



# Link Up Sandwell - Digital inclusion for people with learning disabilities

January 2022

# Background

## Digital exclusion and learning disabilities

Digital exclusion refers to barriers such as

- lack of internet access,
- lack of technology,
- lack of skills or confidence

that prevent some people making the most of the digital tools that many of us take for granted (Good Things Foundation, 2021).

*“There is a close correlation between digital exclusion and social disadvantages including lower income, lower levels of education, and poor housing...In an increasingly digital world, people who are digitally excluded are at risk of worse access to services and worse health outcomes. People who have characteristics that are protected under the Equality Act 2010 (age, disability, race) are less likely to have access to the internet, and the skills to use it.” (NHS Digital, 2021)*

Although disabled people are 23% less likely to have essential digital skills than non-disabled people (Lloyds, 2021), this picture is likely to be even worse for people with learning disabilities, who face additional barriers to understanding information and accessing technology.

Digital exclusion impacts on people’s health outcomes both directly, as access to health services moves increasingly online (Healthwatch, 2021) and indirectly, as digital access impacts on wider determinants of health, such as employment or social participation (Good Things Foundation, 2021). It’s hard to think of an area of our lives that isn’t somehow integrated with digital technology.

Historically, people with learning disabilities have been excluded from the digital world. In part this may be due to a risk averse approach to online safety from families and professionals in the lives of people with learning disabilities, or an assumption that they won’t be interested in or able to understand technology and the internet.



## The local picture in Sandwell

In 2020, Changing Our Lives conducted a Quality of Life review, which involved speaking to people with learning disabilities in supported living in Sandwell. Many people we spoke to did not have their own device, relying on staff to use company tech or even staff's own personal smartphones to facilitate online conversations with us. Few organisations had taken the initiative to support people to use technology to set up contact with friends and family, or to access any of the creative online activities that sprang up in the wake of the lockdown.

Far from being an early lockdown problem, these conversations were happening in October and November of 2020 when online meetings were becoming increasingly commonplace. We saw that people with learning disabilities who were generally more independent before lockdown were most likely to have their own Wi-Fi and their own device to get online.

As a picture of increased digital exclusion for people with learning disabilities emerged, Changing Our Lives began proactively seeking grants to ensure this technology was part of the lives of the people we work with. We have trialled different tools and have made a commitment in our strategic planning to continue this work for the next 2 years.



# Changing Our Lives' digital inclusion work

## Digital Lifelines

In 2021 Changing Our Lives was selected to be a community partner for the Digital Lifeline programme, coordinated by the Good Things Foundation and funded by the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. We distributed 36 tablets to people with learning disabilities, who didn't have access to the internet or a suitable device to get online, 18 of whom lived in Sandwell. We supported people to develop their digital skills and to use their tablets to connect with friends and family, including some who hadn't seen loved ones since before the pandemic started. We used people's new devices and their emerging skills to link them in with other Changing Our Lives projects, including our Speakeasy project. Although many people are still learning new skills and gaining confidence with their tablets, outcomes included people using their tablets to keep fit, shop online and even get back to work from home.

## Speakeasies

In 2020 we developed our Speakeasy project in Sandwell, which built social connections and promoted digital inclusion for people with learning disabilities, autistic people and their families. When the majority of the community had shut and many people were told to shield, people's lives had been completely disrupted. Using Zoom, we facilitated a series of virtual "Speakeasies", including a Drag Bingo, Christmas Cabaret, Valentines Cabaret, Pub Quiz and Pamper Night. We supported engagement in this by offering a tablet loan scheme and by giving people technical help to get on Zoom. Since this project, our use of Zoom as a social tool has continued into other projects and ongoing work, with a mixture of curated events and informal social get togethers.

## Active Black Country - Fitbit project

After the success of our Digital Lifelines and Speakeasy projects, and knowing that people with learning disabilities experience significant health inequalities and sometimes are not given opportunities or access to healthy lifestyles, we decided to develop a project where people have access to Fitbits and use these to become both more active and connect with their peers or the wider community. This work is funded by Active Black Country and is an opportunity to explore how this technology can impact on both the overall quality of life of people and result in improved health outcomes. To date, we have distributed 30 Fitbit devices which have acted as a motivational tool to encourage individuals to leave their homes, gain confidence and get moving.



## Outcomes

There have been a range of outcomes from our digital work so far.

