



**Doing digital:**

**How it can help improve**

**wellbeing in the**

**homelessness sector**

Developed by Good Things Foundation with Homeless Link,  
and supported by the National Lottery Community Fund



**Good Things**  
Foundation



homeless link

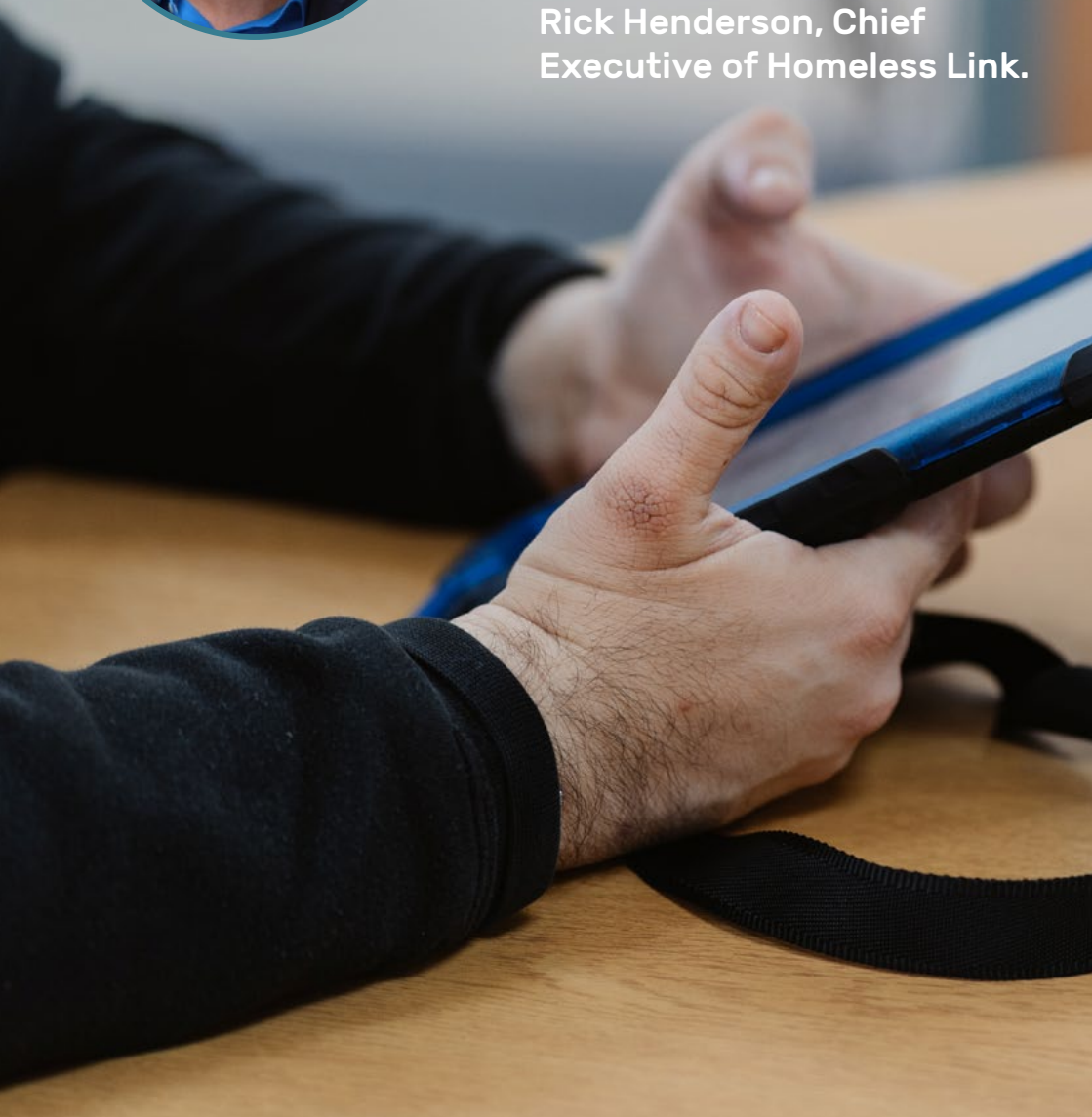


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“ Digital literacy can help to grow people’s confidence and independence, and become an incredibly empowering influence on their lives.”

