

# Spark iT Impact Report 2026

# Connecting Somerset



**Do you need digital support?**

Hosted by  
volunteer

**VISIT OUR DIGITAL CAFÉ TO**

- Build confidence using your **phone, laptop**
- Learn new digital skills and improve your health

Access devices and data

**FREE**  
to attend  
**ALL ages**  
abilities

**Do you need digital support?**

SPARK iT  
your digital discovery

Hosted by our friendly team of  
volunteer Digital Champions

**VISIT A DIGITAL CAFÉ TO:**

- Build confidence using your **phone, laptop or tablet**
- Learn new digital skills and improve your health and wellbeing
- Access devices and data

**FREE**  
to attend  
**ALL ages**  
& abilities

**DONATE IT**

# The Digital Divide in Somerset

Spark iT was founded in 2021, as the UK emerged from Covid, to tackle digital exclusion at its roots.

Today, partnering with community spaces to run Digital Cafés across Somerset each month, **more than 30 cafés open their doors**. Each with trained and friendly volunteer **Digital Champions** on hand, ready to help.

They're **free**, welcoming to everyone, and support people to use the internet safely and access online services that support their health, wellbeing and daily lives.

"Digital exclusion is deeply intertwined with other forms of disadvantage, including poverty, unemployment, lack of education, and life impacting challenges for people with accessibility, language, or literacy needs."

West of England  
Combined Authority



**19 million**  
people in the UK  
experience digital  
poverty



**40%** of adults  
aren't registered on  
the NHS app,  
creating a massive  
barrier to modern  
care



People without  
internet access pay  
**25% more**  
for basic goods and  
services



**£2.4 billion**  
annual cost to the  
system of social  
isolation leading to  
health interventions

**£1 billion**  
government  
efficiency savings are  
achievable through  
greater digital  
inclusion

Somerset has higher  
than average **digital  
exclusion**

"Loneliness and social isolation increase the risk for premature death by 26% and 29% respectively. More broadly, lacking social connection can increase the risk for premature death as much as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day."

Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors Report, 2021

# Real consequences

Healthcare is harder to reach



Financial services are inaccessible



Public services become digital-only



Loneliness and isolation rises



People are more vulnerable to fraud



"18,000–24,000  
lives could be saved annually  
among over-65s through  
improved digital access and  
health literacy."

Deloitte/Digital  
Poverty Alliance



# Spark iT solution - place-based, human-centred support

We don't just hand out IT devices; we build community infrastructure. Through our network of over 30 Digital Cafés, we meet people in the spaces they already trust including community centres, faith spaces, libraries, surgeries, and community hubs.

## Free, place-based, one-to-one digital support across Somerset



## What Spark iT offers

Judgement free spaces in our Digital Cafés, hubs and drop-ins across the county

Integration and referral pathways including the NHS, JobCentrePlus, housing associations and local councils

Friendly and patient Digital Champions offering safe digital support

Open to people of all ages and abilities



Confidence building and digital skills and safety

## Somerset

Access to a range of refurbished devices

Connectivity with free data SIM cards



Our first Digital Cafés were in Bridgwater and Minehead, in partnership with the Minehead Eye. We now host Digital Cafés across the county.



"Where else could I have gone? I couldn't walk into a PC shop with all my devices and personal information. They'd have charged a fortune, which is money I don't have. And it wouldn't have felt safe. For someone like me who depends on technology but doesn't understand it, there's nowhere else to turn."

Kate, Digital Café member

"Spark iT helped me find a community when I was far from everything familiar. As a displaced person I couldn't work, even as a graduate, but volunteering at the Digital Café gave me confidence, skills, and a sense of belonging. I love helping people improve their digital skills and being part of something positive. Volunteering helped me get leave to remain, and now I'm building my new life in the UK."

