



Digi Friends
Impact Report
October 2021 - April 2022



Introduction

Digi Friends is a free peer support service for SYHA customers, providing personalised, one to one assistance to build digital skills and confidence.

Trained volunteers work in a strengths-based way to bring people and communities together and achieve positive change.

Sessions take place in the community and remotely, depending on customer and volunteer requirements.

Our network of volunteers have supported customers to undertake lots of new activities and harness new skills such as send emails for the first time, set up online banking and shopping, configure new devices, pay rent through the SYHA Customer portal, and download Zoom.

Originally delivered as part of our Covid response to customers in 2020-21, the relaunched service fits within our wider Digital First strategy.

Why is this service needed?

Using the internet and modern devices such as smart phones, tablets and laptops are an integral part of everyday life and being confident with technology has become increasingly important since 2020. As part of the shift towards online services for SYHA customers, there are a number of benefits to providing peer support to build confidence and skills.

“At SYHA we take a strengths-based approach, starting with what customers can or could do, rather than what they can't. Many customers are not only capable of sorting out the logistics of transacting online, but would feel liberated by being able to do it for themselves. If we can encourage and support customers to take their first steps online by managing their tenancy, this can address the other inequalities of being offline. By using their digital skills, customers will be empowered to manage other aspects of their lives online – using the internet to access information, shop, manage their finances and maintain relationships.’ – Making Our Services Digital First, SYHA Report.”

Over 150 SYHA customers were involved in the design and development of the first iteration of Digital Friends.

- **95% told us they require support getting online.**
- 75% need support accessing devices, organising broadband installation and developing the skills and confidence to get online.
- **Less than 10% of customers have internet access. Of those, 85% report feelings of anxiety about being online, due to concerns of internet safety, or it being 'too difficult'.**

Learning from customers has shown us that:

- **One size doesn't fit all; personalisation is key**
- Peer discussion and support is invaluable in building a sense of belonging and sustainable connections
- **Support needs to be accessible and flexible**
- 'Hopeful' strengths-based suggestions provide motivation, confidence and lead to increased outcomes.

Our approach

Collaborative

Building on early collaboration to develop the service, we continue to engage with customers to help us improve the service. Changes made as a result of customer collaboration include volunteers wearing ID badges for home visits and certificates being issued at the end of the service.

Person Led and Strengths-Based

Volunteers are trained in strengths-based approaches and our way of working puts customers at the heart of the service. This enables people to gain confidence and skills and have fun on their digital journey by making it their own.

Evidenced Based

Using data to understand barriers around digital skills helps deliver services efficiently and effectively. It has helped us identify communities that are less confident online, and tailor services or communication to help those customers connect with the service. We are starting to test using data to recruit more SYHA customers as volunteers to support people in their local area with digital skills and confidence.

Our customers

Between October 2021 and April 2022, we've delivered:

- 167 volunteer hours
- 78 one to one sessions
- 7 drop in sessions
- 21 devices

We've received:

- 49 referrals, the majority of whom were self-referrals and Live Well customers
- 31 attendances at drop in sessions and events across the organisation
- Requests from numerous SYHA teams for guidance / signposting to digital inclusion services in the region

Referrals for Digi Friends since October 2021



Outcomes

Customers are asked about their confidence and skills (based around the 'Essential Digital Skills Framework') as well as wellbeing, loneliness, and self-efficacy at the beginning and end of their time with Digi Friends.

Surveys completed with customers showed that by the end of their time with Digi Friends:

- All respondents saw an increase in their confidence and knowledge and skills.
- All respondents had a device and data/Wifi to connect to.
- All respondents could **turn on a device, use the controls** on their device, **interact with the home screen**, update and change their password, connect to Wi-Fi and use the internet to **find out how to do something**.
- There were changes in wellbeing, with more respondents able to **stay active, keep learning** and **give to others** than at the beginning of their time with the service.
- There were changes in self-efficacy, with more respondents agreeing with the statement **'It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals'** than at the beginning of their time with the service.
- All respondents said they would **recommend Digi Friends to other people** and said they felt **their Digi Friends volunteer had helped them**.

“It has been great, very helpful setting up different applications on my new device I’d like some help with sending attachments to renew my disability bus pass because the paperwork to do it is all online. I want to be able to do it myself, and I’d like the confidence to do that.”

“It’s a steady pace, I can learn as I like. I can ask my Digi Friend volunteer to go over things and get them fixed in my head. I’ve conquered texting... I’ve got broadband and I’ve got my tablet now... I love learning and I know I’ll get there in the end. It’s all about confidence and getting stuck in and taking the plunge!”

“In my first session, it was good for me to figure out how to use YouTube and to discover new channels that I can subscribe to. Now I can also get on Netflix which is good for me because I can watch what I want anytime. It is nice to discover new things.”

“I’m really pleased and happy, no one has helped me like this before... I am feeling more confident with using the computer and my volunteer is very patient and kind... I think it is easier to learn with a stranger than with family! I used to approach the laptop with dread... but now I approach it much more confidently... I’m 93 and I’m looking forward to learning new things!”

