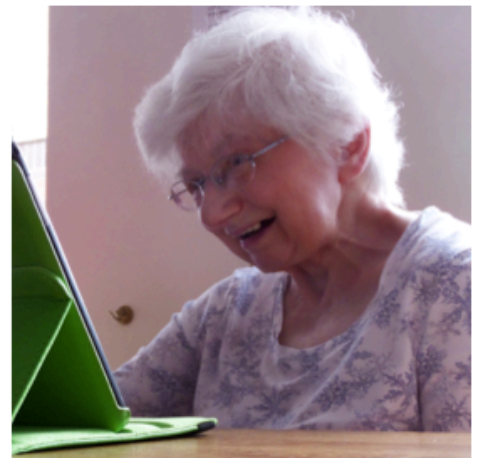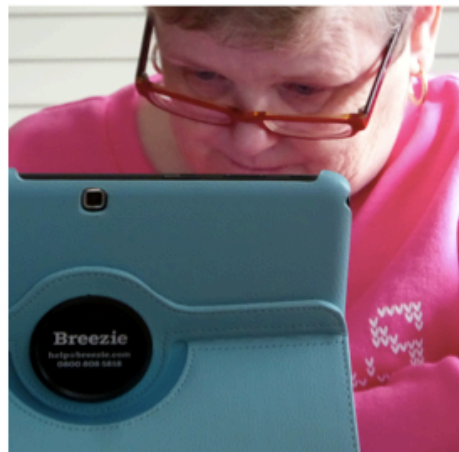# Bridging the Digital Divide

## Project Final Report

December 2015

Summary

The 'Bridging the Digital Divide' Project aims to break down barriers to digital and social inclusion amongst Housing Association tenants and to support and develop tenants' self-confidence, digital skills, access to online services, and further learning opportunities. It is a partnership project between Clanmil Housing Association, the Department for Finance and Personnel's Digital Inclusion unit, and Supporting Communities. The pilot for the project ran from February 2015- December 2015.

This document will detail the project's aims, objective, methods, and outcomes, and will finally make recommendations for further work.
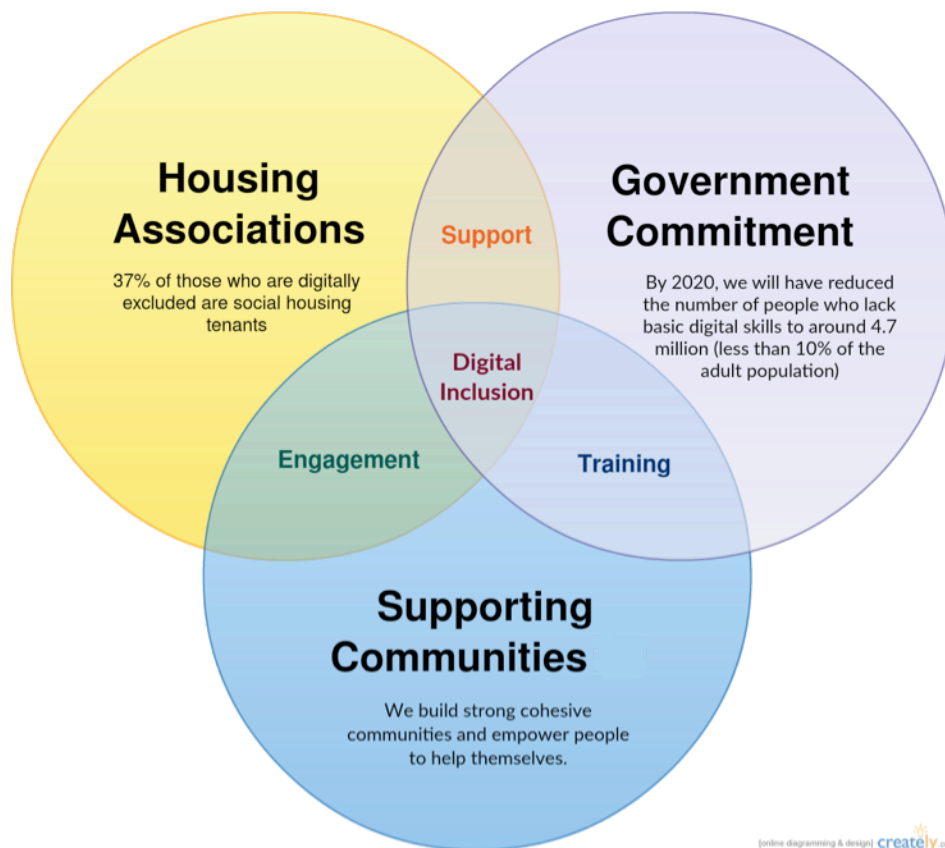
Background

The "Digital Divide" was first recognized as a major challenge over 20 years ago, but still, the problem has not gone away. Far from dying out with the older generation, the social, economic, and educational inequalities that are at its root cause persist, and affect individuals across their entire life course. Sadly, the digital divide has taken its place alongside other long-standing, stubborn inequalities. The problem, in fact, becomes increasingly acute as more and more essential parts of everyday life take place online and further exclude those who are not.

A few statistics[1]:

According to the BBC Media Literacy study, 21% of people can't use the web. 14% of people don't have Internet access at all, so 7% do have Internet access but don't use it in ways that benefit them day to day. And these people are already some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society including:

- Those with literacy problems - 5% of the adult population do not have basic literacy skills (2.6 million people), making using the Internet a bigger problem for this group
- **Those in social housing - 37% of those who are digitally excluded are social housing tenants**
- Those on lower wages, or unemployed - 17% of people earning less than £20,000 never use the Internet, as opposed to 2% of people earning more than £40,000. 44% of people without basic digital skills are on lower wages or are unemployed
- **Those with disabilities - 33% of people with registered disabilities have never used the Internet. This is 54% of the total number of people who have never used the internet**
- Young people - 6% of people who lack digital skills are between 15 and 24 years. Only 27% of young people who are offline are in full-time employment.
- **Older people - over 53% of people who lack basic digital skills are aged over 65, and 69% are over 55**

Unlike tackling all of the world's ills however, working towards full digital inclusion is eminently achievable. Research from the Tinder Foundation shows exactly what it would take to achieve that goal.[2] With proper resourcing, it can be done, but we must target and tailor our efforts to meet the specific circumstances of the people who most need our help. We need to engage with them and empower them to contribute to the process.

