

One of the aims of Discover Digital was to engage the most digitally excluded communities in digital learning. Initially, the project planned to offer structured classroom-style trainings, but we quickly learnt that this method was not going to attract the people we were trying to reach.

The local shopping centre had recently changed management, and there was a renewed focus on community projects that would benefit the local area. We approached The Potteries Centre in Hanley who were supportive and allowed us to use an empty unit to deliver the project over 5 weeks between April and May 2022.

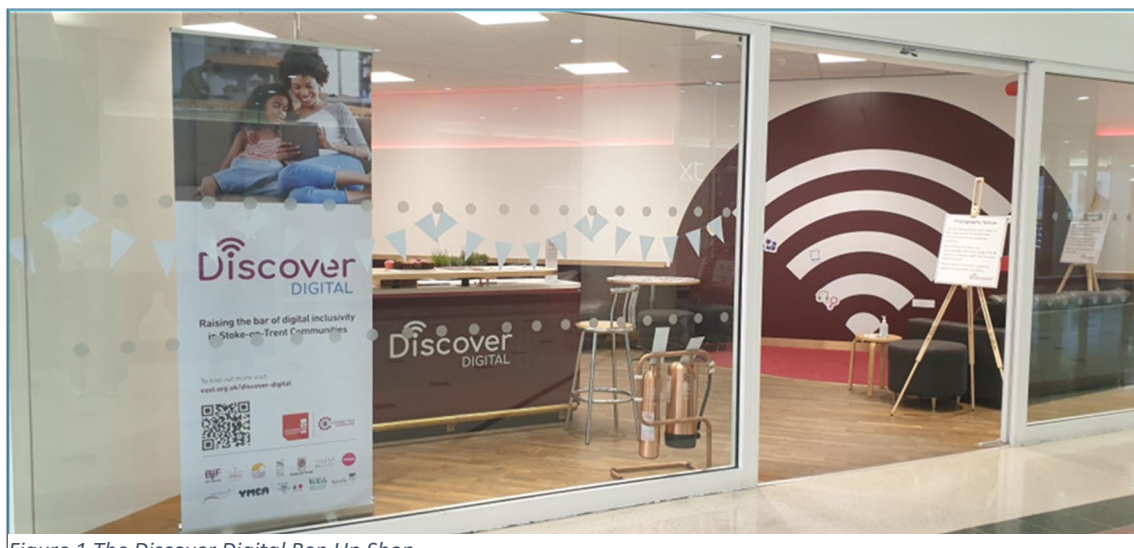


Figure 1 The Discover Digital Pop Up Shop



The shop had four clear zones:

- **Chillout and Chat Zone** with comfortable seating where we conducted community consultations to ensure as many voices as possible fed into the research that would inform the project
- **Learning Zone** set up with tables and chairs where we could deliver training sessions
- **Drop-in Zone** where people could pop in and get bespoke digital support that they needed
- **Quiet Zone** which offered a private space to support grant applicants to fill out the application forms, helping to break down barriers

Workshop topics included social media, photoshop, CV writing, creating podcasts, basic IT skills, saving money online, safe online banking, benefits applications and calculations, and general information about navigating the internet.

The shop was managed by the Digital Engagement Manager (Staffordshire University) and staffed by Digital Champions as well as staff from across the project partners. A loyalty scheme encouraged repeat visits to the shop, and all loyalty card registrations were entered into a prize draw to win a tablet. Visitors would earn stamps every time they engaged in an activity in the shop, whether this was training and support, consultation, grant



applications or enjoying our digital hooks. Those who completed their cards received pens, pencils, USB drives and power banks as incentives.

The way in which support was delivered in the shop changed over the course of the 5 weeks as we learned more about the local community and the ways in which they wanted to engage with the project. Some of the training sessions were available at set times, while others were drop-in days – and we quickly learned the latter were preferred over a rigid schedule.

