



Funded by  
UK Government



**Sefton CVS**  
Supporting Local Communities



## UKSPF-funded Digital Skills Project



### Final Evaluation

**Dr Jane Hobson**  
**Independent Evaluation Consultant**  
[jhobson@regenconsulting.co.uk](mailto:jhobson@regenconsulting.co.uk)

**May 2025**



**METRO MAYOR**  
LIVERPOOL CITY REGION

**VOLA**

## Table of Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Section 1: Introduction .....</b>   | <b>4</b>  |
| Project Context.....   | 4         |
| About the Evaluation.....  | 4         |
| Methodology .....  | 5         |
| Report Structure.....  | 5         |
| <b>Section 2: Project Design &amp; Rationale .....</b>                                   | <b>6</b>  |
| Project Design and Funding.....  | 6         |
| Project Design and Delivery Partnership Development .....                                | 6         |
| Volunteer Digital Champions and Digital Drop-Ins .....                                   | 7         |
| Delivery Partnership .....   | 7         |
| Delivery Format .....  | 7         |
| Theory of Change .....   | 8         |
| Project Management Systems & Processes .....   | 8         |
| The Digital Exclusion Context in Liverpool City Region .....                             | 9         |
| <b>Section 3: Project Performance, April 2023 - March 2025 .....</b>                     | <b>11</b> |
| Finance .....  | 11        |
| Outputs .....  | 11        |
| Outcomes .....   | 13        |
| Summary .....  | 14        |
| <b>Section 4: Delivery &amp; Management .....</b>  | <b>15</b> |
| Central Project Management Team .....  | 15        |
| Project design adaptations: 2023-25 .....  | 15        |
| Promotion & recruitment .....  | 16        |
| Community outreach provision .....   | 17        |
| Customised Delivery .....  | 17        |
| <b>Section 5: Positive Impacts for Learners, Volunteers &amp; Delivery Partners ....</b> | <b>20</b> |
| Profile of learner survey respondents .....  | 20        |
| Motivations to sign up to the course .....   | 21        |
| Perceived digital skills levels prior to engagement .....                                | 23        |
| Increased confidence in using digital skills on course completion .....                  | 23        |
| Overall satisfaction levels .....  | 24        |
| Course highlights .....  | 24        |

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| Suggested improvements to the course .....  | 26        |
| Reported IT usage post-participation .....  | 27        |
| Learner engagement with Digital Drop-Ins .....  | 28        |
| Learner interest in further IT learning .....   | 28        |
| Impacts of participation on learner wellbeing .....   | 29        |
| Impacts for Digital Champion volunteers .....   | 31        |
| Wider impacts for delivery partners .....   | 34        |
| Emergence of LCR's digital inclusion ecosystem – project alignment .....  | 35        |
| <b>Section 6: Project Success Factors &amp; Recommendations .....</b>   | <b>36</b> |
| Success factors .....   | 36        |
| National Digital Inclusion Action Plan – implications for Include-IT Mersey and the LCR digital inclusion ecosystem ..... | 37        |
| Recommendations - operational and short-term .....  | 38        |
| Recommendations - strategic investment and medium-term .....  | 38        |
| <b>Annex 1: Additional Case Studies: Digital Champion Volunteers .....</b>  | <b>40</b> |
| <b>Annex 2: List of Consultees .....</b>  | <b>42</b> |

## Section 1: Introduction

### Project Context

Launched in February 2017, Include-IT Mersey is a Digital Inclusion project originally funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) and The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF), through its Building Better Opportunities (BBO) programme. The first two tranches of this project (2017-2019; 2019-2023) provided support to digitally excluded, workless people across the Liverpool City Region to learn basic IT skills to help them move into or closer to work.

Led by the [VOLA Consortium](#) team at [Sefton CVS](#), the project was awarded several BBO funding extensions due to sustained good performance, with the national BBO programme ultimately concluding in March 2023. In its original Lottery/ ESF funded phase, the project supported over 2,100 digitally excluded, adult learners to develop basic digital skills and get online, 50% of whom progressed to work, further training or active job-search, significantly exceeding contractual targets. Over a thousand more people benefited from the support of its volunteer Digital Champions and network of Digital Drop-Ins. Evaluations of the BBO-funded phase are available on the [Include-IT Mersey website](#).