---

[1] Digital Inclusion Strategy: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-digital-inclusion-strategy/government-digital-inclusion-strategy#people-who-are-digitally-excluded

[2] It's £875 million by the way - *"A Leading Digital Nation by 2020: Calculating the cost of delivering online skills for all." Catherine MacDonald, Tinder Foundation, 2014*

Policy Drivers

As more and more government services become digital by default, offline citizens are increasingly disadvantaged and cut off from basic information, assistance, and communication. Go On NI is the government unit (within the DFP) tasked with encouraging "offliners to become Internet beginners" and in partnership with Supporting Communities has sought new ways to target and engage with their toughest customers. Supporting Communities have worked in partnership with the NI Direct Digital Inclusion Unit since 2012, playing an integral role in the achievements of their Digital Transformation Programme[3].

Supporting Communities continue to assist the Department of Finance and Personnel in meeting its aims and objectives by developing Digital Champions to share their IT knowledge, providing accredited OCN Level 1 and 2 in Computer Essentials Training, providing IT equipment including laptops and mobile broadband as a learning resource to groups and signposting members of the community to other partnership projects including the Libraries NI Got IT programme.

We have a very successful record of such interventions since 2012, with over 600 Digital Champions gaining either an OCN level 1 or 2 in Computer Essentials. There remains, however, a cohort of people that cannot or will not avail themselves of these kinds of resources. "Bridging the Digital Divide" was developed as a more intensive method to reach the very "hard to reach". We believe that access to and effective use of the Internet has something to offer everyone and can improve a person's sense of connectedness and well being as well as providing a tool to access the modern world.

"This is a must because of the way the government is going and the way technology is going. There will be no such thing as ringing up and making an appointment.

I'm pleased that we've had this opportunity because it's the way the future is going."

– Project participant, Gloonan House

---

[3] https://www.dfpni.gov.uk/digital-transformation-service

Aims and Objectives

As a pilot, this project started with the fairly wide remit of "breaking down barriers to digital inclusion amongst social housing tenants". The participants themselves determined more specific objectives and outcomes. Each individual had their own reasons for participating and their own ideas about what they wanted to get out of the project.

From an organisational point of view, Supporting Communities wanted to develop a model of engagement with social housing tenants that were very unlikely to ever go online without intensive intervention.

The four official stated aims for the project are:

- To break down barriers to digital and social inclusion amongst Clanmil Housing tenants.
- To support and develop tenants' self-confidence, digital skills, access to online services, employment opportunities, and further learning opportunities.
- To develop positive engagement with a wide range of stakeholders and share best practice.
- Demonstrate value for money and sustainability of the project.

"For me, seeing something that has such a positive effect on them - it's very easy in this job to see barriers, but when you find a way to overcome them it has a great effect on me.

It gives me confidence to try other new things with them. I always tell my colleagues how fantastic this project this is, my tenants are getting so much from it. It's bigger than you realise!"

- Scheme Coordinator, Gloonan House

Our Participants

This project targeted older people with some kind of disability living in housing associations, thus reaching participants who fit into at least three of the groups most likely to be digitally excluded noted in the statistics above. As a pilot project, we worked with only a limited number of participants. This enabled us to really get to know each person and do some in depth case studies along the way.

We have worked with two different groups of Clanmil Housing residents:

- A group of 8 older people aged 60+ living at Gloonan House – an independent living accommodation in Ahoghill, Ballymena.
- A group of 9 people aged 70+ at Mullan Mews – a supported housing scheme designed to meet the needs of people with dementia in Belfast.

Over the course of the project, the numbers reduced to 5 at Gloonan House and 6 at Mullan Mews due to a number of extenuating circumstances.

Participants were chosen by the Clanmil Scheme Coordinators based on their own estimation of who would get the most benefit from being involved in the pilot. Most of the people chosen had never used the Internet before or had done so in a very limited way.

The two groups had different abilities and different goals for their own involvement with the project, but the ethos of our approach – that everyone can and should reap the benefits of being online - remained the same.

"This is marvellous, who would have guessed a wee box like this would give us so much joy, I love the photos of my daughter on holiday... when she is still on holiday!

Facebook is wonderful"

- Resident at Mullan Mews

Our Approach - Methodology

Our approach to this pilot was one of flexibility given that our objectives were quite general. We were lucky to have a full year to run the project and therefore had the time to really develop the groups and the relationships between the trainer and participants and amongst the participants themselves. We had the freedom to experiment and try different things to see what worked and what didn't.

The project piloted the use of "Breezie" tablets – and, to our knowledge, is the first project of it's kind in Northern Ireland . Breezie is a service using Samsung tablets with special software aimed at older people, which removes the clutter, jargon and confusion from the Internet. It can do anything a regular tablet does, but strips it all back to intuitive, user-friendly basics.

Each participant's new "Breezie" came already set up and tailored for them based on a form that was completed when they first joined the project. It is ready to go out of the box with email, Skype, Facebook, and contacts already set up for each user. It also allowed the project coordinator remote access to the tablet to add new content and applications as the project continues.

The learning was directed by both the project coordinator and by the groups involved. By tailoring the course to the interests of the people involved, the coordinator addressed one of the major barriers to learning, *'the lack of motivation or perceived relevance'*. Overall, the project did aim to teach all of the identified Basic Digital Skills[4] required to safely use the Internet and access the benefits it can provide, but in a more flexible way than traditional computer skills courses.

The nature of the project allowed it to grow organically following the interests and priorities of those involved. The two distinct groups of participants also make for a useful comparison between a more traditional digital inclusion programme aimed at improving people's skills and one aimed at using technology to assist in improving overall quality of life without any expectation of gaining specific digital skills.

"Our group values being included in the way the world functions now. Keeping up and feeling that you are a part of the world, and to know what email and Facebook, etc. is. You are never too old to learn something new.