**Rick Henderson, Chief Executive of Homeless Link.**



# Introduction:

In the UK, there are 11.9 million people without essential digital skills<sup>1</sup>, and 15.2 million people who aren't making full use of the internet<sup>2</sup>. Despite the huge growth in ownership of smartphones, people who experience homelessness - particularly those who sleep rough and/or have multiple needs - are often socially and digitally excluded. They can face barriers to getting online and using online services, meaning specialist support and help is vital to help them access all the benefits the internet has to offer.

This guide offers advice and resources for homelessness organisations wishing to do more with digital. Whether it's helping the people you support to benefit from what the internet can offer, or simply helping you and your service users to keep up with the ever changing technological world around you, this guide should have something of interest to you.

You might already be doing some digital inclusion activities and want to learn more and join things up a bit, or you might not feel like you've got your head around 'digital' at all. We hope this guide shows that it's not all about structured support or 'IT classes'. It's about an informal, flexible, person centred, holistic approach that can be incorporated into your existing support.

All of the tips, suggestions and examples of best practice in this document have been provided by Homeless Link, Mind centres and Online Centres, as part of the **Reboot UK project**.

<sup>1</sup>Lloyds Bank, UK Consumer Digital Index 2019

<sup>2</sup>Good Things Foundation and Professor Simeon Yates, supported by BT, The real digital divide? Understanding the demographics of non-users and limited users of the internet: an analysis of Ofcom data, June 2017



## Homelessness and digital exclusion:

Digital skills are crucial for independent living, autonomy and empowerment. By helping clients to develop these skills, you're supporting them to be independent, autonomous, empowered members of society. Digital skills can help with health and wellbeing, hobbies and interests, social connections and skills for employment. And with a shortfall of resources for the homelessness sector, it's great that people can be supported in other ways.

In addition, an increasing number of essential welfare benefits and housing services are often now only accessible online, so having digital skills is more important than ever for the clients you support. But we need to do it with, rather than for people.

Many people experiencing homelessness face challenges to getting online and using online services such as:

- Not having a settled home from which to have a laptop or PC, and establish and maintain reliable internet connection.
- Lack of, or inadequate, devices for accessing the internet. Mobile phones aren't always enough to manage all the digital access and activity that's needed. Issues such as theft, battery life and phone contracts including data restrictions can make even the reliability of phones a challenge.
- Unreliable or restricted WiFi in public areas such as libraries. And not being able to afford to spend money to stay in public spaces to use the WiFi.
- Lack of basic digital skills and knowledge.
- Fears about staying safe online.
- Lack of interest and motivation. For some people facing multiple challenges, other issues and needs can mean that going online isn't a priority for them, and they can't see the benefit of it.

And it's not easy for organisations:

- Digital support isn't often seen as a priority and there can be a lack of senior leadership or commissioner buy-in for including it in front line support.
- There can be resistance to including digital support as part of services from staff at all levels, and from service users themselves. Many organisations require a big cultural change to embrace the value of digital inclusion.
- Frontline staff and volunteers can feel overwhelmed, and there can be a lack of experience and confidence about how to incorporate it and what resources are required, which is understandable as digital may never have been seen as a core service.
- Lack of suitable equipment and WiFi, as well as security concerns.
- There can be particular challenges engaging some individuals with more complex or multiple needs or those who lack any interest or motivation.



## What you and your organisation can do:

Here is our basic five point guide.

1. **Remember anyone can do it:** Providing digital support to clients isn't just for IT bods and techy organisations. We truly believe anyone can introduce digital to their workforce and service users.
2. **A culture change may be needed:** You might need to promote the importance of providing digital support and the value that greater use of the internet can bring to the wellbeing of clients. Use the right language when you're talking to your team - it's not about IT but about ensuring people are not left behind. Concentrate on the outcomes you want to achieve with people and introduce the internet as a way to get there. Support doesn't have to be structured.



The Online Centres Network is made up of over 5,000 grassroots organisations, all working to tackle digital and social exclusion by providing people with the skills and confidence they need to access digital technology.

You can have a look for your nearest [Online Centre on this map.](#)



- 3. Provide kit and connectivity wherever possible:** If you are working with clients on your own premises, try to have PC's, laptops or tablets that clients can use as well as reliable WiFi. There are a number of grant giving charities and funding opportunities (like [Computer Aid](#), [Wavelength](#), [Computer Recyclers](#) and [getonline@home](#)) that could help fund or supply equipment, whether new or refurbished. Consider or explore device 'loan schemes' to give clients the opportunity to make more use of devices in their own time. Where you work with clients in other locations, make sure you can still work on a laptop and there is reliable WiFi or the opportunity to use dongles, and be prepared to signpost clients to where they can access devices and/or free WiFi in your local community - like local libraries or Online Centres.
  
