

Somerset Libraries digital journey

The challenge for Somerset libraries (as with most other libraries) lies in meeting the needs of people who are excited about digital opportunities and the potential of new technology, alongside the needs of those people who require more support with the basics of computer use. Somerset is a largely rural county with some affluent areas and areas of real need - West Somerset ranks bottom of all local authority areas for social mobility and there are some real challenges around accessibility to services and job opportunities.

To try and address some of these challenges, and in line with our efforts to present the service as a vibrant, relevant offer for Somerset communities, the examples below show how we have developed a thriving digital offer with both public and private sector partnerships.

Glass Box

The Glass Box is a co-designed community space in Taunton Library that supports digital skills development and business innovation. Through public sector investment, some support from the private sector and some successful funding bids, we have been able to make cutting-edge technology accessible to children and young people as well as businesses, start-ups and anyone with an enquiring mind.

The tech in the Glass Box includes VR Headsets, Tablets, Drones, Robotics kits and even an HP Sprout, used for detailed 3D Scanning of objects and stop-frame animation events.

Engagement with partners, including the UK Hydrographic Office, based in Taunton, and their nationally recognised STEM Ambassador outreach programme, has seen a varied events programme grow including Code Clubs, Coder Dojos, Adult Raspberry Pi groups, Business Advice surgeries and much more.

<https://glassboxtaunton.co.uk>

Idea Box

The Idea Box is Somerset's inspirational resource designed to engage young people in STEM. The schemes provide an effective way for us to roll out the Glass Box offer across the county with every box coming with everything you need to run a session for young people, whether in an education setting, school or college, or a community venue.

Boxes are themed so provide technology capable of delivering against a range of outcomes, coding, robotics, 3D design. Equipment includes Drones, 3D pens, Lego Mindstorms, Code-A-Pillars and BBC Microbits. Deliberately designed to enable a session to be run with as much or as little staff intervention as required, boxes come with quick start guides, suggested session plans and links to online 'how to' guides. There is a small hire charge to enable us to start to recoup costs and replace consumables.

<https://glassboxtaunton.co.uk/learn/idea-box>

Digital Skills Academy (shortlisted for the 2019 Digital Leaders 100 awards)

The Digital Skills Academy is an example of how we are fostering innovation and developing digital and creative skills with young people. Groups of Year 9 and 10 pupils from schools around Taunton were given valuable insights into the world of creative digital with a series of eight workshops over 12 months, led by local digital businesses, our own library staff and other partner agencies.

Students were given the chance to get hands on with digital technology rarely available in schools, alongside information on career opportunities and skills development. Local businesses, including a web design company, a game designer and an advertising agency, talked directly to young people and we even had a live link-up with a tech giant in the Silicon Valley. Young people learnt practical skills, first-hand and gained some real insight into the peaks and troughs of employment in a competitive marketplace.

All the local businesses involved in this project provided their time and support for free and some even brought their own tech for the pupils to use. They bought into the potential for the project to inspire local young people about the digital opportunities in their own town.

West Somerset Opportunity Area (WSOA)

The library service successfully bid for Department of Education funding to deliver a programme of activity within the West Somerset Opportunity Area. As well as a range of activities to provide support in areas of social deprivation, this funding has enabled us to further develop our digital offer. We have created a digital space in Minehead Library, learning from the Glass Box in Taunton Library and we will offer opportunities to access cutting-edge tech in more remote communities through the creation of 'Digital Dens'.

We have delivered training to staff from local youth providers in how to use technology, enabling them to engage with technology, develop their own skills and then provide space for them to deliver workshops in. This increases our exposure and had provided opportunities for the service to engage children and young people in a whole new way.

Tablet lending for business

Business leaders in West Somerset identified a key barrier to innovation and growth – access to reliable hardware and software. To meet this challenge, we have developed a scheme whereby start-up businesses and small businesses can borrow iPads in the same way they might borrow books. The devices are pre-loaded with a range of apps and links that help businesses to increase their digital skills, grow their digital footprint and explore essential business services such as on-line banking, social media and website development.

<https://glassboxtaunton.co.uk/grow/tablet-lending-pilot-in-west-somerset/>