

Empowering Women and Families Through Digital Inclusion

Introduction

We were fortunate to be awarded funding through the Digital Inclusion programme, which has had a significant impact on women attending the Women's Welcome Group at Samphire Project. The group brings together women from many different countries and cultures who are living in Dover and the surrounding areas, alongside local women from the community. The group provides a safe, welcoming, and supportive environment where women can build friendships, gain confidence, learn new skills, and reduce feelings of isolation.

Many of the women who attend the group have experienced considerable challenges in their lives. Some have no recourse to public funds, while others face financial hardship, language barriers, social isolation, and difficulties accessing services. Despite these challenges, the women demonstrate remarkable resilience and a strong commitment to supporting one another. Many are eager to volunteer with local charities and community organisations as a way of giving something back to the community that has welcomed them.

The Digital Inclusion programme has enabled us to better understand the barriers faced by women in accessing digital services and to provide practical support that helps them overcome these challenges. Through regular sessions, one-to-one support, access to devices, and digital skills training, participants have gained greater confidence and independence in navigating an increasingly digital world.

The Importance of the Women's Welcome Group

The Women's Welcome Group has become an important source of support for many women in the local area. For some participants, it is the only place where they regularly meet other women outside their immediate family. The group provides opportunities to form friendships, share experiences, learn from one another, and access information about local services and opportunities.

Creating a safe and trusted space has been essential to the success of the group. Women feel comfortable discussing challenges they may be facing and seeking support from staff and fellow participants. The welcoming atmosphere encourages participation and helps build confidence among women who may initially feel nervous or isolated.

One of the key factors contributing to the group's success has been the consistency of meetings. Sessions take place on the same day and at the same time each week, making it easier for participants to remember when the group meets. This regularity is particularly important for women who may have busy family responsibilities, limited English language skills, or difficulties navigating public services. If a participant is unable to attend one week, she knows exactly when the next session will take place.

The positive experiences of participants have led many women to recommend the group to friends, neighbours, and family members. Word-of-mouth referrals have helped the group grow and reach women who may otherwise remain isolated from support networks.

The group grew from an initial 10 women to 22 women over the course of the project, demonstrating a strong demand for the service and positive engagement from participants.

The group met once a week, using craft activities as a way to encourage conversation and discuss a range of topics relevant to the women's lives. The informal and welcoming environment helped build trust, reduce isolation, and encourage participation. Professionals from local organisations were also invited to attend selected sessions to provide information about the services and support available within the community.

Where participants required additional support or signposting, they were invited to remain after the group session or offered a separate appointment at another time. This approach ensured that each woman's dignity, privacy, and confidentiality were respected while maintaining professional standards.

Understanding Digital Exclusion

A significant element of the project focused on digital inclusion. Many of the women had limited access to digital devices and lacked confidence in using online services. In addition, some participants had limited English language skills, creating further barriers to accessing essential digital services.

Through the Digital Inclusion programme, we gained a deeper understanding of the extent of digital exclusion experienced by many participants. While smartphones and digital technology are now considered an essential part of everyday life, not everyone has equal access to the devices, skills, and knowledge required to use them effectively.

Many participants had limited experience with technology beyond making and receiving phone calls. Some had never downloaded an app, created an email account, or completed an online form. Others owned older mobile phones that were no longer capable of supporting the applications required to access essential services.

For women facing financial hardship, purchasing a newer smartphone or paying for mobile data can be extremely difficult. As a result, many were excluded from services that increasingly assume digital access and digital literacy.

The project highlighted that digital exclusion is not simply about lacking a device. It can also involve a lack of confidence, limited English language skills, fear of making mistakes, concerns about security, and difficulty understanding digital systems. Addressing digital exclusion therefore requires a holistic approach that combines access to technology with ongoing support and training.

The Growing Importance of Smartphones

During the course of the project, it became clear that smartphones have become essential tools for everyday life. For many participants, a smartphone is no longer simply a means of communication. It is often the primary way they access services, receive important information, maintain contact with family members, and manage their daily lives.

This is particularly true for individuals with limited financial resources who may not own a laptop, tablet, or desktop computer. In many cases, a smartphone is the only digital device available to them.

Participants use smartphones for a wide range of purposes, including:

- Communicating with family, friends, and support workers.
- Accessing healthcare services.
- Managing benefit claims.
- Receiving updates from schools and educational providers.
- Accessing legal and immigration information.
- Searching for employment opportunities.
- Completing online applications and forms.
- Accessing translation services.
- Managing appointments.
- Receiving important notifications and messages.

For some women, the smartphone has become as important as having a postal address or telephone number. Without access to a functioning device, they can become disconnected from vital services and support networks.

Changes Since the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the digital transformation of many public and voluntary sector services. Organisations that previously relied heavily on face-to-face interactions and postal correspondence increasingly adopted digital communication methods.

