



## Going Digital: The new digital generation

The digital agenda has always been important at North Wales Housing, having developed a Digital First Strategy, with the help of tenants in 2014.

North Wales Housing realised that to make more of an impact they needed to invest more in it. Previously, 'digital' was a small part of a few people's roles. The decision was therefore made to recruit a Digital Officer who would dedicate time and develop everything digital.

A Digital Officer was appointed in October 2016 and has worked with all parts of the business to scope what difference she can make. The Older Persons department was part of this.

61% of people aged 75 and over have never used the internet. The most common reason that people give for not being online is that they are not interested in the internet. However, there are also other barriers such as costs, and a lack of knowledge and confidence (ageuk.org.uk)



This case study outlines how being more digital aware can help the older generation, and how North Wales Housing went about identifying their needs and tailoring programmes for them.

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## What is digital? Identifying digital requirements

'Going digital' means something different to everyone. No matter what the level of skill or confidence, whether or not people own a device or have a connection at home, their age or background, whether they are employed or not. We can never assume that we know what's online for them, what the 'hook' is.

What works well for one individual may never work for another. What I hope to achieve in this role as Digital Officer at North Wales Housing is to emphasise that by supporting the organisation, staff and tenants to 'go digital', we are not pushing them away. It doesn't mean that we care less; we are merely catching up with everyone else. We know with digital that the further behind we allow ourselves to go, the deeper we will sink, and the longer it will take for us to surface again!

And that's what I have seen a lot of, especially in our older person schemes. People who may have used email in their work 15 years ago have since retired and decided to take it up again only to be shocked (and put off) by how much it's changed. Our webpages now load in less than a second, we have more options than our 'Compose', 'Inbox' and 'Outbox' folders when we log on to our email accounts, and there is a LOT of text, images and information on our screens. All of which is fantastic **if we know where to go**.

## How did it start?

I have had the freedom (and great support) here at North Wales Housing to bring groups of people together for digital sessions. Here are a few of the requests I have had from individuals during our weekly sessions at an older person's scheme, some of which may come as a surprise:

- *How can I use my own computer to type letters, to print and then post them?*
- *Is there a way of saving images from an email on to my own iPad so that I don't have to look for the email every time I want to see the pictures of my grandchildren?*
- *How can I make better use of my iPad to help me save money? I want to avoid online banking.*
- *Can I set up an email account to make contact with my sister in Canada easier?*
- *Is there a way of connecting to the scheme's guest Wi-Fi?*
- *Can I find information to solve a debate about Owain Glyndwr I've had on the phone with my friend this morning?*
- *Which tablet should I buy? My daughter has told me that I need one.*

## Approach

First thoughts: How do you possibly solve these issues with a one size fits all approach? How can I change someone's mind when all he wants to do is type a letter and print it off, despite having internet connection and an email account? What about safety, cost, confidence – they won't be solved overnight. Some know what they want, others don't; how do you inspire those? What do you show them that will change their mind about digital? How can you put someone's mind at ease when all they seem to remember hearing about is cybercrime - phishing emails,

screenshot and webcam managers, financial crime, and obscene content only a few. Online safety is always a reoccurring theme, and we therefore used safety as a focus for one of the sessions. This related to safe online browsing, being vigilant when making online purchases and when sharing personal details online. Again, personal stories and experiences are crucial as residents learn from each other.

We have kept our focus on useful online tools that require minimal personal information to be shared to ensure that confidence is built first of all. A session on My Supermarket is a perfect example. The residents can see for themselves and make a connection between real life and digital life, and that link may be the light bulb moment for them, showing why being online can be beneficial to them.

## Does it work?

It works! These digital get together sessions really do work! Older people inspire each other; well they definitely do at our schemes. If one person is a keen Facebook user her friend wants to get involved too! If another uses YouTube to find knitting patterns, then there's no doubt she will show everyone the knitting group. One resident I met is a keen Skype user, and was more than happy to share the experiences had with the rest of the group.

