



**Supporting™
Communities**
Empowering Society

Get Connected Project Report

In Partnership with BT Northern Ireland and Choice Housing Association

August 2017

Project Summary

Background

BT Northern Ireland first approached Supporting Communities about developing a community-based project as part of their corporate social responsibility work.

We suggested a digital inclusion project that could involve BT staff as volunteers and brought in Choice Housing as a third partner and soon the Get Connected Project was born.

As a communications company, BT was excited to help improve the digital skills of people in the local community and to have a real impact on an especially marginalized group of people, those living in homeless hostels.



Volunteer David and Participant David make a great team!

We all recognize that digital literacy has become a basic skill that everyone needs to manage information, communicate, save money, access support, and avail of public services. It has become an essential tool for modern day citizenship and participation and no one can afford to be left behind. For those already struggling with unemployment and housing problems, low levels of digital skills is yet another hurdle to overcome. Many homeless people struggle with digital literacy and their opportunities to find work, transport, and housing are limited when resources are increasingly available only online.

Research has shown that a sense of belonging and engagement in the digital world has transferable life-enhancing value such as improved self-esteem, and a sense of authority and agency over one's circumstances and future direction. Studies have found that use of technologies can augment cognitive abilities and social interactions, as well as compensate for a more limited life experience, such as educational and literacy gaps and minimal job skills.

Project Aims and Objectives

'Get Connected' aims to provide training for working age homeless people to gain digital skills such as basic communication, website navigation, online forms, etc. to enhance their comfort level with using the internet and tablets to conduct job searches, look for housing, write resumes, get parenting and health information, access benefits, and improve their overall sense of membership in the digital community.

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This project also aims to make good use of the generous BT volunteers by supporting them to get involved in informal peer-to-peer skill sharing. By facilitating relationships between participants and volunteers over the course of the project, we hoped to provide help with digital and social skills for the learners and a truly meaningful volunteer opportunity to BT employees.

To break down barriers to digital and social inclusion amongst residents of homeless hostels in East Belfast.

To support and develop participants' self confidence, digital skills, access to online services and further learning opportunities.

To engage use of volunteer support from BT Northern Ireland.

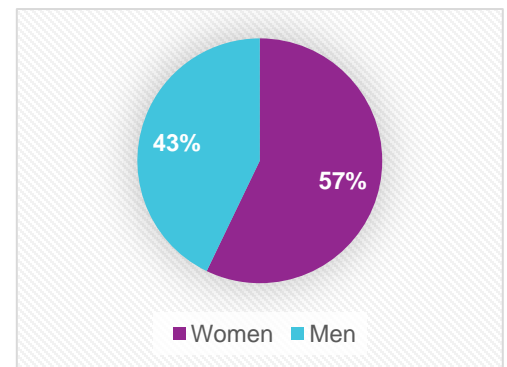
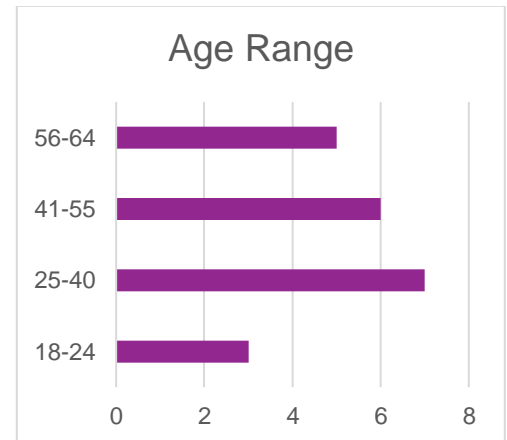
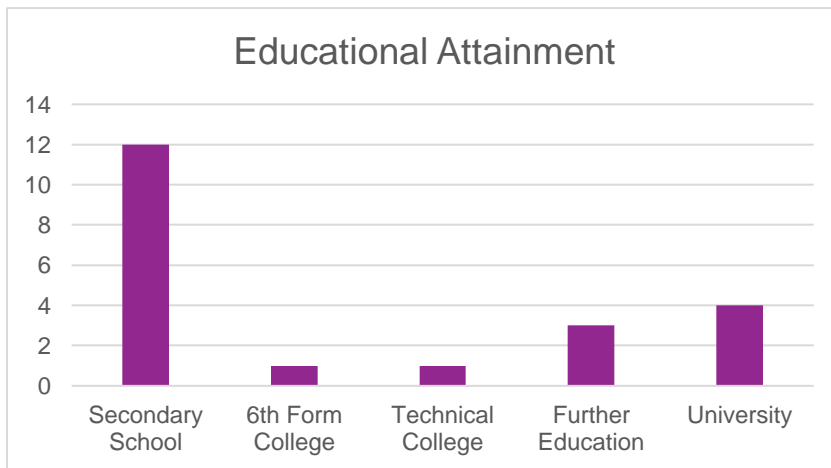


