UKSPF *'Digital Connectivity for Local Community Facilities'* Grants Programme

Final Evaluation

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Section 1: Introduction

About this Evaluation

In Spring 2025 independent consultant Jane Hobson was commissioned by VOLA to conduct an evaluation of the UKSPF Phase 1 'Digital Connectivity for Local Community Facilities' Grants Programme. This report outlines the findings of the evaluation, with the aim of informing the future direction and strategic priorities for digital inclusion support in the LCR Combined Authority area.

The evaluation process commenced in February 2025, with completion of this final report early May 2025 – providing time for final collation and analysis of performance monitoring information to April 2025.

Key Evaluation Questions
Overall programme effectiveness and impact (see section 3)
• Have the aims and objectives of the Grants Programme been achieved? If so, why and if not, why not?
• How effective and efficient are its procedures, processes, management and staffing arrangements?
• To what extent has the Grants Programme achieved its projected targets?
• To what extent have these led to the anticipated benefits (i.e. outcomes and impacts – both quantitative and qualitative) and contributed to achieving overall objectives?
• Are the constituent Grants Programme activities working well and how has this adapted over each funding round?
• Is the Grants Programme and the interventions being delivered in the local LCR areas adding value to existing support and/or fill gaps in provision?
Impact for Grant Beneficiary Organisations and their service users (see section 4)
• What type of support did Beneficiary Organisations need and how well did the programme meet those needs?
• As a result of receipt of the Digital Grant, what impacts has this had on Beneficiary Organisations?
• To what extent do Beneficiary Organisations think the grant has improved the digital inclusion of their services users/ local community?
• Have there been any unexpected consequences resulting from the improved digital facilities for the Beneficiary Organisations, their service users and wider local communities?
Impact for Stakeholders & LCR Digital Inclusion Ecosystem (see section 5)
• To what extent have new effective approaches been developed by VOLA in the management of this UKSPF Grants Fund?
• Is this Grants Fund bringing about activities and outcomes that would not otherwise have occurred?
• Is the programme adding value to/ filling gaps in provision or other interventions being delivered by partners?
• To what extent is this Grants Programme impacting on the overall digital inclusion ecosystem in the LCR?

Methodology

To address these evaluation questions the following methods were utilised:

- **Data Story:** review of programme monitoring and evaluation data: allocation/actual spend data; project output and outcomes data;

- **Beneficiary Organisation Consultation:** online survey issued to all grant Beneficiary Organisations and follow up face to face interviews with a sample of respondents;

- **Stakeholder Consultation:** one to one interviews with VOLA team members; Liverpool City Region Combined Authority's Digital Inclusion Manager and Project Officer; online surveys with steering group members and panel assessors.

Structure of the Report

The report is presented in the following sections:

- Section 2: Programme Design & Rationale: this section outlines the fast developing digital inclusion delivery context across the Liverpool City Region (LCR). It also provides an overview of the Grants Programme design and delivery arrangements by VOLA.

- Section 3: Programme Delivery & Management Performance: provides an overview of delivery and management outputs and performance – informed by programme monitoring and evaluation data and consultation with stakeholders.

- Section 4: Programme Impacts for Beneficiary Organisations and Service Users: based on feedback from Beneficiary Organisations, and secondary service user case studies.

- Section 5: Summary Impacts & Identified Next Steps for the LCR Digital Inclusion Ecosystem.
- Section 6: Programme Success Factors & Recommendations: key conclusions on effectiveness and impact of the programme. Key learning and emerging themes to inform future delivery and local policy/ strategy.

Section 2: Programme Outline, Design & Rationale

UKSPF Programme Development

The LCR Combined Authority's Investment Team approached the VS6 Partnership in 2022, to directly commission a Digital Connectivity Grants Programme for the VCFSE sector. The LCRCA UKSPF Investment Strategy had identified the need for improved community facilities to support digital connectivity and inclusion across the city region. VS6 members agreed that VOLA, having been heavily involved in management and delivery of digital inclusion initiatives since 2017, was well placed to develop and manage this grants programme.

VOLA had existing positive working relationships and networks with the VCSFE sector in relation to digital inclusion through successful management of the Include-IT Mersey digital skills Programme[1], and had recently completed a research and mapping commission for the CA which identified need and demand for improved community based IT facilities[2]. The Consortium Manager was also a member of the Combined Authority's Digital Inclusion Task Force from its formation in 2021.

This grants programme predated the formation of the Combined Authority's Digital Inclusion Team, so detailed development of the proposal was negotiated directly between the Investment Team and VOLA.

Digital Inclusion Partnership Working, 2021 on

Over the last 9 years, VOLA has worked closely with the LCR Combined Authority, delivering both Digital Inclusion services through the Include-IT Mersey project, and strategic working to promote and help to address the Digital Inclusion agenda.

VOLA has worked closely with the CA Digital Inclusion team since its formation in 2022-23 to ensure exchange of local intelligence in terms of LCR digital exclusion profiling and digital inclusion resources and activities. The CA Digital Inclusion Manager sits on the Grants Programme steering group.

The LCR-wide digital inclusion ecosystem has developed rapidly since 2021, not only through this UKSPF investment but also through the development of several other large scale digital inclusion programmes, including the Digital Inclusion Initiative, which has distributed 5,000 free tablets and mobile data over the last 18 months to digitally excluded LCR residents. Many of VOLA's delivery partners and Grant Beneficiary Organisations have been in this initiative and are also members of the CA convened Digital Inclusion Network.

Information exchange and discussion occurs regularly between VOLA and the CA Digital Inclusion Team in relation to progress of both its digitally focused UKSPF programmes (Include IT-Mersey and this Grants Programme). It also liaises around other locally supported activities including the recent Digital Inclusion Initiative, to dovetail distribution of tablets within communities where possible, via VOLA's delivery and grant partners.

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[1] See external evaluation report for 2017-19 Programme: Include-IT Mersey Evaluation Report 2019

[2] The VOLA Consortium was commissioned in 2022 by the CA to develop a map of digital inclusion services across LCR in collaboration with the University of Liverpool. VOLA surveyed organisations across LCR offering digital inclusion services including those providing digital equipment, training, and connectivity. The data collected is available for public use and has been utilised to inform the development of an online map of public-access digital resources, this UKSPF Digital Connectivity Grants Programme, and other work.

Purpose of the Digital Connectivity Grants Programme, 2023-25

In Autumn 2022 **VOLA Consortium** was contracted by the LCRCA to design and manage a Grants Programme to enable Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) sector organisations across the city region to apply for funding to deliver community-based digital inclusion services to their communities and/or specific client groups. The primary focus was on supporting places where people can go to 'get online' and that support LCRCA Digital Inclusion priorities.

The overall purpose of the Programme has been to support VCFSE sector organisations to:

*   Improve public-facing IT (i.e. computer drop-in) facilities
*   Create new facilities in priority (digitally excluded and deprived) areas where there is currently no, or sparse digital inclusion provision.

Theory of Change

The Programme's Theory of Change, developed in 2023, outlines the key elements of the proposed approach:
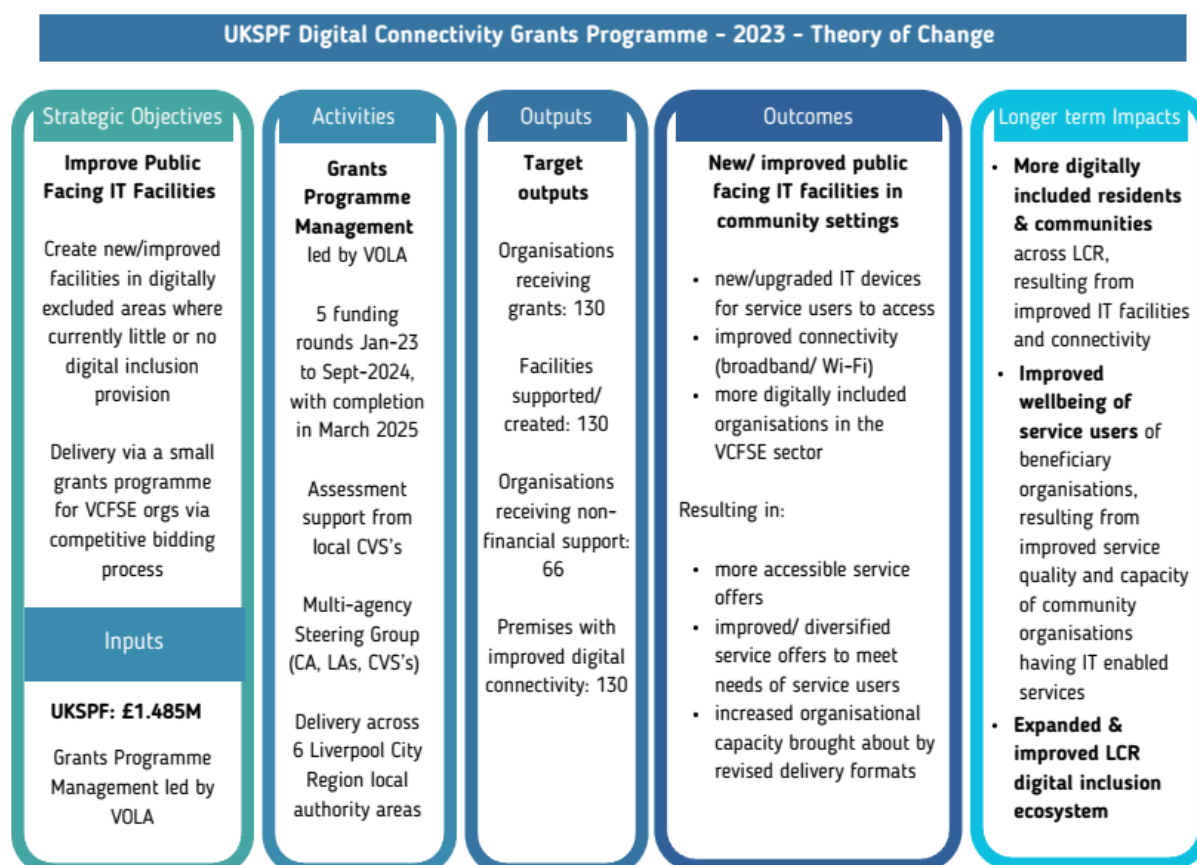
The overall aim of the Grants Programme has been to:

- Upgrade outdated &/or poor quality digital kit (computer devices) and/or improve broadband connectivity, where existing kit and/or connections were being poor.
- Increase capacity: purchase more digital devices, where current facilities were insufficient to meet demand.
- Target neighbourhoods, where there was a lack of community-based digital facilities, to help local community-based organisations to set up new ones.
- Support end-user beneficiaries who primarily are residents of the Liverpool City Region. In terms of members of the public that accesses facilities funded through the grants, there were no defined criteria or restrictions. Eligible organisations were themselves the primary grant beneficiaries.

Management Systems & Processes

The Consortium Manager, who also acts as the Grants Programme Manager, is supported by a small team including a finance/monitoring officer and administrator. The team established a range of policies, procedures and processes prior to the launch of the first funding round, with ongoing review and improvement thereafter, to oversee the effective management and governance of the programme, covering:

Applicant eligibility, application and assessment processes - including organisational due diligence and programme governance.

Financial management – including procedures and a timetable for submission of monitoring evidence by Beneficiary Organisations, in line with detailed Grant Funding Agreements, with information collated and reported quarterly by VOLA to the LCRCA.

Performance and compliance monitoring – including submission of output/ outcome monitoring evidence and site visits to Beneficiary Organisations to ensure compliance with funding requirements.

Promotion & Advertising – including marketing of the opportunity via VS6 partners, the CA convened Digital Inclusion Network, Local Authorities, VOLA's own member networks, wider partners, and referral agencies.

Communications – Over the 5 funding rounds, this has included regular reporting to the Programme Steering Group and maintenance of a dedicated programme webpage on VOLA's website[3], which has been regularly updated in relation to eligibility and guidance, with the inclusion of short videos to make it more appealing and easier for organisations to make informed decisions on whether or not to apply.

Evaluation – Beneficiary Organisations were required to submit brief reports to demonstrate the impact of the grant, with optional case studies of service users also provided by some. This information is fed into the overall evaluation process to provide a key input in measuring the effectiveness of grant and other support offered through the programme. It has been supplemented with a recent follow-up online survey of Grant Beneficiary Organisations.

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[3] UKSPF Digital Connectivity Grants

Programme Funding

- The Grants Programme has been funded through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UK post-Brexit successor to the EU Structural Funds programme, ESF & ERDF). It is positioned in the *'Communities and Place'* Investment Priority, under the *'Support for the voluntary and community sector, including digital and financial inclusion'* funding strand (UKSPF E15 intervention).[4]

- Out of a total UKSPF investment of £1.485 million, £1.303m was made available over 5 grant rounds between January 2023 and March 2025. The remainder of the budget was allocated to grant management and administration.

- Funding was allocated across the 6 LCR boroughs in line with UKSPF funding targets (Halton 7.87%, Knowsley 10.14%, Liverpool 33.17%, Sefton 16.79%, St Helens 12.19%, Wirral 19.84%).

- Grants of, typically, between £2,500 and £10,000 were available per application, paid in advance on receipt of signed acceptance of the grant offer and required documentation.

