

Here's how to work in partnership in your Digital Champion programme

Because together you can do so much

In an effort to improve digital inclusion, more and more organisations are now coming together in co-ordinated partnerships to help local residents online. With fragile funding and tight resources, embedding a Digital Champion approach across several organisations and sectors can help to build capacity and deliver long-lasting impact.



The Bexley Digital Champions Network is one such example. Over the past eight months, around 9 local organisations have joined forces to help people across the Borough with digital skills. Led by the Bexley Voluntary Service Council, the overall aim is to create long term, in person, sustainable support for all residents who need help. Around 24 Digital Champions have so far been enlisted, supported by the training and resources on our Digital Champions Network.

The Bexley Digital Champions are put into action in three ways:

- Centre based support which are drop in or pre-arranged sessions at a public location such as libraries or community centres.
- Home visits for people who unable to access centres.
- Specialist services that are either based around specific online activities that people are reluctant about but have to do, like blue badge parking permits, or for specific groups such as people with a learning disability.

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Create a foundation

Before you start your Network, decide and define the principles that you want your partnerships to be based on. Bexley has four key principles that influence everything they do.

- Sustainability – develop longevity so that the project isn't dependent on one funding pot, one person, or one team.
- Flexible – ensure the Champion support meet the needs of each person, that it reflects an individual need and not how an organisation envisages it to be.
- Accessible – create support that can reach the most number of people as it possibly can.
- Expandable – develop a Champion model that can grow and evolve and not be a superficial quick fix.

Allow partners to be their best selves

Decentralisation is key. Don't tell partners what you need from them. They know their beneficiaries the best and they're trusted by them. Why meddle with that? Help them find Digital Champions that are appropriate to their core services. What is the best fit within an existing offer? What's already happening that a Champion could be part of?

Support partnerships with owning it

The partner organisation should be responsible for their own Champions. In Bexley, partners do their own recruitment, induction, DBS checks and provide ongoing support. And they are wholly responsible for matching learners to the volunteers, in a way that works for them.

Co-ordination is essential

With all the pressures in third sector life, you need dedicated staff resource with time and energy to keep things moving forwards. As the Co-ordinator of Bexley's Digital Champions Network, Sky works with each partner organisation on recruiting and managing volunteers, identifying support opportunities and promoting the Network to residents.

Think bigger

When it comes to recruitment and promotion you've got to think outside the box. Go beyond the normal pool of volunteers. Many of Bexley's Champions are retired or have taken early redundancy, are teachers or in IT by profession and are super skilled. Unusually two-thirds of them are men. They also have Champions who work full time but because of the flexibility of the support they can choose when to help someone. Think widely about locations. A shiny centre won't attract an older learner who only leaves the house once a week. Consider weekly church coffee mornings and supermarket cafes. See the little to get the geographic spread around an area.

Partner up the partners

How can partners help other? For example, one organisation has space but no volunteers. Another has volunteers but nowhere to put them. Join them up. Another micro-organisation might not have the right induction processes or templates but a large charity does. How can you draw in other resource, processes, locations and support? In Bexley, lots of their Champions volunteer across more than one organisation.

Be patient

Partnership working can affect progress and speed and it can take between four to six months from a partner thinking about it to actually delivering something. Recognise partners can be overstretched and accept an organisation's pace and capacity. Some organisations have a funding crisis or a personnel challenge. Build in extra time for these scenarios and wait until they're ready to come back on board again. Likewise, build in longer for promotion. Whatever time you have in mind, quadruple it!

When all is said and done, partnerships can make a huge and positive difference to your Digital Champion programme.

As Sky said; "Working in partnership in Bexley gives us the power of bigger. It means we can build a stronger identity for our Network and create wider awareness of the digital skills support on offer. It allows us to see what's going on across the borough and identify if there are any gaps we need to fill. And, importantly of all, it means more residents can access the help they need in a way that's right for them".

Start your Digital Champion partnership

For information about how our Digital Champions Network can support your Digital Champion programme and your partners, [get in touch with us today.](#)