



August 2024

# **A few steps at a time:**

Supporting lonely and isolated  
older people with digital literacy

## Acknowledgements

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# A pilot project offering digital skills support to Re-engage tea party guests highlights a number of barriers to closing the digital divide for lonely older people, but slow and steady could win the race

## Key findings:

- 1** Internet usage by older people is growing, but the over-70s are still least likely to have digital skills; less than half of our tea party guests are active online and those who are often lack confidence
- 2** Barriers include lack of motivation and poor self-estimation of capacity to learn new skills; awareness of assistive technologies is low and some older people dislike asking for help
- 3** Engagement is strongest when older people have specific goals or needs – just ‘getting online’ lacks appeal, especially if friends or family can take care of things that must be done online
- 4** Relaxed settings such as tea parties allow older people to talk to their online peers and get one-to-one support from trusted volunteers, but present challenges in terms of scheduled learning
- 5** Opportunities to try out devices such as smartphones without the pressures of a commercial or classroom setting can breakdown negative perceptions of the internet and what it means to be online
- 6** As well as letting older learners set their own path and pace, we should ensure no detriment to those who opt not to get online by maintaining offline provision of essential goods and services.

"A relative did offer to set me up with a computer, but I wasn't interested. Besides, I know I wouldn't be clever enough for something like that!"

"With a small group, people might be more confident, less embarrassed. I think most of our group would find using a computer a big help. Apart from anything else, emails will help them not to feel so isolated."

# Introduction

Re-engage is a charity that is positive about older age and committed to fighting loneliness so that people can have social lives and friendship groups however old they are.

We inspire and enable meaningful connections and shared experiences within communities across the UK for people 75 and over facing loneliness and social isolation. Our volunteers work together to create better communities and help to enrich the lives of our members by giving them something to look forward to. Older people who may have felt very alone now feel valued as individuals, continue to form friendships, and have groups that give support.

Our services reduce loneliness whilst removing some of the barriers that stop people from developing and keeping connections with other people. Our research in recent years has given us insight into the multiple exclusions that older people face – social, civic, financial - and how they can be exacerbated by digital exclusion. More than three million people in the UK aged 75+ lack essential digital skills and more than a million do not use the internet at all<sup>1</sup>.

The Covid-19 pandemic prompted a surge in internet use, with people aged over 60 being identified as 'the fastest growing demographic group of novice internet users' when global lockdowns necessitated doing (more) activities online<sup>2</sup>. Between 2022 and 2023, the proportion of people over 75 who lack essential digital skills for life almost halved<sup>1</sup> and in 2023, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported that on average, people aged 75 and over were spending more time online each day than people aged between 35 and 64<sup>3</sup>.

However, it remains the case that people aged over 70 account for more than two-thirds of those defined as having 'ultra low' digital capability. The demographic profile of those who lack what are known as essential digital skills for life overlaps considerably with that of the older people that we support, being most likely to be women, aged 65+, retired, and/or living with a physical impairment<sup>1</sup>.

Additionally, Re-engage works with older people with an average age of 85 who may be very isolated, experiencing chronic loneliness, and who may lack the networks needed to encourage and support them getting online. Research by Re-engage in 2021 found that while the majority of older people who were already online were using the internet more since the start of the pandemic, half of our respondents did not use the internet at all<sup>4</sup>.

## What is at stake?

Fears about online scams and hacking discourage some older people from doing certain activities, such as online banking, and prevent others from getting online at all<sup>5</sup>. So, too, does a lack of confidence in their ability to use new technologies. This is happening at the same time as essential services, including managing personal health and finances, increasingly rely on digital interaction and devices.

Some older people will never want or be able to get online and the provision of equivalent and accessible alternatives must continue as long as that is the case. Some older people, however, are limited for want of the right support rather than motivation, which is why in this project we sought to identify ways of working with older people to increase their confidence and enable them to gain and maintain the digital skills they want and need.