A total of 5 Grant Rounds were administered, with the following launch dates for each round:

Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	Round 5
January 2023	June 2023	November 2023	May 2024	September 2024

Original performance targets were as follows:

Output Targets	
Number of organisations receiving grants	130
Number of facilities supported/ created	130
Number of organisations receiving non-financial support *(Target subsequently replaced – see below)*	~~66~~
Outcome Targets	
Number of premises with improved digital connectivity	130
Increased users of facilities *(Replacement for above 'non-financial support' target)*	130

Changes to Original Targets

Due to the agreement of targets prior to release of detailed guidance by central government, subsequent evidence requirements rendered the 'non-financial support' target impossible to achieve from the outset, as only reductions in costs or increased turnover/profit resulting from the support could be counted. Support of this nature was never planned and did not fit with the purpose of the Grants Programme, so the output measure became redundant. This was replaced with the 'Increased users of facilities' outcome indicator. No formal change control was requested/ processed by the LCRCA in respect of this change, but it was accepted in working practice from the programme's outset.

Similarly, the 'improved digital connectivity' target was also agreed in the absence of detailed evidence requirements, having been set on the basis of improved connectivity as a result of new computers/ digital devices counting towards the target, not solely increased internet connectivity speeds, as subsequent UKSPF guidance dictated.

It became apparent from the first funding round that insufficient numbers of applicants were requesting funding for improved broadband, with the majority focussing on computer hardware and significant numbers on internal network/Wi-Fi improvements, rather than broadband upgrades.

Although the issue was raised with the LCRCA, no change control was processed to reduce the target, with VOLA continuing to work towards the original target of 130, in the acceptance of a likely deficit.

Eligibility: Competitive Application Process[5]

Applications were open to LCR-based, grassroots VCFSE (not-for-profit) sector organisations, with a maximum turnover of £1.5m in the most recent financial year; and which had been in existence for at least 12 months.

Geographical Targeting

Clear guidance was developed from the outset, with applicants made aware of the requirement to clearly justify the need for their project in the application. Local intelligence and ward level data was provided and links made available from the LCRCA Digital Access Interactive City Region Map. Whilst a key priority was on digitally excluded geographical areas, especially those with no or little provision, applications were also welcomed from thematically focused organisations that work with marginalised and digitally excluded groups.

Expenditure: Eligible & Excluded Costs

Originally, funding was not aimed at improving organisations' general IT infrastructure. Following Round 3, this was reviewed and general IT infrastructure improvements became eligible in certain boroughs experiencing underspend (firstly St Helens and Wirral in Round 4, followed by Knowsley in Round 5).

Eligible Cost/ Expenditure Type	• Broadband connectivity • Computer devices • Necessary software/ licenses • Necessary ancillary accessories and equipment • Supplier configuration and installation costs • IT suite furniture • From Round 2 - physical security devices and storage/charging units
Ineligible Expenditure	• General organisational overheads • Capital building works • Staff costs • External contractor costs to deliver training or other activities • Funding to upgrade staff equipment – except for R4/5 flexibilities • Ongoing IT maintenance/ support contract costs • Equipment to be lent out to participants • Equipment for venues used but not owned or leased

Grant Application Process

A summary overview of the Grant Administration and Management process is outlined in the figure below. Applicants were invited to submit a formal application form (together with copies of their most recently published set of accounts and Annual Report for their last financial year) to VOLA by a specified deadline, with a 4-week response window.

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[5] UKSPF Digital Connectivity Grants

Management & Administration of Grants Programme Process

Grant Opportunity Established	Application Assessment Process	Grant Approval	Post Award	Adaptations & improvements by Grant Round
Grant Guidelines established	**VOLA recruits, briefs and assigns panel assessors in 6 LA areas**	**Successful applicants informed** of provisional approval	**Variations negotiated** with successful applicants	**R2**: • Expansion of eligible expenditure • Application form amended • Technical Tips briefing improved, delivered by IT professional • Briefing video produced for website • Borough focused workshops introduced • Halton & St Helens targeted
Grant Round timing scheduled	**Due diligence checks** undertaken on all applicants, each round	**Queries & conditions resolved**, pre-grant monitoring evidence submitted	**Progress review meetings** with Grant Recipients	
Funding Round Opens high profile promotion and engagement including VS6/ LA partners	**Panel assessors review applications** using agreed scoring system	**Grant Agreements** issued & grants paid	**Compliance & performance monitoring** by VOLA Team	**R3**: • Targeted promotion, e.g. Advice agencies, Knowsley HAF providers
VOLA fields enquiries from VCFSE orgs signposting to application support from local CVS & professional IT support	**Assessment Moderation Panel** held to agree recommendations to steering group	**Successful applicants publicised** Unsuccessful applicants able to apply in future rounds - feedback provided	**Post grant round review** of processes, eligibility & priorities - changes implemented as required	**R4**: • St Helens & Wirral targeted - eligibility of general connectivity improvements introduced.
Steering group established (CVS/CA/LA reps)	**Steering group** considers recommendations, making final decision re successful applications		**Quarterly Reporting** to LCRCA	**R5**: • General connectivity improvements extended to Knowsley
Application Round closes			**Final Reporting** to LCRCA **External evaluation**	

Section 3: Programme Delivery & Performance

This section provides an overview of delivery and management performance of the Programme and is based on interviews with management team members[6] and other stakeholders, including Beneficiary Organisation survey respondents (n=97), Steering Group and assessment panel survey respondents (n=17) conducted in Spring 2025. It was also informed by case study interviews with 12 Beneficiary Organisations.

Budget Allocation & Spend

Final programme spend totalled £1,485,000 representing 100% of available budget, with £1,314,850 allocated in grants, plus £170,150 management/administration costs, including the transfer of £11,745 underspend on the management/admin budget to grants spend.

Funding Awards per borough (including post-grant award amendments):

The following table shows the final position of funding allocations per borough vs UKSPF target.

Borough	No. of Grants	Value (£)	Under (+) / Over (-) Budget	% of profiled budget spent
Halton	12	£98,438	£4,117	96.0%
Knowsley	19	£136,391	-£4,256	103.2%
Liverpool	67	£457,111	-£24,872	105.8%
Sefton	33	£226,651	-£7,860	103.6%
St Helens	19	£140,225	£18,624	88.3%
Wirral	32	£256,033	£2,502	99.0%
Total	**182**	**£1,314,849**	**-£11,746**	**100.9%**
Average grant value		**£7,224**		

Delivery Volumes & Performance Against Targets

In total, over the five funding rounds:
- 182 grants were awarded to 161 individual organisations, covering 170 different sites;
- 21 organisations were funded more than once (19 twice and 1 three times); 12 of which for the same site and 8 for different sites.

The following table shows the final position against UKSPF outputs and outcome indicator targets – excluding double-counting for organisations and facilities funded more than once.

Outputs	Target	Achieved
1. No. of organisations receiving grants	130	**161**
2. No. of facilities supported / created	130	**170**
Outcomes		
3. No of premises with improved digital connectivity *(increased broadband/ internet speeds)*	130	**93**
4. No. with increased users of facilities	130	**162**

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[6] Secondary performance monitoring data from the Management Team was also reviewed as part of this evaluation process, including quarterly monitoring reports submitted to the LCRCA.

The following table shows the types of investment, in terms new and existing digital facilities:

Borough	New	Upgrade	Increase Capacity	Increase & Upgrade	General Improvements only	Total Grants	Facility Funded >1 time	Individual Facilities Created/ Improved
Halton	8	0	4	0	N/A	**12**		**12**
Knowsley	11	2	4	2	0	**19**		**19**
Liverpool	21	17	22	7	N/A	**67**	-6	**61**
Sefton	18	5	6	4	N/A	**33**	-3	**30**
St Helens	8	4	4	2	1	**19**		**19**
Wirral	17	5	8	2	0	**32**	-3	**29**
Total	**83**	**33**	**48**	**17**	**1**	**182**	**-12**	**170**

Nature of Grant Recipients & Focus of Their Activities/ Facilities

• Excluding double-counting of multiple grant recipients, funding has been awarded to a wide variety of organisations, including 76 registered charities, 19 CIOs and 66 other not-for-profit organisations (46, CICs, 11 CLGs, plus 9 others), including 12 Churches and a Mosque.

• Beneficiary organisations have wide ranging remits/ specialisms. General purpose Community Centres/Hubs continue to account for the largest proportion of grant recipients (35%), providing open-access digital facilities to their local communities. Advice, education, training & employment support providers account for a significant proportion (16%), as do organisations working with children & young people (19%), minority ethnic communities (11%), disability (9%), and mental health (6%). ***A further, more detailed breakdown is provided in Annex 2.***

Application Rate Variations Across Boroughs

• By the end of Round 5, the programme over-achieved its overall borough targets in Liverpool, Sefton and Knowsley, was very close to target spend in Halton and Wirral but slightly under-achieved in St Helens.

• Low levels of applications from Halton, Knowsley and St Helens in the first funding round were overcome in Round 2 through more intensive and targeted advertising and promotion, working closely with local CVS organisations to encourage and support more applications, including borough-specific online briefings to give more of a local feel. Application deadlines were also extended in Halton and St Helens to allow more applicants to responded to the call.

• Volumes from these three boroughs dipped again in Round 3, along with the Wirral, so further targeted promotion took place for Round 4, with particular success in Wirral and, to a lesser extent in St Helens, but with Halton and Knowsley applications remaining low. With similar targeted approaches in Round 5, Halton and Knowsley made up their deficits, but St Helens remained lower than hoped for, despite intensive targeted promotion by Halton & St Helens VCA.

• A key observation cited by the Programme Manager was that there were noticeable increases in application numbers where targeted promotion by the local CVS took place, and even more so, where face-to-face briefing sessions or local funders fayres were arranged. This was particularly noticeable in St Helens (Round 2), Wirral (Round 4), and Knowsley (Round 5).

Increased IT Service User Levels

The overall approximate increase in **weekly** IT user numbers reported by Beneficiary Organisations was 4,373, with an average increase per facility of 26, ranging from single figure increases to some with over 100, dependent on the size and nature of the organisation and its IT facility. The following table provides a breakdown by borough and funding round:

Borough	No. of Facilities	Increase in Weekly User Nos.	Average Increase		Funding Round	No. of Facilities	Increase in Weekly User Nos.	Average Increase
Halton	12	454	38		1	43	1,331	31
Knowsley	18	445	25		2	34	775	23
Liverpool	61	1,753	29		3	32	994	31
Sefton	30	505	17		4	37	773	21
St Helens	19	426	22		5	23	500	22
Wirral	29	790	27		**LCR**	**169**	**4,373**	**26**
LCR	**169**	**4,373**	**26**					

- The biggest average increase in user numbers by far is in Halton. However, one organisation reported a large increase, which in the context of the relatively low number of funded facilities compared to other boroughs, positively skewed the overall borough average.

- Noticeably lower average increases for Rounds 4 & 5 are likely to be due to the short period of time since the improvements have been made, with all R5 and several R4 funded facilities having not been open long and so are only just starting to gain momentum.

Stakeholder Perceptions of Programme Management & Delivery

Beneficiary Organisation Perceptions

- Beneficiary organisation responses to the online evaluation survey reported extremely high levels of satisfaction with all elements of the Programme's application process and the guidance, as well as the support they received individually from the Grants Team at VOLA.

- 90% of the 97 survey respondents agreed that the grants were sufficiently marketed and, similarly, that they found the application process and the grant guidance easy to follow – with over 97% strongly agreeing or agreeing with both elements. A total of 91% of respondents found the VOLA Grants team to be helpful and responsive to any queries.