People who received a tablet through Digital Lifelines have used their new tablets to

- catch up with friends and family during lockdowns,
- work on fitness goals,
- contribute to research with Changing Our lives over Zoom,
- get back into working from home or make working from home easier,
- take part in hobbies that they were missing from before lockdown
- learn new skills.

People who received a Fitbit through our Fitbit project have achieved an array of outcomes, including

- taking an overall interest in their health and fitness, e.g. tracking and striving to increase their daily step count,
- achieving their goal of losing weight with increased exercise,
- tracking their progress at the gym and therefore improving motivation and stamina,
- using their Fitbit app to track multiple health statistics including sleep patterns, heart rate and menstrual health.

Those who took part in our Speakeasy project

- used Zoom (many for the first time),
- connected with their friends and partners for the first time since lockdowns began (12 months at the time of the project),
- met new friends throughout the length of the project,
- enjoyed various social events which brought comfort at a difficult time e.g. "It was a great night, it helped take my mind off all the lockdown stuff".

We have included two roadmaps that highlight how two Sandwell residents with learning disabilities have progressed with their new tablets.



## Sara's roadmap

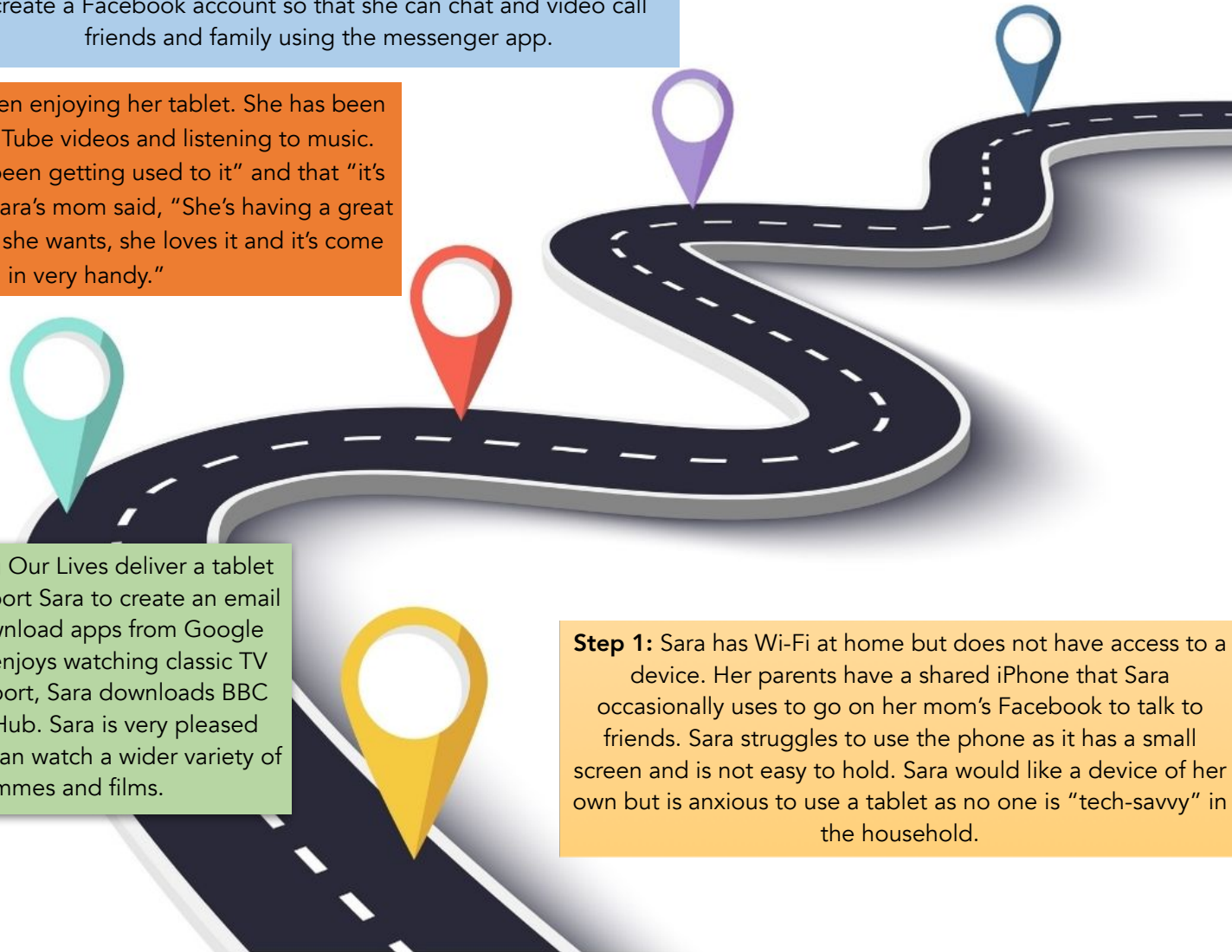
**Step 4:** Now Sara is getting used to her new tablet, she would like to join Zoom calls. Changing Our Lives visit Sara to run through Zoom ahead of the Zoom Bingo night. Sara is also supported to create a Facebook account so that she can chat and video call friends and family using the messenger app.