Fariba, Digital Champion volunteer



# By the numbers



**36**  
Digital Café  
locations across  
Somerset



**58**  
volunteer Digital  
Champions trained  
and supported



**5,916**  
volunteer hours  
donated to Spark iT



**300**  
digital devices  
given through our  
partnership with  
DonateIT



**100%**  
of people asked felt  
more confident  
using the internet  
after support



**2,000**  
people supported at  
NHS app events



**£25,574\***  
annual volunteer  
wellbeing benefit



**450** people  
connected through  
Vodafone SIM cards  
valued at **£81,000**



**8,419**  
Sessions with  
people at  
Digital Cafés




**30,464**  
new NHS app  
registrations



Volunteer value  
**£79,275\***



Digital Champion  
range in age  
**17-80**

A photograph of two elderly women sitting at a wooden table. The woman on the left has long blonde hair and is wearing a light-colored sweater over a patterned scarf. She is pointing at a tablet computer. The woman on the right has short blonde hair, wears glasses, and a colorful patterned scarf. They are both looking at the tablet. On the table, there is a smartphone, a pen, and a cup of coffee. The background is a light-colored wall with a patterned curtain.

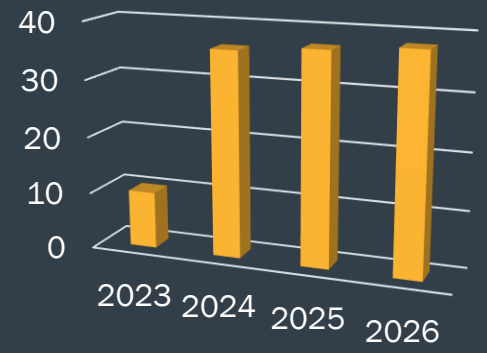
"There is so much more benefit to the volunteers than Spark may realise. We, those of us who come regularly, have all made friends and it has given us a purpose to get out of the house and come to learn and meet up with others each week. One of our volunteers was retired and isolated at home, losing his confidence and connections with people, but volunteering for Spark iT has given him a lifeline and a new lease of life."

Maggie, Digital Champion volunteer



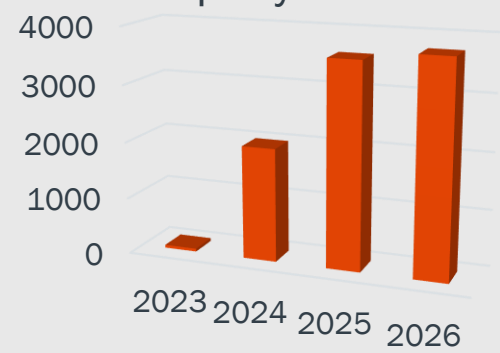
### Active volunteer Digital Champions

From 10 to  
**38**



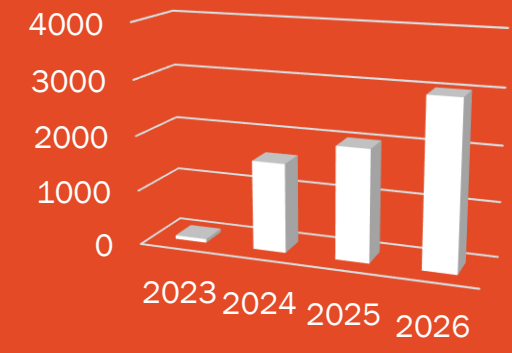
### Sessions with people at Digital Cafés