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**"I'd really love some support with learning how to buy and sell online. I'd also like to know a little more about using apps, maybe something like Facebook? I don't use social media, but I would really like to. The thought of being someone who is active on eBay, that would be great. If Re-engage could possibly help me with such things, I would be really grateful."**

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Here we set out our development and pilot delivery of digital skills support to older people in Re-engage tea parties, and share what we learned in the process. Reflecting on the implications of those learnings, we make recommendations around supporting older people with digital skills.

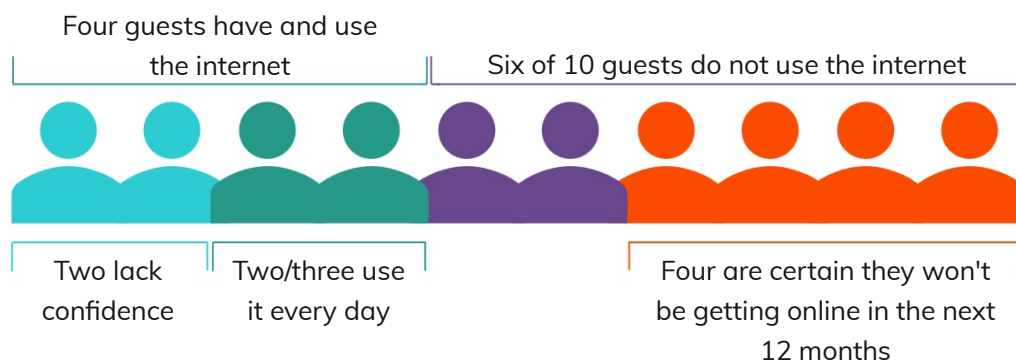
# Designing around older people's needs

The design of this project reflects our commitment to working with older people to understand their needs and priorities, and to making Re-engage a channel through which older people can influence the decisions and services that affect them.

Firstly in terms of our goals: we heard from our older people as part of our regular consultations in 2023 that the cost of living and the economy was the issue that most concerned them. Older people are disproportionately affected by rising costs and are vulnerable to financial exclusion thanks not only to factors such as their age, income and health, but also low digital literacy<sup>6</sup>. For that reason we were keen to ensure that our digital skills programme included helping older people to safely and confidently bank and shop online, and to source reliable money-saving information such as comparing energy providers.

Secondly in terms of our approach: this was a pilot project aiming to engage with around 80 of our tea party guests and the volunteers who support them. We began by identifying tea party groups in parts of the country with higher levels of deprivation, and specifically deprivation affecting older people, so that older people where needs might be greatest could be instrumental in shaping our work as well as being its first potential beneficiaries.

**Phase 1** of the project was to conduct telephone surveys with tea party guests in order to gain insights into their internet access and use, and to ask about the kinds of support they would be interested in. Of the 85 older people we contacted, 52 agreed to complete the survey. With their input, we modelled a 'typical' tea party of 10 guests and their needs and interests.



- Of those surveyed:**
- 54% did not have internet access
  - 42% had access; 38% used it
  - 50% of internet users had a tablet.

## Most likely to



Check emails



Browse social media



Play games



Read news

## Least likely to



Search for information



Book a GP appointment



Manage finances



Make video calls

## How can we help?

The older people who were online are best characterised as 'limited' or 'destination' users, going online to do specific, routine things. Although more than half said they weren't confident internet users, some were also reluctant to engage with support, preferring to stick with what they knew. Others said they preferred to rely on friends and family to do the things that had to be done online.

Good Things Foundation (GTF) sets out five issues when it comes to overcoming digital exclusion, and we found **motivation** to be a key barrier among older people. As well as a lack of interest, people said they were "too old to learn something new" and that it was hard work. One person said they'd been to a session at an Apple store but it had been too fast. For some people, the difficulties associated with limited dexterity and/or vision impairment felt insurmountable.

In addition to providing information about devices catered to older users and assistive technologies, the support we offered our tea party guests would need to focus on their specific needs rather than simply getting online.

