Delivering Digital Support in Homelessness Services

Summary of The Reboot UK Project 2016-2020

Introduction

Homeless Link worked with national digital inclusion charity, The Good Things Foundation, as part of a four-year project from 2016 to 2020 to explore how digital support is offered in the homelessness sector and how it could be improved. It was a 'test and learn' project, exploring peer mentoring and a range of interventions to get people online including use of 'digital champions' and 'community connectors' roles. This activity formed part of a wider Reboot UK project delivered by a consortium led by Good Things Foundation with Mind, Homeless Link and Family Fund. It was funded by the National Lottery Community Fund.

The Project

The project ran through three phases over a four-year period. The initial two phases involved consulting and co-designing a programme of interventions to test different ways of engaging people with multiple needs to support and develop their digital skills and interests. This was about moving away from 'off the shelf' or standard types of IT training and trying out tailored interventions. Evidence was collected of improvements in the digital skills of people who were supported and the wider positive impacts this had on their well-being, confidence, and motivation. An evaluation of the first two phases identified two key learnings for the homelessness sector:

The embedding of digital skills support within homelessness services can be highly effective in creating positive outcomes for individuals.

Peer mentoring is a powerful vehicle to support vulnerable people to develop digital skills.

As a result of this learning, the third and final phase introduced a new focus and tested the benefits of a dedicated 'community connector' role along with digital champions within a range of homelessness settings in the local area. Homeless Link funded eight homelessness organisations to recruit a community connector. These roles sat within their organisations but worked beyond it with a wide range of local agencies (also working with people experiencing homelessness). The connectors established and supported a network of digital champions in their own organisation and within these external partners, supporting them to delivering digital support to people experiencing homelessness and multiple

disadvantage in a variety of different ways. The connector was able to create mutual support among partners, staff, and volunteers. Connectors roles funded through Reboot UK were based at Co-Lab Exeter, Elim Connect Centre in Wells, Foxton Centre in Preston, Seaview Project in Hastings, Connection at St Martins in London, Inspiring Change Manchester, Evolve Housing & Support in London, and St Mungo's in London.

This third phase of the project achieved impressive reach – the eight community connectors recruited over 140 digital champions in more than 45 organisations working with people experiencing homelessness (including local Citizens Advice, Emmaus, YMCAs as well as small local groups such as day centres and night shelters). Digital champions included volunteers and people with lived experience of homelessness. Over 1,400 people experiencing homelessness or using homelessness services were supported with their digital skills – from making Universal Credit claims to researching classic cars, from bidding for flats to publishing their poetry. This contributed to the wider Reboot UK project supporting over 3,900 people in this phase.

In most cases, Good Things Foundation's Learn My Way online resources helped connectors and champions to engage people. But Reboot enabled different approaches to be tested - a mix of one-to-one tailored support, structured and flexible group sessions, more traditional skills such as CV writing and job search, and creative routes such as photography, social media, and music.

Some connectors also helped to overcome gaps and barriers to digital inclusion, for example by sourcing cheap devices and collating maps of local free Wi-Fi hotspots.

Project recommendations to improve digital support to people experiencing homelessness

While it was clear that many homelessness organisations were already doing a lot to develop their digital support offer, others were at an early stage and would benefit from additional guidance, so we came up with some key recommendations for homelessness organisations:

Identify digital champions within your organisation – it's a great way to introduce digital skills within existing resources. Champions are staff or volunteers who lead the way in providing and promoting digital support to clients, either through

existing services or standalone activities. Often the best Digital Champions are clients with lived experience using a peer support approach. Champions don't need lots of IT knowledge, but they do need to be enthusiastic about the opportunities for digital in everyday support and engagement.

Embed digital in every activity - there are lots of activities where digital can play a part, whether it's researching local history, creating a playlist, choosing a film, or finding a recipe. Set your teams a challenge to go online as part of every activity, embedding it in your work.

Learn together – staff don't need to be experts, as there will be a huge mix of digital skills among the people you support. Ask your colleagues, volunteers, residents, and guests to help each other by sharing what they know. A culture of continuing development benefits everyone.

Form a networking group of champions within or across organisations to encourage connections and collaborations around learning tools and sharing what works in digital support. Many organisations won't have the resource for specialist digital roles, so these networks are invaluable to maximise learning.

Further resources and tools from the Reboot UK Project

Basic guide to providing digital support in homelessness settings

In the final phase of the Project, we worked with Good Things Foundation to develop a **simple guide** for homelessness organisations who want to support people to develop their digital skills.

