



How to Start a Computer Club

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January 2019



The Digital Access Project, to employ staff to provide training in digital access to address poverty and increase wellbeing, was funded in part with a grant from the Scottish Government and the European Community Tyne Esk LEADER 2014-2020 Programme.

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Who is this document for?

A volunteer or an organisation who wants to set up a computer club

What does this document cover?

How to get technology, venues, members, lesson ideas and ongoing support for a computer club

What is the hoped for impact of this document?

Prospective club leaders know what they need to know to set up and run a club

What will I need to get started?

You don't need a lot of things to start a computer club! Having some of the following will make the process a lot easier though:

- Computers
- An internet connection
- A place to meet
- Club members!
- Club tutors
- Learning resources (e.g. lesson plans or guides)

In the rest of this guide we'll walk you through getting each of these things set up and later we'll offer some helpful hints and tips that we've learned from observing other local computer clubs.

Where can I get computers?

If you're lucky you may not have to pay for these. Have a think about asking local council, businesses or colleges if they would be willing to donate old machines. If you've no luck getting donations but still want to keep costs down, there are many places that sell refurbished machines at a fraction of the cost of a new computer and you will find these machines are absolutely fine. Everyday computing tasks don't require particularly fast or powerful computers. The batteries on refurbished machines will not last as long as those on new machines but this shouldn't cause you any real problems.

If you register with the Online Centres Network <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/online-centres-network>, you can be eligible for cheap refurbished computers from Computer Aid as well as a host of other benefits <https://www.onlinecentresnetwork.org/resource/affordable-devices-computer-aid>

How do I know what computer to buy and what will it cost?

The three important bits of a computer (known as the "specifications" or specs) to pay attention to are the processor, the "RAM" (also referred to as just "memory") and the type of physical "Drive".

Processor: Most processors are made by either Intel or (less commonly) AMD. If the processor in question is made by Intel, then anything with "i3" in the name will be fast enough. Processors with "i5" or "i7" are even faster with "i7" being the fastest. If the processor is made by AMD or another company, then ask the salesperson if it is equivalent to an "i3". Chromebooks and tablets are the exception to this rule as they will run well on less powerful processors.

RAM or Memory: At the time of writing you'll want machines with at the very least 4GB and ideally 8GB RAM.

Drive Type: Computers have either "Hard Drives HDD", "Solid State Drives SSD" or eMMC drives. SSDs are by far the fastest and most expensive of the three, followed by eMMC drives and then HDDs which are the slowest. HDDs are, however, perfectly adequate for everyday computing tasks. The drive on any computer you buy will either have ample storage or (in the case of Chromebooks) online storage will be provided.

Prices will vary with time but, at the time of writing, laptops with these or better specifications could be purchased for around £400 new or £150 used. Chromebooks and tablets are often much cheaper with tablets from £50 new and Chromebooks from about £150 new.

Should I buy laptops, desktops or tablets? Anything else?

We'd recommend you get laptops instead of desktops (the big box shaped towers with a separate screen). Desktops are a lot cheaper than laptops of equivalent speed but their size makes them a lot harder to securely store and makes it impossible for club members to pick something up, walk across the room and show it to someone else.

Chromebooks are an excellent inexpensive laptop option that runs using Google's Chrome Operating System. These are cheap and lightweight. Since the operating system runs online, don't get Chromebooks if you will need to work offline or if you have an unreliable internet connection.

Tablets are replacing laptops for many people so, while they aren't essential, it would be great if you had some tablets. This is partly so that club members can try these out and decide if they would benefit from buying something similar. Tablets are also much more user friendly when it comes to beginners and can be more easily adapted for those with disabilities.

For members with disabilities, you should consider contacting Ability Net for free, expert advice on accessible, disability friendly software or hardware <https://www.abilitynet.org.uk>. This can make computing tasks much easier for disabled members

There are four main types of tablets: Android tablets, Amazon tablets (Fire tablets) and Apple tablets (iPads). Android and iPads are the most common types. While iPads are a lot more expensive, ideally you would have one Android tablet and one iPad so that members can try them out.

Ideally the club would also have a printer and these are inexpensive. Buy a laser printer if you plan on printing mostly text or an ink printer if you plan on printing a lot of images.

Many members will obviously come with their own devices but you'll want machines of your own to accommodate the many beginners who have no device.

What sort of internet connection do I need and what will it cost?

The cheaper internet deals will serve you well. Internet speeds are measured in Megabits a second (Mbps) and ideally you'll have 25Mbps¹ though you can definitely run a computer club with less if 25 is not currently available in your area.