Customer diversity

Digi Friends customers come from a range of backgrounds.

- 79% are female
- 47% have a disability
- 37% are aged 65 or older
- 16% are racially and ethnically diverse



Our volunteers

We have recruited and trained 23 volunteers since Oct 2021, all of whom have been offered professional supervision and a personal development plan. We are proud to have recruited a diverse group of volunteers and this is strengthening our offer to all our customers in a variety of positive ways.

We've recruited volunteers through:

- University of Sheffield and Sheffield Hallam University
- Word of mouth amongst SYHA staff and customers
- The vacancy page on our website
- Voluntary centres across the city region
- SYHA Work and Wellbeing coaches

Digi Friend volunteers come from a range of backgrounds:

- 50% are racially and ethnically diverse
- 44% are aged 18-24
- 28% have a disability

“ Volunteering with Digi Friends is a wonderful experience. It hasn't only been about digital skills, but learning to teach someone with a very different level of experience to me. Both of us have to be patient with one another as we figure things out together and the result is a genuine human connection with someone I never would otherwise have met.

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What have we learnt?

1 Offering digital support in a personalised, strengths-based way helps people grow their confidence and skills

Our volunteers work in a bespoke way with all our customers because we know that everyone is different and the level of support required to achieve goals varies. Customers use the structure of a 'digital plan' to focus attention on the key changes that will make a difference to them.

Volunteers are trained to use a strengths-based approach with customers and by working in this way we've helped people bring their own skills and interests into goal setting and make the experience more worthwhile.

“ It has been important to learn to send emails, I'm happy and confident that I'll be alright with that now. After sending my first email with Digi Friends, I have been in contact on email with my brother which I have found fun.

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“ When I started with Digi Friends I wanted to get more computer savvy. I feel like I have achieved what I wanted to, I have got Netflix (that was one of the first things we did) and have had time learning different things on my tablet. I've got lots of apps downloaded and I know what I'm doing now.

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“ I can use my tablet ... I know what I need to do. I know where to go for things like apps and I can use YouTube and Google. I can now use the supermarket website. I can open Learn my way, it's very helpful and nice. ”

“ I have come a long way, I feel like I've achieved texting, I have had a go at most of the things on my digital plan. I am now booked into the local library to do a computer course. I'm going to take my tablet along with me. ”

2 Events and drop-in sessions provide an informal way to learn more about Digi Friends and try out new activities – both for customers and volunteers

Events and drop-in sessions have been coordinated across several Live Well services and in the community, and have resulted in referrals as well as fun, informal opportunities to identify solutions and resolve challenges on the day.

At these sessions, customers have been supported to set up email addresses and send emails, shop safely online, browse for entertainment/hobbies, improve data/storage on their device, and search for internet offers.

Events have also been useful for engaging volunteers, for instance, people with limited capacity for 1-2-1 sessions in the community or those who want to 'try out' being a Digi Friend.

“ The Digi Friends Drop In was a really good experience for us here at The Meadows... Being friendly and approachable made our residents feel at ease asking for support... We hope to have another session soon. The referral process was simple and one of our customers has now taken up the offer of one to one support. ”

3 Communication with SYHA staff to promote and develop the service remains vital

To relaunch the service, posters and plans were shared across the organisation, and the Digi Friends page on Base was updated.

We have since returned to some team meeting and launched a [blog](#) about the service and are always exploring new ways to communicate stories and get people connected.

Several SYHA staff have joined the Digi Friends network, with feedback from those that have done so demonstrating how rewarding it can be to volunteer in this way.

Team meetings and online platforms remain useful spaces for staff to share successes and provide feedback to develop the service.

Plans for the future

- We've reviewed the Digi Friends offer, which since Oct 2021 has been for SYHA customers living in our homes. We will now expand and develop this service to include all our customers.
- We aim to match the appetite amongst customers for face-to-face sessions with our capacity as a volunteer-led service and our ambition to deliver high quality support wherever people live. To this end, we're developing a programme of in-person events and drop-in sessions at Rockingham St and across the community and will be encouraging customers where possible to attend these.
- We have created resources for signposting and support around digital skills which are available for staff to download and share with customers.
- We are developing an SYHA device loan scheme, which will initially support Work and Wellbeing customers and Changing Futures customers to build digital confidence and skills as part of wider goals for these services.
- We will keep testing our model of using data to identify people who might want to engage with the service. We will use data to ensure that our service is reaching across communities, in line with our Race Action plan objectives.

Find out more

- Our [enquiry form](#) can be used for referrals and self-referrals. The enquiry form is accessible on the SYHA website and on Base.
- Could you volunteer with us? See here for the latest [volunteer role description](#) and get in touch if you'd like to be involved.
- Posters and flyers can be displayed in Live Well services and across local community spaces- please get in touch for more details.
- Customers can self-refer by texting 'DIGI FRIEND' to 07800 996 958 (we'll call back to complete the forms).