For older people who were offline, **access** was also a barrier - although for some, not having "any gadgets in the house" was not so much a problem as a relief. Around two-thirds of those who were online were worried about **safety** due to scams and fraud, and said they wouldn't be confident about spotting a scam website.

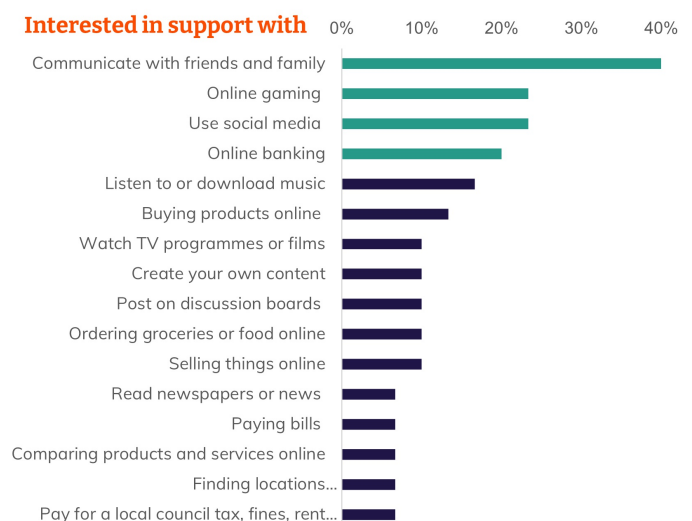
A lack of **confidence** was prevalent in our conversations with older people, whether in explicit terms or implied in references to previous attempts to learn to use a computer. Even for some older people who were already online, the internet and digital devices felt alien and doing something new could mean the difference between managing on their own and needing help. Our survey respondents mentioned having jargon-free, step-by-step instructions on paper that they could continue to refer to.

"I'm scared and just need confidence"

"Help to navigate my iPad would be handy"

As well as encouraging us to offer guidance on 'the basics' in order to demystify the internet, older people identified particular **skills** they wanted to gain: most commonly, learning how to communicate with friends and family. Some people talked about the things they miss out on and how it makes them feel.

**"I feel isolated as all of my family has the internet and keeps in touch that way. I have pen friends who say, 'if only you had access, we could show you x,y,z!'"**



Around one in five people said they would like to know how to use social media, play games online, and use banking services. There was also interest in TV and music, buying and selling, and some content creation/sharing.

## Project delivery

Our findings suggested that a lack of confidence, safety concerns and motivation (including negative perceptions of being online or having someone else do it for them) were the biggest barriers to our older people being online. A number of instructional resources already exist for beginners – including some specifically designed for older people – but another barrier to address is where and from whom support is available.

Evidence shows that older learners value more highly the relationships they have with people supporting them to use new technologies than their technical expertise<sup>7</sup>; they often fare better with organic, flexible support that responds to their own needs and interests than in formal, structured tuition<sup>8,9</sup>. Older learners are unlikely to (want to) learn as a single cohort at the same pace and covering the same topics.

Yet, while older people can be reluctant to engage with formal learning with professional instructors ('cold experts') and prefer the support of friends and family, these 'warm experts' often lack the time and patience to support older people to use digital technologies independently and with confidence<sup>10</sup>.

With that in mind, we built **phase 2** of our project not around a formal programme of learning as originally planned but around access to a range of resources that can be selected as if from a menu. By enabling volunteers, who already enjoy positive and trusting relationships with their older tea party guests, to deliver well-resourced support within the familiar setting of tea parties, we sought to combine the advantages of formal and informal instruction to offer older people the chance to get online safely.