We were all delighted to get the new tablets on the first day!

Our Approach – Methodology

The Group

A group of 20 people¹ were identified through the scheme managers at Inverary House, Hosford House, and East Belfast Mission. The participants are an incredibly diverse group, ranging widely across every imaginable demographic, as well as in terms of existing levels of digital skills.



The majority of participants (18) were unemployed. Two had some part time work and one person was retired. Eight people indicated they had a disability of some kind.

Internet Access and Experience

Past online experience was also varied. Fifteen people said they currently used the internet in some capacity. One responded that they had in the past but didn't anymore and five participants indicated they had never gone online.

5 participants had never gone online before at all.

¹ We started with 20 participants, however, one person dropped out and was replaced by another person from that scheme about midway through so the baseline survey shows 21 respondents.

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Self-reported ability and confidence in using the internet also showed that we were dealing with a wide range of participants. We also asked the group to say how often they did a variety of common online tasks such as checking email and using a social network. As expected, of those who were online, fewer people were engaging with services such as NI Direct or banking online than were regularly doing tasks like searching the internet or communicating with friends and family online. (See appendices for full survey results)

Some telling opinion questions also helped us gauge the group's attitude towards the subject matter such as:

- > "The internet is dangerous" – 9 agreed, 5 disagreed or didn't know while the rest were neutral.
- > "Computers are hard to learn" – 9 agreed and 6 disagreed. The rest were neutral.
- > "Shopping and banking online is safe" – 6 agreed, 2 disagreed, 6 were neutral, and 5 said they didn't know.
- > "Everyone should learn to use the internet" – 12 agreed, 2 disagreed. The rest were neutral.

The Course

Supporting Communities' approach to digital inclusion, like all of our work, is focused on the needs of individuals and communities. For this project, we delivered a 12-week tablet course designed to touch on a variety of topics.

Our standard tablet course is 8 weeks long, but we chose to add in some additional time to take into account the potential additional needs of our target group. The hostel scheme managers advised us that the participants in this project were likely to have issues around attendance and other problems that would affect the delivery of a standard course.

Using the information gleaned from the informal talks with scheme managers and our standard baseline survey we have adapted a flexible approach to best serve the needs of the people who are there on any given day.

The course ran from 10 May to 2 August with a week's break for 12 July and covered a range of topics that included the basic digital skills as well as some more advanced topics that some people were interested in trying. A breakdown of what was covered throughout the course is attached.



A BT volunteer and a participant check out the new gear.

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In our efforts to meet everyone's needs and interests, we tried a few different approaches including broadly dividing the group into "advanced" and "beginners" in order to devise lesson plans that would suit. What also worked quite well was allocating different tables with subject matters. Participants could choose where to sit and what to focus on that day and move around as needed.

The end of course survey shows that the group are mostly up for continuing to meet somewhat regularly over the next year to check in and refresh skills.



Getting the hang of it and learning from each other.

