



Vision Support – Assistive Technology Group – June 2021

Organisation name: Vision Support

Project Name: Assistive Technology Group

Location: Hartlepool, North East England

Grant amount: £9,000

Award date and duration: July 2018, 1 year

Project context: Vision Support, previously called Hartlepool Blind Welfare Association is a local charity offering support for the visually impaired community, by conducting regularly organised activities and clubs, one off events, home visits, and responding to any ad-hoc needs of their members, such as helping with a visit to the hospital.

Project aims: The group aims to help visually impaired people to gain back some level of independence through the help of technology, by introducing them to the tech available and teaching them how to use it.

Project aims

Vision Support identified a need for more information about and engagement with assistive technology which could support visually impaired people to lead a more independent life. The aim of the Assistive Technology group was to introduce people to the different devices and software options available for their needs, and to teach people how to get the most of that technology in order to help them regain a level of independence.

About the grant

Vision Support received a small grant of £9,000 from The National Lottery Community Fund in July 2018, lasting for a year. The grant went towards employing an IT specialist, Thomas, for one day a week, for **one to one sessions** on using assistive technology, both hardware and software, depending on the needs of the individual. The sessions are aimed at people newer to visual aid technology, or

technology in general. Thomas is also in charge of managing the project and the sessions, while Barbara, the charity manager, has a financial supervision role.

After the end of the grant, the project continued, with funding from various other sources, and is currently re-starting after a break due to the pandemic.

Project set up and delivery

The sessions consist of usually one-on-one conversations, highly personalised to the individual's level of visual impairment and need. Sometimes, small groups of people with similar needs are formed for the sessions, if appropriate. They can cover anything from the most basic things to more complicated, depending on ability, from using the basic accessibility features of mobile phones and laptops, downloading music, audiobooks, podcasts and using emails and social media, to using more specialised software for their devices, like the Synaptic software for Android, learning to touch type or getting familiar with specialised portable equipment.

The sessions took place face to face, the majority of them at the Vision Support Centre. However, occasionally the session required a home visit, if people needed Wi-Fi set up, or had any other home-related technical issues, or were simply unable to come to the centre.

They made sure each session is based around what the individual wants, and going at the pace they are comfortable with. This is why there is no limit to the number of sessions people can attend, resulting in lots of people being regulars, sometimes moving to the group sessions, and engaging with the rest of the community as well.

Participants spoke very highly of the project and their experience with it. They found the venue accessible, the information and help received very useful, and the person delivering the sessions very friendly and helpful.

Participants who continue to attend said they started taking the classes to learn to use their laptop or tablet, or because they were recommended to give it a go, but continued because of the friendly atmosphere. Susan, an older lady who has been taking the classes since they first started, said she regularly stayed after the class in the café area, talking to other members of the community who happened to be there

at the time, and the people who came before and after her to the class. She also noted how courteous Thomas was, helping her up and down the stairs.

“I needed to improve my computer skills so I could do emails and things like that. I liked the idea of having someone who could help me with using the new software package I had just got. It was very helpful. I got Audible too and they helped me download it and now I have another interest besides email.” **Susan, beneficiary**

Project impact

Key Highlights

Numbers supported

- 30 individual people attended sessions over the year.
- Most people (15-20) came on a weekly basis for the whole duration of the project, some for 6 weeks, some only for 1 or 2 sessions, depending on their needs and interests.

Key impacts

- Helped people learn to use technology
- Gave people more independence than before
- Allowed them to do things they hadn't been able to do since their loss of vision, such as communicating with family and friends via email or text
- Helped them feel more independent and confident.

Website

<https://www.vision-support.org.uk/>

Barbara and Thomas considered the project to be more successful than they had originally hoped. They managed to get to all people they initially identified as needing those sessions and the demand grew from referrals, an indicator of the usefulness of the sessions.

“The project itself was fantastic. There is an absolute need for those classes to continue - and luckily, they have continued. People can now use tech in their life, and it also helped them with their confidence and motivation. Lots of people live in social isolation, and this gave them the empowerment to do things for themselves.” **Barbara, manager**

The popularity of the sessions and the impact they have had on people's lives was also confirmed by Judith, another employee at Vision Support who conducts home visits and refers people to the Assistive Technology Group when applicable, and by

the attendees themselves, who recommended the classes to anyone they knew in a similar position.

People had access to information and support to improve their everyday life

The sessions broadened people's horizons about the support that is available to them. They introduced people to assistive technologies that they now use regularly, which has positively affected their lives. Project staff gave examples of people who are now able to enjoy their old hobbies again with the use of assistive technology which they have learned how to use in the sessions.

