



Social inclusion in the digital age

Housing advice for everyone project report

Shelter

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A copy of this report can be downloaded from the Shelter website at <http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/digital-inclusion>.

Foreword



After more than a decade of government agendas to modernise and deliver services online, along with initiatives to broaden internet access through training, access to broadband and providing equipment, we still find ourselves grappling with how to achieve real and sustainable equality of outcome for all. There are so many issues to address – literacy, accessibility and capability, to name a few.

Having poured substantial sums into all of those activities, the governments in Westminster and in Scotland are now turning their attention to the concept of Public Legal Education (PLE), which has been described as:

‘... a range of activities and initiatives that aim to improve people’s lives and empower communities... By building skills and confidence PLE can help people to access services, get better homes and jobs and believe in themselves and their future.’

www.plenet.org.uk/what-is-public-legal-education

PLE represents the more difficult aspect of digital inclusion. Similar to training, it is located at the interface between users and technology, but PLE needs to go much further than teaching a new set of skills. It is concerned with the successful handling of life issues – identifying a problem, knowing where to get help, and acting on information. Where those life issues impact on people’s housing (and most of them can) the stakes are extremely high.

After creating a website containing the knowledge and many of the tools to successfully negotiate the housing maze, we at Shelter Scotland wanted to explore how we could make sure everyone is able to benefit from that vast resource – hence this pilot project. With a small amount of money and a large degree of enthusiasm for the task, we were very fortunate to recruit a project manager with a huge array of skills and experience – strategic planning, community development, training, groupwork, filmmaking and sophisticated thinking around issues of equality and empowerment. The project was interesting, challenging, enlightening, full of surprises, and certainly never boring. I hope this report manages to give a flavour of what was achieved and is a motivator for the work that remains to be done.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Barb Kempnich". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Barb Kempnich
Web and Information Resources Manager

Acknowledgements



It's always exciting to have the chance to work on a new and stimulating project. Although the area of digital inclusion isn't new, using it within a housing advice context at a national level certainly is.

This publication has been written in a style that echoes our inclusion agenda – reaching out as a real person to other real people. To this end a narrative approach has been employed to take the reader on a journey. On that journey they are in possession not only of dry facts, but will hopefully be inspired by the process itself. They will get a flavour of the potent force that empowerment provides, and discover how answers and strategies developed collaboratively can release energy and creativity that is much greater than the initial investment.

It's been a privilege to work with the Web and Information Resources team at Shelter Scotland and undertake this groundbreaking work. The commitment of this dedicated, highly skilled and multi-talented group of people made it possible to achieve an enormous amount in a very short time. Having worked in health and education I'm used to working as part of a multidisciplinary team and it was with delight that I received generous support from every one of my colleagues at one time or another in helping to shape and form this project.

It can be hard to make the effort to participate in a research pilot. I am grateful to all our project partners and volunteers who took time from busy schedules to contribute to the development of this cutting-edge project. Shelter Scotland deserves credit for piloting such a new approach.

Many thanks to Elaine MacIntyre and Joyce Horsman who developed so many motivating 'real-life stories' and who made their subject matter come to life on training days, especially with such a wide diversity of participants. Thanks also to David Gibb and Ann Gilmour from the Shelter Edinburgh Advice Service for their invaluable input, and Sue Clowes from Shelter's Somerset and Dorset Advice Services who shared her passion for promoting self-help. Finally, thanks to the project reference group and in particular, Barb Kempnich who had the vision to identify the need for this work and the commitment to make it happen.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jen Clark". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Jen" and the last name "Clark" clearly distinguishable.

Jen Clark
Project Manager

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Executive summary

Housing advice for everyone – Shelter Scotland’s digital inclusion feasibility pilot – aimed to address social inclusion by making the most of the vast resources Shelter provides online. It did this by raising awareness, facilitating and encouraging self help and prevention, and improving the usability and accessibility of the advice section of the website.

This document outlines the activities and outcomes of a digital inclusion project conducted by Shelter Scotland from 2007 to 2009. It provides a context and rationale for this proactive strategy and outlines the main activities undertaken and their outcomes. It also aims to encourage the use of digital inclusion within a social empowerment context and to highlight its use as a tool for developing self-help and early intervention approaches to resolving life issues. The specific context is housing advice, but the issues are relevant to anyone interested in inclusion and community building in the digital age.

The original idea was to test an approach whereby volunteers would support people needing assistance with finding housing information online. However, it soon became clear that before that could happen, the right environment needed to be created. Among other things, this involved:

- developing positive, inclusive and empowering ways of describing and promoting Shelter’s web resources

- creating a doorway to the website that would encourage web novices and anyone who is easily overwhelmed by too much information

- finding a range of partners who were active in their communities and who could see that housing issues are central to the health and well-being of their interest group.

As well as describing the various resources developed, this report outlines the approach taken, the challenges faced, and the unexpected outcomes.

The most compelling findings of the project were:

- early intervention within a community setting has a profound effect on raising awareness and challenging the stigma that can exist around housing issues

- it is possible to successfully reach new audiences by bringing community development and web-based delivery of services together

- people are far more capable of interpreting complex information and taking action on their own or a friend’s behalf than we often give them credit for

- ‘web buddying’ provides a very popular and fulfilling volunteering opportunity

- as in other areas of community engagement, building genuine relationships is central.

It is hoped that this report can be used as both an encouragement and a resource for others who want to pursue their own digital inclusion agenda.

Why digital inclusion?

How would you feel if you didn't have basic computer skills? How much harder would it be to organise different aspects of your life if you didn't feel confident enough to search and find the right information or the best bargains on the web?

With new technology came new ways of living.

These days it is well recognised that services offered by organisations, whether they are businesses, charities or government agencies, need to be accessible by as many people as possible. Yet even legislation to ensure those with physical disabilities can access public buildings is only fairly recent in the UK.