- 4. Identify a lead 'Champion':** This could be for your organisation or for each service area or team, who can make sure everyone working with clients is practicing a bit of digital support in their roles. They don't need to be overly technical, but they need to be open to learning and passionate, and it helps if this person is in a senior position so they can convey the importance of digital inclusion to the top.

They can act as a 'Connector' bringing front line staff together to share their experiences of providing digital support. In a larger organisation there could be value in the Connector working across the sector locally - building and maintaining a network of lead champions from other organisations to network and share experiences and tools.

## Hub and spoke. Community Connector: Learning from the Reboot model:

If you want to embed and promote digital support at a larger scale in the wider community, consider a 'community connector' role in your organisation. For the purposes of the Reboot UK programme, Community Connectors were defined as – either service users with lived experience of the issues faced by other service users, or people who are committed to co-production with people with lived experience. They worked beyond their own organisation and connected with other organisations in their community working with people experiencing homelessness. The Connectors engaged with frontline staff and volunteers in other organisations along with staff and volunteers in their own organisations and established a small team of front line digital champions to lead the way in digital support work with clients. Connectors in the Reboot programme were able to offer support in the form of training, workshops, 1-1's, troubleshooting and sharing resources.

See evaluation report of the Reboot Community Connector programme for more detail: [Connecting with Digital](#)

5. **Embed across frontline staff:** Embed digital support in the roles of frontline staff and volunteers. This could be done gradually over time or all at once alongside training and support. They don't need to be a technology whizz – what's really important is that they can connect with people. You could put prompts in service user's initial assessments to consider digital resources; train staff (including people that come in like CAB workers), how to take ownership over digital and not just signpost people to digital resources. You could add digital to outcomes star measurements.



### Resource:

How to demystify digital - [develop health professionals' capacity to improve digital health skills for people living with long-term conditions](#)



## Working with Digital Champions

Embedding digital support could start by identifying informal frontline champions in paid and volunteer roles as role models/ trailblazers and eventually extend to working towards making digital part of people's job descriptions for all front line roles.

- Start gradually with frontline champions. Here are some ideas for how to recruit, identify and support them:
- These are the people (whether staff or volunteers) who inspire others to use the internet - in whatever form that might take.
- if you don't like the term Digital Champion, you can call them something else - whatever you feel comfortable with.
- Make an agreement with them, discuss and record what they feel comfortable with, and the support they will give. It's useful to make colleagues in the organisation aware of this agreement and to set expectations so the Digital Champion feels comfortable.
- Consider volunteers with lived experience to take on this role - peer-to-peer support can often be the most successful and this can provide great learning and development.

The logo consists of three overlapping rounded squares in shades of blue, purple, and pink. The text 'Learn My Way' is written in white, bold, sans-serif font across the squares.

Learn  
My Way

**Digital Champion resource:**

[How to be a Digital Champion, Learn My Way](#)



## How to get

### digital support right:

1. **Don't assume people know nothing.** People you support will be at different stages of developing digital skills so it's important to have a person-centred approach which considers what an individual might need or benefit from. You can use these [Digital Inclusion cards](#) to help start a conversation so it's interest led - from Nintendo to coding!
2. **Decide which format is best for providing digital support to the people you work with:** You may want to offer drop-in support sessions, group or one-to-one support. It works well to try and include different approaches wherever possible, to cater to different audiences.
3. **Go to where people are:** Some people may not feel comfortable coming to digital skills classes, but you may be able to introduce digital to existing non-digital group work or support sessions. For example, if you already offer support with CV writing or cooking, you might want to think about how you can embed digital within their courses.
4. **Don't mention digital:** Don't say "can you use the internet or your phone?" Find out about the person, what they like doing and what some of their daily challenges are, and then think about how to support them to access and use the internet to help make life easier or develop their interests.

## **Case study: See how Evolve Housing have approached it**

Evolve Housing, the supported housing charity, have used digital to creatively engage with 16-24 olds. At their centre in Stockwell, they used an open cinema to connect service users to one another and allow them to watch and discuss films. After one of their screenings, they invited a well known actor to surprise the audience with an appearance and Q+A session. Volunteers and digital champions came together along with service users and staff to create a dynamic experience, inspiring further digital exploration.