From 51 to  
**3,750\***  
per year



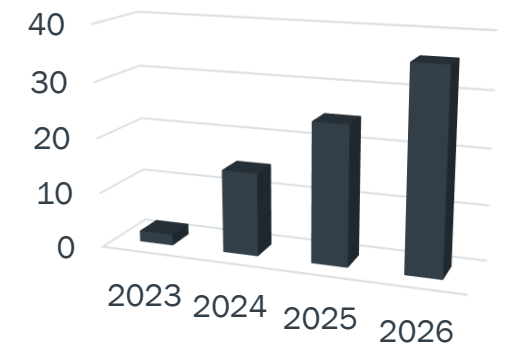
### Volunteer hours

From 66 to  
**3,020\***



### Digital Café locations

From 2 to  
**36**







Starting point

That's an increase of

**7,253%**

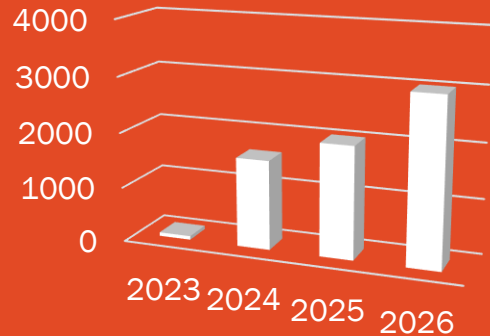
# The momentum: A closer look



Volunteer  
hours

From 66 to

**3,020**



**66** hours

That's an  
increase of

**4,476%**

**3,020** hours\*

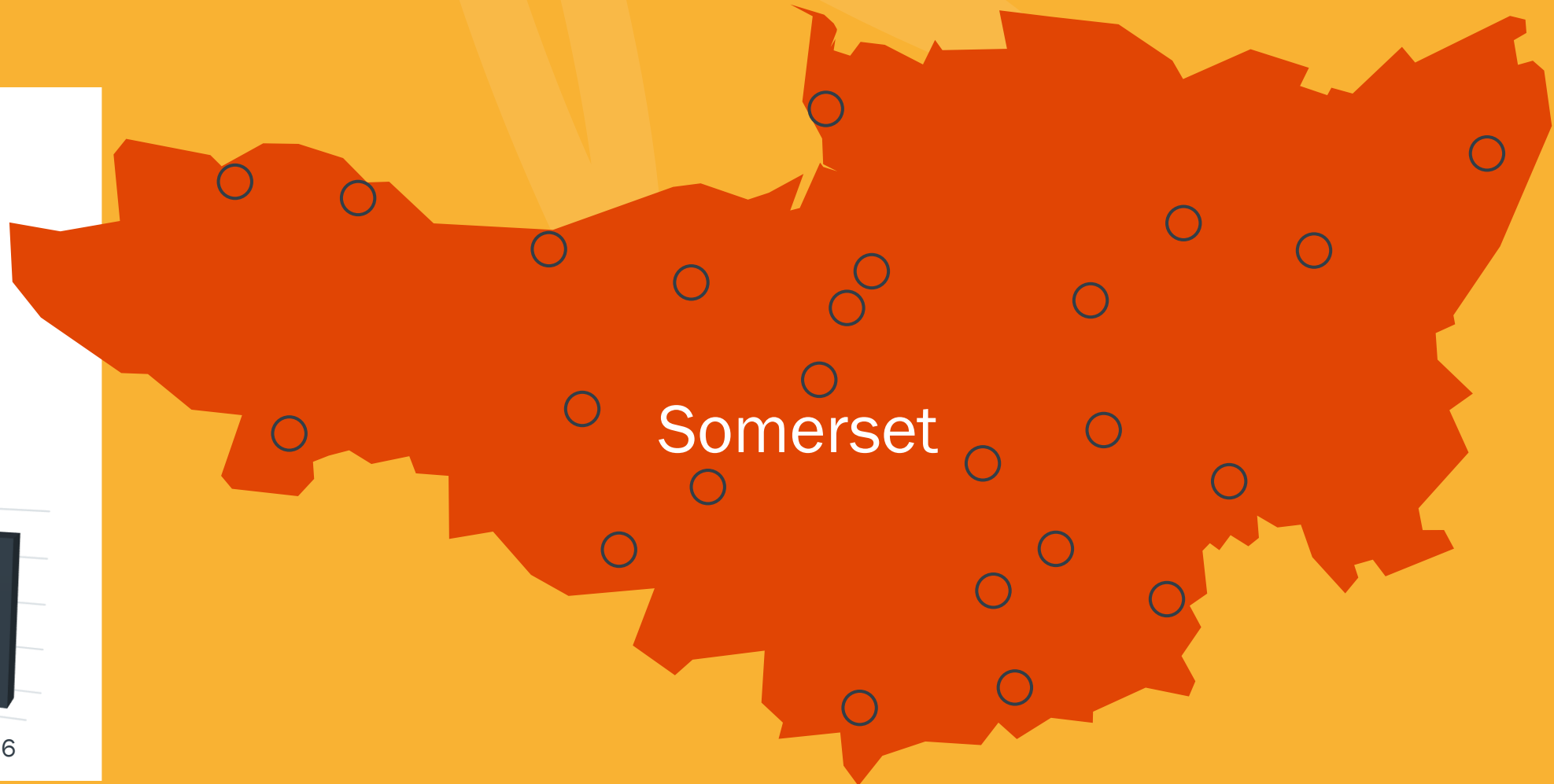
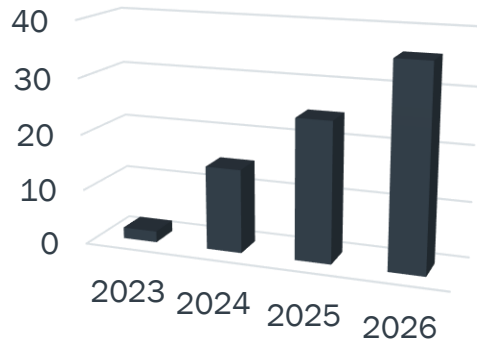