You'll also want a WiFi router installed so that club members can connect to the internet without plugging in cables. Don't worry, though, the internet service provider will set up this and everything else for you as part of your contract with them!

At the time of writing, an internet connection like this costs around £20 a month but prices may change in the future. Bear in mind that there's a good chance the venue you use will come with complementary internet.

¹ Assuming club members are just browsing the internet they each only need about 2.5Mbps. Since your internet bandwidth (the speed) is shared, ten people each needing 2.5Mbps adds up to 25Mbps. The upload speeds offered by broadband companies are often a fraction of the download speeds but since members will upload a small fraction of what they download, this is absolutely fine.

Ofcom's free checker will let you check the availability of different speeds in your area as well as test the strength of an existing broadband connection.

The checker can be run from either the app or direct from the browser
Here's the app which is available on both Apple and Android phones
<https://www.ofcom.org.uk/phones-telecoms-and-internet/advice-for-consumers/advice/ofcom-checker>

Here's where to run the checker in the browser <https://checker.ofcom.org.uk>

What is superfast broadband and do I need "fibre"?

The only difference between Superfast Broadband and regular Broadband is the speed. Exactly what speed should count as Superfast is a matter of dispute with the government defining superfast as 24Mbps and Ofcom calling anything over 30Mbps superfast. You don't need to have fibre.

My area doesn't have good broadband. What are my options?

If conventional superfast broadband is not available in your area, MiFi is a good alternative to WiFi even though it's less reliable when it comes to supporting a signal for multiple devices. The main difference with MiFi is that you'll receive your broadband from the mobile phone company who will send it wirelessly to a small box that you can then connect to from your devices. For this reason, you'll need a good phone signal. MiFi is extremely easy to set up and there are no wires involved!

What software will I need?

Most machines that you buy will come with an option to have software already installed on them so you can just take this option. The only thing that you'll need to explicitly specify is that they include Microsoft Office or a similar office productivity suite. If you're looking to save money, Google Drive is free to use and includes a word processor (Google Docs), a spreadsheet application (Google Sheets) and more. Bear in mind, though, that much of Google Docs requires you to be online so only use this option with a reliable internet connection. To set up a Google Drive account go here <https://drive.google.com/drive>. If you can afford it, we'd recommend Microsoft Office because this is what club members are most likely to see in an office situation outside of the club. If Microsoft Office doesn't come already installed on your computer, you can buy and download it here

<https://products.office.com/en-gb/buy/office>. If your computer club is a registered charity, then you can get MS Office and other software at large discounts from The Technology Trust <http://tech-trust.org/>. If you would like to become a registered charity, details on how to register as one can be found at <https://scvo.org.uk/setting-up-a-charity>.

Where should the computer club meet?

If you already have access to a venue that can be rented inexpensively that's great. You can also consider asking your local library or community centre if they have a room you can use for free.

Most of the checklist for things to look for in a venue are pretty common sense but we'd recommend you take a moment to go through the following line by line. That way you'll avoid any annoyance down the line.

- Tea making facilities are highly advisable as are biscuits! We like hobnobs but your members may have their own tastes.
- Make sure premises are secure and have a lockable storage space for your hardware and any other club materials.
- Computers generate a lot of heat so ideally you'll have decent ventilation.
- Your venue must be on ground level or have access to a lift. Remember many members may have limited mobility.
- Your venue must be close to both parking and public transport.
- Your venue must have toilet access including disabled toilets.
- Do you have enough chairs? Ideally these would be ergonomic having padding, being height adjustable and having lower back support. Consider how any wheels will work with your floor.
- Do you have enough power sockets? Bear in mind that you can expand these and their reach using power boards with surge protection.
- Is there central heating? If not, some sort of heater for cold weather and a fan for hot weather could be very useful. A fan heater will do both jobs and so save on space.

How will I pay for all of this?

A large number of people in the UK lack basic digital skills and this results in their "digital exclusion" where they often find it harder to access services, pay more for things and experience more social isolation amongst other problems. Because this

is such a big problem, there's an increasing amount of funding available for things like computer clubs that help people get online. If you can secure the funds you need for your club this way, then it means you can keep the service free from the point of view of members and so open it up to people from all walks of life and economic backgrounds. In Scotland, SCVO has an extensive guide to available funding and also some advice on how to write the grant applications <https://scvo.org.uk/funding>.

If you are in a different country there should be a similar body that represents charitable organisations and has similar guides. You do not have to be a charity to apply for much of this funding but if you do want to register your computer club as a charity then SCVO or your local body can also advise you on this. Here's the relevant SCVO link on that <https://scvo.org.uk/setting-up-a-charity>. If funding is limited and if you are confident that members can afford it then you can charge club members a small fee. Many successful computer clubs do this and it helps them keep on top of various expenses.