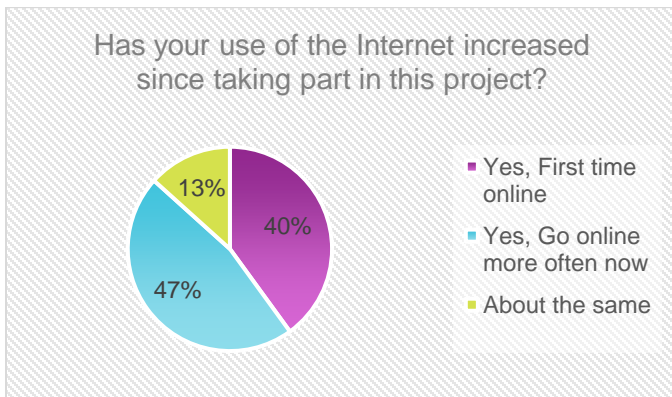
Findings and Evaluation

End of Course Survey Findings

We conducted an online survey on the last day of the course and received 16 responses. We compared the two surveys to measure the group's progress as a whole.

Increased use of the Internet

The vast majority of the group reported increased use of the internet since taking part in the project.

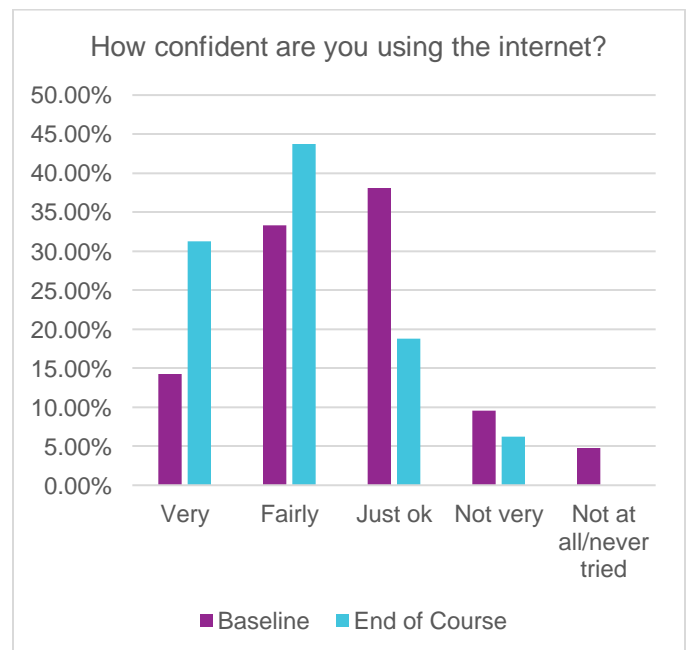
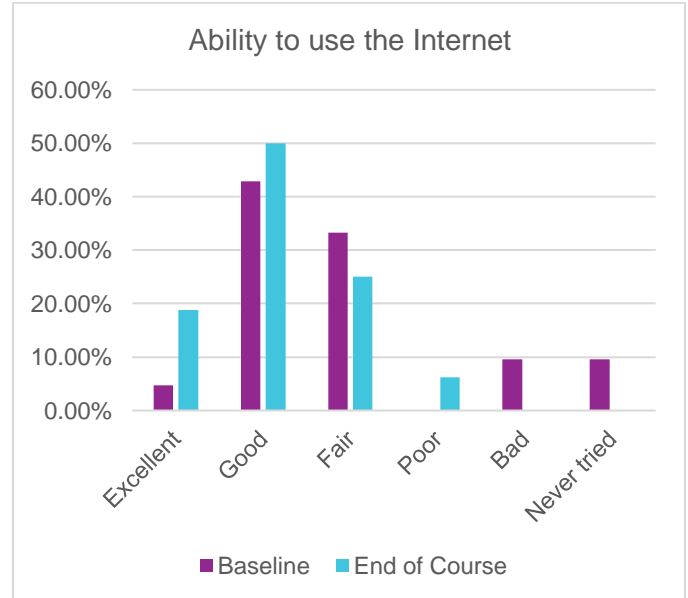


Those who said their use was about the same as before qualified their answer with write in responses saying they had always been a heavy internet user or that they had a new job and were now very busy.