### Between July 2023 and March 2024, Re-engage:

- Developed a suite of accessible training resources for volunteers and older people to use in support of developing digital skills (see facing page)
- Hosted two online sessions for volunteers with Tanya Cook of A1 Community Works, a GTF ambassador, to discuss remote/in-situ digital skills support, review resources and introduce the digital learning platform, Learn My Way
- Promoted the project to more than 100 tea party group coordinators and conducted five in-depth interviews with volunteers to identify challenges to participation
- Continually sought and gathered feedback from volunteers and guests in 14 participating tea party groups in order to develop resources to suit their needs, including evaluation tools and markers of individual progress
- Conducted case study interviews with two tea party guests and two group coordinators to gather qualitative insights at the beginning and end of the pilot period.

"It would be lovely to have certificates to recognise people's progress. Some of my guests would really value that"

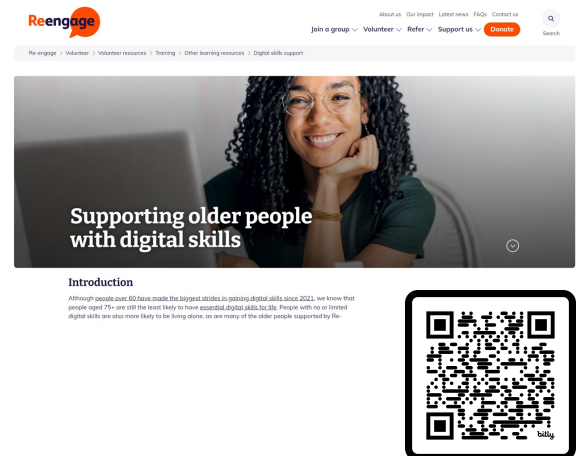
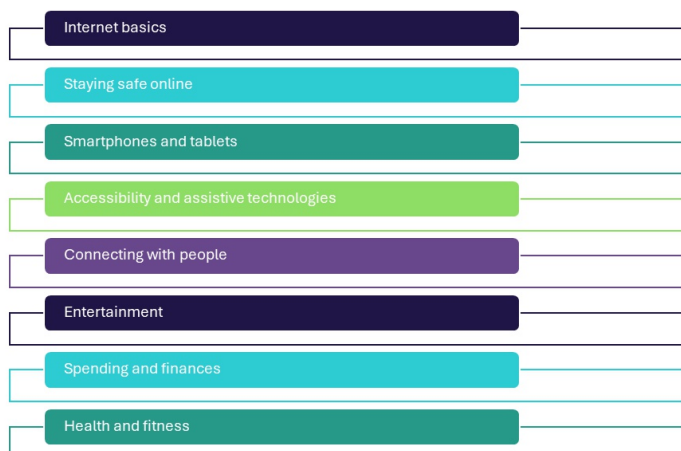
"Something informative but broken down enough that it doesn't get too technical"



# Resources

There is no shortage of resources available when it comes to developing digital skills - but they're largely online, assuming a skill, access and confidence baseline that many older people lack. We sourced a range of materials, from interactive video-learning to written (printable) step-by-step instructions. Volunteers and their guests could access the resources that matched their guests' needs, skills, and interests.

- guidance on talking about digital skills with older people and common problems
- training materials provided by GTF from their 'digital champions' classes, covering how to inspire people and overcome barriers, how to adjust devices for accessibility, facilitating group discussions, and using Learn My Way
- tailored advice from a GTF ambassador on bringing digital skills into tea parties
- support on essential topics such as online safety basics and dealing with scams
- ideas for fun, 'no pressure' activities that can be accommodated in tea parties to introduce guests to digital devices and demonstrate the appeal of developing their skills
- resources to recognise and reward tea party guests' progress, such as essential skills checklists and completion certificates
- a suite of links to resources, guidance and learning designed for older people and beginners addressing topics and activities curated in consultation with tea party volunteers and guests.



Sources of learning materials: GTF, Digital Unite, Hi Digital, Age UK, GCF Global, AbilityNet.

