



Do it – Partnerships

Sevenside Housing and Social Telecoms Partner to Provide Affordable IT Services

Digital Den Becomes New Digital Inclusion Community Centre

Background:

Sevenside Housing was created in 2001 following the transfer of housing stock from the former Shrewsbury and Atcham Borough Council. It's now one of Shropshire's largest social landlords, with more than 5,400 homes in and around Shrewsbury.

During the approach of Welfare Reform Sevenside conducted a customer survey regarding how many of their tenants had internet access. The survey results were that only 2400 of our customers, had internet access in their home, additionally 1440 of these customers are in receipt of part/full welfare benefits.

Customer feedback suggested they struggle to access online services. Libraries offer some provision but these services are currently subject to cutbacks. The scale was such that Sevenside looked at a variety of ways, through their digital inclusion project, to increase access to the internet and provide training to increase the skill and confidence levels of customers in our social housing

Without digital access children are disadvantaged as homework portals cannot be accessed. Households are disadvantaged by not being able to access cheaper online options for services such as utilities, and older residents are more likely to be isolated if they are unable to access and use digital communication.

The results of the survey led Sevenside in 2013 to create a partnership with community interest company, Social Telecoms CIC. Social Telecoms CIC has strong links with leading network and broadband providers to provide good value services to clients, and social value to communities. This led to the founding of a Digital Den to help meet local people's evidenced need for affordable IT services.

Objectives

- To reduce the number of customers who are digitally excluded.
- To provide affordable or free internet solutions.
- To increase access to education, training and employment opportunities.
- To improve the skills and confidence of Sevenside tenants.



- To ensure the smooth transition to new online services provided as part of Government's Welfare Reform Plans

Action:

Through the partnership with Social Telecoms CIC, the housing association was able to take over a vacant shop to create the UK's first Digital Den in early 2013.

Sevenside invested £20,000 of capital to transform the space. Staffing to work with customers to access the computers and utilise the provision costs £1,200 per month through the social enterprise.

Sevenside also invests £7,500 per year to deliver the Learning Programme with partners contributing staff and in-kind support to be able to deliver significant training opportunities to achieve the outcomes. In addition Sevenside staff deliver the job clubs and drop in's as a part of their overall job roles at a cost of just over £3,000 per year.

The cost to the customer is minimal at £2 per week or 30p per day this gives customers access to the internet services. The staff assist customers to access employment sites, utility switching sites and online benefit payment application. This affordable access to the internet allows the tenants and local community to ensure they are in receipt of the correct benefits and reduce their household bills.

John Clarke, Social Telecoms Director, says: "It's a privilege to develop the Digital Den, which we think is the first of its kind. By bringing our commercial experience to the area, we can create a ripple effect of improved skills, enterprise and opportunities."

Business Results:

Economic

- 6 unemployed people gained full time work.
- 3 tenants have returned to full time education
- In excess of 100 customers have benefited from improved financial situations as a result of the support they have received

Social

- The Digital Den enables local people to get pay-as-you-go wi-fi broadband from £8 a month and save on phone calls and computer equipment.



- 10 of Sevenside's sheltered housing schemes also have 'Mini Dens' for the use of elderly residents.
- The job clubs average 8 tenants per session. This totals over 350 in the first year.
- Over 8,000 have visited Digital Den in the first 12 months

Learning:

The project has faced a number of challenges. Finding the right location for the Digital Den and funding the improvements to the property involved a higher level of expenditure than originally anticipated.

Staff at the Digital Den has had to learn how to manage the different user requirements; particularly children and young people, developing a timetable offering different aged related sessions (e.g. children only) and mixed aged sessions.

As a long term project, learning from each stage has been important to ensure sustainability and ensure that the project continues to meet the customers' needs.

Next Steps:

Our 2014 Learning Programme will include additional courses; for older customers to understand how to stay safe online and more accredited courses to support our customers into employment.

Following the success of the Digital Den, Sevenside Housing is now looking into the possibility of setting up similar projects on more estates.

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