Introduction

Helping people with the skills, access and confidence they need to get online.

Go Digital Newcastle: Connecting Our City

In August 2014, the residents' support element of Newcastle City Council's 'Go Digital Newcastle' programme was awarded a research bursary of £6,000 by the CILIP ILG for its 'outstanding' project proposal: 'Go Digital Newcastle: Connecting Our City'.

As more services move online, those without the means or skills to access the Internet are at increasing risk of isolation. Newcastle – like many cities in the UK – has a wealth of third sector organisations and education providers offering free internet access and training. Yet those who would gain most from this support either aren't aware of the benefits (and increasing necessity) of being online, aren't comfortable or confident in the environments where assistance is offered, or are unwilling to ask for help.

This project is working to overcome these barriers by providing relevant, local opportunities for those who feel digitally excluded to develop, or improve their information literacy skills. The project acts as a hub for digital inclusion activity across the city, disseminating information, upskilling key workforces, mapping and promoting existing opportunities and addressing gaps in this provision. It works with, and for local people to understand more about the existing barriers to digital inclusion, and to demonstrate how a few basic online information seeking and transactional skills such as sending an email, accessing a map or downloading a bus timetable can go a long way.

Go Digital
Newcastle
getting everyone online

www.getonlinenewcastle.co.uk
@GetOnlineNCL

Current Activity

2013-2014: Face-to-face digital skills support for 9,000 people.

Strong, Citywide Partnerships

Between September 2013 and December 2014, the Go Digital project worked with over 90 partners (including Newcastle Libraries, Age UK Newcastle, Go ON UK, Newcastle City Learning, JET, Tinder Foundation, Building Futures East and Information Now) to deliver face-to-face support to **over 9,000 people**.

In 2014-15, the project has initiated new courses and workshops (via City Learning, Silver Training); engaged and managed Digital Champions; supported national campaigns such as Be Online 2015, submitted funding bids to enhance information skills provision in the city, and worked with Your Homes Newcastle to provide 'rest room' PCs for employees at supported local business, Palatine Beds.

The project team have delivered training to disparate groups and organisations; brokered partnerships between local skills providers and people in need of support (Opportunity UK – Belsay Hospital Unit); championed information and digital literacy at community events (Alcohol Awareness World Mental Health Day, Carers Day); fostered links with housing provider Affinity Sutton, the local probation service, digital apprenticeship hub 3aaa and the Newcastle City Learning Centre, and are currently playing a key role in a triage pilot designed to overcome the online information barriers that residents are likely to face during the forthcoming roll-out of Universal Credit.

Achievements

Online IT access and support map received 400 hits in its first month.

Maps, Tweets, Blogs and More…

Since receiving the ILG bursary in September 2014, the team have been able to radically develop the project brand: commissioning a new logo 'Go Digital Newcastle: Getting Everyone Online' which has now been adopted by the wider Council to support their 'Digital Vision'; establishing a social media presence **@GetOnlineNCL** to promote digital inclusion in the city and launching a searchable online map of free and low cost IT access and support in Newcastle which received 400 hits in its first month.

Go Digital's fortnightly e-newsletter is now received by 200 organisations and individuals**,** and the project lead has a blog on the City Council's 'Let's Talk' platform.

Ongoing research into information literacy skills and learning preferences (feedback loops, evaluation forms and a 'pop-up' survey on public access PCs) has enabled us to develop our provision according to residents' needs: generating an increase in iPad/tablet sessions, home visits and workshops in community venues.

We continue to work alongside Jobcentre Plus and Newcastle City Council to improve workplace information skills using bespoke and existing training mechanisms (Universal Information), and with Northumbria University to test the effectiveness of a Digital Awareness Learning Management Tool to prepare public sector staff for the wholesale digitisation of council services.

Challenges & Solutions

'do you have any scope for carrying on weekly sessions?'

Finding the Right Tools

The last six months have also brought challenges – some of which have been overcome, and others which have prevented us from meeting targets outlined in the original project plan.