It's interesting to notice how quickly a cultural shift can take place around what seems 'normal'. In my grandmother's day transportation was mostly by horse. In my young life fridges, phones and television were all types of new technology. And with new technology came new ways of living.

Our workplaces would seem truly strange if we were somehow taken back to the fairly recent time when our desks didn't have a computer on them. The thing about something becoming normal is it's easy to forget that for someone else 'normal' can be very different.

If I'm used to searching out information on websites, copying, pasting, using the buttons on a mouse, I may forget that there are loads of people who still think a mouse is something that lives under a fridge. There are many people who will happily use an automated teller machine (ATM), but have somehow missed out on developing, or becoming confident with, the skills needed to access and successfully use digital information.

As far back as 1986, before communication methods radically changed shape, the World Health Organisation recognised in its groundbreaking Ottawa Charter that in order for people to achieve well-being in its broadest sense, they need to be able to 'access information, life skills and opportunities for making healthy choices'.

Digital inclusion initiatives aim to reduce the new divide that is emerging as our ability to make life-affirming choices becomes more and more dependent on being able to make full use of the world wide web.

Cultural context

Proactive thinking can create new ways of doing things.

Think back for a moment to the 1960s civil rights movement in the USA when many African Americans weren't able to vote because they couldn't sign their name. This meant that a huge number of people were disenfranchised. To address this, grass roots literacy programs came into being. And from these networks, as initial reading and writing skills were achieved, new priorities developed around profiling concerns and providing peer support so that a plurality of voices could be heard. There were challenges and struggles in this process, but we now have the first black president of a world superpower. That's quite a leap in a few decades.

Just as our thinking changes dramatically as society shifts, proactive thinking can create new ways of doing things.

Do I want to drive?

Cars have been around for a long time now and it would be hard to find anyone who didn't have a good idea of what they do, or know that they require a driver to operate them. Yet not everyone learns to drive, or even wants to. Some people use their vehicle for local journeys and never consider going on a motorway, some are happy to travel anywhere in a car, and some can drive large passenger vehicles. Different levels of driving ability and different needs require different skills. This is supported by training, testing, licensing and registration.

People who don't drive, and many who do, choose to travel by public transport. As a passenger, all I need to know is where I am and where I need to get to. I can trust other people to sort out the bit in between. And I can trust that they will have been assessed as competent to do their job.

Information and services provided electronically can be excellent. This is still a developing area however, and standards vary enormously from site to site. Advice and information can be hard to access, confusingly named, out of date, missing, misleading, and at times even incorrect. In addition to that there will always be people who lack confidence to act on the information they do access, or need a hand to find out more.

**Different needs
require different
skills**

Information is 'out there'

Although the digital information age is still relatively new, major changes are taking place in how organisations offer services. Led by government moves to offer services online, many organisations are reducing front line staff and managing demand by directing people to a website. In many cases these sites contain a dazzling array of menus, sub-menus and other choices. How would you feel if you didn't have basic computer skills? How much harder would it be to sort out all sorts of things in life if you didn't feel confident to search and get the right information or the best bargains on the web?

Language and meaning

Websites are predominantly a written medium, although technological advancements mean that access to audio and video is becoming increasingly viable. Issues such as reaching out to various cultural groups through inclusive language, images and design are all crucial. So too is providing for those with limited skill or particular concerns such as dyslexia and poor literacy. This is why a feedback loop between site users and site creators is so important.

In western culture the written word has a level of influence not extended to oral delivery. Choosing one phrase over another can, and does, make an enormous difference to the meaning we create. This is an important consideration for the language-based medium of the web that is re-sculpting the world of advice and information systems. Shelter for example, works with issues that concern what many people term 'the homeless'. The words and frameworks we use to describe things have an enormous impact on the structures we develop and how we use them in society.

Definitions can pigeonhole people and inadvertently label them as 'other'. Consider how differently we might feel if instead of 'the homeless', a term like 'people who are experiencing concerns with their home' was used. By changing a few words we've moved away from a 'them and us' perception, thus leaving room for a person's situation to change. This produces a paradigm shift that allows us to open up our thinking and develop a model that includes everyone's needs – one where no one is left out.

**Working with digital
inclusion does
much more than
inspire us to develop
better websites.**

The challenge

So far digital inclusion initiatives in Scotland have tended to focus on providing internet access and equipment, and training people to use it. Less attention has been given to ensure that as websites develop and become central repositories of complex information and advice, we don't inadvertently leave people behind.

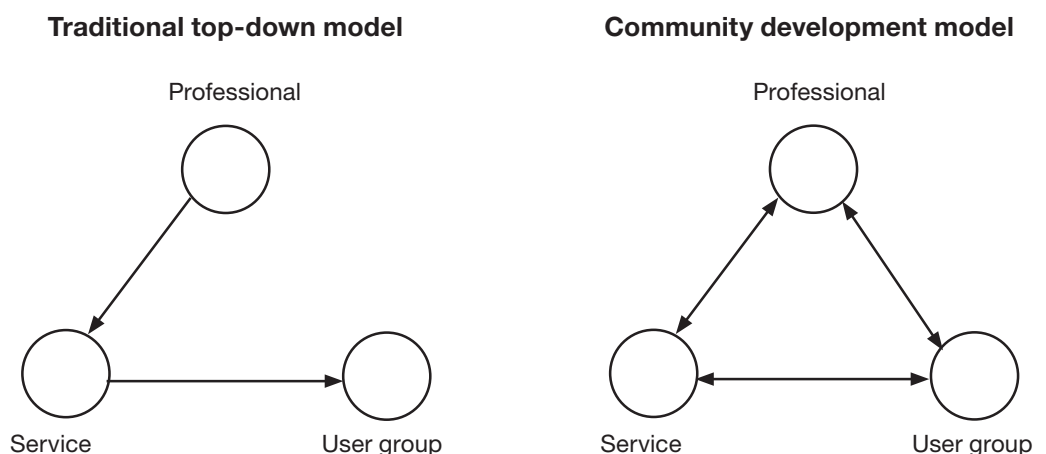
Working with the issues that digital inclusion engenders does much more than inspire us to develop better websites, it gives us an opportunity for fertile interaction with the fundamentals of how we do what we do, why we do what we do, and whether we can do it better.

