The Digital Skills Programme
free help to get online and make the most of the internet

Case study: Tony Sydenham

"When I read about this offer of free digital help at Qube, I jumped at the chance. I was not happy using the internet, and my lack of knowledge restricted me," said Tony Sydenham.

Although he's lived in Oswestry for 16 years, Tony had never visited Qube before. "It's such a wonderful place with a lovely, friendly atmosphere. I felt at home from the start, and Bee (pictured right) is a wonderful teacher with so much patience and kindness. Thanks to this free service, I'm going online every day. I can email, shop and bank digitally, pay my bills and even play retro online games, which is great fun."

"It's never too late to learn," said 77-year-old Tony. *"More people need to know about the online world and how it can make your life easier. For me, improving my digital skills has been a very uplifting experience and I am grateful that I've been able to benefit from the programme."*

Community-based digital support at 26 learning locations delivered by 78 Digital Volunteers

Digital Exclusion

Research by the Good Things Foundation, the UK's leading digital inclusion charity, shows that <u>10 million UK adults lack basic digital skills, and 2 million households cannot afford the internet</u>.

Digital inclusion is a social issue - 83% of people participating in digital inclusion programmes are socially excluded (Good Things Foundation 2022). The pandemic changed how people work and live – leaving many behind.

The Good Things Foundation reports these negative impacts of digital exclusion:
1. poorer health outcomes and lower life expectancy
2. increased loneliness and social isolation
3. less access to work and learning
4. paying more for essentials
5. financial exclusion
6. increased risk of poverty
7. lack of a voice in the modern world.

The latest Census shows there are 82,000 over 65s living in the Shropshire Council area – an increase of 18,700 since the 2011 Census. Right now, 29.5% of our population is over 65, the national average is 20.1%.

Shropshire Council was awarded LGA funding for the Digital Skills Pilot in 2020 because local research showed that approximately 25% of Shropshire residents are digitally excluded, ranking above the national figure of 21%. Of these, a quarter are over 65, reflecting the ageing population of the county.

The Government's Digital Service has developed a digital inclusion scale which maps individuals' digital capability on a scale from 1 to 9, from those who don't use the internet at all to digital experts.

NHS England has produced helpful information detailing What Is Digital Inclusion?

The NHS reports that some sections of the population are more likely to be digitally excluded than others. These are:
- older people
- people in lower income groups
- people without a job
- people in social housing
- people with disabilities
- people with fewer educational qualifications/excluded/left school before 16
- people living in rural areas
- homeless people
- people whose first language is not English.

The council is driving citizens online to reduce costs and improve outcomes. Our citizens must have, or be supported to have, mid-range digital skills, devices, and connectivity to be able to interact and transact with us online and benefit from the

digital resources available to them to live at home, or care for a loved one at home, for longer using technology.

The Digital Skills Programme 2023 to 2026

The Digital Skills Programme commissions providers across north, central and south Shropshire. Each is closely connected to their communities and experienced in delivering digital support to excluded/marginalised groups. These include a mix of 10 voluntary sector organisations and CICs, 13 Libraries and the Council's Enable service. Support is delivered through an extensive network of 78 Digital Volunteers.

The programme links closely to the Shropshire Plan and Shropshire Economic Growth Strategy's Key Values: *recognising the vital role and contribution of the voluntary sector and strengthening connectivity and partnerships.*

Healthy People/Wellbeing and Health:
Digital skills help people manage their health online, connect with services, reduce isolation, and live at home longer. For people on low incomes, digital skills improve learning, employment/better employment, and increase income. Supporting disabled people with digital confidence increases independence, job skills, health management and access to support services.

Inclusivity:
The Digital Skills Programme is inclusive, with specialist digital support for people with sight loss and/or learning difficulties as well as people receiving means tested benefits and/or support into employment through Enable. DSP provider locations are targeted to areas where communities live in the lowest Indices of Multiple Deprivation.

Healthy Economy/Sustainability:
Each provider meets their local communities' needs, bringing Digital Volunteers and learners together for support and learning. Interacting online saves time, resources, and money, reduces travel and expense, reducing carbon.

Digital confidence enables employment options for individuals, empowering them to apply for work and/or work digitally, building resilience in the workforce, and supporting the Economic Growth Strategy.

Healthy Organisation:
The programme is managed transparently. Supporting the drive to digital, outcomes are reported quarterly; performance e-monitoring is closely managed with problems mitigated early. E-feedback systems allow issue identification through participant surveys. The programme enables people to feel confident about transacting online, supporting the Shropshire Plan's digital county ambitions.