Self Confidence and Ability

When rating their own ability to use the internet, the group improved overall – most people gave themselves a positive rating, just one said they had “poor” ability at the end of the course.

Confidence levels also improved with 75% of the group reporting that they felt very or fairly confident using the internet at the end of the course.



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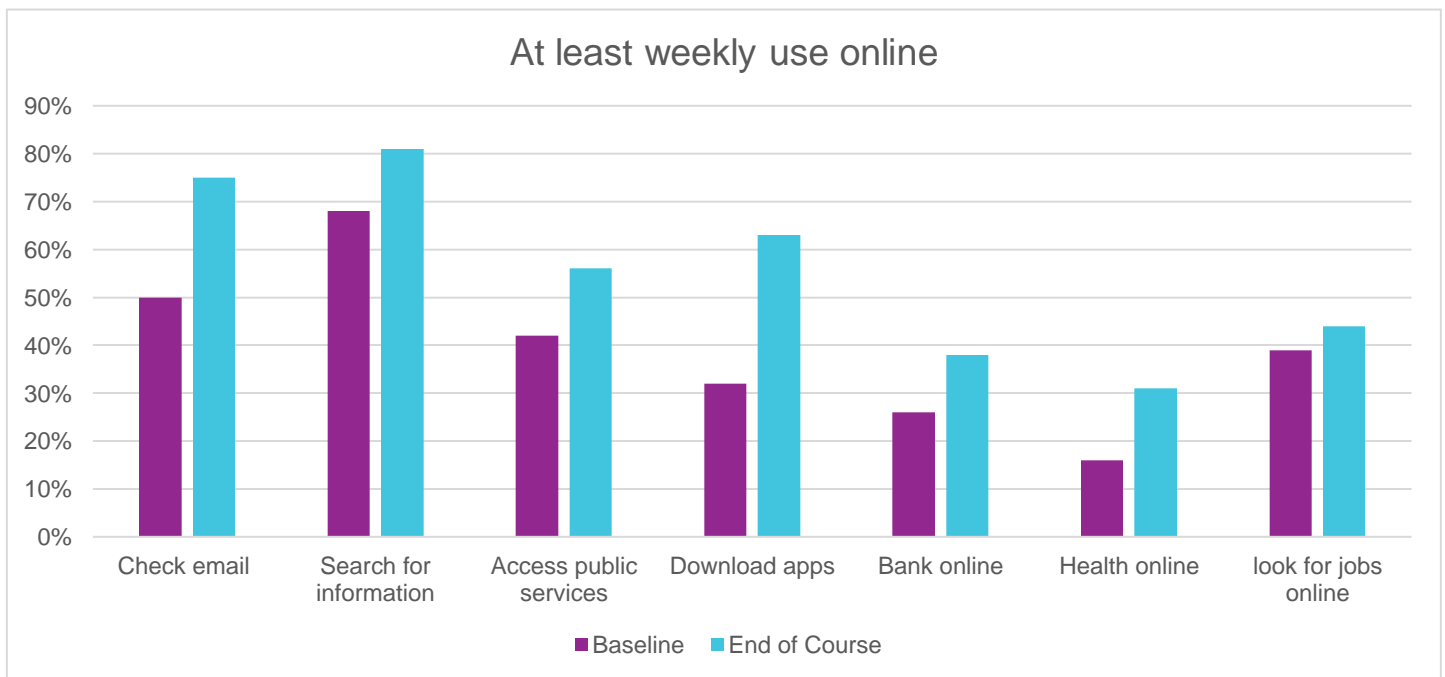
Awareness of the benefits of being online

In a series of Agree/Disagree questions the group responded favourably across the board. (There was one naysayer who disagreed across the board!)