Our approach

The Scottish Government defines digital inclusion as 'social inclusion in the knowledge and information society'. Having developed an excellent website, we at Shelter Scotland wanted to ensure it is used by as broad a range of people as possible – including hard to reach groups. We wanted to observe how people were using the site, and above all, find a way of providing help and support to those who need it, when they need it, and in places where they feel comfortable.

From the perspective of cultural analysis and inclusion, we turned to proven models in other fields such as user involvement in mental health, and community development and peer support in a range of other health settings.

Our digital inclusion project aimed to bring community engagement and empowerment to the delivery of web-based advice. This involved moving beyond a traditional top-down model where the service is devised by professionals and delivered to users in a one-way direction, and moving towards a genuine two-way system with a feedback loop that would enable continuous improvement – depicted in the diagram below. The values and principles underlying this methodology supported a consistent approach to the diverse range of activities undertaken as part of this project – from creating new web pages to training volunteers.



What we did

...we worked in partnership with a range of organisations. Each partner had access to its own target group and had a different reason for wanting to work with Shelter. We supported each partner to develop an approach to our digital inclusion agenda that also suited their own objectives and ways of working.

Our pilot explored ways of offering hands-on support to people who need it to access and interpret online information. This practical support was largely provided by volunteers whose role was to be an ally to advice seekers. 'Web buddies' were not housing advisers or computer experts, they were enablers, helping people to access and understand information appropriate to their needs and their situation.

Supporting people to help themselves and each other is a pioneering new area for housing advice. Most people are affected at some point in their life by an issue to do with where they live. However, there is a huge lack of awareness that help is available and that people don't need to be in crisis before they seek assistance.

Although people recognise Shelter by name, the organisation's work is not always well understood. The sorts of things that lead to concerns with housing are life issues. For instance, the single biggest contributor to someone losing their home is relationship breakdown, yet there is not currently a widespread level of networking between organisations that allows these sorts of social factors and housing problems to be properly connected.

The original idea had been that Shelter Scotland's advice centres would be the locus of activity. However, changes in how advice was being delivered meant that this was not going to be possible, and a different approach had to be devised. To achieve the aims of 'Housing advice for everyone', as the project came to be named, we worked in partnership with a range of organisations. Each partner had access to its own target group and had a different reason for wanting to work with Shelter. We supported each one to develop an approach to our digital inclusion agenda that also suited their own objectives and ways of working. As a result, a range of community engagement and user-involvement approaches was developed.

Partner agencies had many different core activities – a community cafe, a library, a computer skills training provider, resettlement support for people experiencing homelessness, community colleges, disability advice, and a multicultural festival, among others.

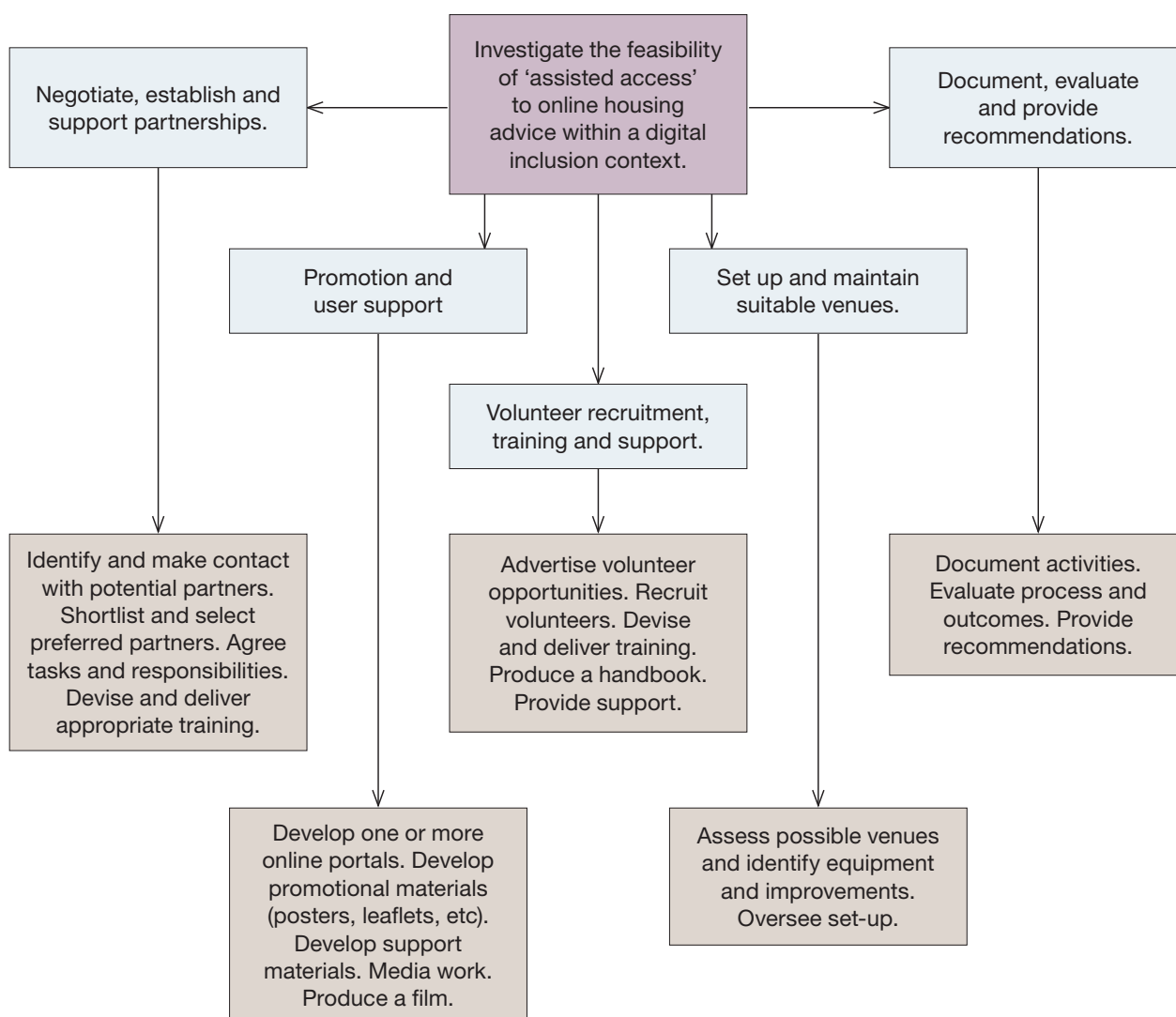
The project generated huge interest among a variety of groups and organisations. Although requiring much initial 'courting' of partners, requests to participate in the project exceeded our ability to support them. In fact, we were still getting expressions of interest after the pilot had finished.