The project received extension funding through the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) for the period April 2023 to March 2025 to continue to support local people to develop essential digital skills.

Include-IT Mersey provides personalised support to digitally excluded Liverpool City Region (LCR) residents to improve their Essential Digital Skills, motivation, confidence, trust of and access to digital technologies. Individually tailored, flexible support responds to specific needs and barriers faced by participants.

### About the Evaluation

In Spring 2025 independent consultant, Jane Hobson, was commissioned by Sefton CVS to conduct an independent evaluation of the 2023-25 phase of the project.

This report outlines the findings of the evaluation, with the aim of informing the future direction and strategic priorities for digital skills training and inclusion across the LCR Combined Authority area.

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

| Key Evaluation Questions   |
|--|
| <b>Overall project effectiveness and impact</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Have the aims and objectives of the project been achieved? If so, why and if not, why not?</li><li>• How effective and efficient are processes, procedures, management and staffing arrangements?</li><li>• To what extent has the project achieved its expected targets?</li><li>• 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?</li><li>• Are the constituent project activities working well (i.e. the digital champions)</li><li>• Is project delivery in local LCR areas adding value to existing support and/or fill gaps in provision?</li></ul> |
| <b>Impact for Learners</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To what extent has the project enabled digitally excluded individuals improve their IT skills?</li><li>• Have these skills improved people's confidence, enabled them to feel more connected to their community and/or improved their health &amp; wellbeing?</li></ul>  |

- To what extent is the project and the activities being delivered relevant to the needs of digitally excluded individuals? E.g. Learn My Way platform, IT skills support, Digital Champions.
- Are the right beneficiaries being targeted and from the right areas?
- Are learners using the skills to overcome barriers to inclusion? I.e. to access information, improve employability, improve health & wellbeing.

#### Impact for Volunteers

- Has the volunteering experience been a fulfilling one and enabled Digital Champions to improve their skills and confidence? And to what extent has this influenced them to pursue other employment/ training/ voluntary opportunities?

#### Impact for LCR Digital Inclusion Ecosystem

- To what extent have new effective approaches been developed? For example use of:
  - Partner agencies to engage excluded groups;
  - Digital Champions;
  - Learn My Way platform;
  - Embedding ICT skills alongside other support.
- Is the Include-IT project bringing about activities and outcomes that would not otherwise have occurred in the absence of UKSPF funding?
- Is the project adding value to/ filling gaps in provision or other interventions being delivered by partners?
- To what extent is the Include-IT project impacting on the overall LCR digital inclusion ecosystem?

## Methodology

To address these evaluation questions the following methods were utilised:

- **Data story:** review of project monitoring information: output, outcome, financial & qualitative data
- **Learner consultation:** online survey – with a total of 104 responses. Follow-up interviews with a sample of respondents, across the 6 local authority areas
- **Delivery partner consultation:** online survey and follow up interviews with tutors and managers
- **Digital Champion consultation:** online survey and follow-up interviews with a sample of respondents
- **Stakeholder consultation:** one-to-one interviews with Project Management Team members; and Liverpool City Region Combined Authority Digital Inclusion team.

## Structure of the Report

The report is presented in the following sections:

- **Section 2: Project Design & Rationale:** outlines the fast developing digital delivery context within the city region since commencement of this UKSPF phase of the project, providing an overview of digital inclusion activities; and providing an overview of project design and delivery arrangements.
- **Section 3: Performance:** this section reports on project expenditure, outputs and outcomes.
- **Section 4: Delivery & Management:** this section provides a qualitative assessment of project implementation related to management and delivery, including partnership working perspectives.
- **Section 5: Positive Impacts:** based on feedback from learners, delivery partners and Digital Champion volunteers, this section describes the impacts of the project for all involved.
- **Section 6: Project Success Factors & Recommendations.**

## Section 2: Project Design & Rationale

### Project Design and Funding: UKSPF 2023-25

The design and business case was built on the learning and experience of 6 years' successful delivery of an existing service model by the Include-IT Mersey partnership across the Liverpool City Region.

