

**Barnwood Trust Digital Inclusion Fund**  
**DEADLINE:31<sup>st</sup> JULY 2022**

**NAME: Forest of Dean Digital Partnership**

**Please give an outline of your project**

A collaborative community partnership project, led by FVAF. This district-wide partnership will be the first of its kind and will aim to break down the barriers people face in relation to digital inclusion and unlock the many assets available within our communities and the digital world.

This will be achieved by bringing together the right and relevant people/organisations who will:

- build on the needs identified by Digital Divides research.  
AND
- work to understand what is needed and where, develop centralised, accessible information and deliver bespoke projects to address the gaps in digital inclusion.

Key findings from the Digital Divides research identified that there was no coherent allocation of resources to match the areas where people are most likely to be digitally excluded, and that there was no joined-up leadership for digital inclusion activity in the county. The report concluded that the full power of existing assets is not harnessed, and that a collaborative focus would contribute to improved quality of support, less duplication, more consistency and more ease of movement around different sources of support.

In the planning and delivery of the Forest of Dean Digital Partnership we are confident that as a collective, we will directly address many of the issues and recommendations from the Digital Divides report.

Harnessing the power of the community sector, to create impact locally, the activity delivered by the project will bring about digital social change through practical and sustainable means.

Focusing on 5 key areas:

1. Learning Disabilities/ Additional Needs
2. Physical Disabilities
3. Sensory Disabilities
4. Mental Health/ Wellbeing
5. Children & Young people that may experience any of the above

The project will be delivered over 18 months in 4 phases:

PHASE 1: Collaboration: The Partnership

PHASE 2: Understanding the Community: The Research

PHASE 3: Removing Barriers: The Pilot Projects

PHASE 4: Learning: The Analysis

## **How will this project benefit disabled people and people with mental health challenges in Gloucestershire?**

### **Identified local need**

The Forest of Dean suffers significantly from rural isolation and poverty which is further exacerbated by a lack of digital infrastructure and literacy. Poor connectivity, a lack of community meeting places and poor public transport means that, in particular, disabled and older people, those on a low income and people with mental health challenges, are experiencing a disproportionately high-level of digital exclusion in the district.

We're seeing a continual increase to a digital first approach across the private and public sector due to funding cuts and changes to practices during the pandemic. The acceleration of the digitisation of public services, e.g. accessing local GPs, managing benefits, and accessing support, is beginning to negatively impact those who are not digitally connected. In a post-pandemic era, ensuring everyone can benefit from the digital world has never been more important.

This project would create a trusted and central point of support and information and will ensure effective and efficient delivery of digital and wider wrap-around holistic support.

### **Benefits for the individual:**

- Those with basic digital skills feel more connected and communicate with their community, friends and family
- Increase in confidence
- Physical access to equipment and internet in community settings
- Creating solutions where digital has become the default and only option
- Personal development – gain and grow IT skills for personal and professional life
- Tackle social isolation by creating online and physical social interaction and networks
- Create new opportunities to grow and move forward, for example gaining employment or taking up volunteering
- Breaking down barriers between individuals and public services by improving knowledge and communication
- Improved and timely access to public services
- Save money – shopping online and accessing government services, utility companies and online banking
- Improved access – reduce the need to travel
- Remote support is of significant benefit for some service users, allowing them to overcome the difficulties of travel and costs. For example remote physiotherapy sessions for those users shielding or with mobility issues

### **Benefits for community partners:**

- Legacy for organisations – create inclusive and sustainable projects/services
- Breaking down barriers by reaching hidden, easy to ignore and underrepresented communities and individuals
- Reduced venue costs and less time spent travelling in between sites, supporting organisations to reach greater numbers of people.
- Utilising the strength of our network will ensure a joined-up approach and reduce duplication of projects and services
- Network of Digital champions to share rich learning that benefits communities and improves service delivery

- Creates a centralised navigation for those in need to the relevant digital support by connecting the various pre-existing digital support offers. Seamless referral pathways between digital inclusion projects.
- Opportunity for FVAF and all partners to directly consult the community on the issues that matter to them the most
- Increases awareness of digital exclusion to help influence providers to reconsider the 'digital by default' approach

#### **Wider community benefits:**

Developing an effective infrastructure to help the whole community access and use digital tools would improve digital literacy and foster digital activities to enhance their lives, for example, money-saving, connecting with friends and family, and seeking a healthier lifestyle which in turn improves public health outcomes.