**Step 3:** Sara has been enjoying her tablet. She has been watching films, YouTube videos and listening to music. Sara said she has "been getting used to it" and that "it's been really good". Sara's mom said, "She's having a great time watching what she wants, she loves it and it's come in very handy."

**Step 2:** Changing Our Lives deliver a tablet to Sara. They support Sara to create an email account and download apps from Google Play Store. Sara enjoys watching classic TV shows. With support, Sara downloads BBC iPlayer and ITV Hub. Sara is very pleased about this as she can watch a wider variety of programmes and films.

**Step 1:** Sara has Wi-Fi at home but does not have access to a device. Her parents have a shared iPhone that Sara occasionally uses to go on her mom's Facebook to talk to friends. Sara struggles to use the phone as it has a small screen and is not easy to hold. Sara would like a device of her own but is anxious to use a tablet as no one is "tech-savvy" in the household.

**Step 5:** Sara enjoys attending the Zoom Bingo night with Changing Our Lives and catches up with friends she hasn't seen since before the pandemic. Sara continues to attend Zoom calls and use her tablet to socialise. Sara's Mom says "[the tablet] is a godsend to us during the pandemic."



## Jared's roadmap

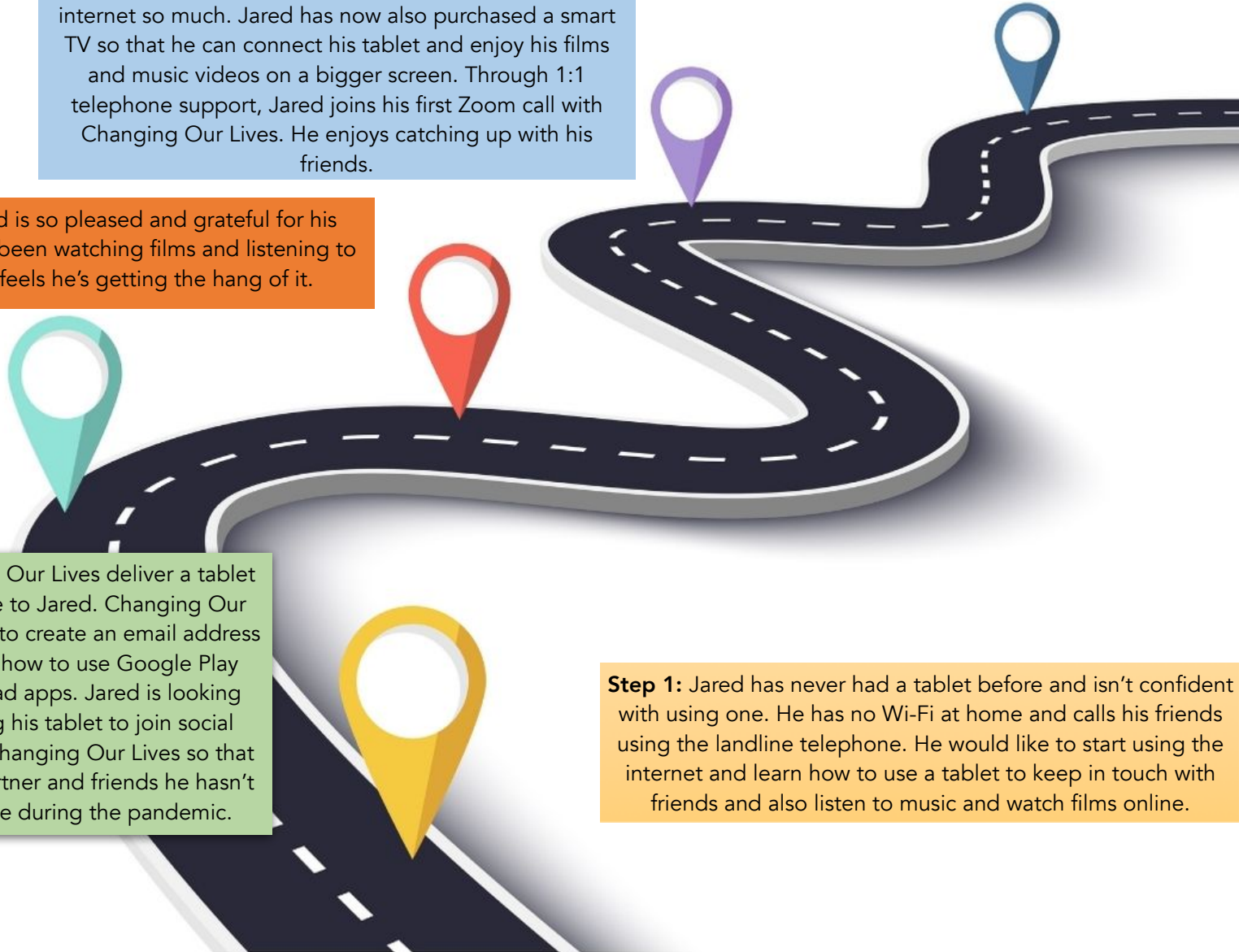
**Step 4:** Jared installs Wi-Fi at home as he enjoys using the internet so much. Jared has now also purchased a smart TV so that he can connect his tablet and enjoy his films and music videos on a bigger screen. Through 1:1 telephone support, Jared joins his first Zoom call with Changing Our Lives. He enjoys catching up with his friends.