In June 2022, once our time in the shop had come to an end, we invited a group of visitors back for a focus group to help to evaluate this part of the Discover Digital project. This case study aims to bring together these reflections and show the ways that Discover Digital was able to engage some of the City's most digitally excluded citizens.

Convenient

The shop was an innovative way to engage with our audience. The central

[I liked] being able to pass by and drop-in without having to make an appointment

location made it convenient, and people could pop in while running other errands. Visitors had the freedom to spend as much or as little time in the shop as they wanted – it was completely led by them and their



needs. This was adopted in Discover’s wider training programme, where trainers went out and delivered sessions in community spaces, instead of expecting people to come to their settings.

Inclusive

While similar support is offered by some libraries, we wanted to offer something away from an educational setting as many of the most digitally

A wide range of staff that appealed to a diverse section of people

excluded groups saw this as a barrier. The Discover Digital Champions were patient and friendly, and were confident in providing digital support to people with differing needs, regardless of current skill level. The diversity of the team helped the shop to feel more accessible.

Bespoke learning

While the shop offered a variety of different workshops, people were also able to drop by and ask for help with the digital skills that were important to them. This could be anything from changing the delivery address on their Tesco shopping app, to using the internet to engage in a particular hobby. The

Covered different aspects of IT, effectively tailored to individual needs. This could be extended and taken on tour to local community centres!



Discover Digital Champions were patient and flexible in their approach, and took the time to ensure that visitors could confidently carry out these tasks before leaving the shop.

Digital hooks

In addition to the four zones in the shop, we had plenty of fun digital hooks

The shop provided an opportunity to be hands on with equipment and gadgets – so I'm now more likely to use them!

to entice people in, including a PlayStation, green screen, VR headsets, drones and 3D printing. We found that by including these fun activities in

the shop, we created a real buzz, and people felt less intimidated to come into the shop, learn about the project, and ask for help.

Friendly environment

The Digital Champion model that was employed in the shop helped us to provide support in a relaxed, informal, unstructured

I always felt at home in the shop

environment. We relied on relationships to ease people in, and once we had built the trust of our visitors, we would see them coming back on several occasions to continue their learning. Visitors enjoyed the friendly,

inclusive, relaxed nature of the shop, with visitors often coming back and asking for specific people who had gained their trust.

One particular event truly demonstrated the power of the shop's presence in the heart of the community, its welcoming environment and the team's ability to adapt and be flexible to local needs. Thanks to the support of a local organisation that advocates for refugees and asylum seekers, news of the shop quickly spread amongst the local Ukrainian refugee community. This came with its own set of language barriers. The team were quick to adapt, using tools like Google Translate and Google Lens to communicate with Ukrainian visitors, and we were able to support several people to apply for grants. Many returned to the shop several times for digital support, which we were able to deliver thanks to these translation tools.

One Ukrainian visitor spoke of how isolated she felt as she had not been able to connect with anyone from her home country, and it was affecting her mental health. Another group of Ukrainian refugees were in the shop receiving digital support, and within minutes they had exchanged numbers and arranging meetups.

The shop gave a face to the project. It put us right at the heart of our community, and allowed us to reach people that we would not have otherwise had access to. It also brought the project partners together in a shared space, and helped the partners to build relationships with each



other. The impact of this cannot be underestimated, with partners already thinking about how they can work together on future digital inclusion projects to continue this important work.

We also must not underestimate the impact that the shop had on the rest of the Discover Digital project. We learnt a lot about our community and the most effective ways to motivate people to engage in digital. We applied this learning to all the training that was being offered through Discover, moving away from a classroom setting and instead taking the training out into the community using the laid-back, friendly approach that had been adopted in the shop.

It was a steep learning curve, and it often felt like we were “building while flying”. We had to learn quickly from our mistakes, but the flexible and adaptable approach of all who were involved is what allowed the shop to be such a success for our community. Ultimately, the success of the shop came down to the people within it and the environment they created.

This learning must not be lost, and future digital inclusion initiatives need to look at the way they engage with the public, respond to their needs, and do so in an environment that is enjoyable, relaxed and inclusive.