The diagram (see next page) gives an overview of the activities undertaken throughout the life of the project. Detailed descriptions of these, and selected case studies, are contained in subsequent sections.

Most people are affected at some point in their life by an issue to do with where they live.

The single biggest contributor to someone losing their home is relationship breakdown.

Supporting people to help themselves and each other is a pioneering new area for housing advice.



Partnership development

Over 70 agencies and projects were approached about being involved in the project. These potential partners were identified and assessed according to the following criteria:

community of interest likely to experience disadvantage in relation to housing and/or access to technology (eg young people, newly arrived migrants, people experiencing relationship breakdown, older people, unemployed people, people with disabilities)

actively engaged with community of interest and committed to user-involvement

accessible, welcoming facilities

ability and willingness to be actively involved

range of organisation types and styles of delivery

geographic spread

ability to fit into pilot timeline.

Eleven organisations were involved in the pilot as primary partners, with many more being involved in other ways. For example a community regeneration partnership provided a means whereby several small agencies accessed web buddy training.

Each partner was encouraged to develop a way of providing 'assisted access' that was compatible with its normal way of working and that would bring benefits to, and achieve the specific objectives of, the organisation or service.

Partners were asked to complete a project pro forma outlining their proposed activities (see Appendix 1). They were encouraged not to feel limited by this outline but to use it as a starting place. The pro forma provided an added benefit of acting as a prompt so that important promotional activities were not forgotten. It also provided a benchmark against which actual work could be assessed at the end of the pilot.

Project identity

Creating a cohesive identity for the project involved ensuring that both the website and promotional materials conveyed a positive, empowering message and were suitable for the diverse target audiences of partner organisations. It was also important to have a consistency of both message and visual design between the website and print media.

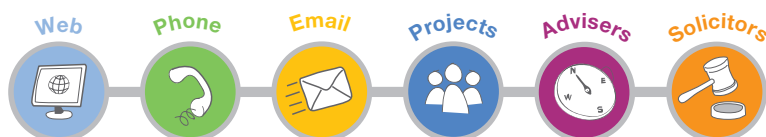
The project's focus on prevention, education, early intervention and self help needed a moderate but upbeat tone. A background paper titled 'Words, meaning and messages' helped initiate discussions and guide thinking around this, and ultimately led to the development of the project's strapline, 'Housing advice for everyone' and the accompanying graphic which depicted people from different backgrounds and age groups. Both of these elements were repeated on all promotional materials, and on the web pages developed as part of the project.

The focus on prevention, education, early intervention and self-help needed a moderate but upbeat tone.

Advice map graphic

The Chartered Institute of Housing's 2008 publication *Modernising Housing Advice* describes the efforts of various agencies to extend the range of services offered under the banner of housing advice, and to provide multiple access points to advice services. It concludes that 'creating an environment that encourages people to think about problems before they happen and to act on them before they "need" to will be a significant challenge for services'.

From a community development perspective it was clear that a graphic representation of the 'advice continuum' would be helpful. An 'advice map' (see below) was created to alert those seeking assistance that there are many types of advice on offer and that people can access services at different points and in different ways.



The advice map also helped users to make informed decisions about what sort of assistance they wanted in the first instance, and highlighted that it is possible to progress from one to another.

Promotional material

Throughout the course of the project, the following items were created and distributed:

- 500 multi-purpose posters
- 1,000 leaflets
- 1,000 business cards
- 2,000 pens
- 500 mouse mats
- a film of real-life stories.



Shelter Scotland – Easy access

http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/easyaccess/easy_access

Your location: [England](#) / [Scotland](#)

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Shelter Scotland • Easy access

Easy access

- Happy in your home?
- Ways to get advice
- Emergency help
- Real life issues
- Watch the real life stories film
- Web buddies
- Useful links

You are on the Shelter Scotland website. For Shelter England, [click here](#).

Housing advice for everyone

If you're not used to surfing the web, our easy access pages can help you find the information you need fast. So whether you have a pressing problem or simply want to find out more about a housing topic, you've come to the right place.

Real life stories film
Think housing issues don't affect you? Our film shows how a safe, happy home is central to a happy life. [See the film](#)

Happy in your home?
Whether you live in a cottage or a caravan, a house or a hostel, find out what you can do to make your housing situation better. [Read more](#)

Ways to get advice
Find advice that suits you - online, by phone, via email or in person. [More information](#)

Web buddies
As part of our digital inclusion work, web buddies supported others to find what they needed on this site. [Find out more](#)

Real life issues
How you can use this website to ease your housing worries? Read about real life dilemmas solved here. [Stories](#)

Emergency help
Got a scary letter? Can't pay the rent? Nowhere to stay? If you're in a mess, don't panic. [Get help](#)

Easy access web pages

Shelter's online advice is relatively text heavy, as housing issues can be very complex. In order for people to find the right practical information, they need to understand the background and context of their situation. For example, a tenant's rights are linked to the type of tenancy agreement they have, so it's important to know this when seeking assistance.