As our next generation comes along we are going to have to be prepared for more digitally able tenants. There are no older people now because we are all engaged with technology.

Everything is achievable even for people with dementia."

– Scheme Coordinator, Mullan Mews

---

[4] http://www.go-on.co.uk/basic-digital-skills/

Measurement

Because the two groups involved were very different, and had distinct needs and reasons for participating it did not make sense to measure them as a whole. Our approach to measurement and evaluation was different for each group. With the Gloonan House group we were able to employ more traditional qualitative approaches as well as case studies whereas with the Mullan Mews group we relied more heavily on observation and feedback from carers.

An initial baseline survey[5] was conducted with all the participants to measure three areas: Use of Technology, Attitude and Views on Technology, and General Lifestyle and Well Being. An information sheet explaining the purpose and use of the survey was distributed along with the questions. The project coordinator and the scheme coordinator were on hand to assist all the participants to complete the survey and to answer any questions they had about filling in the forms.

Gloonan House

The Gloonan House group had already identified a number of goals for themselves. They wanted "to learn more about computers" and "to learn to email" or other specific tasks which makes it easier to measure their success in quantitative terms. We conducted three surveys with this group at the beginning, middle, and end of the project– initially on paper, and then, as their skills with the tablets grew, using an online survey.

"Before this project, I never used to come out of my room or join in, but now our group is like a family and I feel a lot better about myself."

– Group member, Gloonan House

The results of the baseline and interim surveys were then used to inform the next steps for the project and how the course should evolve, for example: the interim survey showed that a great deal of progress had been made in terms of trying new things online, but that confidence in some areas could be improved. It also revealed that a key benefit of the work was in the group itself. The friendships and support network that had formed amongst the participants was one of the main things mentioned in terms of what works well. This helped us steer the project towards more group work such as setting up a shared group Facebook page, taking a field trip to Public Records of Northern Ireland (PRONI), and bringing in guest speakers on topics of interest to the group.

In addition to the surveys, we also collected informal feedback from participants on each session, which was recorded along with the activity conducted on that day. This session log provides a good resource for reproducing the work with future groups and notes any issues that arose. We also conducted an in-depth interview with the Scheme's Coordinator who was well placed to observe changes in the participant's behavior and well being as a result. Finally, the team from Breezie paid us a visit and made an excellent video about each group where the participants had the chance to tell the world how the project has benefitted them directly.[6]

---

[5] *See Baseline Survey Report – April 2015*

[6] *Videos are available on our website: http://supportingcommunities.org/bridging-the-digital-divide/*
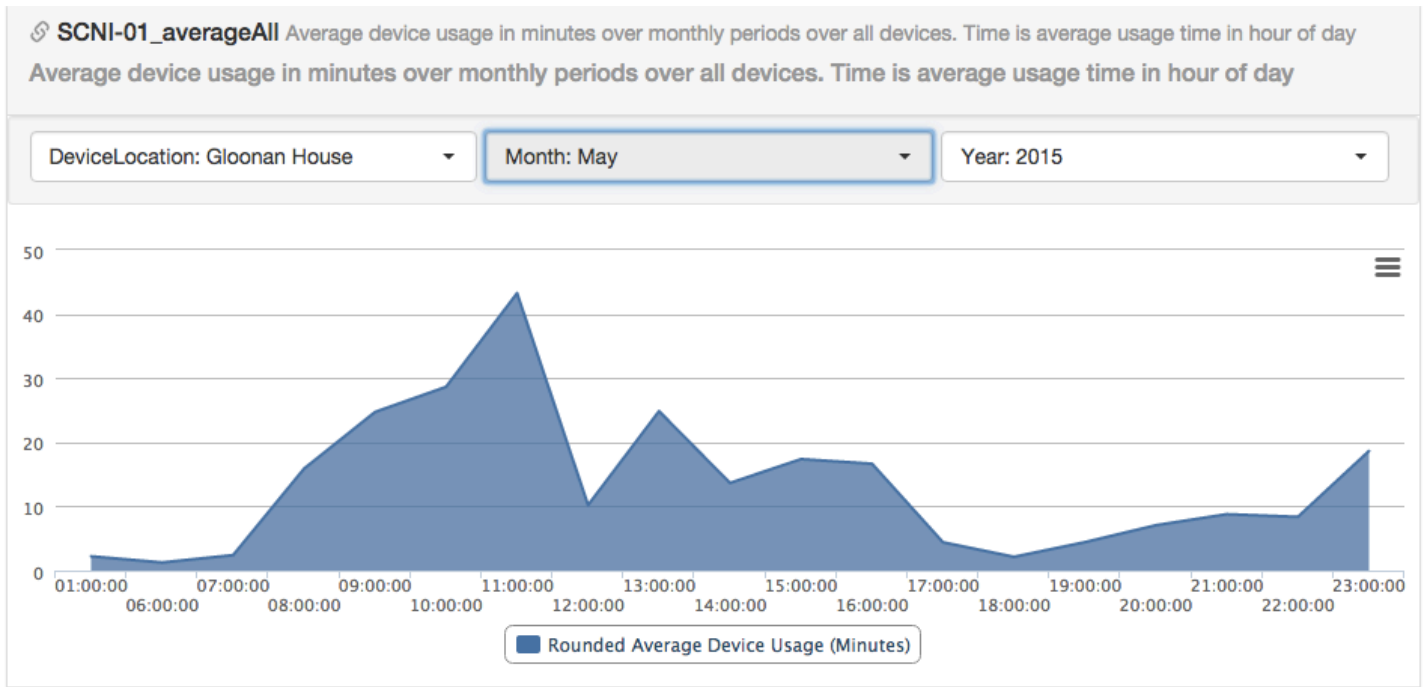
Mullan Mews

