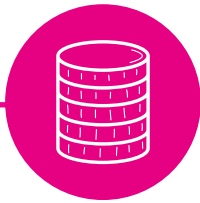




Digital Inclusion Fund: Closing the Digital Divide





£453,383

invested from Barnwood Trust's Digital Inclusion Fund into 6 organisations between 2022 and 2025.



Over 3,000

disabled people were known to directly benefit from the Fund over the course of 3 years.



Projects had an **impact** on individuals, communities, the 6 funded partners, and the wider system within Gloucestershire.

Background to the Digital Inclusion Fund

The Digital Inclusion Fund was Barnwood Trust's first themed fund, launching in 2022. Themed funding was a new funding stream established to test approaches to overcoming specific challenges disabled people and people with mental health conditions experience¹.

Digital Inclusion was chosen as our first theme following the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic and subsequent lockdowns brought the challenge of digital exclusion to the fore. As our lives became reliant on technology to work, go to school, do our shopping, and stay connected to friends and family, the county's digital divide was clear.

¹ The process of creating the Digital Inclusion Fund and our learning throughout can be found in our *What Barnwood Trust learned about funding for social change* report.

Barnwood Trust's [Our Changing World](#) report showed digital exclusion to be one of the ways in which disabled people and people with mental health conditions were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. A year later, the more in-depth Digital Divides report brought together data around digital infrastructure, digital access, and digital literacy to identify risk factors and digital 'cold spots' within Gloucestershire. This report further demonstrated the need to work with partners to address the challenges experienced by disabled people.

The Digital Inclusion Fund attempted to learn about ways to close the divide. Broadly, the Fund sought three outcomes:

- **Inclusive digital access and literacy:** Disabled people and people with mental health conditions can access and use digital technology in ways that suit their needs, enabling participation now and in the future.
- **Co-designed, sustainable solutions:** People with lived experience are meaningfully involved in design, delivery and/or evaluation, with work that builds on existing digital offers, avoids duplication, and leaves a lasting legacy beyond the funding period.
- **Learning and sector impact:** The work strengthens the evidence base and shared understanding of what conditions and approaches best support digital inclusion for disabled people and people with mental health conditions.

Six funded partners, working across the county, received funding to develop innovative approaches that specifically aimed to improve digital access and literacy. In the co-design phase of this Fund, infrastructure was considered out of scope given the investment already taking place through schemes such as [Fastershire](#).

With the Fund now drawing to a close, this report showcases the impact the work of the six funded partners has had on individuals, communities, the funded partners themselves, and the wider system.



Impact for Individuals

- Increased digital literacy – gaining practical skills
- Increased confidence and independence
- Reduced isolation and strengthened social connections
- Unlocking access to services and opportunities including GPs, financial services, and employment

Impact for Communities

- Creation of new community assets
- Creation of resources and guides that can be used by all
- Hub models bringing services closer to those who need them
- Sustainable projects and partnerships

Impact for Funded Partners

- Built capacity through staff training and shared expertise
- Adapted to changing needs
- Fostered collaboration and co-design with people with lived experience
- Organisational learning to take into future projects

Impact for Wider System

- Raised awareness of online accessibility barriers
- Identified opportunities for cross-sector learning and support
- Embracing non-digital engagement
- Input into county digital inclusion, innovation and infrastructure strategy

Impact for Disabled People and People with Mental Health Conditions

The projects funded over the past three years had a substantial impact on the 3,000-plus individuals supported. Whilst there were many examples of the projects achieving the intended outcomes around improving digital access and literacy, the projects' final evaluation reports highlighted many of the indirect impacts as well such as accessing services, social connectedness, and improved wellbeing. As a result of the work of the six funded partners:

People living with visual impairments have been able to access Insight Gloucestershire's expert advice on the assistive technologies that exist to help them retain their independence. This support has ranged from specialist software and devices through to showing them the free-to-use features that already exist on their smartphones.

People are more aware of the risks associated with digital media and are better able to identify scams and potentially malicious activity.

For several of those involved in Reconnect Gloucestershire's project, being supported to join online activity groups proved to be a catalyst for expanding their interest in the digital world.

Across several of the projects, participants reported having made new friends and reported feeling less isolated, more independent and having a greater quality of life as a result.

Likewise, several Funded Partners reported that individuals were able to independently manage their bills, book GP appointments and apply for jobs.



Overall, the six funded projects have demonstrated how essential digital access is to everyday life. In a world where everything is increasingly digital-by-default, simple interventions like ensuring access to a smartphone, or improving someone's confidence with filling in online forms can be the difference between inclusion and exclusion.