To simplify things for specific user groups, the website offers a number of alternative entry points (or portals). For example, there is a portal for young people and another for people with disabilities. These portals highlight the issues most likely to affect members of that group. Ultimately, they link through to the main part of the website that contains more detailed information.

To assist inexperienced web users, a new 'Easy access' portal was created. These pages were designed to encourage intuitive skills development and enable users to build confidence in navigating web pages and using a mouse. They also highlighted some of the issues covered on the site as a way of encouraging further exploration.

The Easy access pages also help people find relevant information without getting overwhelmed by too much detail. They offer:

- a general orientation to the website and what it offers through real-life stories and tasters about the sorts of information available in both audio visual and text formats

- information about what to do in emergency situations

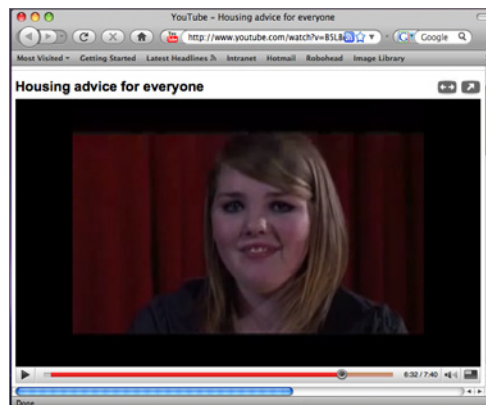
- guidance about the advice-seeking process – how to access advice, how to prepare, what to expect

- an introduction to the idea of web buddying and where to find a web buddy.

Film

Included in the Easy access pages is a short film produced in collaboration with one of the project partners, the Gorgie-Dalry project, run by EverybodyOnline in Edinburgh. The film highlights how housing issues can, and do, affect everyone at some time in their lives, thus directly addressing the stigma that can be associated with housing problems. The film encourages people to use Shelter's website to help themselves.

The film was produced on a very low budget using non-professional actors who volunteered their time. Although only intended to be used as a training aid, it has averaged over 220 views every month since being posted on YouTube.



'The film was particularly useful in pointing out the variety of problems people may be going through that can impact on their housing situation, and the additional stress it can add.'

Trainee web buddy

User input

One of the outcomes of the project was the amount of invaluable feedback received about the website and how people use it. On some occasions we were pleasantly surprised by people's ability to engage with the content in often very sophisticated ways. We also received many practical suggestions about how to make things clearer or easier. These suggestions came from both web buddy training days and from support sessions with members of the public. The value of this feedback loop cannot be understated as it provided a breadth and richness of detail that formal usability testing can never achieve, and it had a lasting impact on the staff who attended and led various sessions.

This feedback loop provided a breadth and richness of detail that formal usability testing can never achieve.

Training



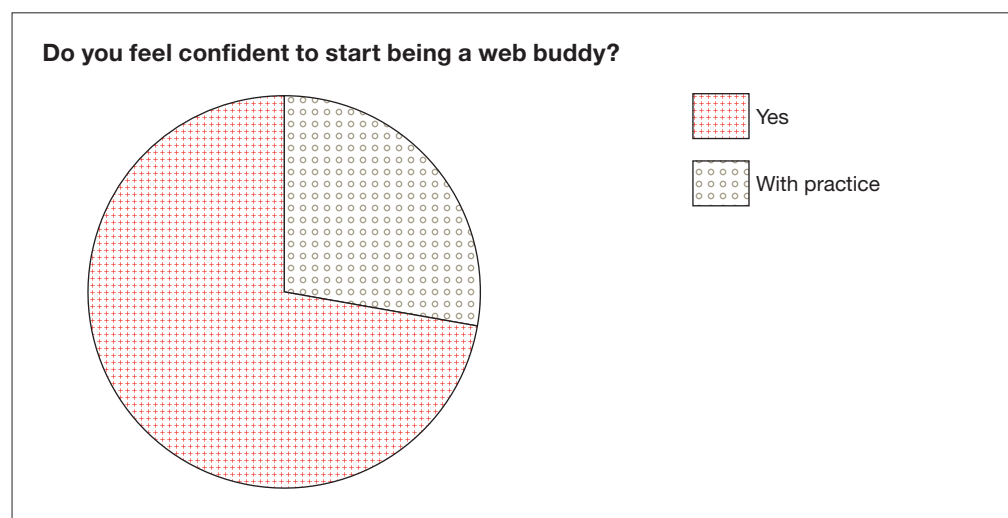
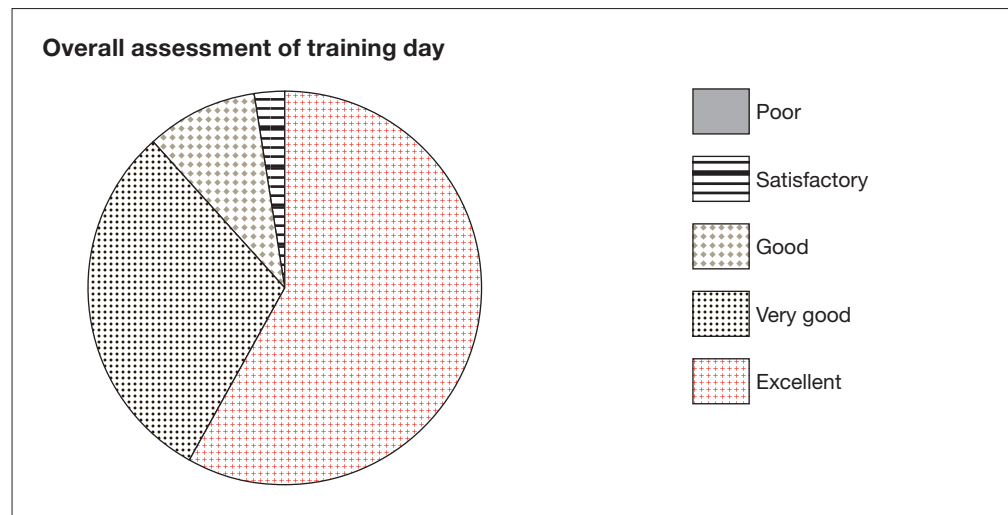
'[the] session left me enthusiastic and feeling prepared to start working with people as a web buddy.'