Over time, the partnership has supplemented its operational knowledge with learning from research undertaken by VOLA for the LCRCA: investigating and mapping local community-based Digital Inclusion provision, priorities and practices. This included the development of an online map of digital hubs and training across the city region. These research findings and recommendations informed the LCR Combined Authority's refreshed Digital Inclusion strategy in 2023/24, which is being driven forward by its Digital Inclusion team, and supported by a newly formed LCR Digital Inclusion Network.

Extensive consultation was undertaken with the LCRCA UKSPF Contracting Team in order to ensure appropriate geographical and thematic targeting of delivery in this adapted phase of the project, taking into account intelligence on known digital exclusion 'hot spots'.

The project was initially awarded £879k funding (later increased to £912k) to extend delivery for two years, from April 2023 to March 2025, positioned in the LCR UKSPF investment plan as follows:

|                            |  |
|----------------------------|--|
| <b>Investment Priority</b> | 3: People and Skills   |
| <b>Delivery Strand</b>     | Supporting people furthest from the labour market through access to basic skills.  |
| <b>UK-SPF Intervention</b> | E36: Interventions to increase levels of digital inclusion, with a focus on essential digital skills, communicating the benefits of getting (safely) online, and in-community support to provide users with the confidence and trust to stay online. |

### Project Design and Delivery Partnership Development

The Delivery Partnership initially aimed to support a minimum of 509 (later increased to 609) eligible LCR residents aged 16+, for whom a lack of digital skills was a key barrier to inclusion and progression; with a focus on particular demographic groups relating to employment status, age, gender, ethnicity, and disability (continuing predecessor BBO target groups).

Broadened eligibility criteria were agreed with the LCRCA, compared to the BBO phase, to include retired and employed people (30% and 10% maximum respectively), not just focussing on those out of work, although this cohort remained the largest priority group (60%).<sup>1</sup> The 'hard' ESF focus on progression towards employment was also relaxed, with the priority primarily focused on the development of essential digital skills. However, employment and onward progression remained a key internal delivery priority, where appropriate to individual learners' circumstances.

<sup>1</sup> **Outcome Targets:** a 10% qualification achievement target was initially set, prior to the release of UKSPF technical guidance. Subsequent LCRCA direction requested delivery of non-accredited provision only, to ensure no duplication of mainstream FE provision (a UKSPF funding requirement). Rationale supporting this decision lay in the project's role in facilitating onward progression of adult learners to mainstream provision. Updated UKSPF guidance expanded the outcome definition to include 'course completion' in addition to 'qualifications gained', essentially rendering the 10% target defunct. Although the official target remained unchanged at 10%, the partnership set itself a more challenging internal completion target of 84%, broadly in line with that achieved in the BBO project phase.

Similarly, no contractual targets were set in relation to post-intervention progression of learners (due to it not being applicable under the UKSPF E36 Intervention code). However, onward progression has remained a key priority for the project, actively promoted & supported by tutors. The partnership set an internal target of 50% progression to further training, employment, volunteering, or active job-search, in line with levels achieved in the BBO phase.

## Volunteer Digital Champions and Digital Drop-Ins

As well as the delivery of course-based support, an additional support strand includes a team of volunteer Digital Champions, who provide weekly support for a fixed couple of hours in host community venues across the city region. Digital Drop-Ins provide an additional service that members of the wider community can access for digital skills advice/ support, without the need for attending a formal IT course. Venues are provided free of charge and the service has always been provided free at point of access. Volunteers are supported with uniform, resources and travel expenses.

Support tends to focus on use of people's own digital devices, with the most common areas of support including general computer basics, emails, use of Microsoft Office applications (Word, Excel, etc.), printing, work with photographs and general use of the internet. Support is provided mainly on people's own tablets and smartphones, with some support provided on PCs at the venue.

A smaller number of Digital Champions undertake an alternative role in supporting project tutors in formal course delivery, in a classroom assistant role.