The Mullan Mews group (older people living with dementia) had no clear goals for their involvement other than to have a good time – which they did! We were careful not to push the "computer" aspect of the project too much since several of the women told us they had no interest in computers and that they were too old or unable to learn new things. Instead, the Breezies were presented more as a novel gadget that could do all sorts of interesting things and we would all have a go together.
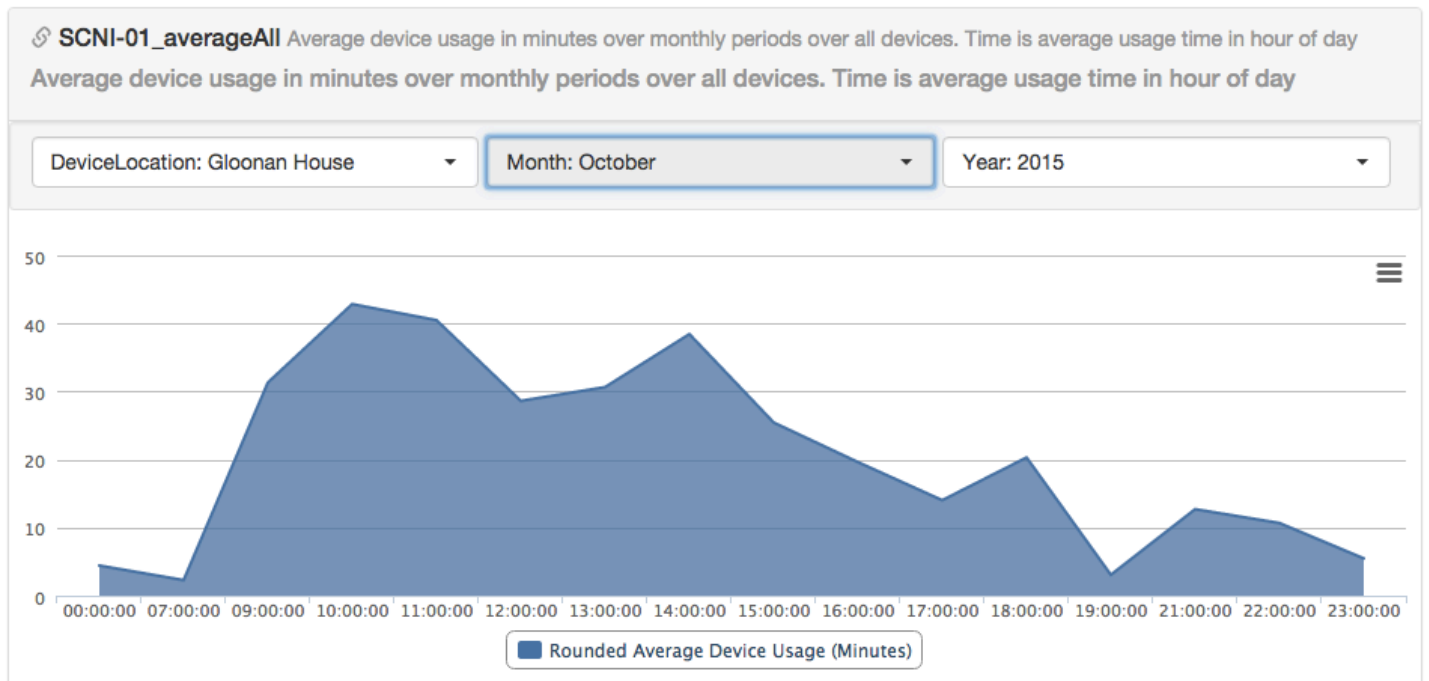
Again, the coordinator noted the activities conducted during each session, who was in attendance and how they fared with it. Because of the nature of their dementia, the participants had some days that were very good and they could remember having learnt some things, other days it was all new to them again. Through observation, however, we noted that some skills were being retained through sheer repetition in terms of using the touch screen and generally understanding what the tablet was used for.

We also conducted in-depth interviews with two staff members at Mullan Mews who were directly involved in the project and knew each of the participants very well. Their knowledge of their residents' interests helped us to shape the nature of our activities to appeal to the group. These case studies (which are written up separately) really demonstrate the beneficial effects of engaging with technology and new methods of communication have had for both the group of participants and for the staff at Mullan Mews who recognise the need to keep up for themselves as well.

Breezie Usage Statistics

The Breezies themselves are also a measurement tool. Because they are all connected to an account at Breezie, we have analytics on how often they were used and what applications were most popular. This has been useful to see if users are continuing to use the lessons learned outside of "class" time and how much overall use they are getting out of the tablets.

⌗ **SCNI-01_averageAll** Average device usage in minutes over monthly periods over all devices. Time is average usage time in hour of day

Average device usage in minutes over monthly periods over all devices. Time is average usage time in hour of day

DeviceLocation: Gloonan House ▾	Month: October ▾	Year: 2015 ▾

Rounded Average Device Usage (Minutes)

For example, looking at the two graphs above, compare the average amount of time the devices were used throughout the day at Gloonan House in May when the participants were still getting to grips with their Breezies. You can see that the bulk of the use is around 10:30–12:00 when the sessions took place. By October however, the devices were being used often and for longer periods of time through out the day and evening, not just in our class sessions.