Trainee web buddy

Fifty-five people attended one of the seven training days held in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Fraserburgh and Dumfries. Trainees included both volunteers and staff from the organisations taking part in the pilot.

Training days were conducted by the project manager with support and expertise provided by other Web and Information Resources team members. In addition to receiving the user feedback already mentioned, this brought staff who write the website content into the 'real world' and enabled them to interact directly with people using the site.

Trainees completed an evaluation form and gave very positive feedback about their experience, as the charts on the next page indicate.



Protocols

Both online and offline protocols were developed to support and guide web buddy sessions and provide a means of standardised data collection. These can be found in the appendices.

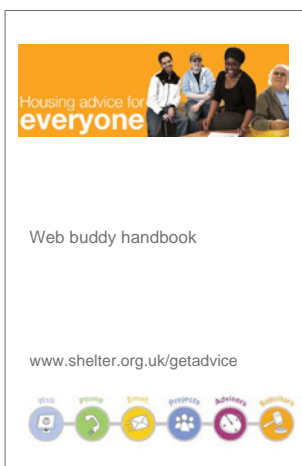
Web buddy handbook

As Shelter's online advice is vast, containing over 900 pages of information and self-help tools, a handbook was designed to be a support for web buddies. It contains information and step-by-step guidance about the web buddy role. The following excerpt provides a flavour.

'As a housing advice for everyone web buddy you are doing much more than supplying someone with information. You are enabling people to learn the skills to take action on their own behalf, know what sorts of help and support exist if they need it, be more proactive in seeking assistance, and take power in challenging life situations.'

Web buddy sessions

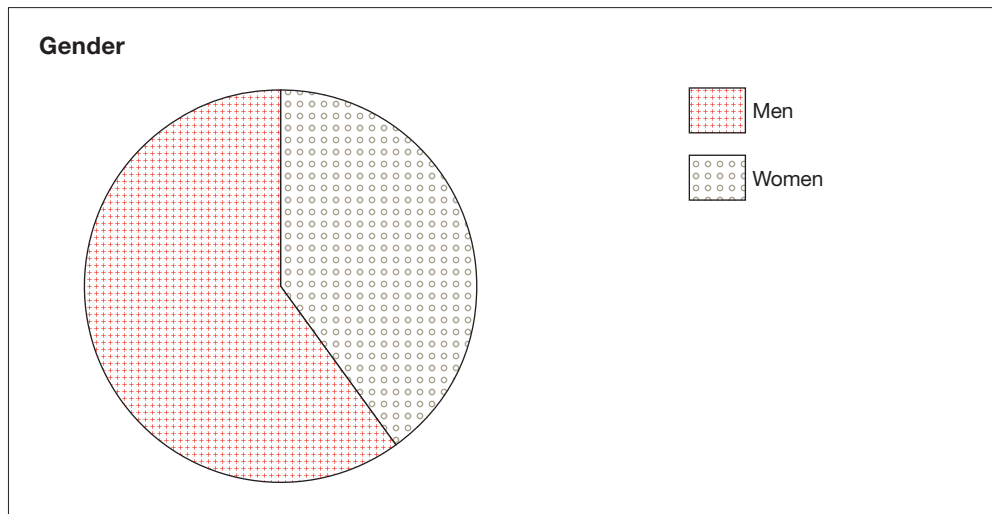
Venues were generally well equipped for offering web buddy support. Although Shelter had set aside a number of decommissioned PCs to install in venues, none of these were needed.



Most web buddy sessions lasted around an hour and a half, and 41 individual sessions were recorded using an online form. In addition, there have been a large number of informal, unrecorded support activities conducted by partners in various other locations including Edinburgh's Telford College and at the Hot Spot café in Peterhead and the Link Up community centre in Fraserburgh.

The following charts (see below) show who received formal help from web buddies and how they found the experience. This data was collected using an online form that had the dual purpose of providing a structure for web buddy sessions, and collecting both demographic and user satisfaction data (see Appendix 2). This information is contrasted with similar data gathered from people filling in a user feedback survey on the website. It shows that through this digital inclusion initiative, we reached a whole new group of users who don't normally access Shelter's online advice.

Gender



'I'm very surprised about all the information that's available. Thanks for the help.'