Respondents Perceptions of the Grant Application Processes & Support

Legend: Strongly Agree ■ Agree ■ Neither Agree Nor Disagree ■ Disagree ■ Strongly Disagree ■ Don't Know/NA

Categories: Grant sufficiently marketed; Eligibility criteria appropriate; Application Process easy to understand; Guidance Info easy to follow; Online briefings useful; Timescales to approval reasonable; VOLA team helpful/responsive

Grant Beneficiary Organisations commented:

> *"Fantastic experience, great communication, the team were understanding and supportive of any issues we had and supported us in adapting the project where necessary."*
>
> *"I found the application process easy and efficient with the information and application guidelines being clear. The application process was also proportional in relation to the amount of grant. The VOLA team were approachable and we could have constructive conversations around the type of equipment and how we were going to use it."*
>
> *"This was the first funding application that I've written for our organisation and I found the process really accessible and manageable and the team were there to support with any questions when needed."*
>
> *"Every interaction had with the VOLA team regarding the Digital Connectivity grant schemes have been swift and responsive, as an organisation we felt independent enough to manage our project with a reliable support behind us should we come to a crossroads in the delivery. I remember during our first application there was some confusion with our application and the grants team were fast to reach out and willing to include our ideas."*

Steering Group Member Perceptions

When surveyed about their perceptions of the Grants Programme, steering group members (*n=11*) reported the very high quality of the mangement and delivery by the VOLA team, with the following agreeing that:
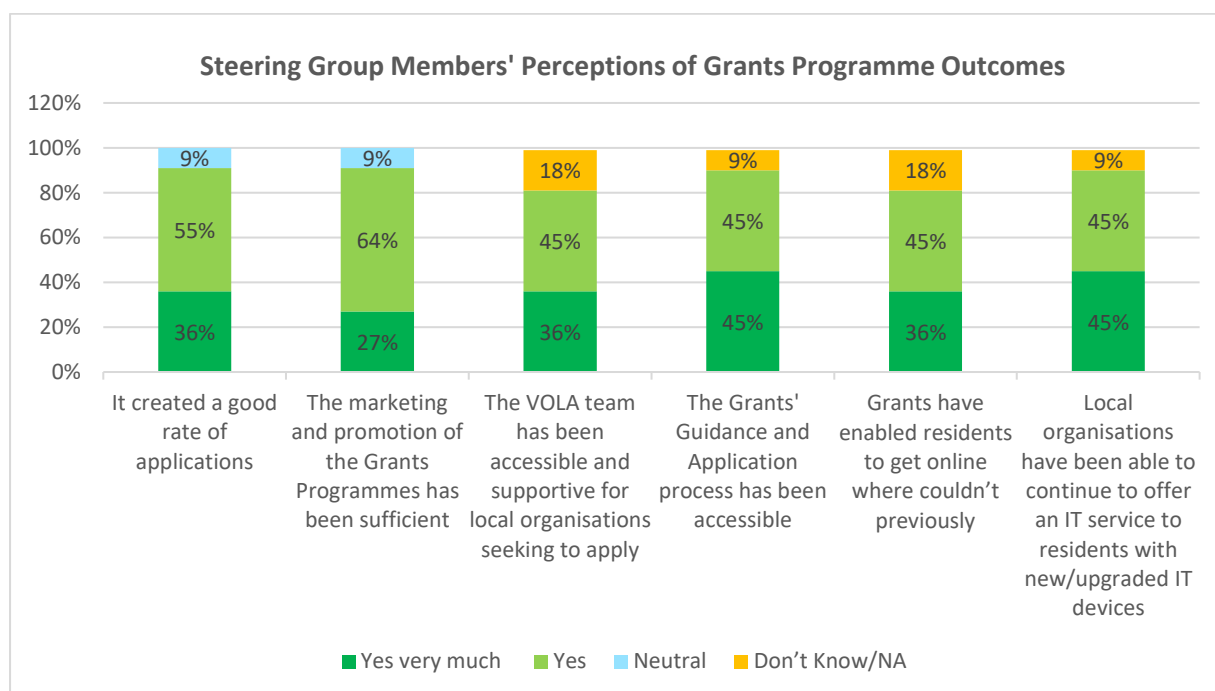
- they received good support from VOLA when asking for clarification/explanation to any queries they had (100% - very much so)

- the aims and objectives of the Grants Programme were clear and well-defined (with 91% stating very much so and 9% usually)
- they received clear and sufficient notification about meeting dates/ timetable (91% very much so and 9% usually)
- the grant assessment and decision making process was clearly defined, thorough, transparent and well explained (91% very much so and 9% usually)
- the steering group meetings were well chaired and managed by VOLA (100% - very much so)

Steering group members commented:

> *"The Chair of the meeting made it simple for steering group members to make informed decisions by providing the right background information."*
>
> *"Despite challenges posed by stringent regulations and inflexibilities with the outputs and outcomes associated with 'digital connectivity', VOLA were able to design and deliver the programme which achieved great outcomes for organisations and residents."*

Steering Group Members' Perceptions of Grants Programme Outcomes

Category	Yes very much	Yes	Neutral	Don't Know/NA
It created a good rate of applications	36%	55%	9%	
The marketing and promotion of the Grants Programmes has been sufficient	27%	64%	9%	
The VOLA team has been accessible and supportive for local organisations seeking to apply	36%	45%		18%
The Grants' Guidance and Application process has been accessible	45%	45%		9%
Grants have enabled residents to get online where couldn't previously	36%	45%		18%
Local organisations have been able to continue to offer an IT service to residents with new/upgraded IT devices	45%	45%		9%

Grant Panel Assessor Perceptions

Similar to steering group members, panel assessors responding to an online survey (n= 6) were unanimous in their perceptions of the overall quality of the grant management the assessment process. When asked the same five questions as the Steering Group members (as above), 100% of assessors responded positively.

When asked about whether the task of assessing grant applications was proportionate and manageable for them, a couple (33%) responded that it usually was, but that covering 2 local authorities was challenging in terms of time commitments.

Conclusions: VOLA Grants Programme Management

- The programme has benefitted from a strong central management unit, being managed in a proactive manner, which has enabled it to remain agile and responsive to need, whilst remaining efficient and achieving good value for money.

- VOLA's extensive project management experience and expertise ensured that the grant guidance was detailed, transparent and well-presented through supporting FAQ & other documentation, with full details on its website and a focus on responding rapidly to prospective applicants' queries.

- It became apparent at an early stage in Round 1 that there was generally a low level of in-house IT expertise amongst prospective applicant organisations, a few of which describing themselves as 'technophobes' or 'not well up on technology'. The team quickly identified the need to work with these organisations more closely than anticipated. As a result, a significant amount of time was allocated to working through early stage proposals with applicants to support them in scoping and identifying their aims and needs, and identifying suitable solutions.

- This continued throughout all funding rounds, with increased encouragement of prospective applicants to seek professional IT advice for help to scope out their needs. Team members commented on a general improvement in applications between the first and subsequent funding rounds, particularly from those that sought such advice.

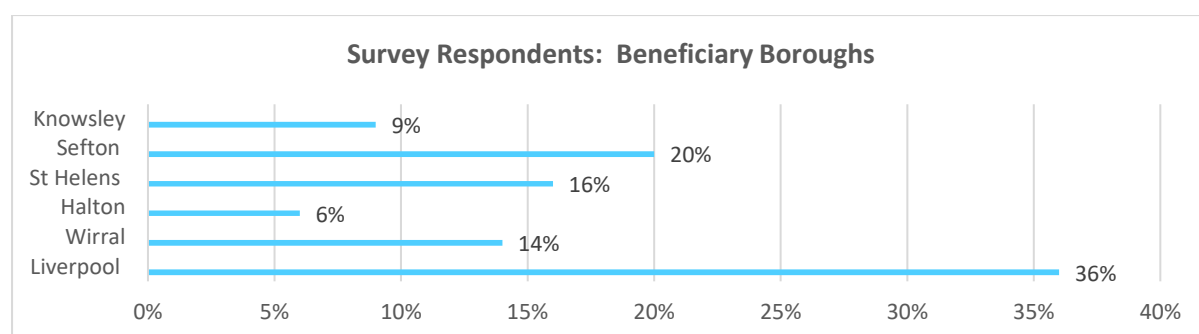# Section 4: Outcomes for Beneficiary Organisations & Service Users

Introduction

Based on qualitative evaluation feedback from Beneficiary Organisations and available secondary data related to impacts for their service users, this section outlines the key impacts of the grants for organisations and their service users. It provides an assessment of the extent to which the programme has achieved its intended outcomes and impacts. Data to inform the findings and conclusions drawn has been gathered through several methods, including:

- An online survey of Grant Beneficiary Organisations.
- Case studies of 12 individual Beneficiary Organisations, selected from the survey respondents to be reflective of the 5 funding rounds and 6 local authority areas.
- An online survey of steering group members and assessment panel members.

Identification of emerging themes has also been drawn from consultation with the management team.

Profile of Survey Respondents: Grant Beneficiary Organisations

In total, 97 survey responses were received out of 161 funded organisations, representing an excellent response rate. Reflective of the geographical profile of grant allocation, the majority of respondents were Liverpool based (36%).

Survey Respondents: Beneficiary Boroughs

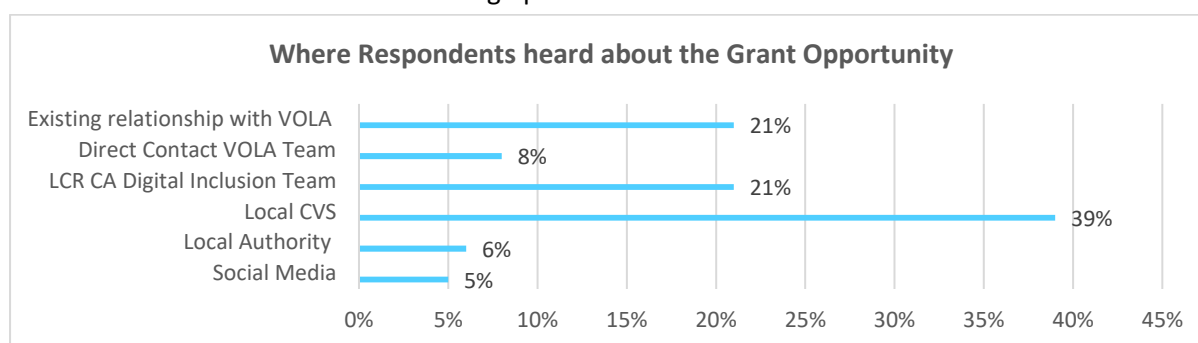| Borough	Percentage
Knowsley	9%
Sefton	20%
St Helens	16%
Halton	6%
Wirral	14%
Liverpool	36%

Respondents were involved in the following grant rounds, representing a good representation of experiences from each, and reflective of the higher number of grant awards in rounds 1 and 4:

Respondents' Grant Round Involvement

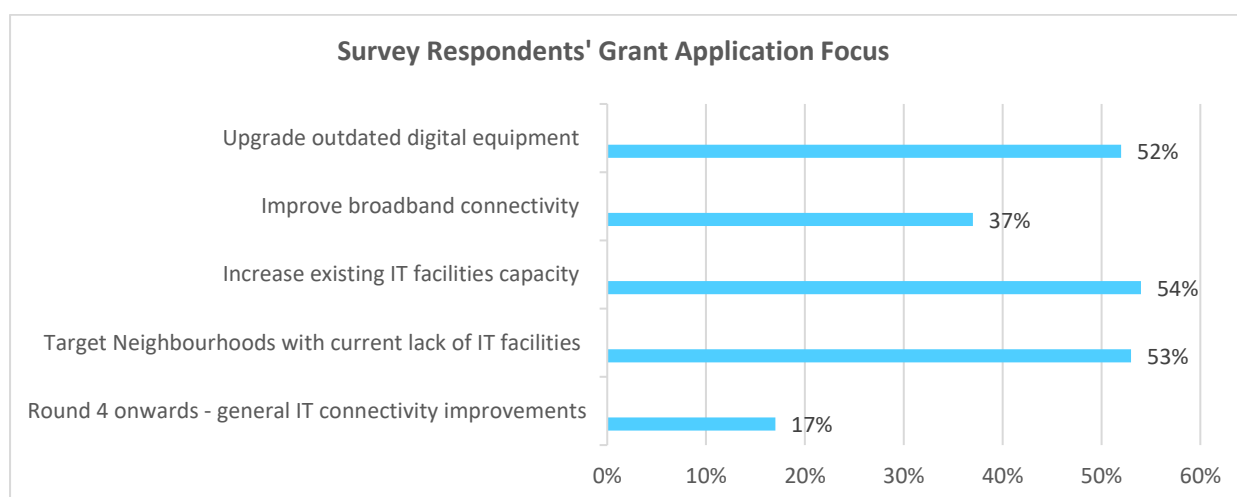| Round	Percentage
Round 5	19%
Round 4	27%
Round 3	15%
Round 2	24%
Round 1	27%
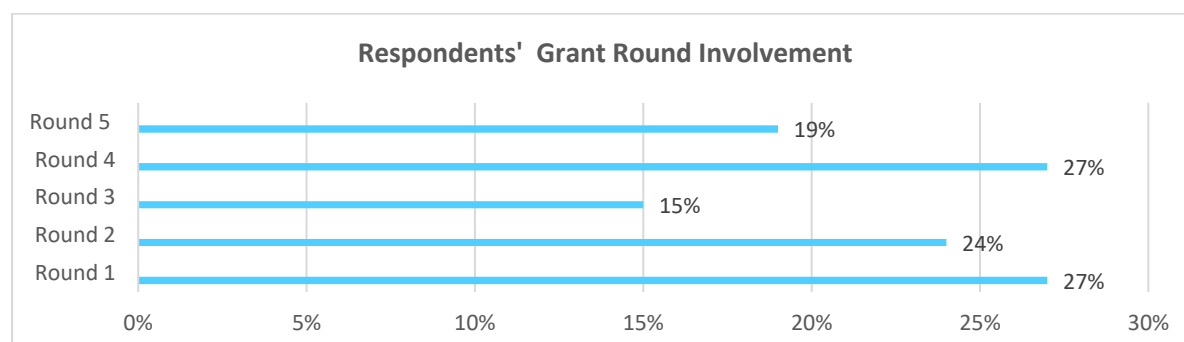
The majority of applicants heard about the grant opportunity through their local CVS (39%): the primary vehicle for the promotion of the fund. VOLA's existing networks (29%) and the CA convened

DI Network (21%) accounted for the majority of other routes of awareness to the VCFSE sector, with local authorities and social media making up the reminder.
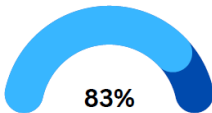
Where Respondents heard about the Grant Opportunity

Source	Percentage
Existing relationship with VOLA	21%
Direct Contact VOLA Team	8%
LCR CA Digital Inclusion Team	21%
Local CVS	39%
Local Authority	6%
Social Media	5%

The primary focus of respondents' applications was clustered around their need to update or replace outdated computers (52%); increase capacity of their IT facility (54%); and to target neighbourhoods with a lack of existing provision (53%). From Round 4, flexibilities were introduced for general connectivity/infrastructure improvements (as outlined in Section 2). Given its later introduction to the programme, this made up a much lower proportion of applications.