The Mullan Mews group need more help and their Breezies have been kept in the office so they are only accessed during the day, but we have seen them in use on days when the class was not in session. We are told they get used for all sorts of group activities in the scheme, especially for looking up recipes in the kitchen or finding music to listen to during arts and crafts.
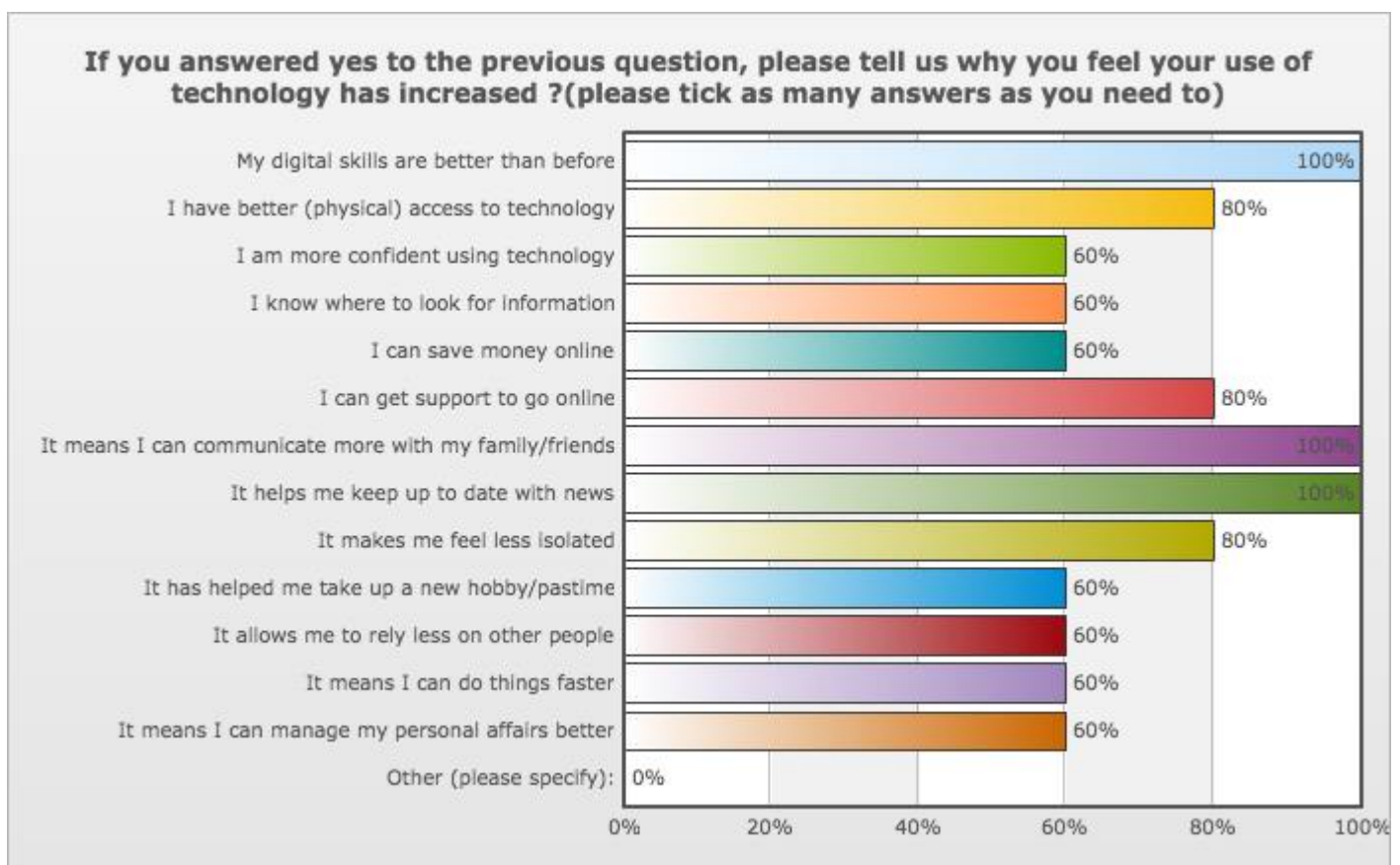
Findings & Evaluation

Our research yielded very positive overall results in terms of achieving our overall objectives around digital inclusion. The more interesting results were around the attitudinal changes and the anecdotal and observed instances of improved well-being and a sense of connectedness to others. Because we used some different measurements for each group, we will report on them in turn.

Findings for the Gloonan House Group

Skills/Confidence/Access

By the end of the project, Gloonan House participants had touched on all, and in many cases mastered the Basic Digital Skills as set out by Go ON NI. All of the participants agreed that their use of technology had increased significantly and that the project had met their self-stated needs and goals. They gave the following reasons for this change:

If you answered yes to the previous question, please tell us why you feel your use of technology has increased ?(please tick as many answers as you need to)

Reason	Percentage
My digital skills are better than before	100%
I have better (physical) access to technology	80%
I am more confident using technology	60%
I know where to look for information	60%
I can save money online	60%
I can get support to go online	80%
It means I can communicate more with my family/friends	100%
It helps me keep up to date with news	100%
It makes me feel less isolated	80%
It has helped me take up a new hobby/pastime	60%
It allows me to rely less on other people	60%
It means I can do things faster	60%
It means I can manage my personal affairs better	60%
Other (please specify):	0%

Even the most tentative of the participants felt her confidence levels had improved and that she would be able to carry on using the tablet to find information and communicate on her own. (The project coordinator actually received a thank you email from this person over Christmas so we know she's doing it - and doing it well!)

The final survey shows that confidence went up in all areas, particularly in the following:

- 100% said they were confident or very confident to use email
- 100% said they were confident or very confident to use search for information online
- 100% said they were confident or very confident to play games online
- 80% said they were confident or very confident to use take and share photos
- 80% said they were confident or very confident to use Facebook (the remaining respondent was neutral on her confidence in these last 2 areas)

The areas where people were less confident were around transactions online. Only a couple of people wanted to actually go through with buying things or banking online. There is still a great deal of apprehension about money and safety online. These topics were covered in the course but to a lesser degree than communications, entertainment, and finding information. Everyone at least had a try at doing grocery shopping online and the survey results reflect that with 40% saying they felt confident to shop and buy online, 20% said they were neutral in confidence, and 40% said they were not confident. However when asked about comparing prices online those results went up to reflect greater confidence overall in just looking, not buying. We got the same results when asking about government transactions online as shopping online. Again, we didn't have a real life opportunity to try this in class, but had a full session devoted to using the NI Direct website.

In terms of access, Gloonan House does have a desktop computer available for tenants to use and there is wifi in the common room. The computer is in a small dark room down a corridor away from the main activity hall and the wifi had a bad reputation for cutting in and out. Our project worked with Clanmil to boost the wifi signal and, of course, provided the new Breezie tablets.

We originally asked participants what has stopped them from using technology in the past. The top three reasons were:

- no access to a computer – 67%
- nervous about technology – 78%
- need support to get started – 100%

By the end of the project everyone agreed that we had ensured easy access, allayed fears about technology and provided a better understanding of it in general, and had supported the group to get started and indeed continue on after the course was officially over. In an open ended question in the final survey, all the respondents told us that they would in fact continue to use their Breezies on their own and in the close-knit group they had established.

"I'm also learning to shop online, which could be very useful to me, especially if in the future if I'm not able to get out to the shops on my own."