Additionally, project activity could create local employment and/or volunteering opportunities to unlock the hidden talents of communities and project participants.

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### **How will disabled people and people with mental health challenges be involved in planning, delivering and/or evaluating the work?**

#### **Understanding the community: The Research**

Based on the current national, local, network partner and first-hand data available to us we recognise the need for a comprehensive collaborative effort to tackle and break down the barriers to creating a digitally inclusive community in the Forest of Dean. The Digital Divides report commissioned research which confirmed that whilst there is much written about the reality and impact of digital exclusion, less is known about what really works in overcoming exclusion. We aim to address this with tangible impact and outcomes through the lifetime of this partnership project.

Therefore, we recognise that in order to effect a long-term sustainable change, we need to gain a deeper, more detailed understanding of the situation here and now – those in the community at the greatest disadvantage, the mechanisms that currently exist and the gaps in support and provision.

To deliver effective change, the project would invest time and resource in creating an accurate and up-to-date picture of the landscape we are operating in by listening to the issues and barriers disabled people and people with mental health challenges face to achieve digital inclusion.

Research areas would focus on the following categories to develop a deeper understanding of the strengths these marginalised groups have and can contribute to co-design and delivery of projects:

1. Learning Disabilities
2. Physical Disabilities
3. Sensory Disabilities
4. Mental Health/ Wellbeing
5. Children & Young people that may experience any of the above

The data gathered would cover:

- localised demographic data

- localised economic data
- lived experience of disabled people
- lived experience of people facing mental health challenges
- accessible community venues
- existing disability services and support providers
- existing mental health services and support providers
- existing public sector provision
- existing digital support and skills training

The data gathering in this phase would build on the Digital Divides research and drive the direction and focus of the project's service delivery. This would prevent duplication and ensure targeted, effective support and sustainable outcomes.

Recording the lived experience and ideas from the community would be fundamental to building an accurate and realistic picture. This would be achieved through a wide-ranging community co-production exercise which would include 1-2-1 meetings, distribution of paper based and electronic questionnaires, and community drop-in events at multiple locations. We would use our established, trusted access to the community and tap into the network of the project partners and our wider community connections to reach people.

At this stage, community advocates with lived experience would be recruited to be part of the project delivery group. These advocates will ensure the voice of the intended user is heard and will influence the direction and delivery of activity and outcomes throughout the project

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## **How will you evaluate the impact of this work?**

### **Learning : The Analysis**

A core aim of the community partnership project will be to create a long-lasting legacy and sustainable change for the whole community. Throughout the project, a robust process of review and evaluation would be carried out to monitor the progress and effectiveness of the activity. This would be achieved by following an agreed project delivery plan template. This project plan will ensure a consistency of the type and quality of delivery and accurate and timely collection of participant insight data.

At FVAF we have successfully reacted quickly to community need and feedback. Constant consultation with users and participants would form a large part of the analysis and influence changes and adaptations to the project.

Qualitative and quantitative data would be collected and measured in the following areas:

- Number of people supported to access appropriate online services
- Impact areas e.g. improvement to digital confidence, physical wellbeing, finding employment
- Support areas e.g. using the internet, health services, accessing benefits, job seeking,
- Attendees to community consultation events
- Attendees to the skills and training sessions
- Number of referrals other service providers
- Number of services and groups that are part of the project

- Engagement, information sharing and interaction from network of community organisations and public sector
- Case studies of services/professionals working together
- Stories from professionals and service providers regarding the appropriate uptake of their services and the wrap around support provided to participants
- Life changing stories of individuals and their families

At the end of the project's timeline, as a collective, the community partnership would propose and agree on next steps to ensure learning is acted on and the successful outcomes are sustainable.

