

# Lewisham Pensioners Forum Intermediate Technology Programme 2012-2014

An estimated 7.63 million adults, 15% of the UK population, have never used the internet. The over-60s form the largest proportion of this shocking statistic with the over-70s identified as the least frequent users of digital technology. Less than a third (29%) had ever accessed the internet compared to 99% of 16-24 year-olds. Given their higher incidence of disability and social isolation, the over-70s are the very age cohort most likely to benefit from being on-line to upload information on health and service provision and link into social-networking sites. In the foreseeable future, digital competency will become the key factor in prolonging independent living within the community. The inability of older people to use computers confidently or engage effectively at a digital level has profound implications for their chance to play a full and active role in national, local and mainstream civil society, ensure that their views and preferences are 'heard' by politicians and participation with commercial and financial organisations to shape services and tailor goods that meet their specific needs. The restrictions on access to information on goods and services imposed by the relentless adoption of 'digital by default' throughout the private and public sector can only compound their marginalisation.



Beatrice proving that age is no barrier to learning new digital skills.

The Lewisham Pensioner's Forum (LPF) has witnessed the creeping exclusion of its less digitally-confident members with alarm. However, our collaboration in 2012 as the UK partner in a two year, EU-funded project, "Social Inclusion and Dignity in Old Age" [www.dignity-in-old-age.eu](http://www.dignity-in-old-age.eu) has focused our attention and goaded us into long overdue action to revisit the existing ITC provision across our borough and devise innovative, sustainable ITC solutions that could be delivered to our members on a low cost/no cost basis in collaboration with local stakeholders such as TUC-funded 'Union-Learn', local secondary schools, Goldsmith's University Student's Union and the University of the Third Age.

We wanted our ITC programme to tackle the three major hurdles blamed for



Jacqueline McNee, former Student Union Volunteer Co-ordinator, and Jane Hopkins, from LPF.

the low adoption and confident use of technology in older age:

- affordability of equipment;
- software and home broadband connection;
- the historical skills-gap and failure to appreciate the benefits of being on-line.

Our target group of learners were in their 70s, formerly employed in low-paid manual public sector jobs who had never encountered computers during their working lives (unlike our 'baby boomer'

members) and without access to a computer at home. None of this 'digitally challenged'

group held any doubts about the value of being on-line. They were desperate to learn how to communicate with distant friends and family, often overseas, using email, Skype and other social media sites, research information, catch up on missed television programmes, download books, store photos and even shop or bank on-line from the comfort of their homes; all tasks easily undertaken by a reasonably cheap-end tablet computer. None of them expressed any burning desire to write, create and save documents, all areas covered at length by traditional ITC courses.

A comprehensive audit of all ITC training schemes across the borough confirmed our suspicions that the majority were too expensive, restricted to 'NEET' groups or unappealing in style and content to the older adult learner. Cuts in library staff meant that the 'Learn My Way' pre-loaded programmes using headphones freely available on library terminals have lacked the level of personal support required to reassure the older, unconfident beginner.

Lewisham libraries are making attempts to improve this situation by arranging timed training sessions with a dedicated staff member on hand, but the 'drop in' nature of the training groups detracts from the sense of social solidarity, 'all being in it together' valued by our members. Despite modest concessions, we therefore decided to design our own bespoke course specifically targeting the 'digitally timid' without a home computer, that would be designed to overcome their lack of confidence and anxiety by ensuring that the learning process matched the learner's preferred pace along with guaranteed individual support to 'nudge' and encourage perseverance.



We launched our pilot course for absolute beginners, 'Basic introduction to accessing the internet', in May 2013 in collaboration with Goldsmiths University who generously provided free access to one of its computer suites.