–Group member, Gloonan House

" I really like Spotify because I can play all the music that makes me feel good anytime I want to – for free!"

- Group member, Gloonan House

Attitudes

A negative attitude is sometimes the most unyielding barrier to digital inclusion. Some older people and especially those unfamiliar with computers frequently protest learning about them for fear that it will be too difficult or that the Internet has nothing of interest to offer them in their lives. At Gloonan House, the participants had been hand picked because they said they would like to learn, but even so some people were rather wary of going online in general.

Over the course of the project, attitudes changed quite a bit as the group got to experience new things and find things online that were of particular use or interest. Part of this was measured in the survey through a set of agree/disagree questions:

- Computers are very hard to learn to use
- Going online can help me stay in touch with friends and family
- The internet is dangerous
- Using the internet can help me keep up to date with the things that are important to me
- You can save money by shopping online
- Everyone should learn to use the internet
- Using the internet can help me maintain my independence
- Shopping and banking online is safe

"It improves family relationships. [Her son] is able to share his interests with her and feel that she gets it because they are doing it together. It really improves the quality of communication between them and gives them something in common."

- Scheme Coordinator, Gloonan House

We saw improvement in the responses to each of these statements, due in large part to the fact that many people answered "unsure/don't know" during the baseline questionnaire. By then end of the project, participants felt empowered to take a positive stand particularly around ease of use and staying up to date.

We also observed many instances of attitudinal change and captured some of these examples in the case studies. For instance, one woman did not want to use Facebook at all. She only agreed to try it because the rest of the group was going to go ahead. She didn't think she would like it or find anyone she knew using it. Almost immediately we were able to find her nephew's page with pictures of his new baby recently posted. She hasn't been off Facebook ever since.

Well Being & Inclusiveness

We attempted to qualitatively measure 'well being' through a series of questions, but the evidence is much more clear in the case studies and individual statements from the group that participating in the course has been beneficial to them in terms of the connections made both on and offline. The Gloonan Group really bonded over their shared experience of learning. They are quick to help one another with the tablet and in other areas. For example, we were looking at how to get a book from the library online and read it on the tablet when one woman said she didn't have a library card and couldn't get to the library to register. Her neighbor immediately offered to drive her there that afternoon and help her get set up so she could try it with everyone else. This small act of kindness meant the world to her and she treasures her time with the group and sees it as kind

of family. A further example is that they wanted to create their own group page on Facebook – they named themselves 'The Gloonan Stars' (and they all are!)

A brief case study for each person (based on interviews with the scheme coordinator) on how the project has affected or changed them has been written up elsewhere. We will share just one here which effectively demonstrates how digital inclusion is also very much about social inclusion and contributes to overall well being.

Case Study "A"

"A would have worked with a computer in her working life, but not with the Internet. She's not afraid of the keyboard but was afraid of the device at the start – getting out in the big wild world. But now she is tapping away and researching things on Google. She has a vast intelligence that is not being tapped into in any other way.

Her physical and mental health is very poor so this is such a gift for her and brings the world alive to her in ways that nothing else does – she can't travel or get out much anymore. Her friends and family are not coming in to visit as much any more either, so this makes a huge difference and the group is very important to her.

She has so many interests and now she has a way to find out things and look up information. She used to ask me all the time where she could ring about this and that, but that is happening less and less now that she is able to look it up and find answers on her own. The group are also collectively helping each other to find information.

It's improving her independence and keeping her from stagnating. When you have chronic pain, you wither and succumb to it all day every day, or you find a distraction. This is her distraction; it's therapeutic and couldn't have come at a better time for A. The interaction with group is so positive for her. She has had a lot to cope with over the last year and it is a testament to her that she comes to the classes every week and she has really thrown herself into it. Seeing her confidently set up her Breezie is so rewarding for me."

Findings for the Mullan Mews Group

Skills/Confidence/Access

The Mullan Mews group also took part in the initial baseline survey that revealed none of them had really used technology before. A few people had mobile phones, but not smart phones and definitely not the internet.

Because of their dementia, we didn't necessarily expect the participants to gain a quantifiable level of skills. In fact, when researching the project, we didn't find much in the way of other work done around digital inclusion and people with dementia. There are many examples of reminiscence work involving computers but nothing around

> *"It's amazing, I can remember all the words to these old songs!"*
>
> *- Group member, Mullan Mews*

actual skills training. Luckily, the experimental nature of this pilot allowed us to basically "try and see". We observed that through repetition, some tasks did in fact become learned. For example, no one knew how to use the t ouch screen at the beginning of the project. By the end, everyone was tapping and scrolling confidently without much prompting.

Again, it didn't make sense to conduct further surveys with this group since their memories of having participated in past sessions varied. We relied instead on observation and interviews with carers. We also got some family members involved who had unique insight into the effects that participating in the project had on their relative.

At the start, there was no shared computer in the scheme and wifi was limited to one room. Now the group all have their own Breezies and the Scheme Coordinator also has one as part of working with the group. They often share with other house residents who occasionally drop in to see what the "craic" is. The Digital Inclusion Unit have also provided a mobile hotspot for the group to use which can be plugged in anywhere. This has allowed the fun to move from house to house within the scheme. The ladies really enjoy hosting one another, serving tea and cake while we explore the Internet and the Breezies.

"I thought I'd never be able to manage this, but it's amazing how you can get on with it."

– *Group member, Mullan Mews*

Attitudes

As explained earlier, we tried not to focus too much on the computer aspect of the course in favour of the actual activities that can be achieved with the computer. Several people told us that computers were not for them and that they had no interest. In fact the most adamant about this was the biggest convert in the end! Because the Breezie tablets don't look like the computers they were expecting to see, and because they come in colourful cases and are set up to greet each person by name, some of their initial misgivings were replaced by curiosity and appreciation of the sleek design. Knowing that the key to changing attitudes is g etting straight to the good stuff, the course did not follow a traditional route. Instead we immediately tapped into some individual interests. It was most important that everyone enjoy the session and have a good feeling associated with the Breezie and with the trainer.

"I am going to master this. I am 80 years old but I am going to do it!"