**"I had a really rewarding dialogue with Re-engage about how tea party volunteers can help their guests with digital issues. I gave advice on working with people outside of classroom settings, balancing formality/structure and flexibility, and the increasing importance of smartphones, among other things. We hosted two webinars to provide insights for participating volunteers.**

**"The web pages that Re-engage has put together are really worth a look. What started as peer-to-peer mentoring became collaboration and we learned from each other, thinking about new ways to deliver digital skills and what our learners have in common" - Tanya Cook, GTF ambassador.**

## Case study

\*names changed



Clare\*, a tea party coordinator, told us that she had taken an iPad for her guests to use and it had generated a lot of interest – including from one guest who had never been online.

“We've got a couple of friends in the group that don't have any internet at home, so it's just completely alien to them. I wanted to introduce them to it within the group where it was safe.”

She told us that John\* struggled with the iPad due to a loss of feeling in his fingers, which makes scrolling difficult. John is 98 and used a computer before retiring; now he uses a laptop regularly.

**“I have family scattered all over the world so emails have been an absolute godsend. Quite honestly, if we were still using the old snail mail, I doubt if I'd still be in touch with them all.**

“Online banking means I don't have to go into the city centre very often; I get around mostly on a mobility scooter, but I like to stay close to home. I think for a lot of people in my age group, online banking can be a big help.”

John hesitates to describe himself as a confident user, having relied on his daughter for 'tech support', but he was keen to become more independent and to help others do the same.

**"A lot of people have made up their minds that computers are far too advanced for people of their age, and they're really frightened to try. I think if we go slowly - take a few tentative steps at a time so as not to discourage them, don't overload them with too much at once - we can go a long way."**

## Findings

As a pilot project, this was an iterative process of consultation, development and adaptation; although we began with goals such as older people becoming able to safely manage their finances online, the primary outcome of the project has been to develop a better understanding older people as learners. In **phase 3**, we reviewed everything we had learned in order to consider how Re-engage and other organisations can support older people with digital skills. Here we present our key challenges, adjustments, and lessons.

## Challenges

**Take-up** was unexpectedly low. In our follow-ups with tea party volunteers who declined to take part, most said the group was not interested; very occasionally this was because guests were already competent internet users, but the vast majority said guests had no devices/access and no interest.

Some volunteers had been keen to help and were disappointed, while others were already giving ad hoc support to their guests and preferred not to formalise this by becoming part of the project.

We later offered a contribution to the group's funds as an incentive, which generated some more interest, but **accommodating digital skills into tea party schedules** remained a challenge.

A sizeable minority of invited tea party group coordinators wanted to check with volunteers and guests at upcoming tea parties before accepting, often creating a delay of a month or more. Some tea party groups wanted to wait until a point in the year when they had fewer activities already planned.

Some groups found that despite the interest and enthusiasm of volunteers and guests alike, making



“We might have to do a separate session for digital skills - I felt like I was taking John away from the group to use the iPad, and I know he really values that time with his friends”

time for digital skills support during a tea party proved difficult, for a host of reasons: guests not wanting to miss out on conversations; activities having been planned months in advance (e.g. Christmas, January panto); something happening at a tea party to direct volunteers' attention elsewhere. This makes short-term goals, including older people moving towards self-directed learning via platforms such as Learn My Way, harder to reach.

Sadly, more than one participating group suffered illnesses and bereavements during the project.

## Adjustments

In addition to adjusting our approach **away from a formal programme** of learning (see p. 6), we also **modified our expectations of progress** within the short lifespan of the project. As well as John's advice and the challenges reported above, our consultation with Good Things Foundation and review of existing evidence established that progress was likely to be slow and not always linear. Before becoming confident to do things such as managing their finances online, older learners first need to spend time doing things they enjoy online and gaining confidence with devices and online environments<sup>7</sup>.

We **adapted our evaluation plans** to focus in the short term on the progress that guests felt they had made and whether and how that was important to them. We developed simple online evaluation questionnaires that volunteers can use when appropriate, rather than according to organisational timelines.

## Lessons

We learned a huge amount that allowed us to review our approach and give shape to future work in this area.

