



Think Digital Programme

Evaluation of Phase 2 (June 2021)

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Executive summary

1. Introduction

This executive summary provides an overview of the evaluation of phase 2 of Age UK's Think Digital programme, which was carried out by Imogen Blood & Associates between March and June 2021. Age UK, with funding provided by Santander, supported five local partners: three Age UK partners (Age UK Blackburn with Darwen, Age UK Leicester Shire & Rutland, and Age UK South Lakeland), and two Age Cymru partners (Age Cymru Dyfed and Age Cymru Gwent) to run the Think Digital programme in their local areas. The programme aimed to engage, inspire and support people over 50 years old to develop their digital skills through individually tailored support. Each area employed a Digital Coordinator to offer training and support to staff and volunteer Digital Champions (DCs), as well as to oversee the programme. The programme was delivered through a mainly remote model, in line with COVID-19 restrictions.

The purpose of the evaluation was to assess the ongoing impact of Think Digital for participants who had finished engaging with digital skills support provided as part of the programme. It explored the extent to which participants had continued or had not continued to use their digital skills, understand why this had been the case, and whether and how it could have been different.

2. Methodology and participants included in the evaluation

Local partners across the five areas identified participants to interview by telephone. A total of 13 semi-structured interviews were carried out, of which six were follow-up interviews from Phase 1. In all cases, interviewees had ended their engagement with the programme at least one month before. All had at least three sessions with a Digital Champion.

Of those interviewed, nine identified as female and four as male, the age range was 62-85; all but one was retired and ten lived with at least one long-term health condition (with six reporting more than one condition).





3. Findings

3.1. The extent to which participants had continued to use digital

All participants reported that they had continued to apply what they had learned to at least some extent, influenced by a mixture of programme and non-programme related factors, including: five who had continued to develop new skills beyond the programme's support; five who were applying digital skills but would benefit from further support to either expand or recap on what they had learned; and three who had continued to use what they had learned and were satisfied that digital offered what they needed at that point in time.

3.2. How digital learning is being applied

- a. Keeping in touch:** The most frequently reported reason for participants continuing to apply their digital learning was to keep in touch with family and friends, which had been especially important during the ongoing pandemic. Supporting participants to use tools that enabled them to connect with others not only encouraged increased digital use, but also inspired some to continue advancing their learning independently. Examples included individuals being supported by a Digital Champion to send text messages, then progressing on to sharing photos, or communicating in new ways via a video platform.
- b. Supporting interests, creativity and culture:** Participants were encouraged to utilise digital to pursue things that they enjoyed, and most had continued to apply the learning for this purpose. Some interviewees particularly valued being shown how to use digital to continue activities that were only available via remote access during COVID-19 restrictions, such as tuning in to church services being streamed online or using digital tools for art-based activities.
- c. Making online transactions:** A few participants had built up the confidence to carry out online shopping and banking, which all but one had continued to do regularly. Participants described digital financial transactions as being more convenient, and supporting independence. For example, one interviewee who had previously relied on her partner to carry out digital financial transactions was now doing this herself.
- d. Accessing health support:** A few participants were using digital to manage their health and increase their health literacy. This included using the NHS App to order repeat prescriptions, surfing the internet for information about a particular health condition, and using the NHS COVID-19 contact tracing App.
- e. Saving money:** Some participants talked about carrying out digital based searches to save money, such as looking for the best value broadband deal and saving on vets' bills through accessing online advice.
- f. Using Apps:** A few participants talked about how they had learned to explore different Apps with their Digital Champion and had been motivated to continue doing so, due to the wide range on offer that met their needs and interests, such as one participant who had downloaded a free sleep aid App.

3.3. Factors which enabled ongoing digital use

- a. Programme-led practical enablers:** These included having access to written learning materials, lending devices and sessions which put learning into practice, such as sending an email backwards and forwards to help participants become more familiar with using it.
- b. Programme-led support enablers:** Most participants attributed the support they received from their Digital Champion as a key enabler to continuing digital use, reporting that it had led to increased confidence, enthusiasm and reassurance that digital could be used as a tool to suit their day to day lives. This was facilitated through working with the same Digital Champion across sessions and building up trust. Participants also reported feeling more comfortable asking family or friends to help if they got stuck.
- c. Participant-led enablers:** Though most participants attributed the initial support provided through Think Digital as a key factor in their continued use of digital, ongoing use was also driven by the strength and nature of their own personal motivation and circumstances, including meeting an interest or need, supporting independence, broadening horizons and saving money.