## Delivery Partnership

Led by Sefton CVS, in partnership with VOLA, the delivery partnership comprises 10 voluntary sector digital skills providers (all VOLA members) based across the 6 boroughs of the Liverpool City Region. Each has an allocated primary area(s) from which to recruit learners:

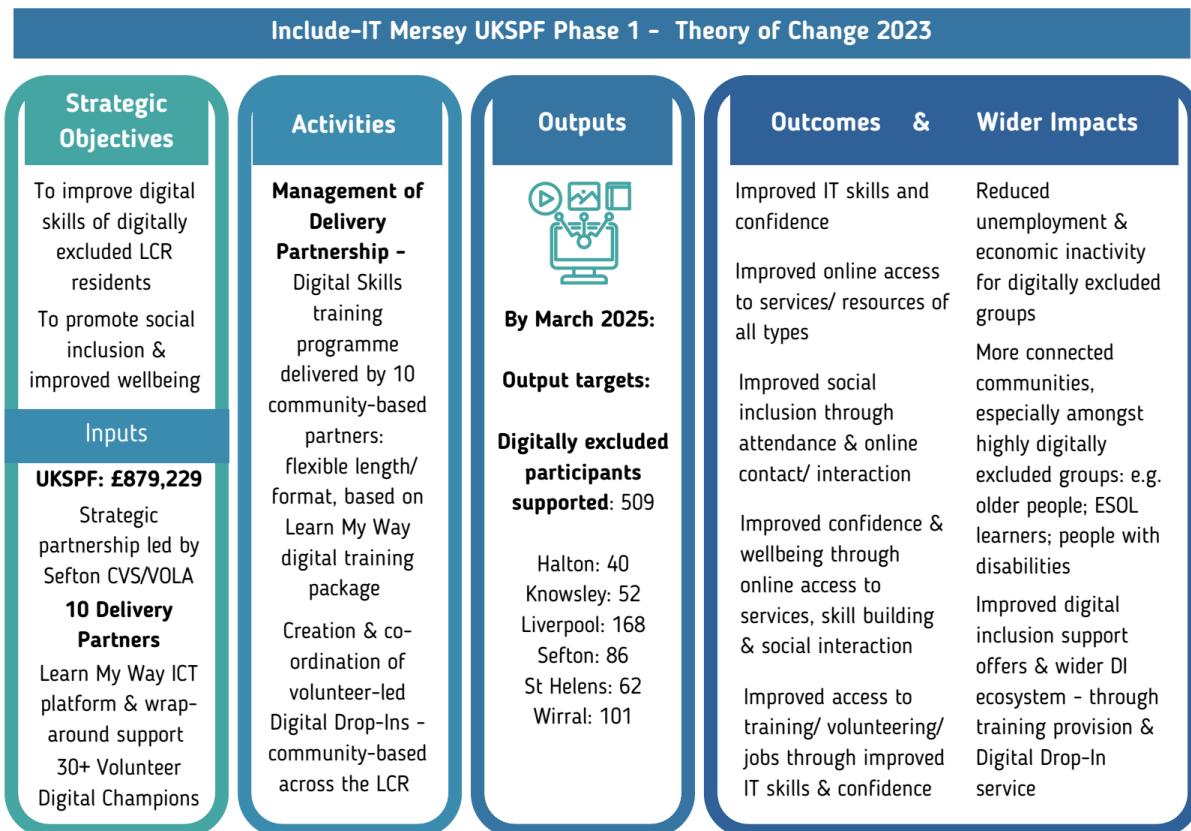
| Organisation                           | Area   |
|--|--|
| Age UK Wirral                          | Wirral   |
| Alt Valley Community Trust             | East Liverpool, Knowsley                       |
| Everton Development Trust              | North Liverpool                                |
| Greenbank                              | Liverpool, Wirral                              |
| Granby Toxteth Development Trust       | South Liverpool (primarily L8, Toxteth area)   |
| Torus Foundation                       | St Helens                                      |
| Independence Initiatives               | South Sefton                                   |
| Rotunda                                | North Liverpool, South Sefton                  |
| Speke Training and Education Centre    | South Liverpool, Knowsley                      |
| Workers' Educational Association (WEA) | Halton, Knowsley, Sefton (North/South), Wirral |

## Delivery Format

- Project participants (learners) pursue their learning to develop basic digital skills (aligned to the Government's [Essential Digital Skills Framework](#), primarily using the Good Things Foundation's [Learn My Way](#) platform, with additional activities and learning taking place outside LMW, both on and offline.
- The flexible delivery model and use of LMW enables learners to both choose topics of personal interest and to continue learning outside supervised sessions.
- Course delivery primarily takes place in partners' own centres, with some outreach provision, most notably by WEA and Greenbank, who have a wider geographical footprint and deliver purely outreach, with some outreach also provided by Age UK Wirral, Alt Valley, Rotunda and STEC.
- Outreach delivery takes place in specific communities and for targeted digitally excluded learners (such as people who are learning disabled; in recovery; refugees and asylum seekers) – with small group sizes, typically between 5-8 learners, to provide more person-centred, tailored support.