One of the starkest examples of this was through Stroud Beresford Group's project supporting survivors of domestic abuse:

Case Study: Stroud Beresford Group



Stroud Beresford Group received £28,586 from the Digital Inclusion Fund for their project over three years. They aimed to address the digital exclusion of women with mental health conditions affected by domestic abuse by providing:

- Access to a basic tablet or smart phone (and broadband for those living in their refuges)
- Support to use the internet to address isolation and unequal access to services
- Support regarding online safety.

O's Story

O was diagnosed with postnatal depression after the birth of her daughter, C. Whilst at the refuge, support staff identified that O had experienced controlling behaviours from her ex-partner, who'd limited contact between O and her family who lived in Poland. O had not been able to visit her family since the birth of her daughter and was only allowed short phone calls with her mum.

Due to the funding, O was able to access a tablet which she used to video call her family in Poland. C was excited to be finally seeing her grandparents virtually and O was getting the much-needed connection back with her parents.

Whilst in refuge O made the decision to report the abuse she had experienced to the police; her ex-partner was continuing to try and contact her through third parties. O was now able to do most of the reporting on her tablet and she was able to use this to store documents safely. O also received family court documents whilst in refuge; this required her to complete documents and translate them from English to Polish and then create her response in English ready for court. O did this with the use of the tablet:

“ I am so grateful to be given this (tablet); I have been able to see my mum on screen for the first time in two years and without the tablet for translation I wouldn't have ever been able to translate every document for court. This has given me opportunities to speak my story to the police and court and to reach out to my family again. ”

O is now moving on from refuge into social housing with her own tenancy, and she used the tablet to receive and sign the tenancy agreement. O's feedback is showing that her confidence has grown but also that she is now feeling more positive in her own wellbeing. She says her anxiety is reducing and she feels much stronger and able to understand more about her depression.



GDA applied to the Digital Inclusion Fund after noticing a growing digital divide experienced in their community. After COVID-19, the world moved quickly online. GDA noticed that many deaf people were being left behind. Barriers like a lack of digital skills and limited access to British Sign Language (BSL) information made it harder for them to connect.

They saw a big rise in queries about basic tech skills, like how to use mobile phones and Facebook. Deaf people sometimes miss out on learning that happens naturally through conversations in the hearing world. The funding offered a chance to bridge this gap and create accessible digital support.

What happened?

With Barnwood funding, GDA started some new projects:

- They ran 6 “Digi Drop-ins” at their centre in Gloucester. BSL interpreters and local business volunteers supported the sessions.
- They created a series of bitesize YouTube videos tackling common tech problems for their community.

The work boosted digital confidence among GDA’s members. It also shone a light on the lack of accessible tech support for the Deaf community. GDA is now continuing to work with businesses, funders, and trustees to offer regular digital sessions and workshops.

Making a difference

The changes have had a huge impact on GDA’s community. Their members feel more confident and independent when using technology. This has also helped improve their wellbeing and social connections.

The GDA team is now more aware of digital barriers and better able to support their members. As a team, they have also improved staff skills through training on tools like Microsoft 365. This ensures the team use an inclusive approach which they promote externally.

“ Don't assume everyone knows the basics. Digital inclusion must start with accessibility at every stage. Offering bitesize training and easy-to-access support can make a big difference. GDA has learned that small, regular steps build real change. Digital support shouldn't be an afterthought, as it's essential for creating a truly inclusive and empowered community. ”

Gloucestershire Deaf Association



Impact for Communities

Whilst individuals have seen the most significant impacts, the impacts of many of the funded projects extend to their communities more widely. These included:

- Building strong partnerships with community leaders and organisations with different skillsets. Forest Voluntary Action Forum's (FVAF) project saw them partnering with six organisations to develop a series of pilot projects addressing the digital divide in different ways. They reported on how these partnerships had enabled them to work with individuals and groups that they would not have been able to on their own.
- The development of resources like Easy Read guides and comic strips to widen the reach of the learning and make it available to all. These materials have been distributed across networks and within residential communities across the Forest of Dean. FVAF now plan to create and distribute even more of these guides.
- Insight Gloucestershire have established 11 sight loss hubs across the county. Their advisors attend these regularly and come equipped with portable technology that they can demonstrate and loan out for individuals to access. Their work has meant that the visually impaired community are never more than five miles away from a sight loss hub – dramatically improving access to support.
- In Oakley, Cheltenham, the Digital Inclusion Fund enabled the creation of a fully immersive community space. The interactive technology can be adapted to suit different activities and used by groups or individuals. It also enables users to practice real-life situations (such as going to the shops, or an airport) in a safe, supportive environment. This resource has been helpful to people with neurodivergent conditions, anxiety and learning disabilities.