- > 81% - Agree or strongly agree their digital skills are better than before
- > 69% - Have better physical access to the internet
- > 75% - I am more confident using the internet
- > 81% - I know where to look for information online
- > 75% - I can access information and services I need
- > 50% - I communicate more with family and friends by being online
- > 88% - I feel more up to date with what's happening
- > 56% - I have found or accesses hobbies and pastimes by going online
- > 69% - I am more independent
- > 63% - I can manage my personal affairs better

Increase in regular use

We asked participants to say how often they would do various tasks online and saw an increase in several key basic digital skills such as email and accessing key information. This chart shows just a few of these tasks and only notes the percent that did these tasks on a daily or weekly basis. The full surveys are included as appendices.



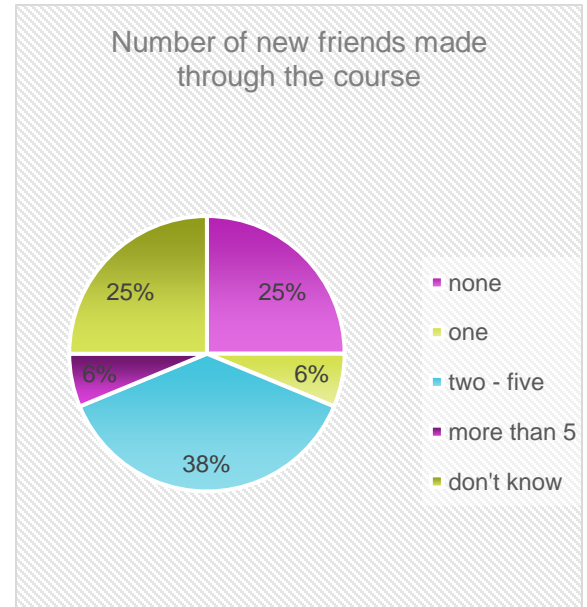
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Other Outcomes

We also measured some softer outcomes since we find projects like this can have a positive impact on the participants' general well being. Taking part in a regular group and learning new things together can improve a person's mood and help them feel more socially included.

The surveys in this case showed only a slight uptick in self-confidence ratings, however, the comments that were written in and especially the feedback we got verbally were very positive with regard to how the experience made people feel and what their social experience had been.

We asked people how many new friends they had made on the course and we are happy to report that what we observed seems to be true. This incredibly diverse group really did 'gel together' and enjoyed coming to the course every week making new friends along the way.



“I personally made new friends id probably never have met in real life.”

“I enjoyed the company and helped me mix with others and got a lot explained to me from facilitators even tho there was a problem with tablet they were very helpful and pleasure to meet.”

“Doing the course got me out of the house and meeting new people also got me using my imagination with certain projects helped me sort certain personal situations out getting a bank account and money advice etc. Great bunch of people lots of time for everyone and Healy made sure everyone knew what they were doing and was quick to cater to everyone's needs.”

“Really good fun and very useful x”

A few comments from the end of course survey.

“What did you learn or like best?” Some more verbal feedback from participants:

"I've learnt an awful lot, especially Facebook and email. I have also been able to access online banking on my tablet which has made things a lot easier. This project has really opened my eyes and I'm still learning. Everybody has been brilliant - both Supporting Communities staff and the BT volunteers. I have been able to access so much information through a range of apps; Play Store is terrific, you can get everything on it."

"I had never used Facebook before so it's been great getting online and getting in contact with others. I have liked everything about this project - there is nothing that I have disliked."

"Now that I am online, it is easier and quicker to send my CV to employers. I have learnt a lot."

"I really enjoyed using OverDrive (Library App) and downloading books, magazines and audio books."



This was the winning submission from our design competition.

The more advanced group was challenged to find and download a suitable design app and make a logo for the project.

It was declared the winner after everyone in the group voted in an online poll.

Not bad for about an hour of work!

Difficulties Affecting the Project

The Venue & Wi-Fi

The Skainos Centre was great for its easily accessible location and was a place where everyone felt comfortable coming. However, the Wi-Fi was not very easy to use and would sometimes drop connections requiring a new log in. Instead of connecting via the Wi-Fi setting as expected on a mobile phone or tablet, we had to log in each time with a username and password on a webpage. This was confusing to users who expected to be connected automatically after having logged in once.