We have iPads and Samsung tablets on loan by Digital Communities Wales, which has meant that the residents have been able to try before they buy. As a result of trying these out residents have bought their own. This is a great outcome and shows that people are undoubtedly ready to learn new skills and to give digital a go; that is what it's all about. If this leads to them shopping online and booking holidays in the future (this is what one couple is hoping for) then great. If it leads to accessing information about bus timetables or listening to music from a certain genre on YouTube, then that is equally as positive.



In one of our schemes, we hold a 'digital surgery', where residents come along with their individual issues and we work with them to overcome the barrier or to find a solution to whatever it is causing them grief on the device. I initially suggested that the residents booked individual slots, but they decided that they would learn more from each other if they were to listen to other people's problems/difficulties too, and everyone was comfortable with this. And they work too! I can only support one person at a time, and in the meantime, the rest of the group listen or help each other. By using a Digital Champion model we can ensure that residents within the schemes continue to support each other beyond the sessions. Digital is normalised, part of their everyday lives as opposed to something that is talked about at our weekly sessions.

We don't go online for the sake of going online; we access valuable services that enable us to make small changes and help us overcome barriers we may need to overcome.

## Lessons to be learned

It is still early days, but we are already seeing results.

The key things that we have learnt so far and will take on board when planning the next sessions are that digital is personal to everyone. No two people will want the same thing. Making it relevant for everyone will ensure that enthusiasm is preserved, and they want to learn.



It's important not to underestimate people's experience and ability; this is still new to a lot of people. It is likely that they will be uncomfortable accessing online services, especially when sharing personal information, and that's fine. Like everything else, it takes time to gain trust. I regularly think of the phrase *"Never make fun of having to help me with computer stuff. I taught you how to use a spoon"* (Sue Fitzmaurice). Although digital is second nature to some, it isn't to others, and they have spent their lives learning and doing other things that they have taught us!

This can be overcome by constantly making a connection between digital and real life:

that's why I would focus on finding knitting patterns, a TV series that was broadcast in the 1950s, Google Earth; whatever I can use to make a connection as there really is something for everyone. But even then, I regularly answer questions about Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat – even if older people have no interest in having their own accounts, they have an interest in what their family members tell them about what they do online, and are not ignorant to it.

We know about the financial savings that can be made online, how we can access services 24/7 and instant access to information. For some, attending the weekly sessions is much more than that. It is about reducing isolation, having something in common with their neighbour, being enthusiastic about learning again, to make new friends, and to have something to look forward to.

Digital services and requirements are constantly evolving, and part of my role at North Wales Housing is to help and support our tenants so that they understand and make the most of these opportunities in a way that is personal and relevant to them.

## Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

## About North Wales Housing

Founded in 1974, North Wales Housing is a successful social enterprise providing homes and delivering services to over 2,500 households across North Wales. We employ up to 200 people and are proud to display the Investors in People Silver accreditation.



As well as maintaining existing homes we are also continually building new homes and bringing empty homes back to life.

We are also a regional market leader in vital areas such as Supported Housing, providing housing and services for vulnerable people.

In 2011 we launched a commercial subsidiary Domus Cambria, a residential development enterprise that ethically develops and builds homes and services.

For more information about North Wales Housing visit [www.nwha.org.uk](http://www.nwha.org.uk)

## About the Housing LIN

The Housing LIN is a sophisticated network bringing together over 40,000 housing, health and social care professionals in England and Wales to exemplify innovative housing solutions for an ageing population.

Recognised by the Welsh Government and industry as a leading 'knowledge hub' on specialist housing, our online and regional networked activities:

- connect people, ideas and resources to inform and improve the range of housing choices that enable older and disabled people to live independently
- provide intelligence on latest funding, research, policy and practice developments, and
- raise the profile of specialist housing with developers, commissioners and providers to plan, design and deliver aspirational housing for an ageing population.

For further information about the Housing LIN Cymru's comprehensive list of online resources and to participate in our shared learning and service improvement networking opportunities, including 'look and learn' site visits and network meetings in Wales, visit:

[www.housinglin.org.uk/Wales/](http://www.housinglin.org.uk/Wales/)

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