Empowering Inclusion: XMA and Sheffield College ‘Try Technologies’ event showcases assistive technologies

The Sheffield College

Empowering Inclusion

XMA and Sheffield College collaborated to host ‘Try Technologies – Plug-in to Assistive Possibilities,’ a pioneering event showcasing cutting-edge assistive technologies as part of the college’s Accessible Technology Week.

With an ambitious vision and tight timeline, XMA brought together an impressive network of partners to make the event a reality. The event offered hands-on experiences that brought the technologies and their potential to life.

It is a key milestone which aligns with Sheffield College’s transformative plans for its Peaks Campus which houses its Bloom Centre. Peaks campus is dedicated to preparing students with learning difficulties and disabilities for adulthood through specialised pathways and immersive, practical learning environments.

Sheffield College’s Bloom Centre – Preparation for adulthood

Sheffield College serves over 6,000 students, providing essential routes into employment and further education. Among these students, approximately 600 have high needs funding for inclusion needs, while more than 1,200 others require support for their Special Educational Needs (SEN).

The Peaks campus provides specialist provision nested within the standard provision, ensuring students with some of the most complex learning disabilities receive tailored support. Developments are underway to provide tailored pathways that include opportunities to ‘learn by doing’ in practical learning spaces such as: an independent living kitchen, a Learning Resource Centre and sensory room, a conference centre space and outdoor classrooms and a multi-purpose creative and educational space.

Long term plans include the development of a café, a shop, and a garden centre to provide work experience opportunities as the bridge into paid work.

Accessibility will be embedded into every facet of the learning environment.

XMA a trusted partner

XMA is playing a pivotal role in Sheffield College's forward-thinking vision by partnering to provide assistive technologies. The aims are threefold:

1. **To uplift the site as a whole, integrating assistive technologies into the learning environment**
2. **To improve the general accessibility of the equipment for a majority of students**
3. **To radically enhance the capacity for making highly attuned individualised responses for those in the greatest need**

The 'Try Technologies' event provided an opportunity for staff and students to experience assistive innovations firsthand, prompting the question:

> *What assistive technology could and should XMA provide to maximise accessibility for all?*
>
> Paul Jacklin, XMA Client Director

Try technologies – Plug-in to assistive technologies

7th May 2025

The event fostered a low-arousal atmosphere, ensuring accessibility for all attendees. It featured a flexible schedule, which included:

- **A keynote address by Sarah Le-Good MBE, Sheffield College Assistant Principal for Inclusion**
- **A talk by Michael Conlon, XMA's Education Transformation Consultant**
- **Alison Warner and Lee Keogh on their experiences as people with disabilities**
- **Rapid 2-minute vendor pitches showcasing assistive technology**
- **Networking opportunities**
- **Tours of the building and facilities run by the students**
- **Hands-on demonstrations of innovative assistive technology**

Key Speakers

Sarah Le-Good

As Assistant Principal at Sheffield College, Sarah Le-Good champions inclusivity in further education, leading the inclusive curriculum to meet the needs of students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). With 30 years of experience, her approach relies on embedding the Social Model of Disability, emphasising the need to dismantle barriers to learning.

In her keynote, she illuminated stark inequalities faced by individuals with learning disabilities: **You are more likely to be treated like a child or assumed not to have mental capacity. You are more likely to have limited choices and limited control of both big and little decisions – from what to wear to where to live! You are more likely to be unemployed**

"Today's activities are about equality of opportunity, learning what we don't know and starting a movement of enablement through technology."

One striking example she shared was that of a young man with learning difficulties who began using an AirTag to travel solo and safely on the bus. By wearing this small tracking device it reassured his Mum of his whereabouts. This demonstrates a simple tech solution that enabled independence.

Michael Conlon

As an Education Transformation Consultant at XMA, Michael Conlon explores how technology can empower students and educators to embrace their own "Main Character Energy", utilising it to take control of their own narrative and give them voice.