Survey Respondents' Grant Application Focus

Focus	Percentage
Upgrade outdated digital equipment	52%
Improve broadband connectivity	37%
Increase existing IT facilities capacity	54%
Target Neighbourhoods with current lack of IT facilities	53%
Round 4 onwards - general IT connectivity improvements	17%

Perceived Benefits of the Grants Programme

Beneficiary survey respondents were questioned about their perceptions of the grant on various aspects of their organisation's services and also their perceptions of its impact for service users.

Improved IT Capacity, Services & IT Offers

	Survey respondents commented:
83% **Increased usage of IT facilities i.e. number of users**	*"Having updated and bought more computers, people using the centre can now access them more and as they are faster as well, we have now been able to set up a digital lessons twice a week."* *"We have broadened our delivery and increased access due to number of devices at any given time. This has helped us to give more time to the newer users and longer access to people who are more proficient. We have had internet issues but that is totally out of the hands of the programme lead and is currently being dealt with by the provider. Overall, we have*

	introduced more people to the internet and computers as a whole. CV writing, emailing loved ones and even facetime to family abroad. Breaking the cycle of isolation even if only briefly. We are looking at ways of supplying to elderly/isolated individuals with families out of area."

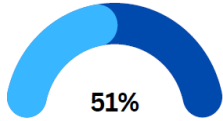**Case Study: Torrington Drive Community Association (TDCA) – Halewood, Knowsley – facility upgrades & increased access**

TDCA is a long established charity, based in Halewood, Knowsley at the New Hutte Neighbourhood Centre, providing activities to support and involve the most marginalised in the area. It works in partnership with other community groups, Halewood Children's Centre, FACE, and Knowsley Council among many others to develop positive services and outcomes for families and their community. It successfully applied for a Round 4 grant, receiving £7,465 to upgrade its Wi-fi network coverage across the site, increasing bandwidth, speed and connectivity and to purchase 10 tablets to support more service users to access online services. They were contacted by VOLA and found the team supportive, informative and ready to help with their queries.
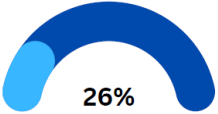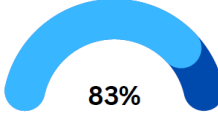
In terms of impact, staff have reported that the upgrades have resulted in increased accessibility and digital inclusion for its users. They have been able to introduce new digital literacy programmes and now host online workshops. Staff and volunteers can now support more users simultaneously, improving the overall experience, and with enhanced digital resources, TDCA has been able to recruit and train more volunteers to assist with digital inclusion projects.

Many individuals who previously struggled with the centre's outdated and limited technology can now confidently access online services, complete job applications, and engage in digital learning. For example, one regular user, a jobseeker, was previously unable to apply for positions efficiently due to slow and unreliable equipment. Since the upgrades, that service user has successfully secured employment after using the improved IT facilities to refine their CV, submit multiple applications, and attend virtual interviews.

TDCA's Chief Operating Officer reported:

"The delivery and management of the Digital Connectivity Grants have been instrumental in significantly enhancing our ability to support the community. The application process was straightforward, and the support provided throughout was excellent. The grant has allowed us to invest in crucial upgrades that have directly impacted the accessibility and quality of our services. And the improvements have enabled us to better meet the growing demand for digital skills training and job support. We've been able to support greater digital inclusion, especially for individuals facing barriers to accessing technology, and this has contributed to their personal development and improved employment prospects. Overall, the grant has had a positive and lasting impact on both our organisation and the individuals we serve."

51% **Increased length of stay per user**	*"People are spending a greater amount of time at the PAL Centre to now use the IT facilities for online benefits information, practice their driving theory test, set up UK government gateway accounts and complete homework."*

26% **Increased opening hours of IT facility**	*"Due to this grant, Shaftesbury have been able to offer upgraded facilities, increasing capacity and accessibility to 5 days weekly from 9am to 5pm."*
83% **Improved quality of IT devices**	*"In particular these new devices have enabled online tasks much easier and we have seen a huge increase in job applications being made on site – thank you!"* *"We have had an increased number of people coming in for help with forms. Before, the computers were so slow and unpredictable they tended not to bother. We have also been able to utilise computers in a range of programmes including local history and general wellbeing."*

Case Study: Veterans HQ, Liverpool – enhanced employability support offer & outreach services

Veterans HQ received a grant of £4,454 in Round 2. It supports the armed forces community, who can have challenges engaging with both non-military members of the public and statutory agencies. Previously reliant on a couple of dated PCs at its base in Anfield, by both staff, volunteers and service users, the organisation was very limited in terms of IT access for anyone in the organisation. A key priority was to access resources to upgrade its IT in order to offer access to its service users. The Director of Operations found the application process easy to follow and the support and follow up from VOLA excellent, who have been responsive and clear in their communications with him.

The grant for 12 Chromebooks, cases and a charging cabinet has had significant impacts for both the organisation and for its service users, to whom they provide tailored, one to one advice and support. The team are able to work with veterans, using the Chromebooks, to focus advice and support around mainly employability and training and as a result, over the past year, many are now finding permanent employment.
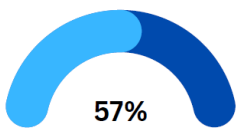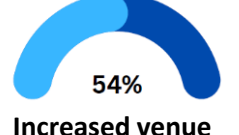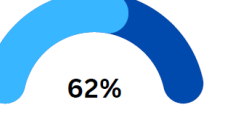
Support sessions focus on using the Chromebooks to review CVs, apply for jobs and complete online qualifications and certifications, such as food hygiene. Many veterans have Google email addresses and are advised to download the Google docs app onto their smartphones, so that they have ongoing easy access to their CVs and personal information. In addition, they are able to access JCP services and upload information to their job-search journals. Many are keen to apply for the Veteran ID card, which can only be done online and is often a first task when meeting a new service users.

In addition to guided support, some veterans have used the Chromebooks individually at the office for use in setting up as self-employed (e.g. one person set up as a CIC tennis coaching service), or accessing online counselling and increasing accessibility to support services. Staff and volunteers are also able to use the Chromebooks peripatetically in community outreach venues such as Everton in the Community, and for home visits to those who unable to participate in a group setting.

Overall, the impact of the grant has been huge in being able to offer a responsive, supportive service with a particular focus on employability and training. This type of support is sustainable by empowering veterans to get online and access services digitally and by linking this with their own Google Docs app/account for future personal use and registering for services such as Property Pool.

The Director of Operations summarised the impact of the grant as follows:

"The grant has been really good for us and our veterans – the Chromebooks are a great tool for our one to one employability work and people are getting permanent employment as a result of using them. Purchasing the equipment has given us the means and the confidence to do this and we've made huge progress in the last year as a result."

57% **Improved connectivity &/ or Wi-fi – i.e. improved broadband speeds and capacity**	*"Previously, we simply could not use any digital equipment on site as there was no Wi-Fi coverage. Now staff can work online at our community farm, users can access our digital facility. We can take payments and donations electronically."* *"The majority of our beneficiaries are Deaf BSL users. On average we have 47 users logging into our new community broadband system each week. We have seen an increase in Deaf people bringing in their own devices and asking our staff for support on how to use and understand their own technology."* *"Our internet is so much better, regular beneficiaries are really impressed with the new setup. It's also much more accessible so people in wheelchairs can now use the IT suite."* *"We had 2 networks with different bandwidth. Users flip flopped between networks losing connection if they moved around the building. We now have good connectivity throughout the building. Public using the cafe have a much enhanced experience. The grant has improved ease of comms in the building - connectivity - cafe staff – through much improved functionality."*
54% **Increased venue capacity to host/run IT skills training activities**	*"This grant allowed us to create resources to allow our community access to IT lessons/job search and gave many confidence using IT they never had previously. It allowed us to give online safety lessons and how to navigate complex online systems including applying for benefits."*
62% **Provided more drop-in sessions for public/service users**	*"One of our service users struggled to even switch on a device. He is now able to use the device and access all his benefit claims and questions, he also now uses online banking to pay bills. He has recently started to do his grocery shopping online. This is supporting his mobility and health issues."* *"Having this opportunity to be able to use the funds to purchase the equipment to offer a digital service to our students' families and local community has enhanced our engagement within the community."*

Case Study: WODIN – increased connectivity leading to improved training offer for black African immigrant women
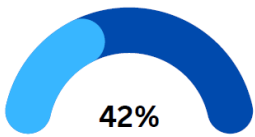
The aim of WODIN is to support women's social equity in a digital world, predominantly working with Black African Immigrant women in Merseyside who are facing digital, social and economic exclusion and inequality. The organisation offers culturally appropriate, trauma informed services, especially digital inclusion programmes and befriending services to enable service users to communicate, socialise, transact and be comfortable online.

WODIN has had a major challenge in delivering its services as its base had inadequate Wi-Fi connectivity which prevented service users (as well as its 15 volunteers) from being able to go online – especially when there were more than a few people trying to do so. Their Round 4 grant has enabled them to install fit for purpose Wi-Fi with much improved connectivity, new laptops (to replace the single dated one they all used to gather round in sessions) and associated kit to enable volunteers to outreach to women in the community. Its Chief Executive Officer reported:

"As a result of these upgrades, women can now learn new digital skills that are peer-led and in languages they understand. They also get to access volunteering opportunities with WODIN and our partners across Merseyside. Their confidence is definitely improved, isolation reduced and definitely their physical and mental wellbeing is improved. Fewer global majority women are facing digital inequity because of this initiative."

The organisation can now operate more efficiently and serve its communities in a more effective way. It has been able to significantly transform its offer: as it is now using fit for purpose Wi-Fi and devices to remove language barriers, upgrade training delivery and content, offering culturally appropriate support through offers of drop-in sessions and training held at times to suit. Summarising the impacts of the grant, the Project Director said:

"We are really grassroots with only 1.5 staff - so you can imagine how small we are. The UKSPF grant has been life changing for the organisation: the way we serve, the way we support, especially since our frontline offer is digital inclusion. So being able to actually have digital tools to serve as opposed to always having one laptop and up to 30 people all gathering around that laptop…. you can imagine. We now have 5 laptops, plus many of those women now have a device themselves, so they bring them here and we're able to support them. Before, the Wi-Fi was very glitchy, but now it's working a lot better. Since we've had the grant we've had an increase in the numbers of people supported, doubling from 20 to 40. People are coming and they are telling their friends."

42%

Improved delivery of services offered by staff/ volunteers

"The new Kiosk system has provided a range of benefits: those of data protection and confidentiality; ease of use and the option for people to work with an interpreter to meet their translation needs - as staff and services users can work together jointly on the new kiosk laptop."

"Our volunteers can now support more users with the equipment we purchased. It has been a major game changer for our outreach campaigns and 1-1 IT support needs."

Case Study: Sefton CAB: installation of IT kiosks– increased capacity & service user empowerment

Sefton CAB successfully applied for a grant in Round 3 to purchase iPads and kiosk stands for their Bootle and Southport bases. This addition to their operations has made a significant impact, not only for their service users but also for the organisation's overall capacity.

Sefton CAB returned to face to face appointments after lockdown, recognising that people wanted that personal interaction rather than online or phone contact with advisors. A grant of £9,822 was secured in order to respond to the enormous demand for appointments with advisors. They recognised that many people were looking for information that was already available online, but that they wanted reassurance and guidance as they were doing so, to access information and then apply for various benefits or further support. This has also been the case for people attempting to complete PDF forms of all types on their mobiles and realising that this was a very challenging, and sometimes impossible task.

The addition of these kiosk iPads and printers has provided an alternative form of engagement for service users with advisors, as people can drop-in and use a device and, if needed, can call on a dedicated member of staff for assistance. The waiting rooms are large enough to house iPad booths to ensure some privacy, so others working adjacent cannot see others' screens. A member of staff is able to provide guidance on which websites to access and how; and the iPads have access to only IAG sites such as Gov.uk, JCP and DWP, for example.

A separate internet connection for the new devices also ensures that the CAB's existing connection is not affected. Use is also being made by those looking to access Property Pool to apply for tenancies, and by people applying for eVisas. This kiosk system is now enabling the CAB to more easily manage waves of high demand, such as managing applications for specific benefits and migration applications – all of which assume that applicants have online access.

Senior staff commented on the positive impact of this new approach:

"The grant has enabled us to install iPads for use by those who don't actually need a one to one appointment – they simply need light touch reassurance that they are looking or applying for what they need online. It's been empowering for people using our service – they can do these things for themselves. By introducing the iPads we have also increased our capacity as its freed up individual appointment spaces, as our clients can instead use them themselves, with minimal guidance."

52%
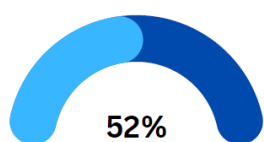
Increased footfall/use of community venue overall as a result

"The digital lounge has significantly boosted footfall to the centre, enabling people to access various services and learn more about what we offer. Figures from a survey completed by willing participants show that over a 12-month period, we recorded 248 individual users, with more than 68% visiting multiple times and 62% attending regularly. Many people accessed other services on offer as a result, for example 196 accessed free food, 165 our warm hub and 46 training courses."

"We have increased access due to number of devices at any given time. This has helped us to give more time to the newer users and longer access to people who are more proficient. Overall, we have introduced more people to the internet and computers as a whole. CV writing, emailing loved ones and even facetime to family abroad."