- Group member, Mullan Mews

Well Being & Inclusiveness

As with the Gloonan House group, at Mullan Mews we found enormous benefit in the group-work approach. The positive exchanges and feelings of camaraderie in the group have encouraged them to keep at it even if they might not remember everything from previous sessions. Playing music on YouTube has been one of the most popular activities. Music has a wonderful way of bringing back memories and a popular song from the right year can spark great conversations amongst the group. We figured out that several members of our group were probably frequenting the same dance halls of Belfast in the 50's. Having the ability to call up and share any song, video of the dancing, and the fashion of the time - as the discussion is taking place in real time- has allowed the group to keep their interactions going in much more meaningful ways. You can actually see the light come on in someone's eyes when a memory is triggered and their personality comes forth.

Email and Facebook have also proven to be very popular with this group. Some are more able to use it independently than others, but everyone has had a great time looking at family photos and communicating online with each other and with family members. Towards the end of the project we also initiated a Pen Pal programme between the two schemes to allow the two groups to practice emailing back and forth, this was very successful for both groups in terms of getting to practice skills and in making connections. The two groups got to meet IRL at the end of the project for a celebration party.

A couple of brief case studies transcribed from interviews with the Scheme's Coordinator illustrate the kind of progress we observed in the Mullan Mews participants.

Case Study "M"

"I mentioned the tablet one day and M sat up and asked, "Have I any messages?" She knows what it's for and is interested. She definitely needs one to one help to use it though. She is engaged as along as there is someone interacting with her. She will happily look at images etc. for a while but you have to help her to move on.

When she got the email from her daughter she was delighted. She was able to read it and said, "Wasn't that nice, wasn't it lovely'?" I think the positives are outweighing the negative in terms of communicating with relatives where there may be some historical issues.

The social aspect is the best part – being part of the group is very important to her. Once she knows she's included she is happy. And it brings tenants from different houses together. The more 1-1 work we do with her the more it builds her confidence."

"I see a big difference. I only go into the room and mention the tablets and they say, "I love doing it".

I notice a lot more confidence among the tenants, even in talking about it."

- Mullan Mews Activities Coordinator

Case Study "P"

"P is really enjoying it. She does quite well. "I think I'm getting better at this!" she said to Healy one day. I have seen improvement in her being able to use it on her own a bit. She really enjoys hosting the group in her house. She gets a lot out of the ownership. I'd like to get her relatives more involved. Her daughter comes in a bit and helped to research a singer they were talking about. She was able to show her mother pictures and videos to prompt memories. P loves the banter emailing back and forth with friends in the same room. She is now quite confident to flick through and tap away trying to figure it out for herself."

Discussion

The Breezie: Using special software? Pros and Cons

The Breezie software was generally well received. Over the course of the project, the participants and coordinator identified some areas where it could be improved in terms of the functionality (these were passed on to the Breezie team). It should be noted that there are competitors in the marketplace for this kind of service, but we found Breezie to be an excellent partner, very responsive to our needs and requests.

The concept behind the software, that of pre-configuring the tablet to the individual was particularly helpful when working with possibly reluctant computer users. All the tedious set up work around accounts and passwords etc. is taken care of and the device is ready to go straight out of the box. It even greets you by name and can show you the names of your friends and family right away that was particularly good when trying to engage the group with dementia.

We noted, however, that the set up process was not without some difficulty. To work best, Breezie needs enough information about a person's online friends and family to populate a contact list etc. Many of our participants were either reluctant to provide this information initially or did not have contact details like email, Facebook, Skype for their family. In many cases, the contact person on file was themselves an older person who did not use the Internet. We got around this problem by adding the project coordinator and the scheme coordinator into everyone's contacts so we all started with at least two "friends" online. Then, with permission, we also added everyone in the group to each other's contacts, which also contributed to the forming of the family dynamic of each group.

Another set up issue that arose at Gloonan House was that the Breezie registration forms had to be completed online. Two student volunteers helped the group to fill in their form but many mistakes (passwords forgotten etc.) were made that later had to be corrected causing some degree of frustration. Also during this registration process, Breezie asked each person if they want various accounts be created. A number of people declined to have Skype and Facebook set up for them because they didn't understand what they were or thought they wouldn't use them. It was not too difficult to set up later in the course, however, we would recommend that this should be made clear that all participants will have certain accounts created for them as part of the course.

At Mullan Mews, we bypassed the forms and the coordinator registered each participant for everything assuming they had no existing accounts online. The problem here was in locating a suitable relative to act as a main contact for each user. We would recommend that more information should be distributed in advance to ensure relevant parties are fully aware of the project and what it involves.

"It was a world that they weren't part of, and to be brought into it and to let them see and teach them those skills, it's bound to have a huge effect.

If you can make it manageable, break it down and approach any problem like it isn't a problem - you make it doable. The person that delivers it is key."

_ Gloonan House Scheme Coordinator

A clear benefit of the Breezie model was that the coordinator had access to certain elements of each participant's device through "carer mode". This enabled us to add new applications and check on each Breezie remotely. This was great for Mullan Mews in particular where we could add new elements gradually. The Gloonan House group was eventually able to learn how to use the Google Play Store and add their own applications.

The X factor – personality and interaction

It should be acknowledged that there is a certain amount of "x factor" involved in the success of a project like this. We were very lucky that everyone involved came together so well and that all sorts of personalities got along. Part of this was due to self-selection. The two schemes were selected to take part because the Scheme Coordinators that put themselves forward for it. These are some of the most active and involved schemes within Clanmil Housing and can be counted on to have an excellent attitude and a willingness to try new things.

This definitely has a knock on effect on the overall attitude of the tenants who get involved as well. The tenants got a lot out of the activities because they were together in a group, supporting each other to learn and try new things. The hardest to reach people, who are perhaps in the most need of digital and social inclusion are unlikely to put themselves forward and therefore we do rely on the knowledge that scheme coordinators have about their tenants and their influence with them.

The project coordinator had also previously worked with Clanmil Housing Association and Gloonan House in particular on other projects so there was a good existing relationship to build on.

