

Setting up a Digital Buddies Project

Many groups and organisations have been in touch with us to learn about setting up digital projects. So we're sharing our experience to connect older people with friends, family and the wider world using digital technology. We wrote down what we did and what we learned, to share our ideas with people looking to set up similar projects.

Digital Buddies Our Approach

Digital Buddies started during the Covid 19 pandemic to enable older people in the Scottish Borders to connect digitally with friends, family, groups and the wider world. We started with funding from Independent Age to pilot the approach. We now have additional support from the Scottish Government through the Community Recovery Fund to share this with more people.

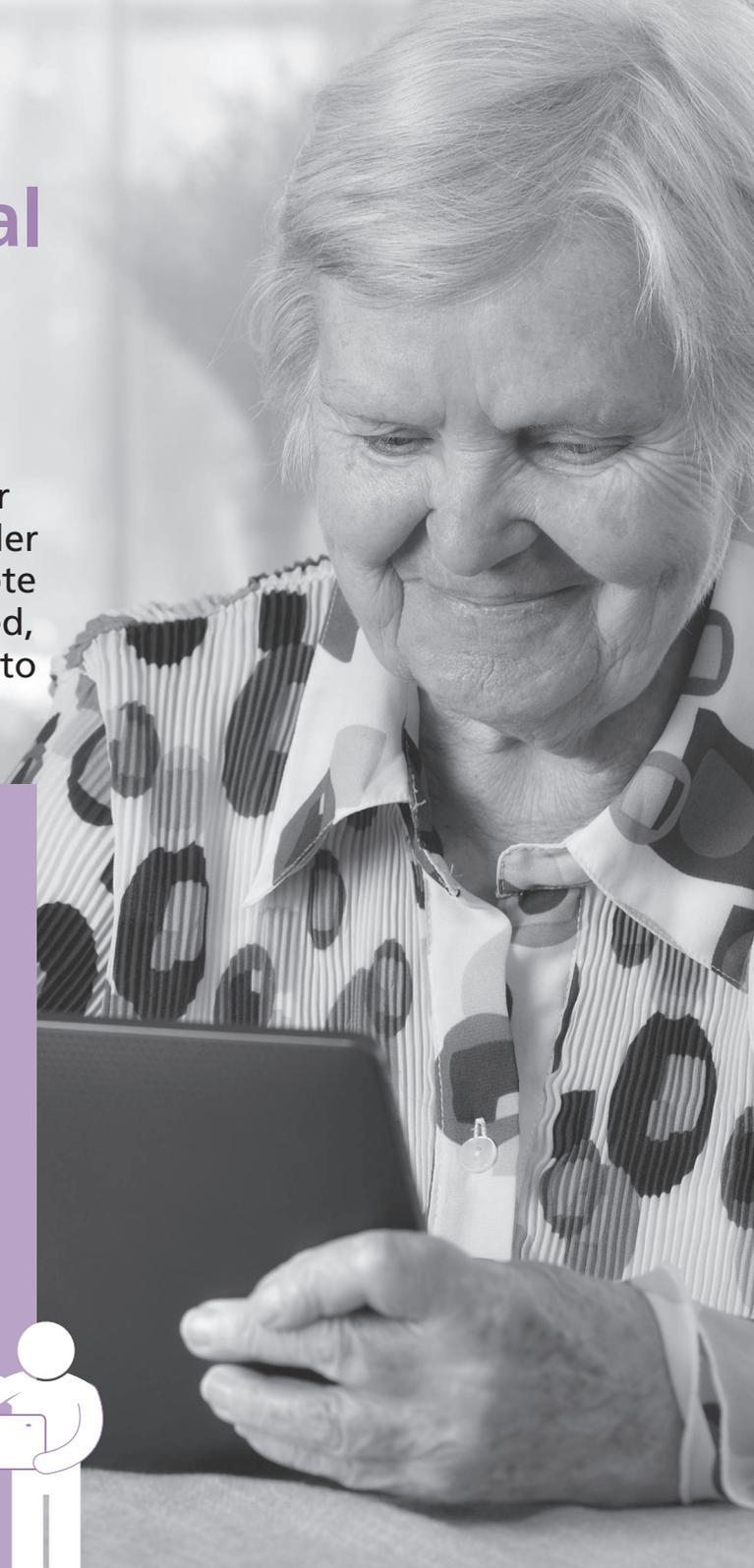


Background

Even before the Covid 19 pandemic many people were feeling excluded if they did not have access to a digital device as more and more services were moving online such as banking. The pandemic exacerbated the issue with all groups cancelled or moving online and connections with family and friends made more difficult when we couldn't meet up or visit one another.