In his talk, he highlighted the transformative potential of technologies in Gaming, Augmented Reality, and Artificial Intelligence as gateways to accessibility and inclusion. Michael posed a crucial question *'How can these tools be part of XMA's offer in places like Sheffield College?'.*

He highlighted how adaptive technologies are a powerful example of inclusive design. Originally developed to support individuals with specific needs, these innovations ultimately serve a much broader audience. The philosophy of "necessary for some, but useful for all" reflects the essence of universal learning design, removing barriers and increasing accessibility. XMA is committed to meeting all learners' needs, making education richer and more flexible for everyone so that, as they say at Xbox, *"When we all play, we all win".*

Alison Warner

For 12 years, Alison has navigated life as a wheelchair user and is XMA's Asset & Configuration Manager. She shared the story of her journey at XMA to ensure she receives the support required to do her role effectively.
It highlighted the importance of accessible work environments. By turning her personal mission into a broader initiative, she is also helping to create a more disability-confident environment. Alison has not only advocated for herself but also collaborated with colleagues to drive meaningful change.

Her favourite assistive technology is her reMarkable, a lightweight digital notepad. She can carry it to meetings, take notes with ease, and then transfer them to her laptop afterwards. This eliminates the need to bring her laptop along with her specialised keyboard and mouse, making her setup more convenient and portable.

Lee Keogh

Lee Keogh is a dedicated advocate for disability inclusion, whose work has significantly influenced accessibility movements - from championing Purple Tuesday campaigns to establishing Inclusive Zones in Watford Parks.

In his inspiring talk, he shared personal reflections on life with cerebral palsy and his ongoing efforts to improve accessibility, firmly grounded in the social model of disability. He emphasised that inclusion is fundamental, and that disabled individuals strive to live as close to a normal life as possible.

His favourite piece of assistive technology is Read.ai which is an AI- powered tool that automates meeting notes, summarises emails, and enhances collaboration by integrating with platforms like Zoom and Teams.

Assistive Technology – a key role to play

The Social Model of Disability shifts the focus away from individual conditions and onto the barriers that society creates. Assistive technologies - whether it's screen readers, voice recognition software, adaptive keyboards, or AI-driven accessibility tools - help break down those obstacles and empower individuals to fully engage and participate with education, work, and everyday life.

When designed and implemented well, assistive technology becomes a force for inclusion, making environments more accessible rather than expecting individuals to adapt.

Assistive Technology and Vendor Village – Who was there?

A diverse range of assistive technologies was showcased during the event, providing solutions to remove or reduce barriers. Vendors demonstrated innovative technologies designed to enhance accessibility, independence, and engagement. The students and staff interacted enthusiastically with both the vendors and their technologies.

douglas stewart
education focused • relationship driven

Douglas Stewart presented a range of assistive technology and productivity tools designed to enhance learning and accessibility:

- **Boox Tablets** – Low light emission E-ink devices for reading, writing, and sketching to assist with productivity.
- **Lili for Life** – a lamp to aid people with Dyslexia read fluidly.
- **Nuance Voice Selector** – Isolates voices in noisy environments for clearer listening.
- **Accessible Keyboards** from LogicKeyboard – Assistive ergonomic keyboards designed to help people with low vision, Dyslexia and other conditions.
- **Andrea Noise-Cancelling Headset** – Reduces background noise for better audio clarity.
- **Vocal from Ipevo** – software and **microphones,** designed to transcribe and translate conversations, online meetings and classroom sessions.
- **Dictaphones by Philips** – Voice recorders for capturing lectures, meetings, or notes.

Everway

Everway

Read&Write, developed by Everway (formerly Texthelp), is a literacy support tool designed to assist students with reading, writing, comprehension, and independent learning. It offers features like text-to-speech, vocabulary tools, study aids, and grammar checking, making it a valuable resource for learners of all abilities.