Digital Café  
locations

From 2 to

**36**



"The Digital Cafés help GPs and surgery teams, as they can signpost their patients to local community venues for digital support. It's time-saving and helps reduce phone calls and queries to practice staff. The support at the cafés goes beyond downloading an App, volunteers build networks and support our communities, they provide advice, guidance and friendship alongside digital devices and connectivity step-by-step."

Julie-Ann Jay, NHS Somerset ICB

8% increase in NHS app registrations between 2023 and 2024, 30,464 new NHS app registrations in Somerset

# Who lit the spark and kept it going



# iT Can't Stop Now

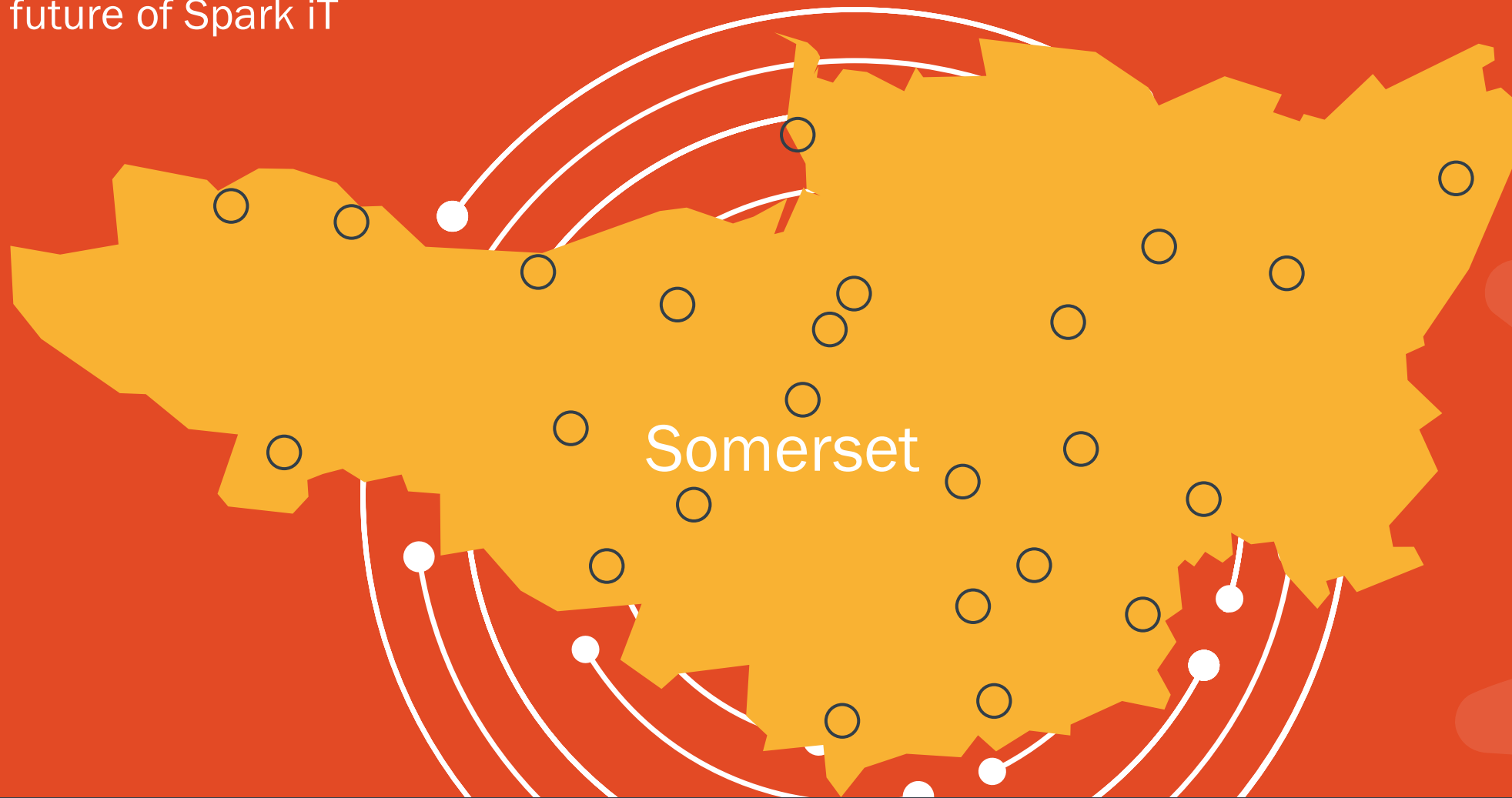
Digital inclusion isn't a one-time fix - it's an ongoing commitment.