## Theory of Change

This service model design was based on the following Theory of Change:



**Rationale:** The Delivery Partnership's wealth of experience and lengthy involvement in the local Digital Inclusion landscape represents a valuable offer across the LCR, in that partners all bring the following:

- **Long-term experience of adapting to the needs of very varied cohorts of digitally excluded learners.** As outlined in the previous (BBO) evaluations, learners may range from those who have never touched a computer to young people who have experience of using smartphones and apps, but have never used a PC or laptop.
- **Specialist skills in engaging and recruiting those who would rarely consider accessing IT advice** and support, but may have been driven to do so to access welfare benefits and/or public services (often NHS) – as they have no other routes to do so, with online commonly becoming the norm.
- **A network of local partners who are a trusted, consistent presence in their local communities** and who have delivered IT training and other local services for many years. Large numbers of digitally excluded residents have heard about the project via word of mouth, through family, friends and neighbours. This strength has been central to the successful engagement of people with no prior IT knowledge/ skills who, previously, have never even considered going online.

## Project Management Systems & Processes

VOLA's Consortium Manager is supported by a small team that includes Project Manager, Finance & Monitoring officer, Quality Co-ordinator, Project Administrator and Volunteer Coordinator.

Robust policies and procedures are in place to oversee the effective management and governance of the project, including financial processes to ensure funding compliance and fraud prevention; and

operational procedures relating to project and partnership management. An overarching Partnership Agreement is in place, with detailed, individual Grant Agreements with each partner outlining all contractual liabilities and responsibilities.

**Financial management:** key policies and procedures include anti-fraud, conflicts of interest, whistleblowing, procurement, risk management and payment authorisation, with clear separation of duties in the processing and authorisation of payments. Well-established processes are in place for the processing and submission of quarterly funding claims, including routine checks to ensure the legitimacy and accuracy of financial claims.

**Quality and compliance:** includes quarterly monitoring meetings with all delivery partners to review progress, compliance, discuss issues, areas for improvement and forward planning. The quality of training delivery is also directly observed by the Quality Coordinator, with detailed reports produced highlighting strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement.

**Communications:** which includes reporting to the Project Steering Group (CEO, Consortium Manager & Project Manager), SMT and Board on a quarterly basis; convening quarterly partnership meetings to share information and good practice; and maintaining a dedicated project website.

**Volunteer co-ordination:** recruitment and management of Digital Champions, development of new drop-ins and liaison with host venues to manage volunteer placements.

**Evaluation:** including both process evaluation, particularly in terms of the quality of training delivered, and monitoring/ analysis of outcomes achieved. Procedures are in place for:

- Initial assessment of all individuals, with development of tailored learning plans, progress against which is frequently monitored;
- Carrying out exit assessments with all learners to assess perceived changes in personal and social skills acquired through the project; and
- Learner feedback on course completion.

Such information has been used in this external evaluation process to provide a key input in measuring the effectiveness of the training and support provided. It has been supplemented with a follow-up online survey of all project participants.

## **The Digital Exclusion Context in Liverpool City Region**

At the heart of Mayor Rotheram's 2024–2028 manifesto and part of the Combined Authority's Four Year Corporate Plan, the local digital inclusion ecosystem has developed rapidly in recent years, not only through this UKSPF investment, but also through several other large scale programmes:

- UKSPF funded [Digital Connectivity Grants programme](#), which has provided 182 small grants of up to £10K to community-based organisations for IT facility upgrades and connectivity improvements;
- [Digital Inclusion Initiative](#) – funded by Lloyds Banking Academy, Vodafone and Assurant - which has distributed 4,500 free tablets and 6 months' free data to digitally excluded LCR residents.
- Growing community sector involvement in the Good Things Foundation National [Databank](#) and [Device Bank](#) initiatives.