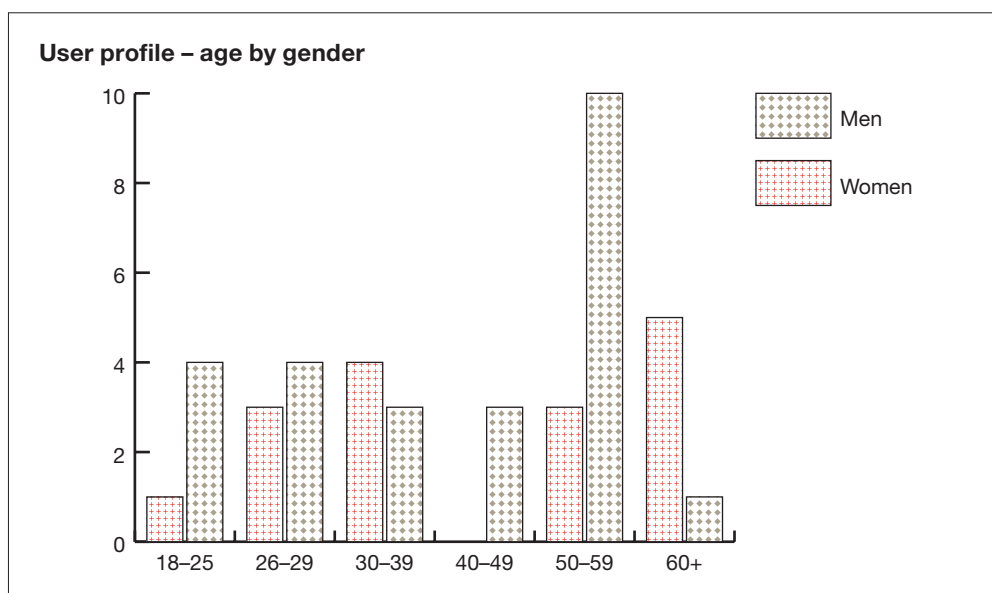
Service user

'What a great learning experience!!'

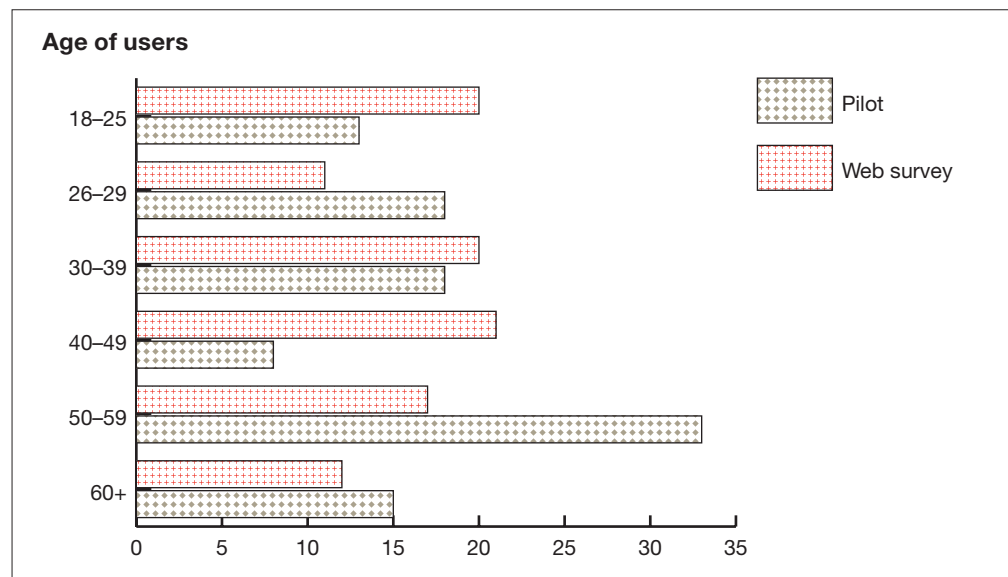
Service user

Those receiving help from web buddies were predominantly men (60 per cent, compared with 40 per cent of women). This is in marked contrast to Shelter's online survey where only 25 per cent of respondents are men and 75 per cent women.

Age

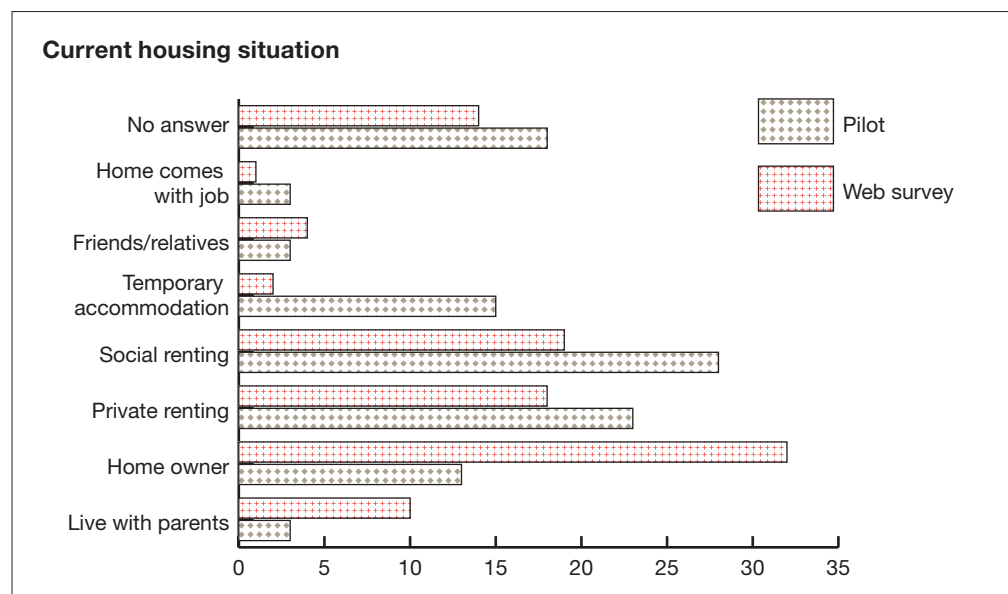


This chart shows a breakdown of age by gender for people receiving assistance from web buddies. It is interesting to note that men dominate in the 18-25, 40-49, and 50-59 age groups, whereas women stand out in the 60 and over group. These differences may simply be the result of a small sample size, but are worth considering.