As services become increasingly digitised, the need for trusted, face-to-face support will continue to grow.

"You are making a real difference to people's lives with this project. Particularly people who are socially isolated for various reasons. I hope you know that."

Cathy Eldridge

 mind in Somerset



Find Your Nearest Digital Café at [www.sparksomerset.org.uk/spark-it](http://www.sparksomerset.org.uk/spark-it)

The future of Spark iT

# Get Involved

Refer people to your nearest  
**Digital Café** - no appointment  
needed.

Contact

Visit  
[sparksomerset.org.uk/spark-it](https://sparksomerset.org.uk/spark-it)

Email  
[sparkit@sparksomerset.org.uk](mailto:sparkit@sparksomerset.org.uk)

Phone  
**01458 550973**

If you can help:

Volunteer as a Digital Champion  
(no technical expertise required - just patience and kindness)



Donate devices for refurbishment (link to drop off points)



Host a Digital Café in your community space



Spread the word about our free services



Community  
voices



**Real Lives,  
Real Impact**

# Staying Connected at 92

Betty is in her early 90s and loves keeping in touch with friends and family using email, but sometimes managing her inbox is challenging. She comes to the Digital Café where Digital Champions help her navigate technology.

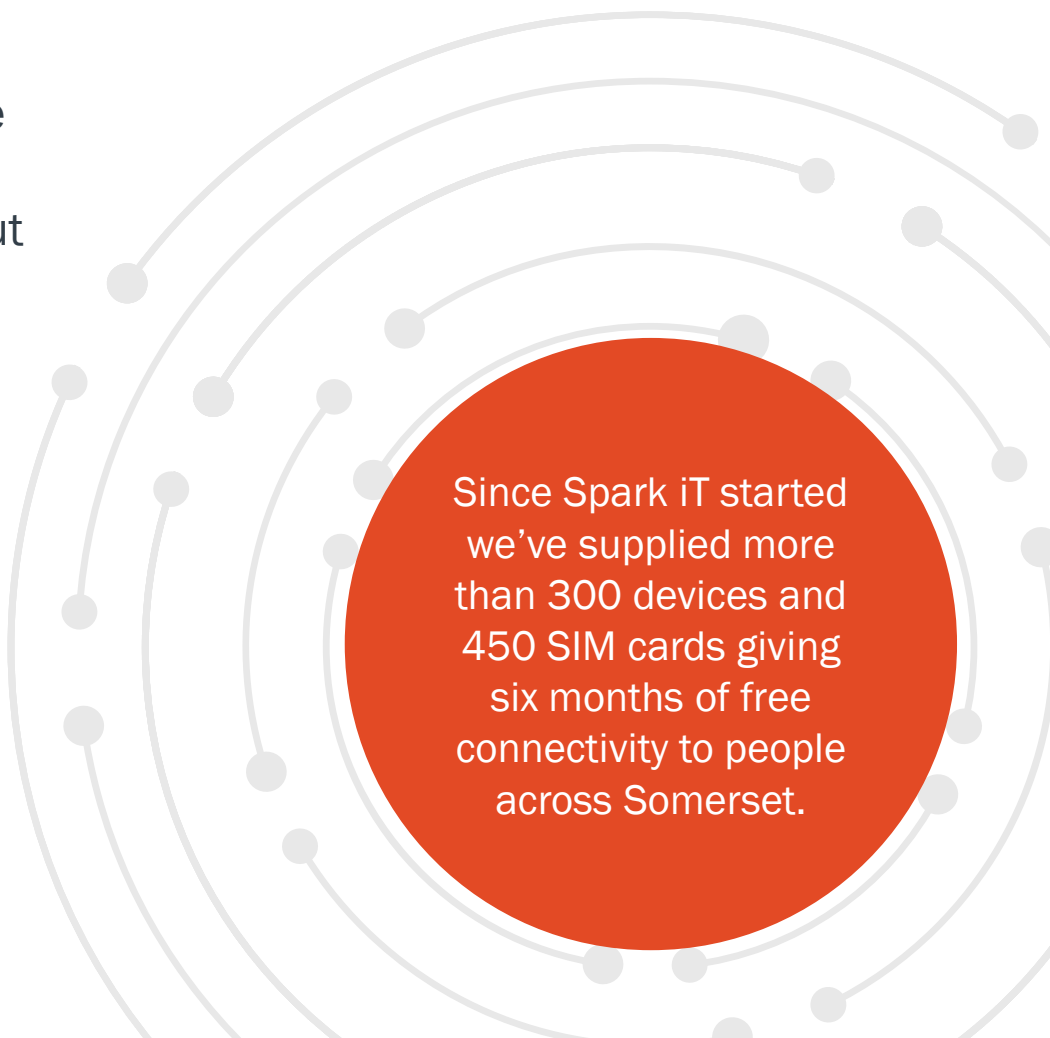
On one visit, Betty wanted to try a video call. A volunteer set up her camera and found a quiet corner and soon Betty was chatting away happily on screen. Giving Betty consistent support allows her to maintain her independence and connections. The café is about more than technology, it's preventing isolation and preserving family relationships.

[Read more about Betty's experience](#)

# Kate's Patient: Safe Communication After Cancer

Occupational Therapist, Kate's patient couldn't communicate verbally following cancer treatment. With no internet access and living alone, he couldn't use the telephone and had to walk to the GP surgery to book appointments and get support which made his symptoms worse and put him at risk. The GP surgery asked Kate to find ways to help him communicate, but purchasing the equipment was costly and complex.