> *"There is a lot of curiosity and talk about what [the group] are doing every Friday morning. Other tenants are asking them questions about what they can look up online. When the others see the likes of [our participants] they think, well if they can do it, so can I!"*
>
> *– Gloonan House Scheme Coordinator*

Did we meet our aims?

The aims and objectives were quite loose in that this was a small pilot designed to explore options more than to deliver specific targets. The four official stated aims for the project were quite broad and the project certainly addressed them all.

1. To break down barriers to digital & social inclusion amongst Clanmil Housing tenants.

Yes, all 11 participants that completed the course now have good access to the Internet where they live, have an understanding of what types of information can be found online and how people use the internet to communicate. Attitudes towards technology and the internet can now be described as positive and interested!

2. To support and develop tenants' self-confidence, digital skills, access to online services, employment opportunities, and further learning opportunities.

Surveys and observations demonstrate increased confidence amongst the participants, and tangible improvement in digital skills. Due to the age of the group members, employment was not a focus of the project, but access to services and information certainly was. The Gloonan House group have explored NI Direct and have had informational sessions from the Dept of Finance and Personnel and Advice NI on accessing help online. The Mullan Mews group will most likely not be accessing such

services on their own, but their overall awareness of the internet and what it can do has certainly improved. Staff members at Mullan Mews have also gained new skills and are better able to facilitate their tenants to go online.[7]

3. To develop positive engagement with a wide range of stakeholders and share best practice.

Yes, the project brought 4 diverse partners together: Clanmil Housing Association, the Dept for Finance and Personnel, Breezie Tablets, and Supporting Communities. We also engaged with a range of other organisations such as Alzheimer's Society, Advice NI, Barclays Digital Eagles, PRONI, and the Belfast Health Trust. News of our project has been published in several newsletters, and has spread across Northern Ireland and beyond. We are presenting this work to other Housing Associations, speaking at relevant conferences, and publishing this report.

4. Demonstrate value for money and sustainability of the project.

As the first of it's kind in Northern Ireland, this project has been very successful with a relatively small investment. This paper did not address the budget involved, which consisted mainly of staff costs for the project coordinator and the cost of the Breezie tablets. Now that the course has been developed and trialed it can be replicated in other settings. It is a more intensive intervention than a simple skills-based course however and the time needed to implement it properly is the main resource needed. Our recommendations (below) call for Supporting Communities to create an course template that can be used by others.

---

[7] *The housing scheme staff's skill development was not measured, however, the scheme coordinator at Mullan Mews tells us that having access to the Breezie and participating in regular sessions with the group has definitely helped her improve her own computer skills. She didn't use Facebook before the project or do much with emailing photos and now she does this type of thing with her residents on a regular basis.*

Conclusion & Recommendations

Based on the success and popularity of the pilot programme, we are pleased to recommend "Bridging the Digital Divide" as a model of digital inclusion which is especially beneficial for groups of tenants living in social housing who are very unlikely to undertake any online activity on their own. While not suitable for every "hard to reach" person, the group work/community approach has social inclusion benefits above and beyond the acquisition of digital skills and is a more sustainable model than a straightforward course with a definitive start and end.

For the Mullan Mews and Gloonan House Participants

First, with regard to the existing pilot schemes, we would suggest some ways to help them to sustain their groups and continue to maintain and improve their digital skills. After 8 months of meeting and learning together, the people in these groups have formed important social bonds and we believe that with a little assistance they can carry on with the project on their own.

- **Keep the tablets**
  We strongly recommend that the pilot participants should keep their Breezie tablets. They are now fully customized to each individual and are a part of each person's regular routine now. To remove the devices would, in most cases, halt any online activity by the user. The tablets themselves are now a year old and well used making them worth very little to anyone besides the current user.

- **Continue to meet**
  Clanmil Housing Association should support the groups to continue meeting regularly. This support could take many forms, but at the most basic level, the housing association should make a commitment to ensuring the groups meet and do some online activity at least once a month (more often is better!) either with volunteers, outside agencies, or with a staff member. A brief record should be kept of the activities.

For New Groups

- **New sources of funding**
  Independent funding options should be explored to expand the project to new schemes as DFP is only able to fully fund pilot projects. We anticipate costs will come down from the initial pilot expense in several areas:
  - tablets are increasingly affordable
  - a volume discount may be available from Breezie or a similar software provider[8]
  - staff can be hired to deliver an existing programme, not develop one from scratch

---

[8] Supporting Communities could liaise with multiple housing associations to secure even better buying power together.

- **Train the trainer**
  Supporting Communities should develop a "train the trainer" course for staff employed to deliver the 'Bridging the Digital Divide' project to new housing scheme groups. The project coordinator who initially developed this programme should pass on her learning to anyone wanting to replicate this project.

- **Create a course template for others to use**
  The session activity list that the project coordinator recorded as part of her monitoring process could form the basis for an "off the shelf" course that can be used to help others replicate this work.

- **Build in Flexibility**
  Part of the reason this pilot worked so well is that we had scope to change and adapt to the needs of each group. Allow the participants to guide the work as much as possible to keep it relevant and interesting to them. Depending on the needs of the group, the time scale for this work should be as open-ended as possible.

- **Measurement and Evaluation**
  Since the inception of this project, the Digital Inclusion Outcomes Framework has been published by Go On UK[9]. We were pleased to find that we were on the right track in terms of the survey questions we used. Going forward, it would be ideal if all digital inclusion work used this same framework for benchmarking and tracking results UK wide.

Success! Certificates awarded at our Christmas celebration event.

[9] http://local.go-on.co.uk/resources/the-digital-inclusion-outcomes-framework/

Additional Resources

Further information about this project including a separate paper entitled "Best Practice Paper: Lessons from the Bridging the Digital Divide Project" can be found on our website. We also have a Facebook page with lots of photos and the videos of our participants that can be found here: www.facebook.com/BridgingTheDigitalDivideNI.

Anyone interested in accessing the session activities log, survey questions, case studies etc. can contact Healy King for more details.

Contact:

Healy King

Bridging the Digital Divide Project Coordinator

Supporting Communities

healy@supportingcommunities.org

www.supportingcommunities.org