Over the 2023-25 period, collaborative working between VOLA and the CA's Digital Inclusion team has continued to develop-and mature, which is supporting the emergence of more co-ordinated digital inclusion ecosystems at a City Region level.

The Consortium Manager has worked closely with the LCRCA to inform the ongoing development of the revised LCRCA Digital Inclusion Strategy to ensure that the project's learning and impacts are maximised. This collaborative working has been developed over several years through:

- Consortium Manager membership of the Digital Inclusion Task Force, from 2021
- Commissioning of VOLA by the CA to research and map digital inclusion services across the LCR
- Membership of the CA Digital Inclusion Network
- Management of the UKSPF Digital Connectivity Grants programme
- Liaison between the central team, delivery partners and CA Digital Inclusion team at strategic and operational levels in relation to this and other DI projects and programmes.

The significant UKSPF investment into the Include-IT Mersey project complements other activities of the wider LCRCA digital inclusion programme. It provides much needed investment into hyperlocal, community-based, basic ICT training, which is otherwise lacking in many areas. It has also supported the expansion of volunteer-led Digital Drop-Ins. The project has become a core element of the LCR digital inclusion ecosystem in that it provides a first step for digitally excluded residents to engage with IT and begin their journey towards digital inclusion.

## Section 3: Project Performance, April 2023 - March 2025

### Finance

Following a forecast budget deficit from the project's outset, as a result of reduced funding compared to the previous BBO-funded phase, an additional £32,700 was allocated in year-2, taking the overall budget to £911,961. This was very much welcomed by delivery partners, several of whom were running budget deficits due to funding restrictions, having forgone overheads contributions (either in whole, or in part) and other incidental costs to focus on covering salaries and on-costs. In response to the increased funding, a commitment was made to supporting 100 additional learners.

The project finished with a small overspend of £1,300.

| Budget   | Actual   | Variance |
|----------|----------|----------|
| £911,961 | £913,261 | £1,300   |

The vast majority of the budget was expended on staffing costs, plus an associated flat rate overheads contribution. Consultant/ sessional staff costs covered this independent evaluation and temporary project/quality management cover in early 2024 following the departure of key management personnel, until suitable replacements were appointed.

Summary expenditure by cost category over the two-year period to March 2025 is as follows:

| Cost Category                         | Expenditure     | % of Budget   |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------|
| Staff costs (direct)                  | £751,798        | 82.3%         |
| Overheads (15% flat rate)             | £112,770        | 12.3%         |
| Staff costs (consultants & sessional) | £20,550         | 2.3%          |
| Staff Expenses                        | £9,433          | 1.0%          |
| Volunteer expenses                    | £3,773          | 0.4%          |
| Learner expenses & course materials   | £9,300          | 1.0%          |
| Venue Hire (outreach delivery)        | £1,137          | 0.1%          |
| Marketing & publicity                 | £2,591          | 0.3%          |
| Equipment                             | £1,022          | 0.1%          |
| Secure online file storage/transfer   | £888            | 0.1%          |
| <b>Total</b>                          | <b>£913,261</b> | <b>100.0%</b> |

### Outputs

In total, 638 learners have been supported over the course of the project, 125% of original target and 105% of the increased 609 target. Recruitment volumes by borough are as follows:

|                      | Halton | Knowsley | Liverpool | Sefton | St Helens | Wirral | Total |
|----------------------|--------|----------|-----------|--------|-----------|--------|-------|
| Target               | 40     | 52       | 168       | 86     | 62        | 101    | 509   |
| Actual               | 42     | 55       | 234       | 106    | 75        | 126    | 638   |
| Variance             | 2      | 3        | 66        | 20     | 13        | 25     | 129   |
| % of original target | 105%   | 106%     | 139%      | 123%   | 121%      | 125%   | 125%  |