**Step 3:** Jared is so pleased and grateful for his tablet. He has been watching films and listening to music. He feels he's getting the hang of it.

**Step 2:** Changing Our Lives deliver a tablet and Wi-Fi dongle to Jared. Changing Our Lives support him to create an email address and show Jared how to use Google Play store to download apps. Jared is looking forward to using his tablet to join social Zoom calls with Changing Our Lives so that he can see his partner and friends he hasn't been able to see during the pandemic.

**Step 5:** Jared has developed confidence in using his tablet and has now joined several Zoom calls with Changing Our Lives and joins the calls without needing support. He is looking forward to using the app to speak to his partner 1:1.

**Step 1:** Jared has never had a tablet before and isn't confident with using one. He has no Wi-Fi at home and calls his friends using the landline telephone. He would like to start using the internet and learn how to use a tablet to keep in touch with friends and also listen to music and watch films online.



## Challenges and assets for getting Sandwell online

Our ambition for Sandwell is that everyone with a learning disability can get online.

**Some of the challenges we envisage for Sandwell in getting everyone with a learning disability online are:**

- **The cost of technology, internet and assistive equipment.** This is becoming more accessible as devices get cheaper, but is still out of the reach of some households. Changing Our Lives have had success with pots of funding to supply people with reasonably priced devices. This is something that could be explored at a wider level.
- **Digital skills in the workforce and among family carers.** Not all staff and family carers are confident with troubleshooting issues or setting someone up online. Older family carers may be likely to be digitally excluded themselves. Training and support for the learning disability support workforce and for family carers could bridge some gaps.
- **Confidence and motivation.** When we first started our digital work, some people with learning disabilities, and people in their lives, weren't sure if the internet was for them. Some were worried about the risks or learning new skills. This improved with practice, by giving people clear information about how to keep safe, and by introducing people to a range of different things they could do on the internet. Everyone who was nervous at the start has since got something out of being online.

**Sandwell also has some great assets that will help with getting people online:**

- **Strong community spaces - voluntary sector, GPs, community centres.** Sandwell has a vibrant voluntary sector, primary care network and many community centres. Digital inclusion training could be targeted into these to meet the needs of not just people with learning disabilities, but also people who are digitally excluded for other reasons.
- **Digital Champions and the library service.** Sandwell currently doesn't have a Digital Champion scheme. However, there are 19 libraries in Sandwell that are already engaging with their local communities and offering free internet access. They would be the perfect setting for spring boarding a Digital Champions volunteer scheme.
- **Accessing national support.** There are already national sources of information and support for getting people with learning disabilities online. One example is Ability Net (<https://abilitynet.org.uk>) who offer free IT support at home to disabled people, and free resources for staff and volunteers about making the internet more accessible.
- **Sandwell Digital Strategy.** The latest Sandwell Digital Strategy ran from 2018-2021. The new Digital Strategy for 2022 onwards could include a specific focus on supporting Sandwell residents with learning disabilities to get online.





## References

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