Case Study: ShahJalal Mosque, Wirral – New IT Suite in Birkenhead

A Round 2 grant of £9,930 has enabled this Mosque in Wirral to establish a new IT facility, where access to IT devices or Wi-Fi was not previously available. Its Community Outreach Worker related its early impact to date:

"Adding an IT suite in the ShahJalal Mosque has had a phenomenal impact on our local communities already. Birkenhead is one of the most deprived areas in the UK and we have already helped people who had multiple barriers, through this new facility: issues related to finance and income, language, travel, childcare."

She found the application process supportive and responsive and was pleased to be able to access the specialist technical support session at the start of the process, establishing an ongoing relationship with the IT firm as a result.

The new IT service offer has been designed to be culturally sensitive: encouraging women to access IT training and timetabled drop-in access to the new devices. The Mosque is now supporting many people who would not otherwise access this type of help elsewhere: including people on low income, asylum seekers/refugees, mums of young children, who struggle for time and to travel any distance, all of whom are now managing to spend a couple of hours participating in new basic IT courses delivered by Wirral Lifelong Learning Service, as well as using the computers throughout the week on a drop-in basis.

Once completing the basic IT courses, some are now enrolling on a range of other courses including in ESOL-embedded childcare, driving theory and baking courses delivered by the Lifelong Learning Service at the nearby Lauries Centre and Birkenhead Library. So the new IT facility is acting as an entry point for many Muslim women in particular: acting as a safe space for them to learn new IT skills, develop confidence and then move on to more advanced training.
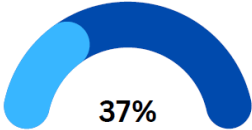
Use of the IT facility has also led to improved wellbeing for many, with reduced social isolation and many conversations, interactions and friendships flourishing amongst the people who have met at the IT suite.

As the first grant secured by the Mosque, it has had significant organisational impact for its team and the community – and they now want to further develop new IT related offer. The Mosque has also recently been a delivery partner for the LCRCA Digital Inclusion Initiative and hope to link up with local social enterprise, Transform Lives Company, to run drop-in sessions.

The Community Outreach Worker is now sharing this positive experience with other Mosques on the Wirral and elsewhere. Experience of the application process has enabled her to develop her fundraising/bid-writing skills to further develop the Mosque's wider service offer.

She summarised their grant journey:

"It's been fantastic, especially for the youth and the women, with so much excitement from people generally: they're just made-up that the community now has access to an IT suite. It's a milestone moment for us at the ShahJalal mosque and the Muslim community."

37% **Enabled other partners who use our building to enhance their offers to service users**	*"We are now able to host a weekly CAB advice session at our centre."* *"As a result we have introduced a tech career expo in partnership with Cisco."* *"We can now hire our Computer room out to other organisations and help co-deliver activities, i.e. Improve access to employment."*

Case Study: Park Farm Community Centre, Moss Bank, St Helens – improved centre usage by partners & service users

The centre received a small grant in Round 2 to upgrade their very dated PCs – replacing them with 8 laptops, an iPad and storage unit. The Manager noticed the opportunity in his local CVS info bulletin and found the application process an easy one to navigate – appreciating the prompt advice and support provided by the team to any queries he had. He explained:

"The application process was clear and manageable. I would rate it 10 out of 10 and I appreciated that the VOLA team responded quickly when we asked for support and that the team actually came out to visit us afterwards – which is rare and we really appreciated that – it doesn't happen enough with funders. I feel this gives value to our work and we can clearly show what we are doing."

Since purchasing the new IT kit in September 2024, there has been huge impact as it has enabled the Centre Manager to promote their space to several other local service providers. The centre is in close proximity to a hotel, recently home to many Syrian asylum seekers and refugees and the IT upgrade has led to support organisations renting space at the centre and accessing the IT facilities to provide support their clients. Many are women and children who need online access and support to make Home Office applications, search and apply for employment, liaise with key workers, and access local services. They are also able to keep in touch with family members.

The centre's use by other voluntary sector organisations has increased, as has the footfall from people attending support sessions with these providers. More recently these are now including the Households into Work team, who use space and the IT facilities on a weekly basis, and Digital Arts Box CIC which runs coding sessions for young people. In addition, the centre has increased its own offerings through a wider, more frequent range of youth and homework club sessions.
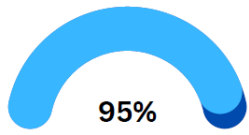
The Centre Manager commented:

"This has really taken off over the last couple of months with young people who are doing their GCSEs now using the laptops to take online practice tests and use revision sites. We could never offer this before we had the grant. Our IT has massively improved and we are looking to get a Digital Champion volunteer recruited as soon as possible to assist us in our offer. The Facilities grant has impacted us greatly and we are pleased we applied."

Whilst use of the laptops in a multi-purpose space already having such a positive impact, the centre is now keen to set up a 'proper' IT suite as soon as possible so that they can expand drop-in access for local people.

Reported Outcomes for Service Users

Beneficiary Organisations were asked their views on the impacts of the grant and resulting improvements to IT equipment and service provision for the people they work with. Highly positive results reflect the substantial levels of service user impact perceived by organisations.

Respondents reported that their service users, as a result of the Digital Connectivity Grant, had:

	Quotes from Beneficiary Survey Respondents:
95% **Reported new access to community IT facilities where there was previously a limited amount**	*"We are the only community digital centre available in Liscard, Wirral centrally, which is a huge bonus to residents and visitors."* *"The grant funds allowed us to purchase some laptops, which are used by some people in the community as well as our students to do class work. Other people use the laptops to get online to sort out issues like housing and benefits, etc. This wasn't available before."* *"The hub has been incredibly useful, we have been able to ensure that we can support service users with a variety of welfare issues, and we don't have to all huddle round one phone or laptop. We now have an IT suite which our children in both junior and senior club can benefit from."*

**Case Study: Leasowe Play Youth & Community Association**

A Wirral-based charity established in the 1970s and run by volunteers, it received a small grant of £2,400 in Round 1 of the Grants Programme for 2 PCs with webcams, monitors, computer chairs and a printer. The volunteer Treasurer who applied for the grant found the application process a straightforward one, attending the online briefing session, which he found useful.

The Association now provides open access for local residents to use the computers 3 days per week. It's proved to be extremely well-timed given the closure of the local library in 2023 and the Millennium Centre at the end of 2024. As a result, digitally excluded residents on the Leasowe estate have had no other community IT facilities, so this open access has proved to be highly valuable to many in the community. The centre's long-standing Treasurer commented:

"We have been visited twice by the VOLA team who are very supportive. As a small organisation, this has been one of the best grants we have applied for and one of the easiest to deliver with real impact for the local community."

Volunteers have advertised the availability of PCs to the community and currently, usage averages at 10-15 people per week for each of the PCs. The IT provision is open access for individual residents, with one of the PC's located in a small room to provide some privacy for online meetings as required. People use the PCs for a range of reasons: NHS and HMRC services; Teams/Zoom meetings; as well as internet searches and paying bills. Many users cite very restricted access to online services on their smartphones so this access is filling a very real gap for many.   For example, one resident has recently set up a new cleaning company and needed to complete PAYE PDF forms, which can be very challenging to do on a mobile, but has been able to do so using the PC at the centre.

In addition, a volunteer Benefits Advisor now offers weekly support to residents using the PCs to guide them through reviews of benefits. This would not previously have been possible. Overall, there has been increased footfall at the centre over the past year, with growing awareness of the freely accessible PCs. Building on this momentum, the centre has recently agreed to be the new venue for an Honesty Library, after the closure of the volunteer-led library in Leasowe and has also secured Henry Smith Foundation charitable funding for a Community Centre Manager to be employed.

97%
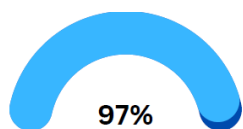
Improved IT devices providing better quality user experience

"Before receiving the Digital Connectivity funding, our equipment was really poor quality and outdated. We also had limited availability of portable equipment like laptops. The grant enabled us to improve our equipment quality and the amount of portable equipment we have. This has allowed more people to access the equipment and get a better service when they do."

"This funding has a positive impact on the individuals we support. This has allowed us to provide access to top quality digital equipment and online support… This ensures that our service users feel reassured that they can rely on us for the digital access support they need."

Case Study: Power in Partnership, Halton

Providing support for 16-24 year old NEET young people in Halton, PIP successfully applied to Rounds 2 & 3 of the Grants Programme to upgrade IT infrastructure and broadband connectivity in both their Runcorn and Widnes centres. The upgrades have been described as 'transformational' by its CEO, and the support they accessed through the VOLA team and their IT service provider (introduced via the Technical Tips sessions) were of very high quality.

Previously operating with recycled hardware, dated software and inadequate Wi-Fi, young people and staff experienced high levels of frustration throughout one to one and group support sessions due to the lack of fit for purpose equipment. With the upgrades to both Wi-Fi and devices, the organisation's offer, service user and staff experience has been hugely improved. This has included:
- Revised content of careers advice and mentoring resources – using new online resources
- Revised group training formats – now using online content and resources not previously possible
- Upgraded software and devices, which are not only available to 'NEET' service users, but also wider programmed activities including the Youth Club members, who access the IT facilities for online information, advice and recreation.
- The wider community in Halton also now see the centres as a safe place to meet with support staff, use the IT facilities, review their benefits and work goals and be signposted to other local support organisations – all improving people's wellbeing.

As a result there has been a significant increase in footfall at both centres, as well as an increase in the number of volunteers recruited to support young people.

The CEO reported:

"It's been transformational and there's so many more people using the facilities now. At one centre, until now, we have been reliant on the same recycled computers for 13 years, which weren't great. They frustrated our young people and they're already frustrated - given that they're so used to their own phones' limited capabilities. When we were asking them to do something on the laptop - research, or their English and maths - and the computer wasn't keeping up, it was a real cause of frustration and this was always at the top response from most of them in terms of what we needed to improve on. These grants have allowed us to do that!"
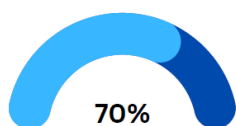
70%

Reported faster broadband connection/ Wi-Fi - improving user experience

"As a result of the IT upgrade more people can use their own devices whilst at our centre to log onto the internet, which frees up waiting time for those who do not have laptops, etc."

Case Study: Ukraine Welcome Centre, Sefton

The centre in South Sefton is specifically for use by displaced Ukrainians and has received two grants (Rounds 1 & 4) for the purchase of new devices, but most importantly, improved access to high-speed internet throughout the centre, which has greatly streamlined and improved the centre's work.

Due to the new, stable internet connection and new digital devices, the centre has been positively impacted through extended and new service offers, and with many organisational impacts, including:
- More actively attracting new service users, through its expanded online communication capabilities including increased numbers of community members who are joining online English lessons and distance learning programmes.
- Enabling service users to apply online for eVisas, fill out employment applications, resolve issues related to housing rental and utility payments, and make NHS appointments.
- Helping the Ukrainian community to keep in touch with family at home. Being able to come somewhere warm, welcoming and digitally connected where they can speak freely in their first language (rather than always translating to and from English) has been a great benefit.
- The computer suite has also enabled a group of 5 students to be supported in their GCSE preparations through weekly lessons.
- The centre can now hold hybrid events (lectures, webinars, master classes) with high-quality video communication.
- Improved connectivity has allowed the creation of a social enterprise: the Ukrainian café, which is open daily. It now has more customers who, using their own tablets and laptops, can work remotely from there. The improved Wi-Fi also helps the café to function more effectively, with the extended Wi-Fi enabling the use of EPOS card payments.
- Its charity shop has also been able to introduce EPOS card payments and promote its activities through social networks and online platforms.
- Co-ordination between employees and volunteers has improved through use of online tools, including maintenance of documents and planning events. Plus more volunteers can now join the centre's activities remotely.

In addition, a Sefton Council advice team now bases itself at the centre weekly, as a venue to provide advice and support sessions for refugees, including those from Afghanistan, Syria, Morocco. The centres' lead trustee/director commented of the programme and overall grant impact:

"I think it's been a brilliant scheme: it's been user friendly and very straightforward in knowing what you are applying for, what you have to comply with, what data you need to produce for monitoring and reporting. As a grant recipient, we've got a good relationship with VOLA.

Over 90 people a week are using these facilities and now have that ease of communication. Our Ukrainian users live on their on their phones: they live on Wi-Fi - they get air raid warnings from their hometown whenever they occur, so they know where they need to worry about their parents, which, sadly, is very frequently. They're able to keep in touch with people at home and also their other relatives who may have moved to other parts of Europe. The ease with which they can now come into the centre and they're connected and they've got the Wi-Fi speed and consistency around the building: this has made a big impact. It's where they can meet other Ukrainians - they can get support with their problems. And most working out of problems involves doing something online.

I don't want to think of how difficult it would have been for all of us if we haven't had these grants. So many of the things we do wouldn't have worked without that connectivity and a lot of our fundraising depends upon that connectivity. We would have been a shadow of what we do without what those grants have achieved. So we are really grateful - it has made a massive difference.

I was surprised, but pleased that such a grant was made available because so much funding is project driven, i.e. 'We won't fund what you're doing now. We won't fund capital, we won't fund running costs, but we'll fund the project'. But this seems a much more strategic approach because it's built capacity. And I think that is the key. It's built our capacity to work well within our organisation and for our service users - it's all been very positive."