The room we used was spacious and comfortable, but was also very loud. When everyone was in and talking, playing sound, asking questions etc., it could be a bit overwhelming. Fortunately, it wasn't too much of an issue, but announcements and instructions had to be repeated many times until everyone got to hear.

Both the noise factor and the somewhat dodgy Wi-Fi meant we weren't able to Skype in class, although Facebook messenger was popular and has a built in video calling function that many people have managed to use on their own.

A client group with extra needs

As anticipated, the participants in the project were facing all sorts of other problems in their lives that affected their capability to take part in the course. A lack of concentration or ability to stay on topic was clearly an issue for several people involved and many would need constant one-to-one attention to really take in new information. A low level of literacy was also a problem for some.

Many in the group were affected by serious health problems; several people missed classes due to hospitalisation or illness or left class early because they were not well. These people genuinely wanted to attend and repeatedly told us how much they enjoyed class and kept coming back when they could. There was really only one person who stopped coming altogether early on with no further communication. He was very digitally savvy, however, and probably felt the course was too basic for him.

Many times, people were really there for a chat with an empathic listener rather than to necessarily learn something new. We don't consider this a negative though; it was a positive outcome for people who needed to talk more than they needed to learn a skill on those days. We had scheduled in additional time for this reason.



The Volunteers

The BT volunteers were essential to the delivery of the course. The participants definitely needed more attention than one or two trainers could provide on their own. Several volunteers made really useful and positive connections with individual people and helped them to make progress on specific issues such as finding a job or getting back into education. Not all volunteers were able to come regularly, however. Twelve consecutive weeks was a significant time commitment to ask of them, and since we didn't have a schedule in place we didn't know how many to expect week to week which could affect what we planned to do that session.

Feedback from the BT volunteers was largely positive. Some felt they would have benefitted from an induction prior to the course so that they better understood the project and felt they were unprepared to deal with the wide range of skill levels presented by the group. As a whole, most everyone was able to "go with the flow" and adapt to new challenges as they arose. It was not an easy group to be sure, but most felt it was a rewarding one. It was certainly something new for everyone involved!

"The course was well run and pitched just right to cover the various levels of learning, I was particularly impressed that it was conducted in a friendly welcoming atmosphere. Everyone treated with dignity and respect. This led to a number of friendships being formed. Some of the class required one to one teaching, as their understanding was very basic or non-existent! In my view, it was these people that benefited the most.

