

How one charity made a step-change in their digital skills support



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Mencap, the leading charity supporting people with learning disability, had been aware for some time that digital exclusion was an issue for people with learning disabilities. But digital technology is not its core business, and managers were not confident they could provide digital skills support to the 300+ local partner organisations who provide support for people with learning disabilities.



But when lockdown reduced face-to-face services, Mencap's local partner organisations had an urgent need to reconfigure their delivery models.

"When the pandemic came, we were getting the message loud and clear from our network partners that people with learning disabilities were really losing out in not having access to digital technology." **Ruth Owens, Senior Programme Manager, National Mencap**

Mencap was successful in getting government Covid Recovery funding early in the pandemic and then faced a challenge in finding ways to use the funds at speed. A swift dialogue and consultation exercise with a hundred of their local partners revealed that supporting staff and volunteers to become digital champions was a clear need.

Creating a Digital Champion army

The aim is to enlist 100 Mencap local partners over the life of the Let's Get Digital project, and to date more than seventy have already signed up. Champions were recruited from existing staff or volunteers who all received access to the Digital Champions Network (DCN). As well as the usual collection of Digital Champion training, the DCN also offered dedicated training on helping adults with learning disabilities get the most out of digital and was complemented by a dedicated learning platform specifically for peer enablers, called Aspire.

“We introduce the DCN at the very beginning, to give Champions a skills and confidence boost before they move into the device set-up phase, which is actually a challenging bit of the whole process. Some people with learning disabilities are able to use the DCN without any trouble, but to have some additional learning on Aspire which specifically designed for them is great. It is well thought-through, the way you can repeat bits if you need to, the integration of the audio.” **Sally Whitehead, Let's Get Digital Project Manager, Mencap**

Each participating organisation also received £2,000 seed funding to spend on devices and/or infrastructure for the organisation such as improved broadband connections, plus an equipment bursary which is used to purchase equipment directly for the customers with learning disabilities. The great majority of Digital Champion support on the Mencap programme is done using tablets. The Digital Champions then mentor the customers to start using the tablets for whatever it is that they want to do.

Benefits at every level

The project has been popular with local partners and Mencap are seeing beneficial organisational outcomes at both a national and local level.

“When we first started our IT department was unsure about the project and why it was not being led by them, given it was 'digital'. But now they completely see the value and the complementary nature of the work, that you need the engagement and skills support alongside the technical implementation, so much so that they have come to us to add the skills support element for a project they are seeking funding for.” **Ruth Owens, Senior Programme Manager, National Mencap**

[Read more about Mencap's story and the learnings they've gained about digital inclusion and their Digital Champion approach.](#)

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