91%
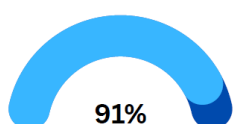
Cited there was now more access to training due to upgraded/ new facilities

"We have been able to launch free courses in photo editing and music DAWs for children, young people and adults."

"Despite a slow start, our community is now using the new computers to access food hygiene training, DBS applications and a range of arts based events and online training."

"Previously we were unable to support those with language barriers in accessing IT courses but due to the development of our Hub we have been able to support them on a one to one basis."

"We are now able not only to have drop-in sessions, but also structured computer classes where local people can get the help needed to access online services, e.g. booking appointments online, ordering prescriptions, and accessing the health records."

"Previously we did have one or two computers for individuals to use however these were in different rooms, which made running training sessions difficult. Now we have one dedicated IT suite allowing more users to be online at once, as well as making sessions easier to run."
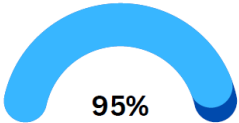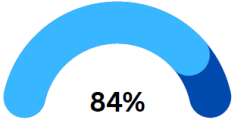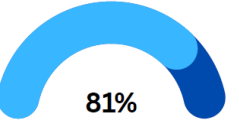
Case Study: Empowering John Through Digital Inclusion

John, a 62-year-old retired factory worker from Halewood, Knowsley had limited experience using digital technology. Living alone, he has struggled with social isolation and has been unable to access essential online services such as banking and GP appointments. Without internet access at home and no prior digital training, John faced difficulties managing his finances, staying in touch with his family, and accessing important health resources. He lacked the confidence to use computers and was wary of online scams.

With the newly improved digital facilities at Torrington Drive Community Association, John was able to sign up and attend a weekly digital skills drop-in session. He was introduced to tablet devices, learned how to browse the internet safely and set up an email account to communicate with loved ones.

As a result he now independently manages his online banking and books GP appointments; regularly joins virtual calls with his grandchildren, significantly reducing his sense of isolation, and has grown in confidence in using technology so much that he now helps other older people in the community get online.

John commented: "*I never thought I would be able to use the internet, but the support I received has changed my life. I can now talk to my grandkids anytime, and I don't feel so alone anymore.*"

95% **Reported more access to drop-in sessions to use devices**	*"This grant enabled us to purchase a range of different devices enabling digital connectivity on various platforms to support the users and drop-in services, e.g. being able to use apps on iPad/tablets and web browsers, supporting them with use of mobile phones, and also providing desktop web browsing and access to Microsoft applications."*
84% **No longer have to wait to use devices** **81%** **Can stay on devices longer due to increased capacity**	*"When we run our holiday programmes, previously, the number of users was so high that people would have to wait due to poor connectivity and under-powered PCs. At half-term there was nobody that had to wait!"* *"We originally received funding after COVID to purchase a set of laptops and these are used by our clients. However, group numbers have grown and we could not cope with a whole group using devices at once, or if we invited community members in to use them, this would stop clients using them. Now, the increased number of devices allows more people a higher frequency and opportunity of use for a longer time, as we are not having to restrict access to share around."*

Case Study: Halton Carers Centre - access to advice and services via new digital kiosks

Halton Carers Centre supports unpaid carers living in Widnes and Runcorn. It received a grant in Round 3 to purchase iPads set up on kiosk stands for use at both of its centres, and for outreach use in a range of community settings, including with young carers in schools and with all-age carers in support groups, GP surgeries and on trips. They are also used by unpaid carers within the community under the supervision of staff members.

Office based devices are mounted on kiosk stands, preloaded with selected information and advice options (housing & benefits information, wellbeing support, etc) - based on the topics most frequently requested by their unpaid carer client group. These are available on an open access basis whenever the centres are open. Since their introduction, there have been several notable impacts:

- Increased numbers 'dropping in' to use them, which, in turn, has resulted in more contact with carers by staff. So now, if people are facing additional issues or difficulties, they are more likely to mention these at an earlier stage so support can be accessed before the problem escalates.

- Carers accessing the iPads have reported that their digital literacy is improving and that they are pleased to be getting immediate answers to any potential issues they are facing. This, in turn, is increasing wellbeing and reducing stress.

Outreach iPads: staff now take iPads to their support sessions to enable carers to get online immediately, if needed to urgently access information and other services. It also enables staff to respond more effectively to their questions and general needs. Overall, the service is better able to track the needs and requirements of carers and adapt its support more rapidly.
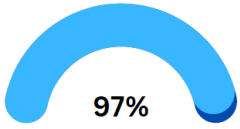
The centre has started to collect impact data, via a short online evaluation form, to assess what difference the new equipment is making, which is getting good responses. Each iPad is used on average 65 times per week. In a short, 3-month period at the start of 2025:

- 98% of users were able to find relevant information when using the iPad

- 32% accessed support to access information online – and this proved useful to them

- Although 68% stated they already felt confident using the iPad, a further 25% stated that they felt more confident in using the iPads and users found it useful having someone at the centre to support them if needed.

Carers who previously struggled to get online now have a space and a designated resource that they can access, increasing their digital confidence and reducing social isolation. One service user who uses the Carers Centre and the new devices commented:

"Using the iPad in the centre has helped me to get the information I need online. I feel more confident using the internet and know there is someone there to help me if I get stuck. I used the iPad in my session with my adult carer support worker, I told her I wanted to do more exercise and together we looked up classes and things locally I can get involved in."

Enhanced wellbeing & social inclusion of service user groups:

97% **Have improved access to online services, resulting in improved wellbeing for service users**	*"The facilities and equipment we now have are a great benefit to our community. We work with a lot of families from deprived areas in Knowsley, and internet access can be a barrier... With this grant we have bridged that gap and allowed families to use our facilities to help sign up for programmes, qualifications and job opportunities."* *"Wellbeing has been impacted by the motivation and desire to learn and by service users accessing beneficial programmes and apps. Significantly, we feel valued, and it mattered that LCR was giving us money to help…"* *"When our advisors support an individual new to the area, maybe even the country, that individual is often unaware of online sites and routes to sort necessary activities. The provision of new tablets has enabled not only the breakdown of language barriers but also the ability to showcase Universal Credit, housing or online banking. In addition, our multicultural group have seen a massive improvement to their digital access - using translated keyboards and peer support to navigate online has been a huge step in a positive direction..."*

Case Study: Ms E - Deaf Active, Liverpool
(Inclusion of young Deaf people through improved facilities and service offer)

Ms E is a young person who attends Deaf Active, based at the Joseph Lappin Centre in Old Swan. She has been able to attend the new IT sessions, which were made possible by a £7,499 Round 4 grant for this small charity. When she started, she had very little knowledge of computers. Since then she has been very proactive in attending the sessions and is gaining new IT skills weekly. She is now confident and competent in navigating G:Drive and Microsoft and is very keen to share her learning experience to support other Deaf young people who have faced similar barriers.

Until recently, Ms E has been very reliant on her mum. She did not use an interpreter and would often struggle. Over the past 6 months, as a result of improving her digital skills and confidence, she has become more aware of her rights and entitlements with regards to her communication and finances. With the support of Deaf Active, access to the computers and the opportunity to enhance her skills, her wellbeing and aspirations have improved hugely. She is currently updating her CV using skills gained over the past few months. Along with other members of the IT training group, Ms E is now creating accessible posters to support Deaf Active, and she is keen to deliver workshops for Deaf children using Canva, a graphic design platform that she has recently learned how to use.

Learning Excel has also improved her skillset and she has now taken on extra responsibilities within her workplace to input shift data. She has also become more confident in filming herself BSL signing and is now uploading her videos to edit into creative content. She would previously have needed support for each step but is now able to do this independently. She is understanding how to research online and is not as dependant on others to do this as her confidence grows. This is a big improvement as she would usually ask for help first before attempting it herself.

She uses her mobile to undertake research at home, learning how to be more creative. With support from the Deaf Active team she now uses Google maps to help her get around independently – including travelling to the centre on the bus. She is also now confident enough to participate in drama workshops as a result of her engagement with the IT course.

Section 5: Summary Impacts & Identified Next Steps for the LCR Digital Inclusion Ecosystem

The sizeable investment in this Grants Programme has supported the significant extension of more modern and fit for purpose community IT facilities, now open to residents living in some of the most deprived and digitally excluded neighbourhoods in the city region.

	Improved local offers • New/improved, fit for purpose ICT devices, fixtures and infrastructure at 170 facilities with 161 organisations receiving grant support. • Improved digital connectivity: broadband, networking & Wi-Fi solutions at 93 premises. • Substantial upgrades to IT facilities have further and rapidly developed the LCR's overall digital inclusion ecosystem, with Beneficiary Organisations integrating digital inclusion into their overall ways of working, many for the first time, and increased partnership working around this agenda (see below).
	Improved quality of service offers In addition to simply enabling better internet access to members of the public, improved connectivity and devices have resulted in <u>better quality content, format and overall delivery of many service offers</u> including: • IT and other training provision • Information and advice services, across a broad spectrum of services • Employment support • Health and wellbeing services • Children and young people's services • Arts and creative provision <u>Previous staff and service user frustrations</u> at the time spent troubleshooting problems to resolve issues caused by dated devices, software or poor connectivity have been greatly <u>resolved</u>. Service users are now also able to complete tasks online that they are unable to achieve with their own devices at home, including online job interviews, meetings with service providers such as Social Services, welfare benefit advisers, or counselling sessions. At many venues there is new public access to printers, which is cited as a big positive by Beneficiary Organisations, as people often need printed information to take away.
	More connected communities • Improved ICT facilities are <u>drawing new service users into community venues</u>. This includes both people who may previously have attended but drifted away due to frustration with the computer facilities; and new people who have never previously engaged with organisations' services. • Organisations have reported that with the draw of quality ICT facilities, as people start to attend more often, confidence grows to connect with other people using the facilities, as does confidence to engage with other services on offer. So the initial incentive of being able to access decent Wi-Fi or computers can snowball and have many other positive spin-offs.

	New/upgraded ICT facilities filling the gaps in community 'digital deserts' • These small grants are <u>filling gaps in local communities</u>, many of which have never had this type of ICT provision, or only had limited or dated kit; or have lost previous facilities in recent years through the closure of community resources such as One Stop Shops and libraries.
	Increased service capacity • Through these ICT improvements, many organisations have been able to <u>revise how they offer core services</u> and, as a result, have <u>increased capacity</u> to support more people more effectively. A key example is the introduction of kiosk stands at Advice Centres; and the Wirral-based Open Door Charity, which has increased capacity on its *Bazaar* mental health programme by 60%.
	Diversification of services • Improved connectivity, fit for purpose devices and working environments have enabled organisations to review their service delivery formats and, as a result, some have been able to improve their offers by introducing <u>new activities and services</u>.
	New/improved outreach working in communities • Some organisations can now <u>better outreach into communities</u>, offering a more accessible service to those who cannot, or will not, for various reasons, engage with community venues. For example, Halton Carers Centre young carer support in schools and Veteran's HQ home-based employability support.
	Improved digital maturity & working environments • Although aimed primarily at the general public, improvements brought about by the grants have also provided a <u>much needed upgrade to many organisations' overall digital capabilities</u>. • For several, the key enabler has been improved Wi-Fi connectivity and/or network solutions, resulting in more productive service delivery across the organisation. • Access to stable online meetings and the ability to support people remotely, as well as in person, has been a significant benefit for many. • Basic organisational functions are now better enabled for many organisations as a result of ICT upgrades, including access to up-to-date software.
	Increased partnership working with other service providers • Some Beneficiary Organisations have been able to review what and how they can offer to <u>host other service providers in their venues</u>. Some are now able to offer flexible spaces for sessional hire, or for free to partner agencies – who often benefit from use of their IT facilities.
	Catalysts for transformational change • For many, the ICT upgrade has been reported as being a '<u>game changer</u>'. With little or no access to unrestricted/ core funds to replace old computers, inadequate broadband or Wi-Fi, many were themselves operating in a context

	of organisational digital exclusion, with highly negative consequences for staff, service users and overall service quality. Cultural changes within organisations have also been reported, with the grant underpinning the opening up of services in a substantial way, enabling a whole system shift in their offers. Through the supportive process offered by the programme - of supporting applicants to thoroughly review their ICT needs, with encouragement to access professional technical advice and support - many report that the impact on their services and clients has been **"transformational"**.
	Flexing services to better meet service user needs • In many organisations, service users now have access to a wider option of activities and programmes, including IT-enabled support. For example, the kiosk stands at Sefton, Halton and St Helens CABx and Halton Carers Centre. • A further example is at Sefton's Ukraine Welcome Centre, where improved Wi-Fi connectivity has transformed its onsite café, which provides a much needed (and now more widely used) informal meeting point for service users.
	Improved wellbeing & confidence in communities through improved access to IT facilities • Access to services enabled by ICT improvements has led to substantial increases in service users' reported confidence, wellbeing and satisfaction levels. • A further direct impact for service users is that of reduced social isolation and greater opportunity for involvement in training, leisure and social activities, as well as employability support services. • Improved service user wellbeing is a **universal impact** cited by all those consulted, through people being able to access online information; services; communicating with family and friends; and feeling more empowered to access such online services. **This is a key impact of the Grants Programme.**

The LCR Digital Inclusion Ecosystem: impact of the Grants Programme on its development

In addition to the organisational, service user and wider community benefits of the Grants Programme, it has, over the past two years, also played an important role in the growth and development of the LCR Digital Inclusion ecosystem, through the following:

• **Collaborative working between digital inclusion stakeholders:** continued successful collaborative working between VOLA and the LCRCA is supporting the emergence of a more coordinated digital inclusion ecosystem across the city region. This has built on existing Digital Inclusion Hubs, which have been part of Good Things Foundation model of digital inclusion working at national level[7] (previously referred to as UK Online Centre network). Coordinated mapping and publicity of community IT resources remains a key priority for the LCRCA Digital Inclusion Team.