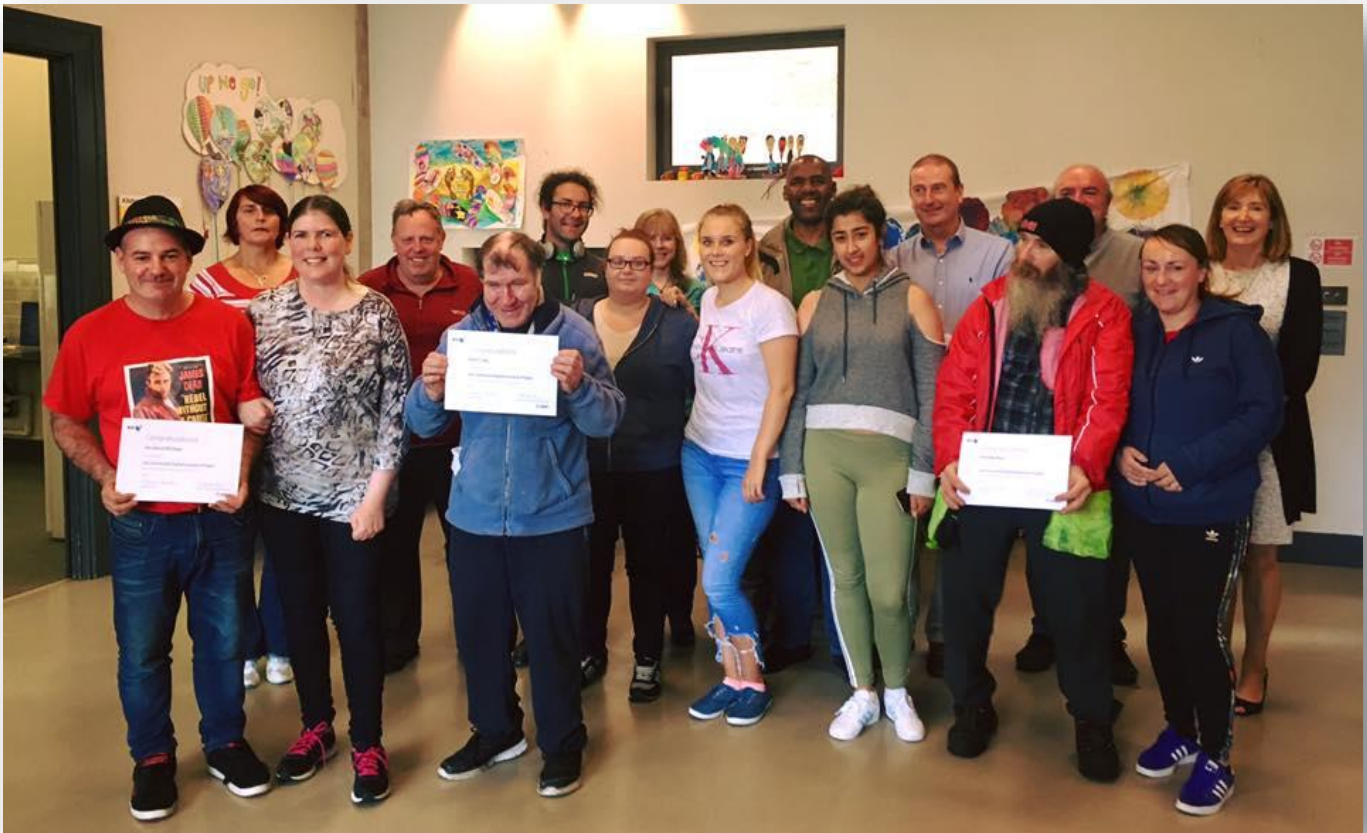
In spite of a very erratic and sometimes frustrating wireless connection, everyone was able to use their tablet, get on-line and learn at their own pace. One person in particular commented to me that using her tablet for connecting with other people has made her feel 'less alone and isolated'. I could see her confidence growing week on week. So much so that she began to enquire about getting internet service at home and considered it essential, particularly during winter months when she would be unable to get outdoors so often.

For me personally, this was a big time commitment but rewarding to be able to pass on some of my own skills."

Feedback from BT volunteers

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“It is great to see the realisation that ‘it can be done.’ A lot of the guys on the course had no knowledge when they came and you could really see them picking up as they went along. It was good to see the learning involved and great to be able to support with other ideas and knowledge, college/job applications/safety-security on line / opening bank accounts/shopping for bargains...things that I find normal but that some of the guys thought to be out of reach.”



“Graduation Day”! BT volunteers and project participants pose proudly.

Next Steps

The original project proposal includes follow up sessions to be determined over the following year with further check in points to see how going online and owning a tablet have benefitted the participants over a longer time period.

The group has been very receptive to our proposal to keep in touch and to get together over the coming year. It might be useful to plan a couple of task specific projects using the internet (researching local history was mentioned or possibly a creative task along the lines of the logo exercise) as well as planning a refresher session or two to make sure basic skills are retained.

We would be keen to coordinate with BT volunteers who may have specific skills or expertise that they could share at one of these sessions.

We will follow up with a survey at about 6 months (Dec/Jan) and again next summer to capture longer-term outcomes.

Apendices

- > Baseline and End of Course Surveys full results
- > Weekly Topic List/ Course Syllabus
- > Basic Digital Skills Sheet