

Pass IT On – achievements during the Coronavirus pandemic and beyond

Aim of the project

Pass IT On is a small, innovative charity which collects donated computer equipment gifted by companies, educational establishments and individuals, adapts it to each client's specific needs, then gives it free of charge to disabled people living in the EH postcode (Edinburgh and Lothians) area. We also offer volunteering opportunities for people with extra support needs.

Pass IT On has been in operation for twenty years, addressing isolation, disadvantage and the digital divide for disabled people in Edinburgh/Lothians through provision of individually adapted refurbished computers donated from within our community. Our volunteering programme provides learning and skills development opportunities for people with additional support needs.

Typically, each year we:

- keep around 7 tonnes of donated equipment in reuse and out of landfill
- refurbish, test and adapt over 250 systems for our clients and for loan or for sale (to raise funds)
- set up 80 adapted computers in clients' homes
- provide over 550 instances of follow up IT support and signposting to appropriate other support
- support 34 volunteers (over half with extra support needs) through their volunteering and our learning and development programme

We ask every client we work with whether our service improved their quality of life, helped them achieve greater equality, increased their independence, provided opportunities to get to know others and make new friends. This demonstrates key practical differences our service makes to the lives of our disabled clients. We believe technology offers real opportunities for equality – which matches what our clients continue to tell us. In practice, using their computers, our clients have written books, produced music for film soundtracks, undertaken collaborative scientific research, made new friends, reconnected with family abroad, learned new skills or exhibited their art to a global audience. On a daily level, many have found independence through being able to shop, bank, seek advice and support and pursue leisure interests which they could not do without adapted IT equipment. People have been equipped and empowered, becoming more equal with those not facing the barriers of ill health or disability.

With our popular and effective volunteer training programme, volunteers acquire practical technical skills in building, repairing and adapting IT equipment while learning workplace skills in a caring and supportive environment. We want to make a difference to volunteers at every skill level, ensuring that complete beginners and more experienced volunteers are challenged and learn transferable, marketable skills.

Our main goal for 2020-21 was to increase the number of refurbished, individually adapted computers delivered to disabled people and those with long-term health conditions in Edinburgh and the Lothians.

However, early 2020 saw the spread of an unprecedented global pandemic which had the potential to significantly disrupt every aspect of Pass IT On's work, at a time when access to online support and information became even more vital to our vulnerable client group. Delivery of our services was fundamentally affected by the pandemic. Our normal practice is to deliver and set up equipment in clients' homes, spending time providing basic introductory tuition and guidance in using the computer. It became clear to us in early March 2020 that this was going to be challenging, not least because the vast majority of Pass IT On's clients are already medically very vulnerable.

We quickly saw that it was essential for us to establish a method of working that ensured our vulnerable clients would not be even more excluded at this critical time. Equally, the impact of the pandemic provided a stark demonstration to government and wider society of the core issue Pass IT On has been working to address for the past twenty years – that digital inclusion can offer an essential lifeline for those who are housebound through illness or disability.

After careful consideration, we felt that our service had a crucial role to play in the response to the pandemic – our clients were already extremely isolated before this happened – and we were determined to continue providing our service to any extent that we could. After consulting with clients, carers, volunteers and staff, we set out a way of working where we could safely deliver sanitised computer systems to a client's door, with friends/family/carers carrying out the straightforward setup of the computer. To help those clients new to computers get started easily, we created a new interactive client desktop, with links to reputable sources of health advice and information, such as NHS Inform, with custom links to each client's own GP practice online. The desktop also has training and tutorials, with an option for clients to get online remote support from Pass IT On staff and trained volunteers. Using screen-sharing software, we were then able to run follow-up remote desktop sessions to address any issues.



Activities

Computer re-use and Service Delivery

The pandemic did impact severely on our ability to secure our usual levels of equipment donations, reducing levels of expected donations by around 80%. Fortunately, we had received large numbers of good quality equipment donations during 2019 and the beginning of 2020. This meant that we were able to supply 193 computer systems during 2020-21, 98 to clients, 95 as loan systems to people in need of a computer to work or study from home. Maintenance of social distancing protocols replaced our usual procedure of personally installing computers in our clients'

homes, and we worked with carers/family members to install the machines, following a simple pictorial guide. Equipment donations picked up again towards the end of the year and into 2021.

As well as delivering individually adapted computer systems to clients and budget systems on loan, we met 531 requests for follow-up technical support, ensuring that clients new to technology were able to make the most of their computer and to address any problems.