Spark iT working with DonateIT and Vodafone, provided a tablet and data SIM making everything simple. With his IT issues resolved, Kate's patient can now safely contact his GP when needed, and Kate can do the clinical work she's trained for.



Since Spark iT started we've supplied more than 300 devices and 450 SIM cards giving six months of free connectivity to people across Somerset.

# Finding Purpose and Connection

John has been coming to the Digital Café for almost two years, rarely missing a session. As a retired postie, John didn't use computers at work, and at home his wife managed everything on the computer. But when he was widowed this changed, and he realised he needed to upgrade his digital skills.

"I came along to try to learn computers, and stayed because I enjoy the company," says John. "It's a nice crowd." Now he comes every week. The café offers John both practical support and meaningful social contact, it's a place to belong.

[Read more about John's experience](#)



# Digital Skills, Human Purpose

Lyn runs the Spark iT Digital Café in Bridgwater, where about a third of people attending are looking for work. The job centre refers people directly to the Digital Café, which takes place within a community warm space hub that welcomes the food bank, village agents, and other vital services. "We help people with all sorts of things, passport applications, driving licenses, bus passes. Everything relies on technology and being able to prove your identity. It seems like it ought to be the simplest thing, but sometimes it's just terrible." Being embedded in the community hub means Lyn can help people navigate the digital barriers to employment while connecting them to other support they need. It's place-based support that meets people where they are, literally and practically.