We all had to adapt very quickly to move further into a digital world where Zoom and Microsoft Teams became the go to platforms to connect with people, but what about those who didn't have access to digital technology or did have it but didn't know how to use it?

Many groups and organisations have set up digital projects in response to the pandemic including Outside the Box. This guide is to give you an idea of how we decided to set up our Digital Buddies project. This will not work for everywhere but hopefully it will give you some ideas that can be adapted to work where you are.



Reaching Older People

Outside the Box is not an organisation that provides a service or tends to run groups so we didn't have a group of older people we were in touch with regularly. Our approach was to try to reach older people who were feeling isolated as their local community/church groups had stopped or moved online due to the pandemic.

We used our local contacts and social media to get the word out. The response was amazing, it was shared on social media so many times that we reached groups and individuals that we had never been in touch with before.

People were getting in touch asking if we could support their parents, churches were in touch for members of their congregation and community groups for their members.

Individualised

After we receive a request to support someone to get digitally connected a member of the Outside the Box team calls the person to find out more about them and their interests. From there we talk about what it is they would like to be able to do. For many this is connecting with family, we have also had people who wanted to connect with their church, learn French online and much more.

Although many people want to learn how to do similar things it is up to the person where they would like to start, what they would like to be able to progress to doing and the speed that we go at. No one is rushed and we will spend as long as needed doing the same thing until the person feels confident to move onto the next. Some people only want to be able to do the one thing and that is completely their choice.

Who we are

Outside the Box provides community development support and capacity building for people who want to make changes in their communities by:

- **Providing advice and development support to small groups led by people who are looking for support in their own lives and to make things better for others.**
- **Delivering projects that provide innovative peer support and other services that are led by the people who use those services.**
- **Developing resources that then provide practical support to a much larger number of people and groups.**
- **Creating opportunities for people to have a stronger voice, raise awareness of others in their community about the needs of people in equalities groups and the contribution they make, and help people influence wider policies and decisions.**

We work in partnership with local communities and respond to needs that they identify.





Devices

We have predominately used touch screen devices such as Samsung Galaxy Tablets and iPads.

We have been fortunate to receive some iPads through the Connecting Scotland programme which allowed us to support more people. Until we received the iPads we were successful in a funding application to Independent Age Grant Scheme which allowed us to purchase Samsung Galaxy Tablets.

We chose Samsung tablets for a couple of reasons:

- Cost - they are considerably cheaper than iPads which meant we could stretch our budget further to support more people.
- Weight - the people we are supporting are older so we had to take into consideration the weight of the device. We didn't want a device that was too heavy to hold.
- Sim card – for many of the people we are supporting this was their first time using a device and nearly all didn't have access to the internet at home so we needed to have a way of getting them access to the internet. Having the option to insert a sim card into the device was a real bonus.

Connecting to the Internet

We have tried a few different options:

- Sim cards – Initially we purchased 24gb data sim cards that lasted for 2 years. These were a great option to get started but some people who were using the tablets to watch Netflix/YouTube soon ran through the data. Using the top up functions wasn't the most cost effective solution so we switched to pay monthly data sim cards. We chose Smarty where we could get 30gb of data each month for £10, the price reduced to £9 per month when you added more sim cards.
- Mifi devices – We received Mifi devices in our Connecting Scotland award and were fortunate to be awarded additional devices for all of the people who were using the data sim cards. The Mifi devices we received are from Vodafone and give unlimited data for 24 months. Once the sim card is inserted they work just like your home wifi but with the added bonus that it is portable.
- Another option we looked at but due to receiving the Mifi devices we have not needed to implement was BT Basic for those who qualify. BT Basic is a low cost telephone and broadband package which costs £10.17 per month for both telephone and broadband. It is a rolling monthly contract with no upfront installation cost. You do need to be a recipient of certain means tested benefits to qualify for this package however.