A final evaluation report of the findings, learnings, outcomes and successes would be published and available publicly to the whole community.

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**How will this project help to make digital solutions and opportunities more sustainable for disabled people and people with mental health challenges in Gloucestershire?**

Sustainable digital solutions and opportunities for disabled people and people with mental health challenges will be achieved by establishing a strong community partnership and developing a co-ordinated and targeted network of support and activities to break down barriers and engage with our hard-to-reach communities.

**Collaboration: The Partnership**

The voluntary and community sector plays a vital role in digital inclusion. Small local organisations offering digital support are traditionally very effective at reaching out to people in need but have financial and resource constraints. By bringing the right community partners together, we will unlock access to those harder to reach communities empower them to be directly involved in the co-production of the design and delivery of highly effective and efficient support and development of digital infrastructure. Collaboration also offers wider benefits by offering the opportunity to learn from each other, forge new links and build on existing partnerships.

The drive to build a collaborative partnership, facilitated by FVAF, grew out of interest from our community network. At the first Know Your Patch in-person event we hosted in June, this funding opportunity was raised and discussed at length.

Following this event, we were approached by many trusted partners, who in recognising our strength as an anchor organisation when developing effective partnerships, voiced their view that FVAF would be best placed to lead the Forest of Dean Digital Partnership.

We have a strong record of developing, overseeing and delivering multi-agency projects. For example, the Gloucestershire Country Council funded HAF scheme (Holiday, Activities and Food) and the Digital Hubs project, a new innovative approach, developed by FVAF and The Adult Transformation Team, to tackle digital exclusion across Gloucestershire.

To move this project proposal forward and to further explore the viability of the planned activities for this community partnership project, we created a briefing note and proactively reached out to our network to invite expression of interest to be involved. Following this, we have identified a range of partners across our network whose input and expertise will help us deliver maximum impact to the community.

Response to our call was very strong and led to productive discussions with a number of interested individuals and organisations including The Shalom Network, Wye Dean Wellbeing, My Network, Age UK and Forest Sensory Services. We are also continuing to field interest from a number of other highly relevant and interested community partners.

### **Removing barriers: The Pilot Projects**

Our mindset would be to position digital as an 'enabler', with the development of pilot projects and shared resources to directly tackle the most common barriers as identified in the research phase (Phase 2). We already know from participant insight data gained from our 6 community hubs across the district that there are a number of factors that contribute to our ability to reaching digitally excluded communities and in turn, the community's ability to engage with help and support. These factors cover social, economic and health issues including:

- poor public transport network
- anxiety and mental health issues
- physical disabilities
- low income – unable to afford transport
- Lack of suitable accessible community venues
- Poor connectivity at community venues
- Regular access to equipment
- Motivation, capability and opportunity

We would approach service delivery using the social model of disability which follows the concept that disability is caused by how society is organised, rather than by a person's impairment or difference. This model could also be applied to the impact of mental health challenges, viewing it as a 'hidden' disability. Removing barriers that restrict life choices would help create equality and offer disabled people and people facing mental health challenges, solutions and opportunities for greater independence, choice and control.

Activity would follow a hybrid/blended approach with online as well as face-to-face and physical activities and resources delivered to tackle broadly:

- Lack of digital infrastructure
- Poor Accessibility
- Low motivation and skills
- Limited knowledge of specialist equipment available
- Limited knowledge of support services and provision
- Lack of consistent trusted support

Through initial discussions with prospective partners we identified a number of potential areas to focus on. These are areas that we have proven success in delivering effective work with positive outcomes. Examples include:

**Support community venues to get connected:** We would seek to engage the private sector to bring additional investment and expertise. For example broadband providers  
**Equipment resource:** Source and provide residents in need with access to equipment and data

**Creating the right environment** - every person facing digital disadvantage should have a friendly, accessible, local place to go for support to use the internet. A comprehensive understanding and a record of accessible community venues would be gathered and shared.