Sheffield College has already adopted this tool, which means students are already benefitting from its accessibility features to improve their learning experience.

chromeOS

Google

Chromebooks come with a variety of built-in accessibility features designed to support users with different needs. Some of the key features include:

- **Screen magnification:** Users can zoom in on content for better visibility.
- **ChromeVox:** A built-in screen reader that provides spoken feedback.
- **Dictation & voice control:** Allows users to type using their voice.
- **High contrast mode & colour inversion:** Helps improve readability.
- **Mono audio & closed captions:** Supports users who are deaf or hard of hearing.
- **On-screen keyboard & switch access:** Enables alternative input methods.
- **Face control:** enables control of mouse cursor using facial movements and gestures.

Smart

The SMART Board RX is more than a display — it's assistive technology that helps every learner engage and learn in their own way. With features like programmable tools, accessible digital inking, and integration with Lumio, it supports inclusive classrooms where students can interact, express, and participate without barriers.

It was powerful to see this in action at the Try Technologies: Plug-in to Assistive Possibilities event.

Wired2Fire

At the Wired2Fire stand, inclusivity met cutting-edge performance with a powerful RTX 5070 and Ryzen 7-powered custom PC demonstrating accessibility in PC gaming. The setup featured Xbox adaptive controllers and a fully customisable joystick, enabling users with a range of physical needs to engage seamlessly with top-tier PC games including Rocket League and Microsoft Flight Simulator. The demo showcased the flexibility of PC gaming—not just in graphics and performance, but in how it can be uniquely tailored for every player, ensuring that no gamer is left behind.

Microsoft Surface

Imagine a classroom where every student can engage and excel, regardless of ability. Microsoft Surface devices, like the Surface Pro, adapt to individual needs with their versatile design, touchscreen, and accessibility features.

Surface Adaptive Accessories - including keycap labels, bump indicators, and customizable mice - make navigation easier.

With Copilot+, AI-driven support takes accessibility further, allowing students to adjust settings instantly via voice or text. Whether resizing a pointer or enabling voice control, technology removes barriers and personalises learning.

Lenovo

Here are a few standout accessibility features from the Lenovo Think Pad and Think Book ranges that can make a significant impact:

- **Visual Support:** Screen magnification and adjustable contrast settings help users with low vision navigate their screens more easily.
- **Auditory Assistance:** Physical volume controls and LED power indicators ensure users with hearing impairments can interact with their PCs effectively.
- **Physical Accessibility:** Voice control and adjustable monitor stands provide flexibility for users with mobility challenges.
- **Cognitive Support:** Simple language instructions and read-aloud features enhance usability for individuals who benefit from clearer communication.

There is a light and a braille-sized bump on these models to show a visually impaired user where to plug in.

Sphero, from Creative Hut

Sphero is a leading education technology company that creates programmable robots and STEM-based learning tools designed to inspire creativity, curiosity, and computational thinking in learners of all ages.

At the event, we showcased:

Sphero BOLT

Sphero BOLT is a driveable and programmable robotic ball that provides an engaging, hands-on introduction to coding and computational thinking.

Using a connected device, learners can navigate mazes, solve problems, give directions, and even tell stories through movement and light. The Sphero Edu app allows students to drive the robot or code it using block-based programming, supporting a wide range of abilities.

BOLT promotes collaboration, creativity, and resilience, making it a powerful tool for inclusive and active learning.

Sphero Indi

Sphero Indi is a screen-free, intuitive robot car designed to introduce early learners to the fundamentals of coding through colour-based navigation. By placing coloured tiles to guide Indi's path, learners develop sequencing, fine motor skills, spatial awareness, independence, and problem-solving skills. Indi's accessible and playful approach makes it ideal for fostering curiosity and creativity in young learners and those new to coding.

Metaverse Learning

Metaverse Learning delivered a presentation on their joint immersive consortia project with Sheffield College (and other partners), which focuses on preparing SEN/ ALN learners with life and professional skills through tailored virtual experiences. Our pitch introduced the audience to how immersive environments can build confidence, independence, and job readiness in a safe, repeatable way. Students were able to try out these immersive environments on our Virtual Reality headsets.