Buddies

Our initial idea was that we would get small groups of people who were interested in learning the same thing together to explain how to do something then use each other for support and practice. It soon became clear that this was not going to be possible due to the restrictions, so we needed another solution. That is when we introduced Digital Buddies.

As part of the initial conversation we have with the person interested in becoming digitally connected we ask if they have a friend, neighbour or family member who can support them if not we find them a buddy.

In the beginning many of the people we were supporting to get digitally connected were shielding or choosing to stay at home more; having a buddy who was a friend, neighbour or family member worked really well, especially if they were in a bubble together as that meant they could go into each other's houses and sit together to learn.

For those we found volunteers for we used several different routes including the local volunteer centre and local resilience groups that had popped up during covid.

A key criterion for us in a buddy was that they needed to be local for several reasons:

- To meet the stay local restrictions.
- A better knowledge of what was happening virtually in the local community that may be of interest.
- A way of keeping the person who was staying at home up to date with the news and gossip from the local community.
- Potential for relationship to continue outwith the Digital Buddy role.

When we were looking for buddies we weren't looking for IT specialists, we were looking for people who:

- Had a little spare time.
- Were patient.
- Were comfortable explaining in non jargon terms.
- Knew how to do the basics on touch screen devices – we try to match people who have knowledge of similar devices.
- Could commit to supporting someone for at least 6 months.

Like with the people who wanted to get digitally connected one of the Outside the Box team has an informal chat with each of the buddies before they start to talk about our volunteer policy, what is expected of them, what support and training they will have access to.

The Outside the Box team checks in regularly with both the buddies and the participant to see how things are going, what they have been up to and what would help.

It is also important to remember that the buddies also have their own lives and they may need to take a step back for a while or stop altogether.

- Some of our younger volunteers took some time out during exam time.
- Some have had to stop due to returning to work or other family commitments as restrictions have eased and they no longer have the time.
- Others have started with one family member as their buddy but now have either swapped to a different family member or have several helping with different things.

Step by Step Guides

As part of the support we have put together some step by step photo guides on how to do the most common activities that the buddies were being asked about such as emailing and video calling. These are then available to all the participants and their buddies as guides and back up if the person fancies giving it a go on their own. All the guides are on our website.

In addition to the guides we have a few short 'how to' videos that can also be found on our website. We have also created a Google classroom as a central place for holding all the resources and videos that can be accessed by all the participants and buddies. The classroom also provides a space for people to ask questions and support each other.

Networking with people from other places

Networking virtually with people from all over the UK has been really important and we would really encourage people to find other digital projects and make contact with them. The sharing of knowledge and resources has been invaluable for us to grow the project.

No two projects have been set up the same as every area and group of people being supported is different but even though the projects are not identical we learn so much from each other which just sparks a solution to a little niggle that you couldn't quite get right or solve. If it hadn't been for one of these conversations with a Housing Association in Wales we would never have thought of setting up a Google Classroom as a way of having an accessible place for the buddies to access the resources.

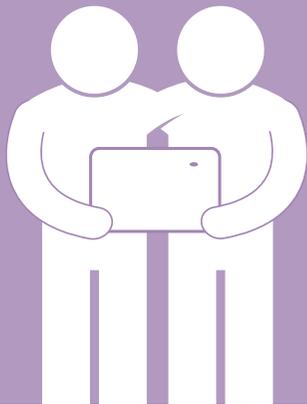


Our Top Tips

1.

Be Flexible

No one approach is going to work for everyone or for every area so keep learning and adapting.



2.

The buddies play a crucial part.

It is important to get the right buddy for each person, someone who can give friendly encouragement when needed and knows the right pace to go at for the person.

3.

Get in touch with other digital projects both locally and further afield.

Learning from them and sharing resources with each other can help build a supportive network and partnerships.

4.

The participants we have been supporting were all keen to have face to face contact with their buddy.

Speak to both the participant and the buddy about what they are comfortable doing, talk through risks and put procedures and practices in place to make both parties feel safe.

5.

Follow the guidance for your area, risk assess and plan accordingly.

6.

Collect stories, achievements, case studies and magic moments.

These show the impact being digitally connected has on that person is more valuable than numbers.



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