Webinar Recording

We also hosted a webinar in May 2020 'Ensuring digital inclusion for those experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond'

Reboot Project Reports

Two other reports written by Good Things Foundation from different phases of the Reboot Project may also still have some useful information, 2017 Project Evaluation report and 2018 Project Impact Report.

Short film

Good Things Foundation made a Short film about the Reboot UK Project in 2019 featuring two of our Reboot partners, Evolve Housing & Support and St Mungo's.

Cathedral Archer Project Reboot Resources

The Cathedral Archer Project (now the Archer Project) in Sheffield worked with us in the early phases of the Project and in 2017 we produced some resources in partnership with them to help share their experience and learning of supporting their service users to develop their digital skills and in setting up peer monitoring. Some of these may still be useful and these are attached at Appendix One.

Appendix One

Cathedral Archer Project - Reboot Resources and tools (2017)

Homeless Link worked with The Cathedral Archer Project in the first phase of Reboot UK testing peer mentor approaches and the following summary and resources were put together in 2017 with the aim of helping other services to deliver activities effectively to people experiencing homelessness.

An overview from Cathedral Archer Project

The challenge, and opportunity, for service providers is to find engaging ways of developing digital skills and confidence, while also considering the impact on people's motivation of homelessness and its related support needs. There are huge benefits to be gained, both in terms of the practical advantages of being able to use online services, and the improvements to well-being that come from learning a skill, following a passion, or joining a community – all outcomes seen in Reboot UK.

First steps

Job search is the most common online activity that people using homelessness services need to complete, using the Universal Job match website. Although the site is not very user friendly, it is a first step to getting digitally engaged and is an opportunity to develop rapport, with consistent weekly support. The key is to move from an activity that someone has to do online, to finding something that they want to do online.

Digital skills should always be considered in relation to wider benefits, such as improved physical/mental health and social skills, and attention paid to any unintended outcomes. For example, Cathedral Archer Project (CAP) noticed that some clients were developing online skills but were increasingly isolated in the process – focusing on screens had resulted in less meaningful social interactions with other people in the service. CAP responded by making digital skills a more social experience, encouraging people to share what they were experiencing with others around them so that they were connecting to people around them in the communal space, as well as online.

Interests should be nurtured, with staff and volunteers looking out for different motivations in each person. For example, helping people find recipes so that their food goes further; reconnecting with friends and family; finding websites about their passion or hobby; learning a new skill; or virtual visits to other towns and countries.

Creativity and personalisation

CAP found that delivering activities branded as 'digital skills' didn't engage many people. Instead, they used Film Club (via Open Cinema) and Code Club. Film Club allowed them to engage their clients in discussions about favourite films and how special effects are created, in order to relate it back to the skills they had been learning. Code Club allowed clients to engage with something that was bit more advanced and to be more creative when using a computer.

Personalised approaches are the best way to engage the diverse group of people using homelessness services. Classroom-style groups are less popular, although there is a happy medium in bringing together a group who can talk and support each other, without expecting them all to work on the same activity. This promotes social interaction and knowledge sharing, while also accommodating different abilities, for example in literacy and English for speakers of other languages. Asking a group to complete the same task creates embarrassment for people who struggle with particular skills or are new to using a computer, who may feel they are being compared unfavourably to others in the group. Aim for a supportive group atmosphere with plenty of individual tailoring around pace and difficulty.

Engagement and motivation

Due to the unsettled lives of people experiencing homelessness, consistent attendance may be an issue. In a day centre like CAP it is possible for a client to engage for a while and then move on to something else as their circumstances change, or to be absent for several weeks at a time. The service needs to offer the right content to the right person to allow for these intermittent periods of engagement. Each individual session has to be tailored to give them the tools and knowledge they need to progress, with the skills and abilities they want to gain. No session should be a barrage of unnecessary information as this may lead to a reduction in attendance and retention. The smallest stone needs to make the biggest splash.

When planning sessions with clients, it's important to understand what motivates them – people will easily lose interest if they feel their time is being wasted. Time with each client is usually limited, so look for ways to create a sense of accomplishment when tasks are completed, as this improves client retention. Time spent online has to feel rewarding enough for people to recognise how far they've progressed, especially with people starting with little or no digital skills. Getting online can be a daunting prospect, but breaking activities into small steps that can be celebrated along the way helps people to see their progress and avoid feeling too overwhelmed to continue.

A small and clear starting point goes a long way to helping someone improve their digital skills. It provides an achievable goal from which they can branch out to other areas. Gaining confidence with a search engine like Google can lead on to searching for people on Facebook, something that at first seems difficult but, with reference to that initial skill, begins to feel familiar. This process of finding and understanding the similarity between activities, and where to apply those skills, leads people to become more confident and, eventually, digitally independent.