One such example was a person who had been crocheting for over 20 years, before becoming sight impaired, who got a glass that can magnify up to 20 times on the computer, which allowed them to continue crocheting. Another was a man who used to enjoy gardening. After a group demonstration for a handheld device which reads out the text to them, he decided to purchase one and now he can plant seeds in his garden and correctly identify what he is planting.

According to the beneficiaries interviewed, the sessions have given people the ability to do things that others may take for granted, such as keeping up to date with the news, reading books (by giving them access to audio books and podcasts), using Google, social media and sending text messages to keep in touch with friends, finding the nearest bus stop and bus routes to get to the desired destination etc.

"I can communicate with my friends, go on the computer to see if anyone sent me an email. It was very helpful during the pandemic to have a way of contacting people. I listen to radio programmes if I missed them live. It's quite useful." **Susan, beneficiary**

People's confidence, self-esteem and resilience was improved

Perhaps the biggest achievement of the sessions is that people have become more self-reliant. Giving them some independence to learn to do things for themselves led to a noticeable confidence boost in all users of the programme.

People also felt much more confident using the computer and going about their lives in general. Everyone interviewed mentioned that with the help of the sessions, they feel like they are a lot more

"I feel much more confident and independent and I can do more or less what everyone is doing." **Helen, beneficiary**

independent than they were before, and can do most things they need to do to be an active member of society and avoid becoming isolated.

“After my sudden vision loss, I was afraid I was going to become fully dependent on my wife. But with the help of the sessions, I’ve been able to go on being half independent. Without the help from the Assistive Technology group I would be relying on my wife for everything. I couldn’t go out on my own and I’m not sure I would be able to get places with taxis...” **Mark, beneficiary**

People were able to have more social contact and feel less lonely

Judith talked about an old lady who, after attending some sessions, was finally able to speak to her son in America as a result. Learning to use even the simplest of programmes such as the smartphone accessibility features made a great difference in her life. Thomas also mentioned a gentleman recently diagnosed with Macular Degeneration (a vision impairment resulting from deterioration of the central part of retina) who came in as part of the group sessions and got some software on the laptop to be able to read and dictate emails back to the family.

People’s mental health and wellbeing was better

Barbara spoke of a gentleman who wouldn’t come out of the house, but then his wife took him to the class and sat in with him. After a few weeks she could just drop him off, and a few weeks later, he came by a taxi, and later was able to sit for longer and have a coffee with other people at the centre.

“For some people it’s life changing. Being able to contact people confidently on their own now, being able to speak to their grandchildren from their own phone, being able to keep up to date with news and people especially in lockdown.” **Judith, employee**

Importantly, the classes revealed the need to keep up to date with assistive technology for visually impaired people, and how important it is to have sessions and group demonstrations with new technology. This led them to apply for a different fund which allowed for some assistive technology purchase. Being able to keep up to date with the technology available is essential in order to help their members find solutions that work for them and understand how to use them. However, they are only able to purchase one item of each new technology due to limited funds. Everyone involved with the charity mentioned they would like to be able to do more to support people get access to the technology they need, like establishing a loan system or being able to subsidise the price for people buying it.

Overall reflections

Everyone from Vision Support was glad to have received the initial grant, and reflected they would not have been able to start the programme without it.

One small challenge faced had to do with the limited availability for the sessions, which were only run one day a week. They solved this by offering shorter drop-in sessions during lunch and encouraging more people to join small group sessions.

Overall, they feel like they made a good impact through the grant they received from The National Lottery Community Fund, which they have subsequently built on through funding from additional sources. The initial grant gave them a good grounding, and underlined the importance of what they were doing, helping them to identify how their initial programme could be extended and improved.

“Actually it all went better than we imagined. It really did change people’s lives. For someone with no sight it’s amazing and very necessary. They would never believe they would be able to do simple things like emails.” **Judith, employee**

In the future they want to offer more smaller groups, and make sure they can continue to keep up to date with new technology. They would like to offer the service more often than one day a week to reach more people (they have 400 people on their contact list), but are limited by funding.

About the case study

As part of this case study, IFF Research spoke to Barbara, general manager at Vision Support (formerly called Hartlepool Blind Welfare Association), along with Thomas*, the IT expert delivering the classes, Judith an employee involved in home visits and referring people to the project, and 3 beneficiaries, Susan*, Helen* and Mark*.

**Names have been changed.*