[Read more about Lyn's experience](#)



Since Spark iT started we've supported 58 volunteers to run 36 Digital Café locations.

# From Volunteer to Career

Q had been out of work for three years and was experiencing fear of failure when he first considered volunteering. "Before I came to Spark, it had been three weeks since I'd even left the house," he remembers. "Spark just asked me to give them one hour." That hour changed everything. Volunteering at the Digital Café gave Q more than something to do, it gave him purpose, belonging and confidence. "This job gives me peace of mind, more than money. Every day I come here, I feel appreciated. I really feel part of my community."

Since April 2024, he's supported 748 people with everything from account recovery to price comparisons, but for Q it's about far more than technical fixes. "One of the most important skills I have is listening. Sometimes I'm the only person someone might speak to. I call it digital dignity, but it's really just dignity."

[Read more about Q's experience](#)

[Meet Q and other Spark volunteers in this video](#)



# From Jobseeker to Employed

Paul came to the Digital Café looking for work. Without digital skills, job applications felt impossible as recruitment is increasingly online. The café volunteers helped Paul create and polish his CV, teaching him how to use a laptop and navigate job application sites. The support worked and Paul got a job at Asda that he's now enjoying.

Even after securing employment, Paul still drops into the café from time to time. Recently, he came back to get help sorting out his council tax. For jobseekers without computer literacy, every application is a barrier. The patient, practical support at the café removes that barrier and opens doors.

[Read more about Paul's experience](#)



# Building Community Infrastructure Where It's Needed Most

Caroline runs the Waffle Hub in Burnham-on-Sea, which hosts a Digital Café. Burnham-on-Sea and Highbridge are areas of high deprivation within Somerset, with few local services meaning residents must travel to Bridgwater for basic services like JobCentrePlus. The Spark iT Digital Café has become essential to the hub's integrated model of providing services locally, and hosts the food café, clothing bank, Somerset Community Employment Services, Citizens Advice and other services. Being all in one accessible, local place enables services to cross refer people.

"Digital Champion, Q, has many regulars and once they come in, we're able to signpost them to the additional services we offer, and it works two-ways. It's been hugely beneficial." says Caroline.

[Read more about Caroline's experience](#)



# The Cost of Digital-Only Services

Lesley works at Priorswood Community Centre in Taunton, where literacy skills are below the national average and around 90% of visitors can't use a computer.

"We're battling with people struggling to fill in online forms, we get this weekly," Leslie explains. "We had a lady come in to pay for her green bin. She came to us in a pickle because she didn't have an email address and couldn't make the payment online. She started to panic." Without help, that unpaid bin charge would have led to reminder letters, enforcement action, then debt, a cascade of consequences from a single failed transaction. It's a pattern Leslie sees repeatedly. Without local digital support, each person who can't complete a form can create costs elsewhere including unpaid charges, deeper poverty from unclaimed benefits, GP visits from mounting anxiety. The Digital Café provides early intervention that prevents these escalations at a fraction of the cost.

[Read more about Lesley's experience](#)



# Lynne: Partnership Working That Saves the NHS Time and Money

Lynne has worked in the NHS for 34 years and chairs the Patient Participation Group at Langport Surgery. Knowing the NHS is using technology more to support patients, she wanted to help her community to keep up.

The impact on the surgery has been immediate. "The Digital Café has ensured that the Digital Manager now has much more time to do essential work. Once a month, we feedback any issues with the NHS App, and she can do all the back-office work far more efficiently than if each person comes separately into the surgery."

Patients benefit too, one café attendee regularly having blood tests discovered she could find her results on the NHS App, no longer having to call the surgery. "It really relieved her anxiety. She felt empowered."

[Read more about Lynne's experience](#)

# Transforming Healthcare Access Across Somerset

"The Digital Cafés help GPs and surgery teams, as they can signpost their patients to local community venues for digital support. It's time-saving and helps reduce phone calls and queries to practice staff. The support at the cafés goes beyond downloading an App, volunteers build networks and support our communities, they provide advice, guidance and friendship alongside digital devices and connectivity step-by-step."

Julie-Ann Jay, NHS Somerset ICB

[Read more about Julie-Ann's experience](#)



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