Digital independence should be the end goal for every client. As people become more relaxed using computers in communal spaces, this creates a welcoming atmosphere for less skilled and more introverted people. Achieving this atmosphere with a small group of people at first can motivate the more vulnerable and hard to reach clients to engage with digital as part of a supportive community.

Peer mentoring

CAP recruited clients as peer mentors who were reaching the end of their developmental journey at the day centre, as a way of honing their skills for future opportunities, such as employment. To be a peer mentor, people had to understand IT and be calm, understanding, respectful, reliable and able to receive constructive feedback to support their personal development.

The first set of peer mentors were handpicked following one-to-one discussions going over the details of the project. These people were already involved with volunteering at CAP and well known in the service, so they could easily engage with other people to ensure a successful launch for Reboot.

As the project developed, CAP used word of mouth to promote peer mentoring opportunities to people wanting more involvement or responsibility within the

centre, as well as to those people actively participating in Reboot activities. Posters were also used to advertise the position.

Brainstorming groups were set up as an opportunity for clients of CAP to express their interest in participating in activities, joining Reboot as a mentor and as a forum to discuss how to improve the project.

CAP budgeted for 20 hours and this budget was shared between the peer mentors on a weekly basis. Payment for mentoring was optional, as for some it was an incentive but for others a deterrent due to the negative effect it would have on their benefits. The hours were first come, first served, which allowed the peer mentors to have flexibility with their work and avoid the stresses of having a quota. A rota was used to share the responsibilities of providing and setting up a computer-based group each week.

Posters advertising peer mentoring were displayed around the computer area to make people aware of the help available. There weren't any set times, as the support provided was drop-in, drop-out and could be accessed at any time. If anyone wanted a more private session they could book a time with the peer mentors to use a laptop in a room or other space away from the main group of clients.

There was no set number of clients per peer mentor. Each mentor was encouraged to work with as many clients as they felt comfortable with, which could range from one client a week to five, depending on their workload and confidence levels.

Sessions in CAP's lounge were drop-in, giving on-the-spot help to the clients when needed. These sessions were all one-to-one. CAP's education room was used for group work, such as The Works (job search) and Code Club. 'Flipped classroom' was used here, encouraging participants to prepare the room themselves to create a sense of ownership. The dynamic environment this creates prompts the clients to discuss what happened in the previous session, which can also be used to identify which clients need some extra support to catch up with the rest of the group.

The education room was also used as a quiet space for one-to-one sessions for clients who wanted to do something important with as little distractions as possible.

Delivery methods

The peer mentors used several methods to engage people:

1. At first, they engaged clients by discussing digital skills with them and finding out if they have interests that can be explored and nurtured digitally.
2. Social media – CAP can support clients to share the information they learn with each other using an easily accessible platform. Fun activities can also be set up alongside in order to teach people how to easily search for information on the internet by doing something as simple as ranking tweets made by their favourite celebrities/artists or searching for the strangest thing they could find on eBay. This is a great tool to use as it requires little motivation to implement.
3. Gamification – this approach had great success with clients of all ages and abilities as it can be used to teach general computer skills and to gauge skill levels by the way of games and simple internet quizzes.
4. Independent learning can be implemented by way of handout, as many clients like to have tasks to do outside of scheduled sessions in order to occupy their free time and to continue their development. This also should be the end goal for all clients as it promotes continued digital skills development.

Developing peer support

An informal approach to recruiting peer mentors generated interest from CAP's main client group. Informal peer support was developed throughout the project - once a topic was covered by one client, such as how to use YouTube, when another client asked to cover the same topic staff would suggest that they talk to the previous client for support, and this developed informal peer mentors. CAP found that informal peer mentors were more likely to help out than not in response to requests, which meant Reboot has had a long-lasting effect with clients and, in time, has led to Reboot methods becoming embedded and continuing after initial funding finished.

Ongoing support to peer mentors

The CAP Reboot Coordinator (or other relevant members of staff) delivered one to one support sessions for peer mentors as and when needed, to ensure that mentors felt as supported as possible. The general support given involved

supervision, personal development, practical support, emotional support and on the job support.

Project supervision by the Coordinator was a constant and ongoing process throughout Reboot. This ensured they identified any issues arising within the project, and worked quickly with the peer mentors in order as to deliver a better service.

Peer mentors' progress was reviewed and tracked in order to provide positive feedback and to identify areas of personal development, allowing the peer mentors to recognise what skills could be improved as well as celebrating successes.