Inclusive technology

Eyetuitve for iPadOS is an Apple certified eye tracker and is the only device on the market that natively supports iPadOS.

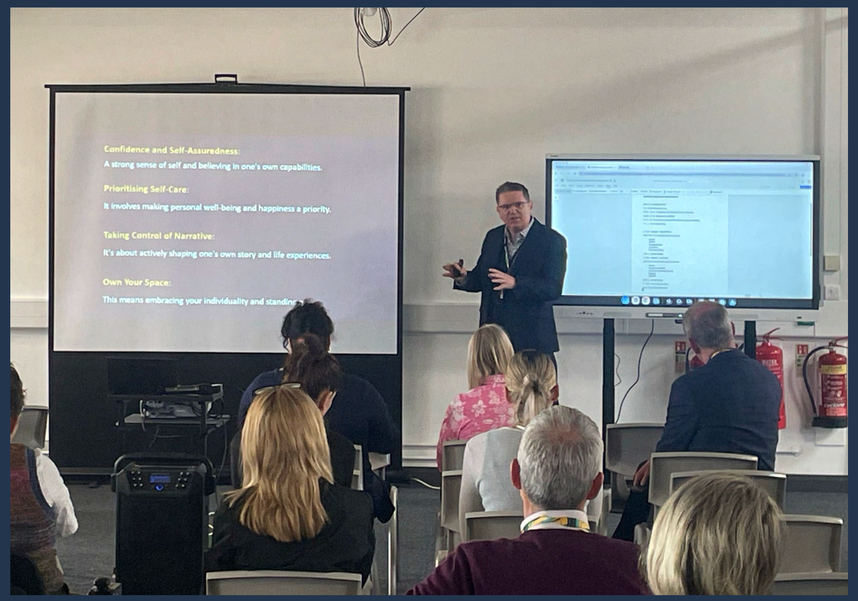
Eyetutive can take full advantage of iPadOS ‘Snap to Item’ functionality, meaning a more stabilized eye tracking experience when accessing AAC apps such as Proloquo2Go and Grid for iPad.

Eyetuitve can also be used for environmental control purposes. When combined with the iClick, individuals can activate a mains powered device such as a lamp or fan. When combined with the EnvirON Hub, eyetuitve can be used to control a television or music system.

Feedback from the Google stand

Nick Cox, XMA’s Google Business Manager, showcased the powerful accessibility features built into Chrome OS. Sheffield College has integrated a large number of Chromebooks into its classrooms. Many staff who visited the stand were unaware of these accessibility tools and so Nick demonstrated features like browser zoom, screen magnification, large cursors, inverted colours, text-to-speech and ChromeVox for users with visual impairments.

One standout feature was face-controlled mouse navigation, where staff used small head movements to control the cursor and clicked by smiling. Another well-received tool was voice dictation in Google Docs. This helps students who struggle with typing to record what they would like to say.



Looking ahead – A Festival of Inclusion

The ‘Try Technologies’ event marks the start of a journey towards the college embracing assistive technologies on a larger scale. Plans are underway to hold an annual Festival of Inclusion, bringing together students, educators, feeder schools, and XMA’s assistive technology experts and partners, to create a lasting movement toward accessibility and raising the status of technology in this space.

Why XMA?

Homegrown

We are a private, family run UK-based business.

Award-winning

We are a national award-winning IT reseller.

Public sector approved

We hold status on 25+ procurement frameworks.

VIEW OUR FRAMEWORKS

Right-sized

We can provide and tailor service solutions for any size project, while maintaining a personal experience for every customer.

Established

We have served thousands of customers over 35+ years in business.

Partner accredited

We have an unrivalled partner accreditation portfolio that means customers have access to best-in-class solutions, always.