### Perceptions of incapacity are a major barrier

Worries about scams are prevalent - some tea party volunteers were worried that this risk outweighed the benefits of any help they could offer their guests - but first, older people worry about their ability to use new technologies. Older people often doubted they could use digital devices and/or to learn how to; some had impairments that they felt made it impossible or too complicated to be worthwhile. They were fearful about handling problems.

"I'm scared of the thing... I'm frightened of doing something wrong."

"It's hard to explain. I've been on my own a long time and I've managed up to now."

### Asking for help can be difficult

As Pat's story demonstrates (facing page), reaching out for support is not always easy. Some older people dislike needing or asking for help because they're accustomed to their independence; some feel that they're being a burden even when accepting an offer of help. Although participating volunteers were happy to lend a hand outside of their monthly tea parties, some of their guests preferred not to trouble them in their own time.

### Building confidence is crucial to delivering digital skills support

Some older people had no interest in developing digital skills, some lacked access, and some were already online but felt uncertain about how to use their devices or were wary of doing new things. Some people, like Pat, had had negative experiences in the past and 'lost faith'. Simple confidence-building activities can shift people's perceptions of the internet and themselves, addressing concerns about ability and support needs at the same time as opening up possibilities for skills development.

### Focusing on individual interests and needs is key to successful engagement

Simply 'getting online' is rarely a draw for older people; tea party volunteers were best able to support guests who had particular interests or needs that could be met online. That might be shopping or banking, but it could be something as simple as in one tea party where two guests downloaded the same Scrabble app so that they could play against each other any time they wanted to. Pat, our case study, hopes to be able to video call a relative in Canada whom she has not seen for 40 years.

"Even that five-minute conversation has made such a difference to her already."

### Digital devices can seem alien, but not unappealing

In 2012, 3% of people in the UK aged 65+ owned a smartphone; in 2023 that had risen to 71%<sup>11</sup>. Most of those users are likely to be younger than the people that Re-engage supports<sup>12</sup>, but we found lack of familiarity was a bigger issue than a lack of interest. At one tea party, volunteers were able to help a guest who had accidentally muted her smartphone and couldn't understand why she could no longer hear it. They spent time showing her how to adjust the settings.

### Easy does it: slow pace, low pressure works for older people

Older people liked talking with volunteers and other guests about digital skills. In one group, volunteers started a conversation about online shopping and found that guests who already shopped online offered advice and encouragement to others. They did not always want to 'lose tea party time' to digital skills discussions, though, and even the most interested guests were not in a rush to learn new things. Pat, for instance, relies on her laptop for shopping, but if something pops up that worries her, she closes it until she next sees Tracey or Kate.

"A gentle bit of assistance, as and when it is needed, might be more appropriate for our group at the moment."

## Case study

\*names changed

Pat\*, 87, has had terrible luck with technology. She currently has two doorbells designed for people with hearing impairments but neither works, and a phone that crackles and distorts the line. While we're talking, someone delivers a third doorbell. They plug it in and leave, throwing the box (and the instructions) into a wheelie bin as they go. Pat looks exasperated. "You lose faith."

At the start of the project, Pat had a very old mobile phone - if she wanted to type a text message, she still needed to press the buttons multiple times to change numbers to letters. So her tea party group coordinator Tracey\* reset an old iPhone and showed Pat how to use it.

Pat struggles to type on a touch screen, so Tracey and her fellow coordinator Kate\* showed her how to use speech-to-text conversion. Pat gets a bit flustered using it and has apparently sent Tracey "some very funny messages", but she's getting the hang of it now. She was even confident enough to show another tea party guest, Jane\*, her phone and how she's able to check the weather app every day, and now Jane is looking to get her own smartphone.

Pat's always been independent and self-reliant so she doesn't find it easy to ask for support, even with Tracey and Kate's insistence that they're happy to help. It can put a limit on what Pat wants to learn to do, but she is far happier taking these small steps with them than with other modes of learning.