Many participants reported that before the pandemic they received letters, attended appointments in person, or communicated directly with service providers. Following the pandemic, many organisations shifted towards online communication through websites, apps, email, and text messaging.

As a result, important information is now commonly delivered through:

- Email.
- Mobile applications.
- Online portals.
- SMS messages.
- Video consultations.
- Digital appointment systems.

While these developments have improved efficiency and accessibility for many people, they have also created additional barriers for those with limited digital skills or access to technology.

Women attending the group frequently reported feeling overwhelmed by the number of digital systems they were expected to use. Some struggled to remember passwords, navigate websites, or understand unfamiliar terminology. Others were anxious about making mistakes that could affect important applications or appointments.

The project has helped bridge this gap by providing practical support and opportunities to develop digital confidence.

Accessing Essential Services

Many public services now require individuals to use dedicated applications or online accounts. Participants often needed support to access and use services provided through government departments, healthcare providers, educational institutions, and local authorities.

Examples included:

- Accessing Home Office communications.
- Managing Universal Credit accounts.
- Using NHS services.
- Booking medical appointments.
- Accessing school communications.
- Completing housing applications.
- Accessing legal support services.

Many of these systems require users to create accounts, verify their identity, remember passwords, and navigate complex digital processes. For individuals who are unfamiliar with technology or who have limited English language skills, these requirements can be particularly challenging.

Participants often expressed concern about accidentally entering incorrect information or missing important messages. The project provided reassurance and practical guidance, enabling participants to become more confident in managing these systems independently.

As the funding was available for only three months, the project prioritised digital skills that were most relevant to the participants' immediate needs. Support included using job search websites and apps, the Home Office app, accessing Universal Credit accounts, and booking GP appointments online.

The project also included a session on online shopping, highlighting both the benefits and the potential risks. Participants learned how to identify online scams and phishing emails, helping to improve their confidence and safety when using the internet.

The NHS App was introduced, including how to order repeat prescriptions and access healthcare services online. We also discussed school communication apps. As different schools use different platforms and layouts, it was not possible to provide detailed training on every app within the three-month timeframe. However, individual support was provided to women who needed additional assistance.

The project demonstrated the value of tailored digital inclusion support in helping women become more confident and independent in accessing essential online services. The combination of practical learning, peer support, and personalised guidance contributed to increased confidence and reduced barriers to digital access.

Device Challenges

A significant barrier identified through the project was the age and condition of participants' mobile phones. Many women were using devices that were several years old and no longer supported essential applications.

In some cases, participants were unable to install necessary apps because their operating systems were outdated. Applications frequently require newer versions of software and may not function correctly on older devices.

Participants also faced challenges such as:

- Insufficient storage space.
- Broken screens.
- Poor battery life.
- Slow performance.
- Limited mobile data.
- Lack of internet access at home.

For individuals living on very low incomes, replacing a phone can be a major financial challenge. The project highlighted the importance of ensuring that digital inclusion initiatives consider both skills development and access to suitable devices.

Language Barriers and Digital Skills

For many participants, English is not their first language. While some women are highly educated and skilled in other areas, they may still face difficulties understanding digital terminology and instructions presented in English.

Common challenges included understanding:

- Technical vocabulary.
- Security warnings.
- Password requirements.
- Verification processes.
- Error messages.
- Online forms.

Tasks that may appear straightforward to experienced technology users can become highly complex when undertaken in a second language.

Many participants also came from backgrounds where digital technology was not widely used. Some had limited previous opportunities to develop computer or smartphone skills.

The project adopted a patient, supportive approach that recognised different learning styles and starting points. Participants were encouraged to learn at their own pace and ask questions without fear of embarrassment.

This approach helped build confidence and reduced anxiety around technology.

Building Digital Confidence

One of the most significant outcomes of the project has been increased confidence among participants. Many women who initially felt intimidated by technology are now using digital services independently.

Confidence-building activities included:

- Learning how to use smartphones effectively.
- Downloading and updating applications.
- Creating and managing email accounts.
- Understanding passwords and security.

- Using internet browsers.
- Completing online forms.
- Managing digital documents.
- Participating in video calls.
- Accessing online information.

Participants were encouraged to practise their skills during sessions and between meetings. As confidence increased, many women began helping one another, creating a supportive peer-learning environment.

This peer support model has been particularly effective because participants often feel comfortable learning from others who have faced similar challenges.

Online Safety and Scam Awareness

As more aspects of daily life move online, digital safety has become increasingly important. Many participants expressed concerns about scams, fraud, and online security. Several women reported receiving suspicious messages, emails, or phone calls. Others were unsure how to determine whether communications were genuine.