3.4. Factors which hindered ongoing digital use

- a. Equipment:** Some participants purchased a new tablet following their sessions and struggled to navigate the different settings and functions. An additional issue for some was losing the tailored 'set-up' which Digital Champions had provided them with during the programme.
- b. Affordability:** For a few interviewees, cost was the main barrier to them applying their digital learning, after the return (or expected return) of a borrowed device.
- c. Lack of confidence or fear:** Of the few interviewees who had been willing to use digital for financial transactions, there was a view that face to face support would be more appropriate. Health was another area that a few participants were unsure about exploring online, yet this was generally due to factors outside of the control of the programme, such as following advice by family or a GP.
- d. Additional learning needs.** In most cases, additional learning needs could potentially be met through offering intermittent 'check ins' or perhaps a refresher.





4. Sensory impairment: a 'Deep dive'

We interviewed six participants with a sensory impairment: five with a sight or hearing impairment, and one with difficulties due to sense of touch.

4.1 What supported continued digital use:

All attributed this to the tailored Digital Champion support, where learning was delivered with patience and adaptability (e.g., around length of sessions, setting up a video platform to support lipreading). Another important facilitator was advice on accessibility, appropriate tools and adaptations.

4.2 Barriers to ongoing digital use:

- a. Programme based factors:** The programme support finished early for a participant with a hearing impairment due to a combination of her Digital Champion being unfamiliar with the functions of a newly purchased tablet, and the older person struggling to hear instructions by telephone. The remote learning process itself was also perceived to present hurdles, due to being much slower and the lack of visual cues. Hybrid support or a mirrored device may have mitigated some of these barriers.
- b. Factors outside of the programme:** Including the need for friends or family to be on hand to provide additional support as required; the need to limit digital use due to impact on impairment; cost (such as in one case where a person with sight impairment who could not afford to purchase an iPhone which had a range of accessibility functions).



5. Key learning

The evaluation identified six key areas of learning to consider when running a programme such as Think Digital:

1. Hook participants through matching interests and needs
2. Provide support access to learning materials and devices
3. Provide person-centred and tailored support
4. Remote support will not suit all learning needs
5. Some participants require ongoing support
6. There is a need for additional factors to be considered for those with sensory impairment





6. Recommendations

Based on the learning discussed throughout this report, we recommend the following should be considered when looking to apply a programme such as Think Digital to maximise the likelihood of the digital learning being used after the programme ends.

a. Explore wider needs and interests at the outset

A key enabler to building confidence to encourage older people to continue using digital was Digital Champions taking an exploratory approach to working with older people around how digital can fit into their everyday lives. Particular attention should be given to those who will need to return a loaned device once the sessions end or those who may need additional support due to an impairment.

b. Consider access to equipment and connectivity

Participants suggest the need for technology (loaned or owned) to be set up so the Digital Champion can more readily work remotely with participants and ensure the older person can learn and continue to apply the learning after the support ends. Ensuring a good exit strategy is in place for participants who loan equipment that needs to be returned should be considered.

c. Provide supplementary learning materials

Provide a range of supplementary learning materials, or ensure the sessions give time for participants to make their own notes if they wish. This was identified as a key mechanism through which some people were able to refresh and continue using their digital skills. It might be worth exploring how to develop written resources based on the learning to date, the content of which can be agreed through collating feedback from the Digital Champions and Digital Coordinators who are running services.

d. Be flexible around the support offer

The findings identified the need to adopt a flexible approach through asking older people what they feel comfortable doing online. This will ensure that those who are happy to try remote support are given the opportunity to do so, with those who would prefer face-to-face being signposted accordingly. For those who prefer to learn specific digital tasks (e.g., financial based) in a face-to-face setting a hybrid approach, which incorporates a mix of remote and face to face support, would work well.

e. Be open to delivering further support where needed

The interviews suggested that potentially extending the offer so it includes some level of ongoing support where needed can support some older people to continue applying what they have learned. This might include 'light touch' support to 'troubleshoot' unpredictable obstacles or to offer 'quick fixes' when people get stuck on a particular task.

f. Offer additional training to Digital Champions

To ensure participants take learning forward, having the right support in place during the programme is important, and it may be necessary to offer additional training to Digital Champions. Staff and volunteers may not necessarily have experience of supporting people with accessibility needs remotely and may require additional training and support in this area.