"Buddies" in action

The course consisted of five, fortnightly one-hour sessions with each learner partnered by a student volunteer, a 'buddy', who sat alongside them offering encouragement and guidance as they worked through set tasks at their own pace. Participants were assigned an email address, shown how to use a keyboard and mouse and then, guided by work sheets, investigated popular websites that

provided practical information on health and welfare benefits, on-line shopping and London's public transport system. The final session took place at the participant's local library to transfer learnt skills to unfamiliar but free-to-use community terminals. The participants whose ages ranged from 65-87 all reported feeling far more confident about logging onto and using the internet following the course and had enjoyed meeting up socially in a hitherto unfamiliar environment. Buoyed up by their positive feedback, we embarked on our second course in November 2013. That proved less successful given the limited number of buddies electing to volunteer their time and their unpredictable attendance. We still intend to run these courses on a termly basis once a new cohort of 'buddies' is recruited.

Invitations to attend 'techy tea' parties, the brainchild of Age-UK, hosted by large corporations as part of their community engagement, are highly prized by our membership and hugely oversubscribed because they marry up opportunities to master digital equipment within the context of a sociable outing. LPF takes full advantage of all offers even using limited funds to hire a community minibus to convey our less mobile members to such events. However, our attempts to export the 'techy-tea' model to local secondary schools across the borough have proved unimpressive to date, failing to convince over-burdened teachers of the positive improvements to their year ten and eleven pupils' 'soft skills' and the opportunity to count ITC sessions towards their scouting or Duke of Edinburgh Bronze and Silver awards.



Clifford Chance volunteer and LPF member exploring the mysteries of a smartphone together.

LPF, in common with other voluntary grass-roots agencies subject to funding cuts imposed by cash-strapped local authorities, has been forced to approach unfamiliar bedfellows in the corporate sector in the search of one-off funding for extra amenities such as five cheap-end tablet computers for in-house training use. We have met with a deafening silence to date apart from a major



Warm glow of digital confidence achieved.

electronic retailer who we approached in 2013 to propose a local partnership and with the suggestion of a dedicated sales assistant prepared to offer jargon-free advice on equipment suitable for the needs and purses of older people, free personalisation of their purchase and an on-site 'techno-surgery' that has resulted in an invitation from the local manager to discuss the matter further. It would appear that most corporations are far

more comfortable making donations to large national charities trusting to the 'trickle-down' effect rather than small grassroots organisations. It is a shame as it is agencies like LPF that gets information out to its 1,500 odd members via old-fashioned, hard copy, bi-monthly newsletters hand-delivered to save on postage that are best placed to identify and recruit groups most in need of ITC training. Older people wanting to learn 'how to access the internet' are unlikely to be recruited onto courses advertised over the internet!

LPF has now had a chance to review, re-evaluate and rethink the focus and direction of its ITC training strategy. Self-learning ITC training modules have now been loaded onto our website and be downloaded for home use by members with a computer to work through at their leisure.

We are keen to focus the bulk of our energies on the over-70 year olds, a group of the 'digitally challenged' who seem to have been somewhat 'written off' by agencies as not worth the investment of ITC resources—a problem that will eventually resolve itself within a decade or so. Tablet computers may prove our salvation. We could dispense with the time-consuming search for free computer training suites (as any venue with free Wi-Fi access is suitable for adult learning) and offer the flexibility to move around the borough and co-operate in joint initiatives with other stakeholders such as the University of the Third Age. Basic tablets are now reasonably cheap to purchase by families on behalf of their older members or by corporations keen to donate to a worthy cause, in addition being portable and easy to store. Tablets aren't perceived as technically threatening as a laptop, and enjoy an altogether 'cuddlier' image whilst still performing all the key tasks on the wish list drawn up by our members. Once a learner becomes proficient in their use, a tablet could then act as a key gateway device to help them graduate onto devices that can perform more advanced functions as their initial digital anxiety is overcome and confidence builds.

We will also continue to avail ourselves of offers of corporate techy-teas and redouble our efforts to promote the idea within local schools and colleges.

Jane Hopkins – Secretary to the Lewisham Pensioners Forum 14.3.14

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