A notable number of our new clients did not have broadband internet access at home. This is a particular issue for individuals with mental ill-health and individuals and families living in poverty. Funding received from the Scottish Government Wellbeing Fund enabled us to purchase pay-as-you-go mobile internet devices, preloaded with 24Gb of data. This enabled us to provide internet access along with the computer for those clients unable to access fixed broadband contracts, either through chaotic living circumstances or financial constraints. We supplied 22 mobile internet devices as part of client computer systems, with a further 15 awaiting convenient dates for delivery to clients.

We worked with Edinburgh's Multicultural Family Base to deliver computers to 20 disabled Syrian refugees living in Edinburgh and the Lothians, enabling them to participate in digital skills training in Arabic using Zoom videoconferencing and to keep in touch with friends and family across the world. Four of these clients were using their computers to study the Driving Theory test, which must be taken in English.

We worked closely with medical professionals in specialist occupational therapy, community mental health services and general practice to deliver computers and internet access to vulnerable patients identified as urgently requiring computer equipment to meet their specific support needs.

Volunteering

The first quarter of 2020 was excellent in terms of volunteer engagement – we had 34 regular volunteers who gave 526 hours of their time. Even before formal covid restrictions were in place, we made the difficult decision to suspend in-person volunteering – our client group is particularly medically vulnerable, and it would have been irresponsible of us to continue to carry out any activities that might potentially increase their risk. Pass IT On Manager, Sandy Kerr, carried out all of the refurbishing, testing and adaptations required by himself.

We used videoconferencing to keep in contact with our regular volunteers every week to reduce isolation. Many of our volunteers have additional support needs, and their regular volunteering provides social opportunities, friendship and contact with peers. Our volunteers assisted us in finding resources and activities online that would help our clients and created tutorials. Through specific crisis funding for the pandemic from the Scottish Government's Wellbeing Fund, we were able to re-employ our former Volunteer Co-ordinator for five hours each week, to continue his programme of volunteer learning and development through remote videoconferencing, using



Zoom. A key aim of this work was to offer training in delivery of technical support to interested volunteers, increasing employability and adding demonstrable skills to their CVs.

We were also unable to place new volunteers because of the pandemic. However, one of Pass IT On's former clients felt empowered by their experience as a client to move forward into volunteering with us. This led to them building their own replacement client computer,

helping them to develop new technical skills, increase their confidence and in turn give back to the organisation. This experience motivated them to go on to volunteer with another disability charity – running small IT advice drop-in sessions for elderly people in sheltered housing. During lockdown, this volunteer offered their assistance to provide remote support for new clients, using resources like TeamViewer screen sharing software to help clients learning how to use Skype to keep in touch with family members abroad.

Another of our volunteers told us:

"When I first started volunteering for Pass It On, I had been working as a healthcare assistant in care homes. I was finding my feet in Edinburgh and the opportunity to volunteer helped me a lot with bonding to the locality. As of now, I have been an active volunteer for nearly 3 years and during this period I managed to get two promotions and ultimately land a job in IT. Pass IT On gave me exposure and experience which directly leveraged each of my job applications. I gained a lot of confidence and my skill-set improved significantly. Volunteering in Pass IT On encouraged me to explore further opportunities in the tech community. I couldn't put a value on this experience, and I can only hope that Pass IT On will be able to carry on for a long, long time so that plenty more people can use the volunteering opportunity as a means of improving their own life whilst helping others."

Staff and Service Delivery

Our administrator moved to working from home in March 2020 because of a long-term medical vulnerability, and continues to fulfill this role remotely, supplied with equipment to use at home by Pass IT On. Our IT Technician and Volunteer Co-ordinator, head-hunted for a new post at the beginning of 2020 returned as a volunteer before being re-employed to co-ordinate remote volunteering activities for five hours each week.

Our service delivery was fundamentally affected by the fast evolving restrictions in place because of the pandemic. To address initial challenges, we adapted our usual eligibility process to allow new clients to access our service much more rapidly – often within several days rather than up to six weeks. This enabled more clients to receive their computer as quickly as was possible.

We realised early on that circumstances might mean that our sales of surplus computers would decline owing to the pandemic and subsequent restrictions. At the same time, we identified a possible need for equipment from people having to work and study at home at short notice.