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[7] Good Things Foundation Website

- **Grant Beneficiary Organisations:** since receiving the grant, many have become more participatory in the LCR digital inclusion ecosystem; and indeed some are reporting that they are starting to engage in the DI agenda more widely. 63% of survey respondents reported being registered with the LCRCA Digital Inclusion Network, which for many represents the first time they have begun to participate more proactively in the wider digital inclusion landscape.

- **Increased confidence to engage:** many organisations consulted commented on how the grant has given them confidence to start to address, or more fully participate in further digital inclusion opportunities, for both their service users and organisation generally. A chronic lack of core/unrestricted funding for IT investment over many years; lack of access to affordable specialist IT support, as well as low digital skills levels amongst staff and volunteers were commonly reported. As a result of the grant and DI Network membership, many more are now starting to recognise the fundamental need to embed digital inclusion in their core activities and development plans.

- **Raised digital inclusion profile**: with their role in promotion of the Grants Programme and membership of the steering group and assessment panel, the profile of digital inclusion has been further raised within local authorities and social infrastructure support organisations across the LCR. There remains, however, a lack of dedicated digital inclusion roles, expertise and resources within many stakeholder organisations more generally, which restricts strategic activities to embed digital inclusion at pace.

Future Direction of the Grants Programme

Steering Group Member and Panel Assessor Views

Both steering group members and panel assessors were asked in the online surveys about their views on the future direction and targeting of the 2025-26 Grants Programme.

When asked if they thought there are specific communities, organisations or digitally excluded groups still in need of this type of grant in their respective local authority area, steering group members identified the following as examples:

- Digitally excluded residents across LCR who do not 'belong' to any organisations or community groups who tend to be socially isolated individuals. For example, retired older residents living alone. These individuals are often 'hard to reach' in terms of marketing and promotion. They tend not to take up the offer of digital support provided via community groups and need to be specifically targeted.

- A significant number of organisations that are not currently engaged with existing VCFSE, trade body or community networks, and are not on the mailing lists for these types of funds – with identified need to try to link these up with the LCR DI Network.

- Continued demand from micro groups such as 'Friends Of' groups and that there are still some anchor organisations that require capital grant input.

- Another consultee stated that across Halton and St Helens there had been sufficient funding for 'improved connectivity' (i.e. broadband), but that there was still demand for computer devices and associated equipment.

Future Eligibility Criteria

- When asked about future eligibility criteria and grant values, steering group and assessment panel survey respondents had mixed views, though a slight majority agreed that the maximum grant level should remain at £10,000.

- The majority (64%) of steering group respondents stated that eligibility in relation to applicants' maximum income level should remain at £1.5m, with assessors more divided in their views.

Some steering group members expressed the following views about potential future changes:

> **"***We want the funding to go to the smaller organisations who don't necessarily have the experience or staff to bid for funding but do operate very locally. Leave the maximum at £10k. While this will reduce the numbers of grants handed out, you can't get much for under £10k but priority could be given to smaller projects who ask for less.*"
>
> "*Given the increasing pressures on VCFSE regardless of the size of the balance sheet, this programme should be well resourced and inclusive to the whole sector. Conscious that organisations with the larger balance sheets are those most affected by the Budget decisions in play.*" [ref. Employer's NI increase]
>
> "*There are some larger organisations with a broader reach who may be able to deliver and support residents but are currently restricted due to financial constraints - obviously we want to ensure that those in most need are getting the grants rather than large national programmes, but if uptake is low, this may be a route to support flexibility. The Grant limit of £10,000 should remain as it is a sensible medium.*"

Changes to Geographical and Thematic Grant Targeting

- There were mixed views as to whether the programme should be more geographically targeted than it is now: with 55% of steering group members and 50% of assessors stating it should stay the same.
- Amongst steering group members there is also majority support that the programme should be more thematically targeted than currently, and that it should be opened up to organisations that deliver purely outreach support (64% and 55% respectively).
- A significant majority of steering group members (82%) and panel assessors (67%) supported the introduction of funding flexibilities to all boroughs (previously restricted to only 3 LA areas) to allow 'general connectivity' improvements to community facilities without the need for developing 'public-use' computer facilities.

Two steering group members commented:

> "*Opening the programme up to outreach organisations would help target those who don't want to be involved with the traditional Third Sector groups. Targeting thematically may be a good way of targeting new groups of excluded individuals.*"
>
> "*....there is more we can do to target certain areas IN ADDITION to the broad geographical approach, if we are clear the evidence is there to showcase that there is a lack of uptake or provision in an area. ... I do believe that we should look at focusing support on specific groups - we can produce targeted support on certain cohorts in need, aligned to the Governments new Digital Inclusion Action Plan categories... keeping the broader VCSFE setting.*"

Future Digital Inclusion Support Needs

Stakeholder Perceptions

All stakeholders were asked about their views on future needs in relation to digital inclusion investment and support.

- The majority of Grant Beneficiary Organisations, steering group members and panel assessors agreed that there needed to be access to further capital equipment funds and revenue support to fund IT training delivery staff.
- However there were mixed views on the need for access to training for staff in relation to digital inclusion, and for IT skills training for staff and volunteers more generally; with, perhaps

surprisingly, a far larger proportion of steering group members and panel assessors considering them key priorities than the Beneficiary Organisations themselves.

Focus of future digital inclusion investment: stakeholder views

Category	SG member & Assessors	Beneficiary orgs
Acccess to staff training for IT generally	70%	45%
Access to staff training in DI	60%	37%
Access to revenue for IT staff	74%	67%
Access to capital for kit	70%	77%
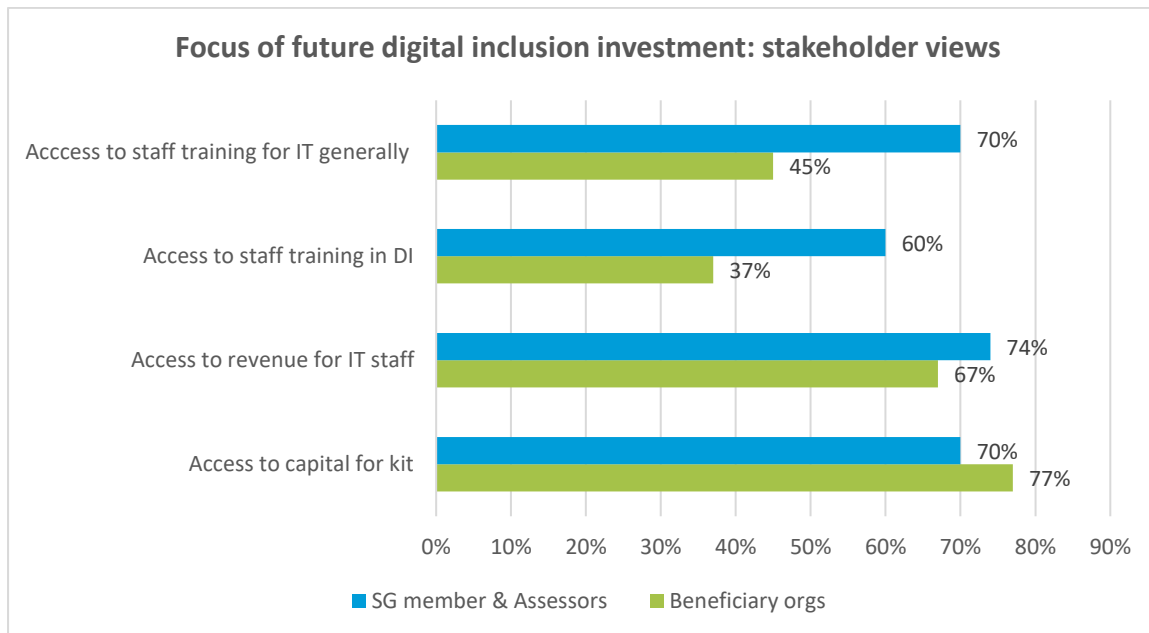
Assessment panel members explained their responses:

> *"Digital Inclusion training is needed – more training for volunteers and grassroot organisations: revenue support would complement capital."*
>
> *"I think there is a need for groups and organisations to be able to improve their kit and connectivity which enables them to continue to provide services. There is a growing need for groups to understand how technology can support their delivery - AI and Power BI."*
>
> *"Ongoing support is important especially for groups often reliant on volunteers and where volunteer/ staff changes occur."*

Some steering group members had the following views in terms of future priorities:

> *"Costs to improve the staffing and revenue related funds would be of immense value to many organisations to support the work they do, but many feel put off from applying because they don't have the necessary capacity to deliver on any associated outcome requirements"*
> *"There still remains high demand for capital but also, importantly, revenue funding to support capacity and delivery. Also to build capacity in organisations as digitisation becomes the norm and to enhance service offers and keep pace with technology."*
>
> *"I think digital inclusion will be a constant priority for all organisations as technology develops. VCFSE groups may not themselves want any full-time IT support in-house, nor would it necessarily make economic sense, but local VCFSE groups may want a pro-rata equivalent of ongoing IT training and support e.g. 7hrs per week. Funding this sort of infrastructure support via a third party e.g. a local infrastructure organisation, could support an IT specific post(s) that can provide IT capacity building and infrastructure support to a larger number of local groups than ad hoc awards to individuals organisations."*

Beneficiary Organisation Views about future IT needs

When asked whether they thought they would have been able to invest in IT and connectivity improvements without their grant, 100% of survey respondents stated that they would not have been able to (43% probably not and 57% definitely not).

Importantly, some key themes emerged when asked about views on future priorities in relation to their role in improving digital inclusion, including:

Revenue support for:
- IT staff, as a priority – dedicated staff or sessional workers to allow community organisations to provide structured digital literacy training, one-to-one support and troubleshooting assistance.
- Priority IT challenges over the next 6-18 months, including: replacement of other outdated computers (not funded by grant), which some have identified as not being suitable for a Windows 11 upgrade, or move to Microsoft 365.
- Digital subscriptions e.g. MS Office, Zoom.
- Access to online training platforms to support hybrid delivery of services.

Further capital funding for equipment:
- To enable <u>regular</u> upgrading of IT infrastructure to ensure continued provision of high-quality digital services, including assistive technology to support individuals with additional needs.

Suggested areas to factor into future funding eligibility included:
- For some, new challenges are already arising where there has been a significant increase in service users, putting pressure on the existing broadband, which now needs to be upgraded to keep up with demand. Some organisations requested that this is factored into future funding rounds.
- Requests to open up eligibility to applications for equipment used purely for outreach activities.

In summary

The management of the Digital Grants Programme has created high levels of valuable local intelligence in relation to the IT needs, demand and challenges facing many VCSFE sector organisations – in terms of their own digital exclusion and that of their service users. This is coupled with complementary (and often more detailed) intelligence gained from VOLA's long-term management of the Include-IT Mersey digital skills programme.

The following section provides an overview of the identified success factors enabling effective and efficient delivery of the programme, as well as suggested operational and strategic recommendations.

Section 6: Programme Success Factors & Recommendations

Overall the 2023-25 UKSPF Digital Connectivity Grants Programme has been delivered to budget and has very largely achieved its target outputs and outcomes, significantly exceeding 3 of the 4. Not only has the programme been delivered professionally and efficiently, it has also achieved significant impact for its direct beneficiaries (grant recipients), as well as wide-ranging impacts for their service users.

VOLA has managed this Grants Programme in the context of a VCFSE sector which is highly stressed and under-resourced: from very small grassroots community groups, through to larger community anchors and social infrastructure organisations. Recent profiling of digital inclusion levels of the VCFSE Sector nationally[8] is reflected by small charities and voluntary & community sector organisations locally: with smaller charities having much lower digital skills and capacity than larger charities, and this gap appears to be increasing. Barriers to moving forward with digital engagement include squeezed organisational finances, lack of organisational headspace and capacity, and the difficulty of finding funding to invest in digital infrastructure, systems and tools.

Digital Connectivity Grants Programme: Success Factors

The programme has developed a service model which is highly successful in supporting improved digital capacity within disadvantaged communities, increasing the digital maturity of Beneficiary Organisations and enabling improved access to and use of digital resources and services by digitally excluded residents. These achievements have been made possible through several key success factors:

- **Strong Grants Programme management**: providing a high quality application experience for organisations, many of which far from being digitally enabled (infrastructure/skills) and without other means of support to address this organisational and ultimately community issue.

- **Delivery model based on trusted VCFSE members and networks:** the flexible and supportive approach of the VOLA team, often building on existing trusted relationships with local VCFSE partners, has produced highly positive experiences for all involved.

- **Multiple small grants rounds format:** with five grant rounds staggered over a 21 month period, applicants were able to apply when suitably prepared and ready to maximise the funding opportunity. As a result, organisations have been able to use the grant not simply to upgrade IT facilities, but to also consider potential wider opportunities the improvements could bring about and then introduce, adapt or grow existing and new service offers. Having multiple rounds also enabled unsuccessful applicants to apply in subsequent funding rounds.