The project provided training and support on recognising common scams, including:

- Phishing emails.
- Fraudulent text messages.
- Fake websites.
- Social media scams.
- Impersonation attempts.
- Financial fraud.

Participants learned how to:

- Verify information before responding.
- Avoid clicking suspicious links.
- Create stronger passwords.
- Protect personal information.
- Recognise warning signs of scams.
- Report suspicious activity.

These skills are essential in helping participants remain safe while accessing digital services.

Accessing Healthcare Digitally

Healthcare has become increasingly digital, creating both opportunities and challenges for participants.

Many GP surgeries now use online systems for appointments, repeat prescriptions, and e-consultations. While these systems can improve access to healthcare, they can also create barriers for individuals with limited digital skills.

The project supported participants to:

- Download healthcare applications.
- Register for online services.
- Access NHS information.
- Book appointments online.
- Participate in e-consultations.
- Request repeat prescriptions.
- Access health advice and guidance.

For many women, successfully completing an online consultation represented a significant achievement and increased their confidence in using digital services more generally.

Completing Online Applications

Participants frequently required support with online applications relating to benefits, housing, education, employment, healthcare, and immigration matters.

Completing online forms can be particularly challenging because they often require:

- Detailed personal information.
- Supporting documents.
- Evidence uploads.
- Identity verification.
- Accurate completion within deadlines.

The project provided practical assistance while also helping participants develop the skills needed to complete similar applications independently in the future.

Women learned how to:

- Navigate application portals.
- Upload documents.
- Save information securely.
- Track application progress.
- Respond to requests for further information.

These skills contribute significantly to participants' independence and ability to access opportunities.

Social Connection and Community Impact

Beyond practical skills, the project has strengthened social connections within the community. Women who may previously have felt isolated now have opportunities to engage with others, share experiences, and build supportive networks.

Digital skills have enabled participants to:

- Stay in contact with family overseas.
- Join community groups.
- Access information about local activities.
- Participate in online learning opportunities.
- Engage with support services.

The confidence gained through the project has extended beyond digital skills, contributing to greater social participation and community involvement.

Many participants have gone on to support others, sharing their knowledge and encouraging new members to engage with digital learning opportunities.

Having a café located in the centre of town, close to local shops and the bus stop, has made the group more accessible for women attending. The café also sells women's clothing to support survivors of domestic violence, creating a safe and welcoming environment. By using the café, our group also contributes to supporting women within the local community. Overall, choosing Ocarina as the venue has played an important role in the group's continued success and sustainability.

Holding the group on the same day and at the same time each week has helped establish a consistent routine, making it easier for participants to remember when the group meets. If someone is unable to attend one week, they know they can return the following week without missing the opportunity to take part.

To ensure the group is as inclusive as possible, mothers are welcome to bring their children with them. This removes childcare as a barrier to attendance. The café also provides toys for children, helping to keep them occupied and making it easier for parents to participate fully in the group.

We also use the group as a way of promoting integration within the local community by welcoming local women to join us. We have been fortunate that several local women have generously given their time to support the group. This has helped build positive relationships, encourage community involvement, and create a welcoming and inclusive environment for everyone.

Volunteering and Giving Back

A particularly inspiring aspect of the project has been participants' desire to give back to their communities. Despite facing significant personal challenges, many women actively volunteer with local charities and community organisations.

Improved digital skills have supported volunteering by enabling participants to:

- Register for volunteer opportunities.
- Communicate with organisations.
- Complete training requirements.
- Access information and schedules.
- Participate in online meetings.

This increased participation benefits both the individuals involved and the wider community.

Conclusion

The Digital Inclusion programme has had a transformative impact on the women attending the Women's Welcome Group. It has highlighted both the growing importance of digital access and the significant barriers that many individuals continue to face.

Participants have developed practical digital skills, increased their confidence, improved their access to essential services, and strengthened their ability to participate fully in society. They have learned how to use smartphones more effectively, access healthcare and public services, complete online applications, recognise scams, and communicate safely online.

Importantly, the programme has demonstrated that digital inclusion is about much more than technology. It is about empowerment, independence, confidence, and connection. By providing a supportive environment where women can learn together and support one another, the project has helped reduce isolation, strengthen community networks, and create opportunities for greater participation in everyday life.

As society continues to become increasingly digital, ongoing support for digital inclusion remains essential. The experiences of participants clearly demonstrate that when people are given access to the right tools, training, and encouragement, they can overcome barriers, develop new skills, and achieve greater independence and wellbeing.

We are actively seeking additional funding, including potential support from the university and other funding bodies, to continue and expand the programme. Future funding would enable us to provide longer-term support and deliver more in-depth sessions on the NHS App, school apps, online safety, online shopping, and other essential digital services that help women access healthcare, education, employment, and public services independently.