Case Study: Oakley Library



Gloucestershire Libraries noticed that many local people in the Whaddon area of Cheltenham had little or no access to digital spaces or support. With £48,000 funding from the Digital Inclusion Fund, they wanted to create a new way for people to experience stories and digital content, and opened the [Oakley Interactive Space](#) in July 2023.

The space includes public computers, a lending library and a new immersive reality room. This room offers 360-degree digital experiences - from children's books and art galleries to natural environments and more. It allows people to enjoy activities they might not otherwise access, making these experiences more inclusive and accessible.



What happened?

Since opening, Oakley Interactive Space has welcomed people of all ages and backgrounds. Most visitors now come to explore the immersive room.

It has also become a space for digital inclusion events, including:

- **Wellbeing sessions:** A local charity used the immersive room for a movement and wellbeing course for people with Parkinson's and dementia. Participants explored calming environments like beaches and woodlands while taking part in gentle activity.
- **Education sessions:** Local nurseries, special education schools, and a local primary school have all taken part in sessions using the immersive room. Children and young people have visited virtual versions of the Moon, the Sahara Desert, and the River Nile. The sessions support learning, emotional wellbeing, and life skills.
- **Library activities:** Regular Storytime and Library Littles sessions now take place in the immersive room. Themes include the ocean, woodland, and space. At Christmas, the space becomes Santa's grotto. These sessions combine storytelling, nursery rhymes and sensory play.

Making a difference

The immersive room is helping more people access digital experiences in a fun, safe, and inclusive way. It is now a part of Gloucestershire Libraries' digital inclusion work and continues to grow in popularity.





Insight Gloucestershire received £59,700 funding for their three-year project in which they employed Sight Loss Advisors to support people with visual impairments to access digital equipment and assistive technology. They have achieved this by establishing 11 hubs across Gloucestershire. Peter's story below highlights the impact of these hubs.

Peter's Story

Peter has always found joy and connection in reading newspapers, magazines, and personal letters. But over the past 20 years, his vision has deteriorated, making reading increasingly difficult and taking away one of the activities he loved most.

Mark (Sight Loss Advisor) showed him how to use tools like magnifiers, lighting, and text to speech options. After demonstrating the Ruby XL digital magnifier, a portable device that can enlarge text up to 14 times, Peter decided this suited his needs the best. With this simple piece of technology, Peter was able to return to reading his newspapers and personal letters restoring his independence and daily routine.

"It's so important to know that help of this sort is available. Based on the help I've already received, I'd be optimistic about any future support they could give me."

The charity now runs 11 monthly hubs across Gloucestershire and has opened its first charity shop in Stroud, equipped with a new resource and appointment room. By expanding their reach across the county, Insight Gloucestershire is making its services more accessible to people who face travel difficulties, giving people with sight loss the tools and support they need to live independently and confidently.

Impacts for the Funded Partners

As shown in the *What Barnwood Trust learned about funding for social change* report that accompanies this report, the learning from the Digital Inclusion Fund has been significant for Barnwood Trust and the six funded partners. Involvement in the Fund, therefore, has been shown to have had an effect on the providers as much as for the individuals and communities benefiting from the funded projects. Impacts included:

- organisations building their capacity to support individuals by sharing expertise to train new staff.
- recognising the need to be flexible and adapt to changing trends and contexts. At a recent celebration event to mark the end of the Fund, all the organisations reflected on how quickly technology and needs are changing. Many told us that they had changed course from their initial applications as a result of these advancements and the changing needs of their clients.
- developing skills around co-design and collaborative working to ensure work was fully informed by those who would be using it and by people with relevant expertise. Projects have shown commitment to this way of working and have said they would continue to work in this way post-funding.
- some organisations had taken learning from their own projects and identified gaps or improvements needed in their current offer. Reconnect Gloucestershire, for example, have committed to redesigning their website to improve navigation and ensure users can access the information they need.



FVAF received £203,000 from the Digital Inclusion Fund for its two-year project and was arguably the project with the most significant organisational learning. Working with several partners, FVAF co-designed, developed and piloted a number of projects focusing on different aspects of digital accessibility. FVAF's role was to facilitate, support and administer the funds, acting as a bridge between smaller organisations and the funder. This approach generated significant learning about how organisations of different sizes can work together to achieve better outcomes.