   The multi-round approach has proved to be a successful formula, pitched at the right size of grant (£10k max) and applicant eligibility, rather than providing a one-off large grant fund open for a single round of applications.

- **Expert IT advice for applicants -** responding to feedback from Round 1 applicants, the introduction of an enhanced 'technical tips' briefing (initially delivered in-house and subsequently by an external IT professional) was a positive development. This provided more in-depth guidance in relation to assessing organisational IT requirements, which proved to be highly beneficial for both applicants that took up the offer and for the VOLA team. This was reflected in more informed and practical funding requests, with higher quality applications generally submitted by organisations that attended the briefings and/or taken professional advice.

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[8] The Charity Digital Skills Report is an annual assessment of digital skills, attitudes, and needs within the UK charity sector. It focuses on the ongoing digital transformation of charities, gathering data on skills, support, and funding needs. Established in 2017, this report serves as a barometer for how charities are adapting to digital changes and informs funding and support strategies across the sector.Charity-Digital-Skills-Report-2024

Overall Programme Alignment

- The Grants Programme has had a significant, positive impact on the city region's digitally excluded communities and demographic groups. With significant over-achievement in the number of IT facilities created and increased user numbers at these venues, the Grants Programme has played a vital role in expanding and sustaining the core foundations of the emerging Liverpool City Region digital inclusion ecosystem.

- In relation to how well the programme is aligning with and complementing other local activities, it is important to outline the context in which it was delivered. As outlined in Section 2, the programme was conceived and designed at pace in 2022, by the CA Investment Team and VOLA, through consultation with the VS6 Partnership.

- There was limited UKSPF guidance available nationally at the start of the design process, and a relatively low level of strategic direction in relation to effective digital inclusion interventions at that point. It is apparent that the programme was very well informed by VOLA's local intelligence and networks, which have underpinned its promotion and delivery, responding well to identified LCR digital exclusion 'hot spots'. Use has been well made of VOLA's 2022 DI research and mapping.

- Building on this complementarity, the Grants team has strived to align, support and complement the various emerging digital inclusion programmes across the city region in recent years, including the CA's Digital Inclusion Initiative (DDI) and LCR Cares digital inclusion grant fund.

- Digital inclusion stakeholders have started to link these various initiatives together. For example:
    - The proactive targeting of successful grant applicants by VOLA and the CA to encourage wider involvement in the DI Network and the DDI initiative, providing added value to each.
    - Sharing of information between VOLA and the Community Foundation for Merseyside to provide complementarity between this grants programme and the LCR Cares DI fund.
    - Close working with the Include-IT Mersey project, facilitating the delivery of outreach courses at some Beneficiary Organisation's premises; and several Include-IT partners benefitting from investment from the grants programme.

- Strategic stakeholder partnership working to seize the opportunities created by this grants programme are now key in upscaling to a more integrated digital inclusion offer to residents across the city region - this has been identified as a priority in the CA's Digital Inclusion work programme.

- This programme has enabled the next stage foundations of a network of local, accessible, fit for purpose digital inclusion facilities, and wide-scale, co-ordinated promotion to the most digitally excluded residents is vital to ensure that these resources are effectively accessed and public-use maximised (see recommendations below).

In summary, through the grants programme, VOLA has been successful in delivering targeted funding and support to assist small to medium VCFSE organisations and groups with their capacity, skills and time to focus on digital and organisational development. The grants programme has been highly complementary to other local digital inclusion initiatives launched in recent years.

Launch of National Digital Inclusion Action Plan, February 2025 – Implications for the LCR Digital Inclusion Ecosystem

In February 2025, the national Digital Inclusion Action Plan[9] was presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT). It details how over the next year, 2025-26, the Government is focusing on the following priorities:

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[9] Digital Inclusion Action Plan, February 2025

- Launch of an ambitious Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund in Spring 2025 to support local initiatives that increase digital participation, to be delivered in partnership with local leaders and devolved governments.

- Enhanced support for the framework that helps people and businesses get the essential skills they need to get online safely and with confidence.

- Pilot a proof-of-concept, multi-department device donation scheme with the Digital Poverty Alliance to provide re-purposed government laptops to those that need them.

- To make government digital services easier to use with a renewed focus on digital inclusion, for example by improving the whole experience for users and increasing the number of services that use GOV.UK One Login.

- Measurement of what works on digital inclusion, identifying where the need is greatest, and establishing the economic and social value of upskilling adults with digital skills.

The Digital Inclusion Action Plan states that:

'Digital inclusion is an intersectional and cross-cutting issue that cannot be solved by government alone. We know that digital inclusion interventions work best when government, the private sector, the third sector, local authorities and devolved governments work in partnership to deliver tailored and impactful schemes that fulfil the needs of local communities.' (section 4.3).

Its intention is to implement a holistic approach to digital inclusion policy, with government working in partnership with those *'who know what works best across the UK'*, outlining roles and responsibilities as including the following to address digital exclusion:

- The third sector, including charities and non-profit organisations, which plays a vital role in supporting and amplifying the voices of underserved communities. By directly engaging with digitally excluded individuals, these organisations advocate for inclusive policies, foster collaboration with local governments, and build trust within communities.

- Recognising devolved government's existing work in tackling digital inclusion and the devolved nature of several key policy areas, they will continue to provide strategic direction for digital inclusion, share best practice, and lead on devolved policy areas such as skills. By working with devolved governments, we can develop a common framework from which to work and this will help provide a more strategic approach to measuring individual and shared successes.

- Local authorities, including Mayoral Combined Authorities will be key to the delivery of digital inclusion interventions. By convening and conducting activities in their local areas, they can deliver tailored and targeted, community-based initiatives in collaboration with the private sector and third sector organisations.

In the context of this rapidly evolving digital inclusion policy landscape, the following short and medium-term recommendations are made.

Recommendations for Operational and Short-Term Priorities

- Review and refresh of the overall geographic and thematic targeting of future grant funding rounds – to include recognition of the potential delivery impacts of increased community demand on recently funded IT facilities and the issue of supporting them to stay current and well maintained. I.e. ongoing license costs, maintenance and upgrading requirements (hardware and software).

- Grant application assessment processes need to be reviewed to take account of the immediate impacts of the 5 grant rounds on the current map of community IT provision, with evidence of localised digital exclusion needing to be carefully considered when assessing future applications. Sharing updated digital inclusion intelligence in a structured and evidenced way needs to be

central to VOLA's ongoing programme management and collaboration with assessors, steering group members and prospective applicants.

- Linked to this, the local digital inclusion ecosystem has developed rapidly in the last 2 years and assessment panel membership may benefit from the inclusion of emerging specialist DI partners operating at borough/LCR level – in terms of operational and strategic leads within local authorities or social infrastructure support organisations.

- Rapid sharing of good practice and lessons from the 2023-25 programme: to encourage more creative, innovative grant applications and community delivery, supporting more customised approaches. This could be done by a refreshed communications plan for the programme in partnership with the CA Digital Inclusion Team.

- **Development of a social value measurement tool** for use by those involved with digital inclusion activity across the city region. This Grants Programme has undoubtedly achieved a wide range of outcomes and impacts, but attempting to quantify the wider, aggregate social value is challenging.

- Moving forward, any future programme would benefit from a detailed social value assessment using an agreed collaborative approach. This needs to be developed in partnership with the Combined Authority's Digital Inclusion and Investment teams, and Social Value lead officer. Social value measurement is included in the CA's Digital Inclusion workplan but has not been progressed as yet. **There is opportunity for VOLA to work collaboratively in this development process, which is recommended for consideration as an LCR investment priority for government's impending Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund**.[10]

Recommendations to support Future Strategic Investment: Medium-Term, 2026 onwards

To facilitate alignment of digital inclusion priorities and the further growth of a local digital inclusion ecosystem, the following recommendations are suggested for the medium-term:

- Initiate strategic discussions between VOLA and LCRCA Investment <u>&</u> Digital Inclusion teams: to review options for improved integration of digital inclusion into its future post-UKSPF Investment Strategy for 2026 onwards. Embedding digital inclusion within service delivery is a key foundation for local economic growth, but digital exclusion remains a major obstacle for many LCR residents and organisations. **Digital inclusion needs to be a central priority within LCRCA investment planning processes.**

- This opportunity to push forward with the embedding and mainstreaming of digital inclusion support across all elements of public service design and commissioning, at both community and city region levels, is a crucial step in recognising and responding to the massive challenges of digital exclusion prevalent across many local communities.

- As part of this, the low levels of digital maturity of many local VCFSE organisations is currently hampering efforts to embed digital inclusion into mainstream services of all kinds. There is a priority need for a collaborative assessment of the current digital capacity amongst VCFSE sector organisations involved in frontline public service delivery, and the digital skills capacity and training needs of the VCFSE sector workforce. I.e. significant numbers of management, staff, volunteers and trustees are digitally excluded, or lacking in digital skills themselves, and most organisations have little or no access to funding to address deficits in skills or suitable IT equipment.

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[10] Development of specific, customised evidence measurement systems reflects one of the five key priorities set out in the recent national Digital Inclusion Action Plan.

- Alongside this, in relation to effective service planning, local authority commissioners and the CA Investment team need to recognise these current high levels of organisational digital immaturity, which are negatively impacting on the reach and quality of public service development and delivery by local, community-based service providers. Any assumption that stakeholders involved in frontline public service provision have fit for purpose digital infrastructure needs to be reconsidered and factored into commissioning and procurement approaches, to enable budgets to incorporate funding for suitable digital infrastructure and skills training.

- Expanding the methodology for evidence measurement recommended above, there is also a medium-term opportunity to develop a collaborative 'test and learn' methodology to digital inclusion social value/ impact measurement, to contribute to the wider TOMs approach to social value adopted by the LCRCA.

  This Grants Programme and the longstanding Include-IT Mersey digital skills programme, both led by the same team, provide a highly suitable pilot opportunity to agree and incorporate relevant and proportionate DI social value measures that can be shared with local stakeholders and further developed over time. This is timely in light of new social value legislative approaches and central government's recently launched Digital Inclusion Action Plan.

- All the above recognise that longer term opportunities are likely to emerge through the launch of the central government Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund, to support the development of creative digital inclusion ecosystems, which respond to the need/ call for more innovative 'test and learn' cultures at local levels.

Dr Jane Hobson
April 2025

Annex 1: List of Consultees

97 Grant Beneficiary Organisations responded to an online evaluation survey, 12 of which took part in more detailed, follow-up interviews:

Name	Position	Organisation
Katie Godfrey	Joint CEO	Deaf Active
Erin Williams	Tutor	Granby Toxteth Development Trust
Carl Harris	Manager	Halton Carers Centre
Paul Townley	Treasurer	Leasowe Play Youth and Community Association
Craig Fryer	Centre Manager	Park Farm Community Centre
Claire Bradbury	CEO	Power in Partnership
Maxine Ennis	CEO	Rotunda Community College
Claire Inglesby	Quality Assurance Manager	Rotunda Community College
Pauline Killen	Chief Officer	Sefton CAB
Sandra Penketh	Operations Manager	Sefton CAB
Piara Miah	Community Outreach Worker g	ShahJalal Mosque
Alan Lewis	Lead Trustee	Ukraine Welcome Centre
Ian Tumilty	Operations Manager	Veterans HQ Liverpool
Sylvia Kalungi	Services Manager	WODIN

In addition to the 17 steering group and assessment panel members that responded to the online survey, The CA Digital Inclusion team and VOLA Consortium Manager were interviewed in-depth.

Rob Benson	Digital Inclusion Team Manager	LCR Combined Authority
Tara Jussa	Digital Inclusion Project Officer	LCR Combined Authority
Stuart McGrory	Consortium Manager	VOLA

Annex 2: Funded Organisations – Beneficiary Specialisms

The following table provides a comprehensive breakdown of the nature/ focus of grant funded organisations:

Activity/Focus	Count	%	Target Group	Count	%
Addiction Recovery	3	2%	Autism/ASD - Ch & YP	2	1%
Adventure (Scouts, Cadets, etc.)	1	1%	Autism/ASD - adults	2	1%
Advice (e.g. CAB)	**5**	**3%**	Blind/ visual impairment	1	1%
Advice/Training/ Emp. Support	**6**	**4%**	Care/ care leavers	1	1%
Community Centre	**43**	**27%**	Carers	2	1%
Community Centre (Faith-led)	**13**	**8%**	**Children & Young People**	**30**	**19%**
Creative Arts	5	3%	Deaf/ hearing impairment	2	1%
Disability	**14**	**9%**	**Diverse Ethnic Backgrounds**	**15**	**9%**
Domestic Violence	3	2%	LGBTQ+	1	1%
Education	**15**	**9%**	Men	2	1%
Family Support	2	1%	Older people	4	2%
Farm	1	1%	Refugees/asylum seekers	2	1%
Health & Wellbeing	3	2%	Veterans	2	1%
Homeless	2	1%	Women	5	3%
Horticulture	1	1%	Women, DEBs	2	1%
IT	2	1%	Young mums	1	1%
Mental Health	**10**	**6%**	**Work with anyone**	**87**	**54%**
Multi-purpose	**19**	**12%**	**Total**	**161**	**100%**
Offenders/ex-offenders	1	1%			
Sport	**6**	**4%**			
Youth Club	4	2%			
DWP Youth Hub	2	1%			
Total	**161**	**100%**			