**Accessible communication channels:** Support service delivery organisations to create and maintain accessible communication channels. For example websites that feature a range of accessibility functions, alternative formats

**Create toolkits:** to make sure staff and volunteers are 'disability confident'

In developing the final themes for the pilot projects we would consider the recommendations of the Digital Divides report and the needs and ideas captured from the community in the research phase of this project.

**The Digital Support Directory:**

One of the goals of this project is to build on the initial asset map collated by Digital Divides to create a trusted and central point of resource and information. A core element of the research phase will be to draw up a detailed asset map of all the existing services and opportunities that currently operate to support disabled people and people with mental health challenges in the Forest of Dean. Alongside this, a comprehensive analysis and record of suitable, accessible local community venues would be created. All the gathered information would be compiled into a clear, concise and fully accessible Digital Support Directory.

This Digital Support Directory would be aimed primarily for use by the community and therefore would be co-produced with the project's community advocates. This will ensure that we create a user friendly and accessible publication.

We know that this style and format of publication offers real benefit and value to the community, having recently created and distributed similar comprehensive directories, Forest Compass and Volunteering in the Forest of Dean.

Physical i.e. print and digital copies would be freely available to any and all members of the community. Alternative formats would also be provided for example large print, braille.

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**What steps will you take to ensure your project is as accessible as possible to a wide range of people?**

**Act on community consultation** – ask, listen and act on what the community is telling us.

**Get the environment right** – make sure that we use easily accessible and visible physical spaces to offer training and support.

**Get the technology right** - find out exactly what the person needs.

**Trusted experts** - make sure staff and volunteers are 'disability confident.'

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## Can you map out the timeline for your expenditure and key activities for this grant?

### **PROJECT DURATION: 18 MONTHS**

#### **Phase 1**

Identifying Project stakeholders/ partners across 4 main areas who bring value, knowledge, expertise and energy. (Maximum of 12 partners)

- 1.Learning Disabilities/ Additional Needs
  - 2.Physical Disabilities
  - 3.Mental Health/ Wellbeing
  - 4.Children & Young people that may experience any of the above
- Initial set-up of Project Partner Forum.

#### **Duration of phase: 3 Months**

##### **Expenditure:**

Facilitator: £10k

Partners: £9k

#### **Phase 2**

- Research/ co-design/ co-production
- Research to be across the 4 categories'
- Research focus on understanding Digital Divides insights- deeper dive in to localised digital exclusion the WHY- How and What
- Digital Support asset mapping/ to enable the creation of Digital Support Directory- physical and digital copies
- Exploration of community wifi installation in areas with zero coverage
- Reporting of findings and suggestions for pilot phase

#### **Duration of phase: 3 Months**

##### **Expenditure:**

Research: £20k

Directory: £5k

Facilitator: £10k

Partners: £9k

#### **Phase 3**

- Delivery of Digital pilots identified and designed in phase 2.
- On-going work improve digital infrastructure in community settings (I.e. Community halls etc)
- Creation of resources/ support for VSC; to increase/ create online presence, website templates, ensure accessibility and legal and best practice functionality are met universally across the sector.

#### **Duration of phase: 9 Months**

##### **Expenditure:**

Projects delivery:£50k

Facilitator: £10k

Partners: £27k



#### **Phase 4**

- Pilot evaluations/ findings
- Sharing impact/ success
- Proposal on next steps/ funding requirements

**Duration of phase: 3 Months**

**Expenditure:**

Facilitator: £10k

Partners: £9k

#### **Additional information**

- Each selected project partner will be paid to provide 8 hours of time/ contributions to the project per a month
- Each project partner to receive remuneration of £250 per month- £3k in total for project.

Facilitator £40k

Research £20k

Directory £5k

Partners £54k (£250 per day), £3k per year

Projects delivery:£50k

Organisation on-costs at 15% £34k

TOTAL: £203k

Year 1 = £157k

Year 2= £46k