As a relatively large and well-established organisation with a presence across the Forest, FVAF was well placed to coordinate delivery through local partners working on the ground. The six projects supported through FVAF were:

- **Camp Hill Village Trust:** working with adults with learning disabilities, autism and mental health support needs, building their skills and confidence to help them to access digital services easily and use social media.
- **Forest of Dean Community Choir:** using digital technology to connect two choirs (one managed by Forest sensory services, the other by Artspace Cinderford) and support visually impaired people to take part in rewarding creative experiences.
- **Forest Pathways:** a research-based project to support local organisations in the Forest to make their websites more accessible for disabled people.
- **Outdoors, Indoors:** using digital resources and virtual technology to enable people who can't physically access outdoor spaces to enjoy the beauty and tranquillity of the Forest's natural environment.

- **Project Engage:** capacity building and training to facilitate 'try before you buy' and equipment loan schemes to make the digital world more accessible for disabled and isolated people.
- **Virtual Sight Loss:** creating software to simulate a range of eye conditions using VR headsets, building empathy and understanding of how visually impaired people experience the world.

This role of 'fiscal host' was new for FVAF and required the organisation to strengthen its internal accounting and administrative processes to manage local relationships effectively. Financial procedures were co-designed with the local partners to ensure that these were in line with the partners' needs but also enabled FVAF to ensure that all parties remained accountable to each other. Additionally, there was initially some confusion, and occasionally disputes, over the ownership of technical equipment used in delivering the projects. FVAF and its partners overcame this by developing a 'technology pool' where the tech was made available to all the partners: and devising written agreements setting out how the tech would be used.



Case Study: Reconnect Gloucestershire



Reconnect Gloucestershire supports people affected by strokes and aphasia. The organisation used its £90,000 Digital Inclusion Fund award to explore and develop innovative ways to support people through digital means, for example peer support groups, which enabled people to take part from hospital or from home.

Reconnect Gloucestershire also found that their DIF funding enabled them to review their own ways of working and how their services were presented and promoted, leading to an overhaul of their website. They also developed a theory of change for people affected by strokes and similar conditions, which highlighted the concern that people affected by these conditions were likely to become isolated and disconnected from their community. Their response to this was to devise ways for people to engage with others through a range of groups, including choirs; art groups; and nature-based groups. This helped the participants to feel more engaged and optimistic, which in turn supported them to develop new skills and independence, thereby reducing their long-term reliance on statutory health services.

The fund has empowered Reconnect Gloucestershire with the knowledge, confidence, and momentum to continue offering life-changing digital support, and to explore new possibilities that will uplift stroke survivors for years to come.

Impact for the Wider System

The Digital Inclusion Fund set out to improve conditions for individuals and to enable funded partners to use their expertise to help close the digital divide. With digital exclusion being an area that is complex and cuts through all aspects of our lives, the Fund did not set out for policy or systems change. That being said, the projects delivered work that could be significant to the wider system:

- Despite being a project about digital inclusion, organisations reported the importance of analogue solutions – particularly when trying to work with those who are digitally excluded. Such methods include leaflets, posters and working with trusted local figures to spread the word within communities.
- The creation of easy read guides and resources could be of real support to those working in adult social care who are supporting people, and whereby digital exclusion may be exacerbating their needs – for example because they cannot find information about assessments, access health appointments, or apply for benefits. Insight Gloucestershire reported that their referrals from hospitals and social care are increasingly around digital support rather than managing in the home – showing the need for attention in this area by health and social care.
- One of the pilot projects in the Forest of Dean has been working with disabled people to evaluate the accessibility of websites. Such work could have a significant impact on website design and ensuring that people who are disabled or have low digital literacy can easily access valuable information and utilise key services.

The learning from partners and from this project as a whole has helped to inform parts of Gloucestershire County Council's new [Digital Inclusion, Innovation and Infrastructure strategy](#) that was launched in 2025.

Reflections as the Project Closes

In November 2025, the funded partners came together one final time to share their final reflections on the projects. This conversation further highlighted the way digital access should be treated as a utility in the way we treat energy and water, rather than as a nice-to-have. Reflections from this final celebration included:

- How people need to have choice in their use of digital services by avoiding 'digital-by-default' as the only way to access essential services such as health, finance, and advice.
- There is a need to invest: digital inclusion is not just about getting people online; ongoing support is needed as needs change and technology advances. All six Funded Partners noted the significant advancement in technology just in the three-year duration of this Fund.
- Digital skills and literacy needs may not always be the gateway to closing the digital divide. Creating everyday spaces and introducing technology gently, or as a way to keep in touch between activities, has shown to be an impactful way to support people without making the intervention all about technology.

If you would like to know more about this work, please get in touch with Ged Cassell Funding Policy and Evaluation Manager at ged.cassell@barnwoodtrust.org

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