The Marches Local Skills Report Key Need is:
Enabling digital across generations: digital skill needs span all skill levels and sectors. Continued, increasing and responsive support could unlock the potential of the Marches' workforce.

Our programme provides core digital support for those in greatest need and likely to be digitally excluded. It meets the needs of Driving Digital: *30% of employers asking for basic digital skills for workers,* and the need identified in the Covid19 Impact Reflections: *that the drive to digital has increased the opportunity for the Marches to harness and strengthen the core digital skills.*

In 2023, Council funding was awarded to the programme deliver to following outcomes over 3 years:

- 1500 eligible people to receive 8 weeks of one-to-one digital support.
- 750 additional eligible people to receive free one-off digital support at a Digital Drop-In.
- 20 people in greatest need provided with free devices and connectivity.

Staff: Digital Skills Lead – 0.6 FTE and from April 2024 a Digital Skills Assistant – 0.6 FTE Fixed Term to 31 March 2026.

Eligibility has broadened to support a wider range of known digitally excluded groups. Criteria is for individuals is to meet <u>one or more</u> of the following (stats Oct 2024):

1. aged 65 and over (30.5% of participants)
2. a health condition or disability (14.5% of participants)
3. live alone (19% of participants)
4. an unpaid carer (3% of participants)
5. in receipt of care, paid or unpaid (8% of participants)
6. in receipt of a means tested benefit or on a low income (25% of participants).

Free digital support is delivered by the programme through structed learning that links 7 basic learning outcomes to the Good Things Foundation's Learn My Way digital learning platform. Learners are supported one-to-one each week by trained and experienced Digital Volunteers.

Participants receive a minimum of 8 hours of one-to-one digital support. Each person is assessed pre and post learning to ensure they have progressed in a minimum of 5 of the 7 learning outcomes.

Providers are key to the success of the programme. They recruit, train, and support Digital Volunteers, market the programme and attract eligible learners to sign-up for support. Their teams undertake the pre and post learning assessments with participants, produce monitoring reports on a quarterly basis for the programme, and ensure that progress in the delivery of their target outcomes is achieved through a bespoke Council digital performance monitoring system.

Each provider agrees, and receives funding, to deliver a set number of "completed learners" during the length of the programme. A "completed learner" is one who has received a minimum of 8 hours of one-to-one digital support and made progress in 5 of the 7 learning outcomes.

Strong, supportive and resilient working relationships have been developed by the programme lead with providers.

Achievements in Year 1 of the 2023 to 2026 Digital Skills Programme

421 participants have completed a free programme of one-to-one digital support

695 additional individuals have accessed a free Digital Drop-In

21 people given a free device

8 hours of free digital support provided on average per person

28% average digital skill level on commencement of digital support

60% average digital skills level on completion of digital support

32% increase in digital skills after participation in the Digital Skills Programme

26 learning locations across Shropshire

95% of participants responded "yes" or "maybe" when asked if they would access support from Shropshire Council via their website

90% is the rating given by participants of their overall experience of the Digital Skills Programme.

Shropshire Council funded free digital support is available at:

North
Qube, Oswestry; Oswestry Library; BizEd Projects, Whitchurch; 4 All Foundation at Market Drayton and Cockshutt; G.O.A.L. Wem; Market Drayton Library; Wem Library.

Central
Barnabas Community Projects, Shrewsbury; The Roy Fletcher Centre, Shrewsbury; 4 All Foundation at Ditherington Community Centre, Shrewsbury; Shrewsbury Library; Library at the Lantern, Harlescott. Shrewsbury; Bayston Hill Library; Pontesbury Library.

South
Mayfair Community Centre, Church Stretton; Enterprise House, Bishops Castle; Craven Arms Library; Ludlow Library; Bridgnorth Library; Broseley Library; Much Wenlock Library; Shifnal Library.

Specialist digital support
Enable: for people receiving support into employment and/or training
Taking Part: for people with learning difficulties
Sight Loss Shropshire: for people with visual impairment.

Recent initiatives for the Digital Skills Programme address the following issues:

Worklessness – helping those unemployed and needing help to build digital confidence to apply for work online and carry out basic tasks at work online.

<u>Free School Meals</u> – helping eligible families gain digital skills to apply online for free school meals for their children, helping improve outcomes for children from low-income families.

<u>Health</u> – working with NHS PCN Leads, to support people to learn how to better manage health digitally through health apps, online GP appointments and medication ordering.