While your computer club doesn't have to have a bank account you should keep good and clear records of any income and expenditure, receipting and banking any amounts received as soon as possible.

How do I teach people how to use computers?

First, don't worry, you don't need to be an IT genius. Teaching people basic digital skills is more about your people skills than your computer skills. All you need is to be patient, friendly and willing to research questions you might not immediately know the answer to.

There are as many ways of learning as there are computer clubs but, broadly speaking, there are two ways to work with club members with some clubs preferring one model over the other and some clubs using a mix of both styles. The first method is group learning where a group of members will all work on the same lesson or project. The advantage of this is that it is easy to deliver and it's very sociable. There are, however, drawbacks. If all members of a group are working on the same thing, this means that more confident learners may slow down at the same time that less confident learners may find the pace too fast for them. If you are using this first method make sure to check with learners that they are happy with an exercise and emphasise that it's always possible to move to a different one if they like. Computer club should never feel like school!

The second method involves one to one learning. With this method the pace and material can be entirely tailored to the learner but it is far more resource intensive than the group method and also less sociable.

A middle ground between the two methods is to group learners of similar abilities together.

Whatever style you choose, don't worry. Both methods and a mixture of them have been used to great effect in many other computer clubs. Also your club can change its method at any time so just get started, experiment and see what works for your community.

Many people attend computer clubs as much for the social interaction as the digital skills so consider holding some purely social events (e.g. a Christmas lunch or dinner). This will not only help build relationships that allow better learning but will make your club more popular and help you recruit new members much more easily.

If you can, try sitting in on another computer club for ideas.

Do I have to write lesson plans?

Some computer clubs use formal lesson plans but others are more informal. Both formats have been very successful.

If you do decide to use lesson plans, though, you can save yourself a lot of time writing them by just using some of the publically available, tried and tested lesson plans.

In addition to lesson plans there are also some great interactive learning resources online.

Here's some resources that we like:

- Membership of the Online Centres Network (by The Good Things Foundation) is free and provides extensive lesson plans <https://www.onlinecentresnetwork.org/>
- Membership of the Digital Champions Network is also free and comes with similarly extensive lesson plans. You will need a code from a sponsoring organisation such as SCVO <https://www.digitalchampionsnetwork.com>
- Digital Unite also have some free, easily printable guides <https://www.digitalunite.com/technology-guides>

- Mousercise is a great interactive learning resource for people learning to use a mouse <http://www.pbclibrary.org/mousing/mousercise.htm>
Typing Club is an extremely engaging game for people that want to learn to touch type <https://www.typingclub.com/>

How do I get people to join the club?

Since many of those interested in joining a computer club aren't currently online, old fashioned publicity drives are your friend. Message your local paper to see if they would be willing to write a short piece or provide free advertising space. Similarly, local radio stations may be willing to give you a mention on the air. Noticeboards in supermarkets and community centres are also a great resource.

While old media is great for reaching prospective club members directly, newer media like Social Media can indirectly be extremely effective. Though many prospective club members may not be online, their friends and relatives will be and can pass the word on to them. With this in mind, you might want to phrase online messaging along the lines of "do you know anyone that would like to join a computer club?" Social media can also be great for finding the more advanced club members who can help with tutoring.

Once you have even a few members, you'll find that word of mouth does wonders for getting more.

What should we do for the first meeting?

The most important thing about a computer club is that people feel safe, comfortable and have fun. With this in mind it's a good idea to consider not doing anything directly with the computers for your first meeting. Instead try getting out the tea and biscuits and have a chat to find out what each person's interests are and what they want to get out of being in the club.

Here's an idea of how a first meeting could go

11.00 – 11.15 You briefly explain the idea of the club and go around the room allowing people to introduce themselves.

11.15 – 11.45 Tea, biscuits with each person, if they like, saying something about their interests and what they'd like to get out of the club. Based on this the group can decide how they'd like to structure future meetings

11.45 – 12.00 Wrap up: scheduling the next meeting and agreeing a rough outline of what will take place.

Further resources and support

Several organisations offer “Digital Champion” training where they give you tips and advice on how to support people’s digital learning in your area:

- Digital Champion Training from LearnMyWay (part of The Good Things Foundation) <https://www.learnmyway.com/courses/how-to-be-a-digital-champion/>
- Digital Champion Training from SCVO and Access to the Digital Champions Network <https://scvo.org.uk/digital/participation/champions>