"I went to a few classes but I need one-to-one help." Pat was the only woman in the class and felt uncomfortable. The instructor spoke while writing on a blackboard so Pat couldn't lip read and quickly got lost. "I can't get to grips with the jargon. It's embarrassing." For Tracey, the problem isn't Pat but the support available - or lack of it:

**"We have all this technology, but we just assume that people know how to use it. Most training is generic. You need training for just the things you need."**



## Recommendations

Pat's experience (previous page) goes a long way to capturing what we learned from this project and demonstrate the tangible impact of this work; Pat's journey highlights various challenges faced by older people and underscores the value of personalised, empathetic support in digital learning. Our recommendations for delivering digital skills support for older people:



### Be prepared for a slow start

We invited more than 100 tea party groups to take part; 14 accepted and most of them struggled to build momentum, regardless of interest or commitment from guests and volunteers. Our tea party groups' schedules were affected by factors including the health of older guests. Offering incentives attached to learning/feedback milestones had limited effect. Even if following our other recommendations, allow for a slow start.



### Build for long-term, unstructured learning

Set long timeframes that can accommodate gradual starts, repetition and an overall lack of structure. While a structured curriculum creates a clear timetable for progress, we found that older people wanted to take their own path at their own pace. For example, Pat's willingness to ask for help, her faith in technology, and the urgency of her desire to learn are contingent on various factors and can fluctuate as her wants and needs change. When experiencing difficulties with ostensibly simpler technologies such as doorbells, Pat feels embarrassed and frustrated and is less inclined towards digital learning. Offering support that is always available but not 'pushed' can help older people to feel more in control.



### Focus on individuals rather than organisational goals

People are better motivated by their own interests than by a curriculum or standard 'essentials,' and our findings show the subjective nature of engagement with digital skills support. We suggest that programme goals (e.g. financial digital skills) work best without a deadline, and since older learners' individual interests are the gateway to building digital skills, programme goals should be secondary to ensuring that each participant feels they have achieved what they want to and that their progress is recognised.



### Promote awareness of and facilitate access to assistive technologies

Perceptions of incapacity ('too old to learn') are a barrier to participation, as are concerns about physical limitations. Some people felt that impaired vision or other health conditions such as arthritis made it impossible for them to use computers. It is possible, then, that some older people are dissuaded from showing an interest in getting online by impairments that could be mitigated by software (like screen readers and dictation software) and devices (such as a vertical mouse or modified keyboards). Support programmes need to inform people about assistive technologies and, ideally, provide access to them.



### Cost provision of digital devices (and data) into the programme

Getting hands-on with new technologies can make a huge difference: although older people sometimes spoke as if mobile devices were alien, several tea party groups found that opportunities to play with phones and tablets encouraged older people to see them as 'something for me'. Volunteers felt that being able to offer their guests tablets or smartphones to try could have made a difference, especially when getting started. Digital skills programmes aimed at older people should be built around sharing devices and data.



### Create space for peer-to-peer support and learning

In group settings, making devices available for all participants to try and/or organising activities that the whole group can join in with maintains the social element of the group, and might weaken motivational barriers for some. This could have knock-on effects for take-up and progress - as could seeing peers, rather than younger people, successfully using digital devices.



### Co-design with participants

We consulted with our tea party volunteers and guests throughout our pilot, allowing us to develop resources that work for them and gather invaluable feedback on their experiences. To build a longer-term project, we recommend involving all stakeholders fully from the start, including the design and planning stages, so that any issues or obstacles can be better anticipated and mitigated for or removed.



### Do not create a 'digital only' world

While increasing digital literacy and skills development for older people is beneficial, it is important to recognise that there are many reasons why older people cannot or prefer not to use online services or technology. When consulted in May 2-24, almost two-thirds of our national older people's advisory group reported no interest in having a smartphone, even when reviewing a simplified handset designed specifically for older users (61%). Ensuring that offline connections and services are available is crucial, maintaining access to services and helping to reduce social isolation by fostering opportunities for human connection.

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