding newer learners to try new things. In a similar way to learner-led discussions, a peer support approach balances the power in the room and provides the opportunity for tutors to understand their students even better. Learners also told us they enjoy being able to help others in a similar situation, and beginner learners can benefit from the experience of others like them.



What to do at the end of the course

Recognising learning and achievement with certificates and awards can be really appreciated.

Learners can feel rightly proud in seeing their learning acknowledged and formalised. Several hubs found that certificates were very popular with learners and a good motivator during times when they found learning difficult.

Be aware that learners can become less confident about certain online activities when they discover more of their potential risks.

At some hubs, learners chose to disengage with activities after learning more about them - for example, by deleting their Facebook account. Tutors tried to view this positively: ultimately, it should be up to people with learning disabilities to decide how they feel comfortable using the internet. These independent decisions are part of the self-determination that we want to encourage learners to achieve through equipping them with reliable information about staying safe online.

Learners' Experiences

"I come to Bishop's House Day Care Centre every day. Hertfordshire Libraries had sent details of the internet safety topics to the hubs and some service users of the hubs were asked whether they would like to take part in the training and complete the Learn My Way topics [...] I felt pleased to be attending the session and was very keen to learn about internet safety [...] Since completing the topics I have improved my knowledge of Facebook use. I also have more information about completing online forms and increased awareness of online scams and of how important it is to keep your passwords and account details safe."

Nigel Broe, Learner at a Day Centre

"I use my iPad to look up stuff, I watch websites on it, I use it to FaceTime, I've got my own Facebook page... I use it to look at the daily news headlines and stuff. I find it very interesting."

- Siobhan, Learner at Wirral Mencap

Useful Resources

[Making written information easier to understand for people with learning disabilities](#) - a guide to creating 'Easy Read' information for people with learning disabilities, which you may want to consult if you are creating learning materials.



If you decide to try doing more digital inclusion with people with learning disabilities, please let us know how you get on! We're always available at hello@goodthingsfoundation.org, or you can tweet us [@NDI_Network](https://twitter.com/NDI_Network). We'd love to hear from you.