### **[Watch the full case study](#)**

5. **Get peers to support each other:** Add digital to existing peer support projects. This tried and tested approach, the Reboot project has found to be particularly successful for improving the digital skills of vulnerable people.

## **Elim Connect Centre in Wells in Somerset. Engaging people in digital through art.**

At Elim Connect Centre, the most common digital needs are knowing how to write a really good CV, how to apply for jobs and learning that the internet is a tool and you can manage it.

Going straight to writing CVs can be intimidating for some people and helping people to engage with digital in a more meaningful way to them could mean taking a more creative approach.

Chloe is embedding digital in art sessions called 'Creative Connections' to help people engage with digital in a different way to increase their confidence.

## Peer mentors:

This is an adaptation of the successful therapeutic model most commonly used in mental health. Peer mentoring creates an open and informal learning environment where people share skills, helping individuals with low confidence to learn. It can give vulnerable adults progression routes after crisis points in their lives, and can provide a clear route back to employment and positive employment outcomes.

Peer mentoring encourages people from similar circumstances to support each other to build independence and resilience. Reboot UK used this model as a critical part of digital skills support. Peer mentoring creates a non-hierarchical learning environment, which facilitates support and 'discovery learning'. In Reboot UK, this model of support has often been facilitated by volunteer peer mentors and expert tutors.

**Case study:** Sal Limpeshah was homeless when he first went into Deptford Reach. They've helped him to fund accommodation and receive benefits, and he's now spending time building his computer.

Understand practical needs, digital doesn't have to be an add-on. By this we mean understanding the practical needs of the people you support, and embedding digital skills into your existing activities, such as:

- Reconnecting people:
  - a. Socialising online – social media, Skype, email
- Managing money:
  - a. Online banking, knowing your rights, budgeting, saving money online
  - b. Universal Credit – in this [Learn My Way course](#) you will learn about Universal Credit and how to work out if you can claim, how to make your first claim online and what information you need to do this

- Health and wellbeing:
  - a. Apps for medication reminders
  - b. Look out for local websites like [Sheffield Flourish](#) and the [Healthy London Partnership](#)
  - c. If people are waiting to start counselling or receive other support, find something they can use on their own in the meantime. For example there are apps and websites to help people manage anxiety and panic attacks
  - d. If people are isolated and anxious about going out, there are online support groups
  - e. Befriending services online
  - f. Alexa for housebound people
  - g. Interest led - films, religious readings on YouTube, digital art, cooking (cooking club), coding (coding group)
  - h. YouTube for meditation
  - i. [NHS Apps Library](#)

## Case study: Homeless and insecurely housed people in Hastings

Can digital help rough sleepers get the health support they need?

The Seaview Project, a homeless charity in Hastings, have tested ways to support the homeless and insecurely housed use digital to access health information and support they currently don't feel able to access.

They tested two models:

1. Using digital technology to record and triage health concerns of rough sleepers.
2. Supporting people who visit the wellbeing centre and other public spaces to use the internet to access health information.

[Read the full case study](#)

- Housing:
  - a. Help people onto the housing register
  - b. Mending things in the house - YouTube!
  - c. A house bidding group
- Further goals and skills:
  - a. Jobs: link in with previous professions. What are they good at and what is their experience
  - b. LinkedIn
  - c. Help with CVs
  - d. Coding
  - e. For those that are self employed - Google Digital Garage, The Digital Skills Directory
  - f. Word/Excel courses on Learn My Way
- Be aware of online safety: It's natural that people will be wary of doing certain things online, so make sure you've got some tools you can use to help people stay safe online. There are some courses out there to help you including hints and tips from Mind.

## **Shared practice: Online Centres supporting specialist homelessness charities**

This model brings together specialist services and digital skills support, to help improve the capacity of organisations who are unable to provide digital skills support in-house. Some delivery partners used this model to reach out to crisis services, such as food banks, but the greatest success using this intervention was seen through the coupling of specialist social care and mental health provision with digital skills delivery.

If you're a charity lacking resource, there might be an Online Centre locally you can work with. Take a look at our [Online Centre map](#).



To help sustain what you have started:

- [Find out more](#) about the Online Centres Network, and [register](#) as an Online Centre
- [Join the Online Centres Specialist Networks](#)
- Evaluate your work, measure its impact and collect case studies
- Look for funded digital inclusion opportunities

For more information about the project, please contact:

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