Practical support is important. With people of varying abilities being recruited to the role, some peer mentors required more help than others to reach a standard level of digital skills. Practical support also allowed peer mentors to keep their knowledge up to date with new developments on devices/programmes.

Some peer mentors may also need emotional support when dealing with certain stressors and with difficult clients. The peer mentors could be working with some clients who have traumatic personal histories – these clients might want to talk about what they have experienced, and peer mentors need to understand professional boundaries, how to signpost people to appropriate support, how to deal with disclosure and how to get support themselves when they hear about trauma. Some peer mentors won't have experience of receiving feedback and will need support to work through criticism.

On the job support is effective. Many peer mentors learn best by physically doing a given task, but might not feel confident enough working with clients, so they might benefit from someone co-delivering or shadowing a few sessions. This allows the peer mentor to develop their interpersonal and digital skills alongside the confidence to perform their role with the knowledge that there's always help available when needed.

Outside of the one-to-one sessions CAP held group meetings once a week to allow the peer mentors time to discuss what help they needed and how to improve delivery of Reboot. This was also a great space for the peer mentors to talk about what challenges they faced with certain clients and to share ideas to better engage them.

Example session plan for peer mentors 1: Using email

Content

With the help of a peer mentor, the client will be able to understand how to create an email account, how to identify what kind of email they have and how to access it and how to send/receive mail. They will be able to check and clean their inbox and understand why this is important.

Objectives

To begin to recognise the importance of having an email
To begin to identify the different icons and to know their uses
To build their own personal and appropriate email address.

Introduction

In a quiet area discuss the needs and uses of an email account, and agree what kind of email will be created within the session (preferably Outlook, as the calendar is useful for keeping track of the client's appointments). Ask if the client has any previous knowledge of using/creating an email account in order to assess their level of skill.

Development of lesson

Go through the 'create an account' page and encourage the client to do it themselves as giving them control of personal data increases a feeling of safety while online.

When creating an account name discuss appropriate and inappropriate email addresses, and work towards creating a safe and memorable account name. Asking consent to keep a note of the password may also be useful for future sessions, for example until someone has gained confidence about choosing, remembering, and changing their password.

When setting the language ensure the client chooses one that they are comfortable with (as it may not be English) and select the correct time zone (there are a lot to choose from so ensure the correct one is selected).

Once the inbox is created, go through how to write a new email, and send it to the email account that was just created. Now that there is an email in the inbox go through how to open the message and then how to delete it.

Adaptations

For someone who is struggling with this task it might help to provide a print-out of how to use email and how to access it. The print-outs should also be given to anyone that requires/asks for them. If they still struggle after this, introduce them to a tutorial video on YouTube to provide some clarity (in some cases this should be in a different language).

Assessment

Ask the client to log out of their account and to close the browser, and then ask them to log back into their account with minimum guidance. It is useful to repeat this to ensure the client is confident to access and open the account on their own.

Closure

Ask again if the client knows how to access their email and let them know that if they need any more assistance it is available, and that they can go through this session again if the need arises.

Lesson extensions

At the end of the session, ask the client to play with their email in their own time to get used to it. Also now that the email is set up it will allow the client to access other sites such as Facebook or Indeed (for job search).

Example session plan for peer mentors 2: Job search and CV writing

Content

This session will support the client to create a CV and to gain confidence using different job search sites. They will be able to access Word and to download CV templates with the knowledge to edit them correctly to the needs required of it. They will also be able to identify the total number of jobs they have to apply for each week and the best and fastest way to achieve their targets.

Objectives

To identify the easiest way to achieve the weekly Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA) targets agreed with their Jobcentre work coach
To build on CV templates
To discuss job searching techniques with other people

Materials needed
Computer with internet access
CV template
Print-out list of useful job sites
Active email account

Introduction
Before starting, discuss with the client which benefits they are claiming, as this will inform you how intensive their job search should be. For example, people on Universal Credit will have to search for 35 hours a week but many people will be on JSA (if they don't qualify for ESA) and will have to average around 8 to 10 job applications a week unless specified by their work coach, which could mean it is significantly higher. Also check if the client has any previous job search accounts and discuss their uses where applicable.

Development of lesson
Check if the client has already set up a Universal Job match account. If not, set one up, ensuring the Government Gateway Code is noted down and filed correctly.