<u>Increased Financial Support</u> – helping people to gain the skills to apply for Pension Credit (1/3 of eligible people in Shropshire do not claim this benefit) and support to apply for other means and non-means tested financial support where appropriate i.e. Attendance Allowance.

New relationships with Barclays and HSBC will bring online banking workshops to locations across the area to enable people to access digital banking and be supported to manage finances digitally.

<u>Digital Poverty and Free Devices</u> – the programme will provide long-term results by providing 120+ free repurposed devices for participants and their families to keep via its successful application to the Council's Social Value Fund.

<u>Digital Poverty and Free Connectivity</u> – free SIM cards via the Good Things Foundation, containing 1 year of free calls, texts and data, are distributed by providers to participants in greatest need.

Case study: The 4 All Foundation, Market Drayton

More than 100 free SIM cards have been distributed to Market Drayton residents through the Digital Skills Programme's links with The Good Things Foundation, providing vital connectivity to those experiencing digital poverty. Free SIM cards help people to access online resources and stay connected with friends and family, pay bills, and access essential services.

As well as helping people to improve their digital confidence through weekly learning sessions, the 4 All Foundation has delivered a series of digital workshops focused on e-safety, online bill support, and other relevant topics. These have equipped community members with the knowledge and tools needed to navigate the digital landscape safely and confidently.

"We are thrilled to see the positive impact of the Digital Skills Programme on the north Shropshire community," said George Hounsell, Director of Sport and Community at the Marches Academy Trust. "Access to digital resources and skills is more important than ever, and we are grateful for the support of Shropshire Council in making this initiative possible."

Case study: Chris and Paul, Digital Volunteers

Since 2020, Shrewsbury's Roy Fletcher Centre has supported more than 400 people to increase their online confidence through the Digital Skills Programme - thanks to their dedicated team of 10 tech-savvy volunteers.

Chris (pictured left) volunteers while he looks for work. "I'm trained as an IT support engineer, but finding work when you are disabled is very difficult. Each week I come to the Roy Fletcher Centre and help people to use their mobile phones and laptops. It gives me a sense of purpose to be part of such a friendly team of supportive people."

"There is so much digital know-how amongst the team here," said Paul (pictured right), who has been a digital volunteer for 4 years. "It's sociable and fun and benefits the community too. The atmosphere in the weekly learning sessions is really uplifting. If you want help to get online, you couldn't come to a warmer or more welcoming place."

In October 2024, the High Sheriff of Shropshire, Brian Welti JP, presented awards to all 10 Digital Volunteers at the Roy Fletcher Centre, after they were nominated by the DSP programme lead. He said: "It gives me great pleasure to make these High Sheriffs' Awards to the amazing team of Digital Volunteers here at The Roy Fletcher Centre. In this ever-evolving world of digital technology, the time and dedication put in by this team, to enable so many digitally excluded members of our Shropshire society become more integrated with our ever-increasing reliance on having to carry out so much of our daily lives on-line is inspirational. The relationships they establish and the confidence building they achieve must be so reassuring to recipients of this help. Congratulations to all of you."

Case study: Tonia Roberts

Wistanswick resident Tonia has taken part in the Digital Skills Programme and is enjoying her new-found digital confidence. She now banks online, uses email and WhatsApp to keep in touch with friends, and shares photos using her iPad.

Tonia signed up for free digital support after reading about it in her local newspaper. "It was great fun to learn something new and I'm no longer worried by my lack of knowledge," she said. "My digital volunteer was patient and friendly, and I enjoyed the company of the centre's

team each week."

Tonia added: "People who aren't on board with the internet are missing out. I recommend the Digital Skills Programme to everyone – it's free, and you meet some lovely people while you are learning."

Conclusion

The aim of the programme is to upskill Shropshire's digitally excluded citizens, but it delivers far more than this.

One of the most powerful results of the digital know-how achieved by participants is their increase in well-being, independence, and overall confidence. They are more in control of their lives and their future.

Here are just some of the additional benefits the programme brings:

- 46% made new friends.
- 93% were satisfied with their overall experience.
- 93% said their digital volunteer was friendly and patient.
- 94% said they enjoyed their digital support sessions.
- 96% would recommend the programme to others.
- 85% learned more than they expected to.
- 71% say their experience had made them feel better about life in general.
- 30% are now online banking.
- 34% are now ordering medication digitally or accessing the NHS App.

The programme's 78 Digital Volunteers are gaining life skills, employability skills, problem solving skills and meeting new people. Research shows that helping others reduces stress, boosts self-esteem, and helps people to feel happier.

Andrea Miller. Digital Skills Lead, Shropshire Council
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