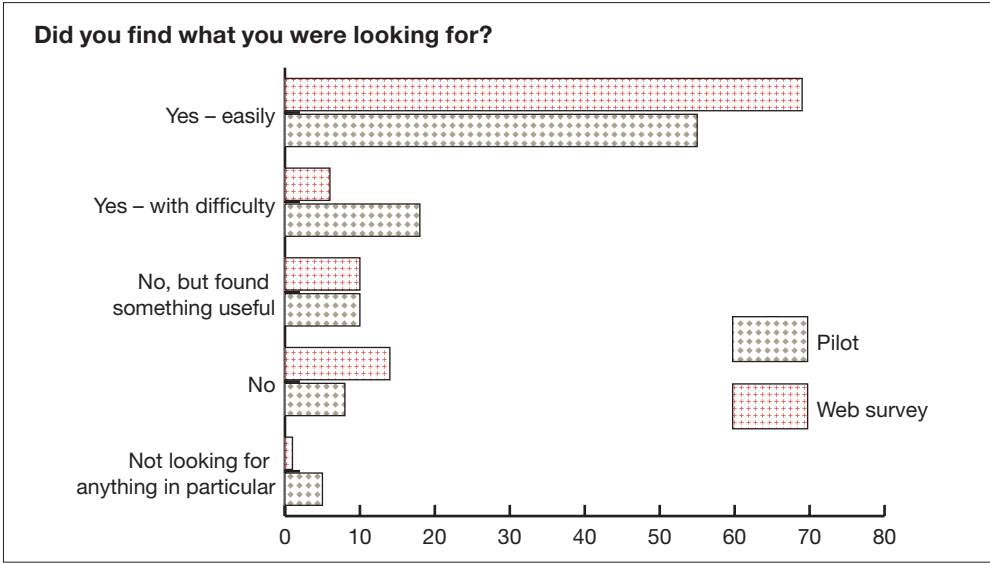
This chart compares people using web buddies with those using the site on their own. Of particular interest is the larger proportion of web buddy users aged 50 and over compared with other web users. A similar pattern occurs in the 26–29 group, while those aged 40–49 are more prominent as independent web users.

Current housing situation

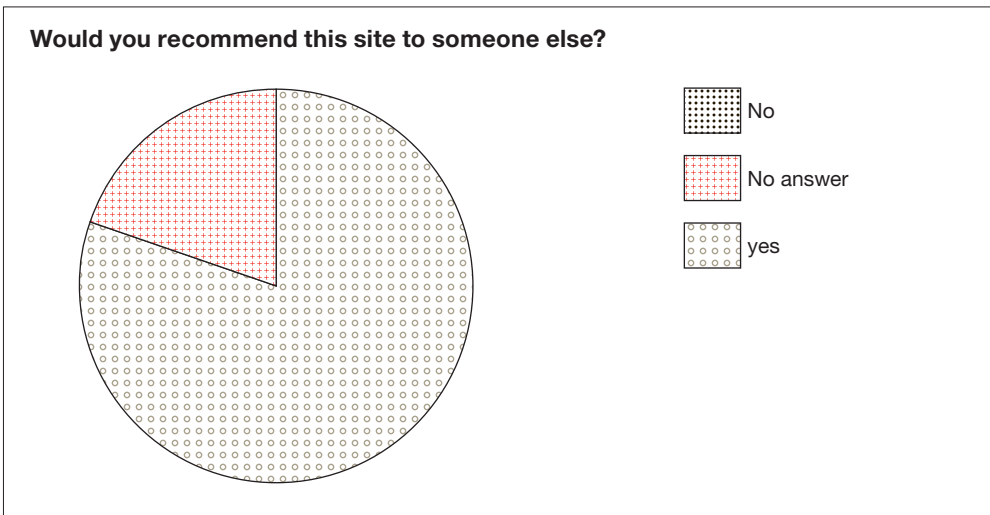


This chart provides one of the most compelling comparisons between web buddy users and independent web users. Note the contrast in the categories of 'homeowner', 'temporary accommodation' and both social and private renting.

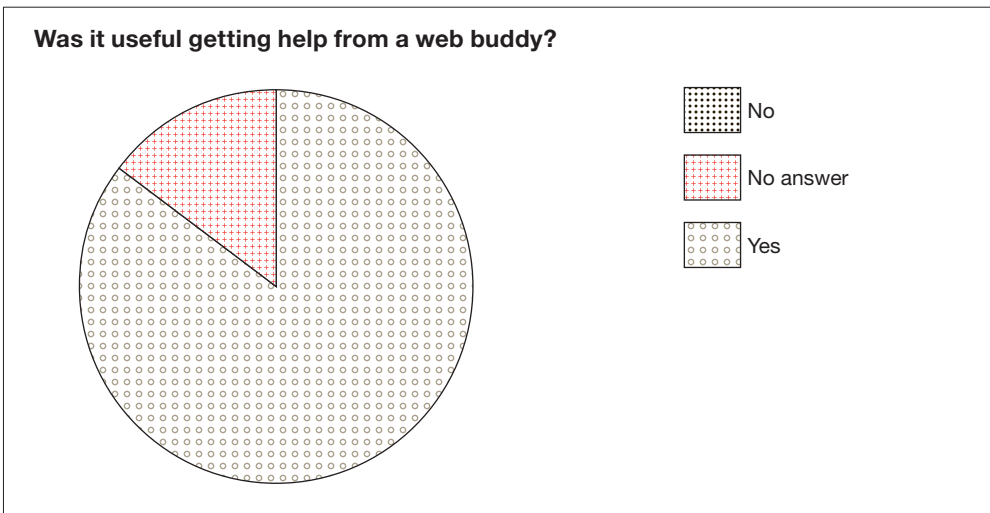
About the experience



A surprisingly high proportion of those working with a web buddy said they easily found the information they needed. In addition, these people were less likely than other web users to say they didn't find what they were looking for.



Everyone who answered this question said they would recommend the website to someone else. In the web survey, 94% say they would recommend it.



'The help provided has been tremendous.'
Service user

Again, everyone who answered this question said they found getting assistance from a web buddy useful.