As a service to our community, we decided to offer computers for loan to anyone who needed one, secured through payment of a refundable deposit. This resulted in us providing emergency loan computers for a broader range of people needing computer access to work/study/shop/keep

in contact with friends and family during the pandemic. These included children in gypsy traveller families in Falkirk – enabling them to keep up with school work, elderly and very medically vulnerable people self-isolating at home and foreign students unexpectedly stranded in Edinburgh. Edinburgh College asked for our help to support over 50 of their students without IT equipment at home with loan computers to allow them to continue with their studies. The Department for Work and Pensions provided deposits for people made redundant during the pandemic to access our loan scheme.

We were able to donate 74 computer base units to local charity People Know How to refurbish as part of their digital inclusion project, and supplied 6 full computer systems to a foodbank in Midlothian setting up a job club and digital skills project. We also provided computers and support to a domestic violence support service, offender rehabilitation services and local housing associations.

Outcomes – the difference we made



The people we provided computers to became digitally included – rather than being isolated at home with little or no external contact, they were able to receive an individually adapted computer with support and guidance to ensure they were able to use it to shop, bank, find health information and keep in touch with friends and family via videoconferencing. Older people with long-term conditions or going through life transitions (such as bereavement or the onset of illness

or impairment) were enabled to use technology to take part in hobbies and activities online, find sources of support and advice and keep in touch with family and friends. One client was supplied with a tablet to allow her to take part in a video consultation with a specialist doctor to demonstrate the impact of her neurological condition on swallowing. Gypsy traveller families were able to use the computers provided for children to do schoolwork. A single parent living with a brain tumour was able to find advice and support. Students were able to finish their studies and submit coursework online. A client with dementia was provided with a simple computer that they could use unaided to write letters, scan photographs and read news online. Other clients were able to access online wellbeing material and build up support networks that assisted them in managing mental ill health. We were able to support several small charities whose staff are working remotely by supplying suitable computers to help meet their technology needs.

“My children are able to do online school work - that was very difficult on a mobile phone with a small screen.”

“My family and I are able to stay in touch with other members of our family who are scattered all over the world because of the war in Syria.”

Our service had a profound impact on disabled people affected by isolation and loneliness. When registering for our service, one very socially isolated client living with a cognitive disability and bipolar disorder told us *“I get a bit lonely at nights, the silence hurts me”*. We provided a laptop along with advice and support around accessing online tv and internet radio. This is what the client said

after getting his laptop. "Thank you, thank you thank you, from my heart, I got the laptop today thank you I'm so exited, I'm really happy that you helped me it's humbling."

Future challenges and opportunities

Pass IT On faces some fresh challenges coming out of the pandemic. Since the organisation was founded in 2002, we were incredibly fortunate to operate from gifted premises in Edinburgh. Sadly, with the death last year of our landlady and subsequent sale of the property, we now find ourselves in the position of obtaining and funding suitable accommodation for the first time in our history. However, we see this as also offering an opportunity to expand and enhance our work with volunteers, building on the significant volunteer training development work carried out by former Volunteer Co-ordinator, Damian. Suitable premises would mean we could accommodate more volunteers than before – pre-pandemic, we had to operate a rota and restrict the amount of time each volunteer attended because of the space limitations of our workshop. We have always been in the very fortunate position of having more volunteers than available placements, having to operate a waiting list for the vast majority of the time. A move to a larger space would provide scope for us to be able to offer more volunteer placements, which in turn has the potential for us both to increase our sales income and provide significantly more opportunities for training and skills development.

More space also offers scope for more formal apprenticeships/work placement opportunities with young people with additional support needs – something that we've regularly been asked to offer, and which we were beginning to work with the City of Edinburgh Council on just before the pandemic struck. This also has potential to provide essential income for Pass IT On through funding and grants available for apprenticeship provision.

In addition to applying to trusts and funders for ongoing funding to retain our staff, we also plan to seek new funding for accommodation with a workshop space where our volunteers can gain training and workplace skills development, while assisting in the preparation of computers for our disabled clients and for sale/loan. We also need secure storage for one of the foundations of our service – the donated computers that are so generously donated by businesses, schools and individuals.

Staff

Sandy Kerr – Manager
Helen Russell – Administrator plus
Damian Czop – IT Technician/Volunteer Co-ordinator (*to August 2021*)

Trustees

Lydia Morrow – Chair
Simon MacLaren – Treasurer
Kirstin Corrie
Ian Currie

Pass IT On

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