Limited capacity and low-take up has left us unable to engage the number of Digital Champions we would have liked. Those we have are providing invaluable support for residents, and going forward we hope to work with Age UK Newcastle to attract and manage additional volunteers.

We have also been unable to launch a Virtual Learning Environment (Moodle). Instead, we plan to remodel Newcastle Libraries 'Computer Access' webpage to fulfil a similar function by including pdf. links to online information skills guides, useful websites and digital events.

In some instances, we have had difficulty encouraging residents to attend local information skills sessions. To remedy this we are rethinking our offer, trying new topics and changing the ways we engage with residents by trialling SMS messaging.

A lack of centralised funding for regular training sessions has meant that we have occasionally been unable to meet demand from groups who require repetitive and trusted rather than one-off support. We will continue to search for funding streams to address this need.

A reduction in staff capacity from April 2015 will require us to work even more closely with Newcastle Libraries and other key partner organisations to continue to deliver the range of activities and support that we currently offer.
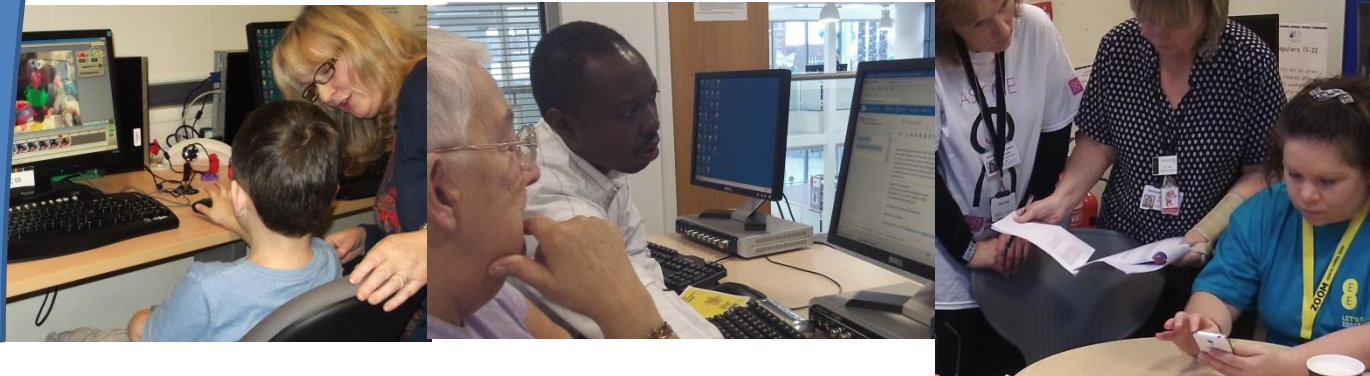
Next Steps

'excellent digital services which are so easy to use that they are naturally the way people choose to engage with us'.

Universal Credit and Digital Newcastle

In February 2015, Newcastle City Council launched 'Digital by Choice', their vision 'to have excellent digital services which are so easy to use that they are naturally the way people choose to engage with us [and]…improve digital opportunities for residents to help them access an improved customer experience (for council services and beyond)'.

In the next six months, our work will become more closely aligned with these aims: supporting residents to manage their Council transactions online and contact the Council using digital channels. It will also be influenced by our involvement in the Newcastle Universal Credit Support Partnership which is working to prepare residents for the arrival of this new benefit by triaging their needs and signposting them to local support in four key areas: Digital, Financial, Housing and Employment.

Other upcoming initiatives include a Digital Reading Group pilot with students from the local Excelsior Academy and skills sessions aimed at encouraging older people to become film and TV extras. From April 2015 Newcastle Libraries will meet demand by launching iPad/tablet 1-2-1s, and Go Digital will continue to teach information literacy skills and promote digital inclusion at community events across the city. The project team will present papers on our work at the CILIP and LILAC Conferences. We will remodel the Digital Awareness LMS tool in line with our research findings and push for its mandatary roll out across the Council.

In **January 2015**, Newcastle Libraries alone dealt with over **5,200** IT support queries. As more services, and particularly benefits, move online, we expect this number to rise and the work of this project to become ever more crucial.

Save time Do it Online

let's talk Newcastle