Once the account is set up, use Google to search for CV templates (the ones from Monster are particularly helpful). Once downloaded, take them through how to access the Downloads file and then how to open files. When the CV template is opened you can go through how to edit the document. As all the sections are all ready to be filled in with clear headings, the client should feel confident enough to fill it in themselves. Once the CV is completed, go through how to save the document with an appropriate name.

Once the CV is saved, it can also be sent to their email account by sending an email to themselves with the CV attached and then saving it to the Archive folder. This keep the client's personal details secure with easy access.

After completing and saving the CV it is now possible to upload it to Universal Job match (ensure the CV is made public so that their allocated work coach can see it). Also at this point it's possible to create accounts on other job sites, Indeed is great to use as once the CV is uploaded it's one click per job application, which makes reaching targets so much easier (more often than not targets can be reached in a single session which leaves the rest of the week open to more interesting activities). Also, each job applied will send a confirmation email so that the client has proof if they are questioned by the Jobcentre. Remember to update

the client's activity log on Universal Job match after applying for jobs on different sites as a record for their next appointment with a work coach.

Adaptations

If any clients are struggling with job searches it's a good idea to start up a job search club in a setting that allows the clients to face each other as to encourage discussion. This will promote the sharing of useful tips and motivation among clients and so provide a calming atmosphere to a stressful and often worrying activity. There is a lot of information given with this session, so print-outs to read between sessions might also be beneficial.

Assessment

It is always best to discuss with the client how to record log-in details and job applications correctly. This session covers a lot of information, so information retention may be low and require multiple small recaps on how to complete this task.

Closure

When closing down this long session (it takes about an hour), remind them that the other people in the service in similar situations will be more than happy to discuss the easiest ways to complete job applications. Ensure that the client is happy enough to complete the job search task on their own. After this session the client shouldn't need too much input, but let them know that a peer mentor shouldn't be far away if they need assistance.

Learning extensions

By covering how to save and download the CV templates the client learns (or is at least aware of) how to access computer documents and how to open saved files. While someone wouldn't be expected to pick this up but fully, it at least provides a base to build on during a later session.

Example session plan for peer mentors 3: Facebook

Content

This session supports the client to create their own Facebook page backed with knowledge about how to use it confidently and safely. It will also cover the use of personal data on public online platforms as a background on internet safety.

Objectives
1. To identify the uses of Facebook
2. To discuss the positives and negatives of using a public online platform

3. To acknowledge what is and isn't appropriate material to share online

Introduction

At the start of the session, discuss why they want to use Facebook so that you can shape the session to benefit the client as much as possible. Inform them of the uses of the platform to spark their interest in a range of areas so that they get the most from the session. Also use this discussion as an informal assessment of their capacity to recognise and avoid risks online, as using Facebook could pose risks for vulnerable adults.

Development of lesson

Check that the client has access to their own email and ask them to fill in their details to create an account. Remember control of personal data will help the client to feel more safe and confident with using the site. Encourage the client to go into their email to activate their account.

After the account is set up, it would be best to go straight to their page and to upload a photo to identify themselves before starting to search for friends. From there you can go through updating their status and uploading general photos. This is the perfect time to discuss what is appropriate and sensible to upload. As you'll be working with vulnerable people, ensuring they know what and what not to post on Facebook, and consider who is viewing their content, is valuable for reducing the risk that it might cause problems in future.

Take them through searching and sending friend requests. While adding friends you can also suggest 'liking' pages relating to their personal interests as this will make their news feed more interesting, making it easier to engage with, until the news feed starts to fill up with updates from their friends.

Once they have some Facebook friends it's a good opportunity to go over how to use Facebook Messenger.

Adaptations

Most clients would prefer to perform this task individually, as they want to concentrate on it without any distractions, but there will be some who prefer a group setting as they benefit from visually watching other clients using the site. Some may also require a print-out to help retain information between sessions.

Assessment

After taking the client through of how to upload photos, see if they can download an image from Google (this step may require some support if not covered previously) and create a new status update with minimal input, as this shows you and the client how much information was retained from the session. This should be followed by a discussion of what is appropriate to include in status updates, encouraging the client to lead this discussion so they can come to their own conclusions.

Closure

Once the task is completed, ensure that the client is happy using the site and that they are confident enough to 'police' themselves and know what not to include in their posts to reduce the risk of negative repercussions. Facebook is a great platform for the clients to reconnect with friends and family but it's really important for them to recognise the potential hazards so that it's not easily abused.

Lesson extensions

To develop more extensive engagement with social media, this knowledge of Facebook can be allied to using other sites like Twitter and LinkedIn (where appropriate). Also if the client is willing, having the experience of their own Facebook wall might spark interest in starting their own web page

What We Do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

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