## Geographical Targeting

Delivery took place in the following areas:

| Halton  | Knowsley    | Liverpool  | Sefton    | St Helens   | Wirral      |
|---------|-------------|------------|-----------|-------------|-------------|
| Runcorn | Halewood    | Belle Vale | Bootle    | Town centre | Birkenhead  |
| Widnes  | Huyton      | Croxteth   | Crosby    | Fingerpost  | Bromborough |
|         | Prescot     | Dovecot    | Netherton |             | Pensby      |
|         | Stockbridge | Everton    | Southport |             | Wallasey    |
|         | Village     | Kensington | Waterloo  |             |             |
|         |             | Kirkdale   |           |             |             |
|         |             | Netherley  |           |             |             |
|         |             | Speke      |           |             |             |
|         |             | Toxteth    |           |             |             |

\* Blue text denotes outreach delivery locations.

## Demographic Profile of Learners

The project has continued to succeed in recruiting its target learners (see below table) - working within minimum/maximum targets relating to employment status; and meeting or exceeding targets relating to age, ethnicity and disability/long-term health conditions.

| Priority Group                            | Actual % Achieved | % Target |
|---|-------------------|----------|
| <b>Employment status</b>                  |                   |          |
| Employed                                  | 8.5%              | 10%      |
| Unemployed                                | 32.9%             | 30%      |
| Economically inactive                     | 36.5%             | 30%      |
| Retired                                   | 22.1%             | 30%      |
| <b>Gender</b>                             |                   |          |
| Male                                      | 45.6%             | 50%      |
| Female                                    | 54.4%             | 50%      |
| <b>Age range</b>                          |                   |          |
| 65+                                       | 26.3%             |          |
| 50+                                       | 65.8%             | 57%      |
| <b>Ethnicity</b>                          |                   |          |
| Diverse Ethnic Backgrounds                | 10.7%             | 9%       |
| Prefer not to say                         | 1.9%              |          |
| <b>Disability or L-T health condition</b> |                   |          |
| Yes                                       | 50.5%             | 39%      |
| Prefer not to say                         | 2.8%              |          |

## Outcomes for Learners

| Outcomes  | All learners | Unemployed & Economically Inactive learners only |
|---|--------------|--|
| Total learners  | 638          | 443  |
| Course completion/ achievement                              | 522<br>(82%) | 362<br>(82%)                                     |
| Positive progressions achieved within 28 days of leave date | 256<br>(41%) | 213<br>(48%)                                     |
| - Paid employment   | 39           | 39   |
| - Active Job-search   | 59           | 59   |
| - Volunteering  | 29           | 23   |
| - Further training  | 129          | 92   |

With the project's focus on 'non-traditional' learner engagement – achievement of over 80% course completion is highly satisfactory.

### Progression Rates for Unemployed and Economically Inactive Participants

As the above table shows, progression rates for unemployed & economically inactive participants is significantly higher than the overall rate, including employed and retired participants. At just over 48% it is close to the 50% target progression rate set internally by the team and is comparable to the rate achieved on the predecessor BBO project (50%). Although slightly lower, this is considered satisfactory given the refocused nature of the project, with the reduced emphasis on employment progression.

### Digital Champion Volunteers and Digital Drop-Ins

- A total of **59 volunteers** have been involved over the two-year period, not all active simultaneously. As of March 2025, 31 Digital Champions were actively engaged as project volunteers, most of whom dedicate 2-3 hours of their time per week either running one of the 23 Digital Drop-Ins across the city region or supporting course delivery.
- Collectively, Digital Champions have contributed a substantial number of voluntary hours to the project, 2,522 during 2024/25, and approximately **4,250 hours over the course of the project**.
- The total number of recorded **attendances at Digital Drop-Ins** over the two years of the project is **1,923**, with year-2 60% higher than year-1. Incomplete recoding by some volunteers in year-1 suggests that this is an underrepresentation of the true number of attendances, and therefore some of the year-2 increase is due to improved recording. However, the significance of the margin of increase suggests a clear increase over the last twelve months.
- Overall, the **age profile of volunteers has shifted considerably** compared to the BBO phase of the project – away from a mainly older male profile to a much younger cohort, with over 40% being under 24 and over 40% female, representing a big change from previous years.
- There are now more people involved as volunteers who are not currently working but looking for employment and this is reflected in their positive views in relation to skills and experience gained through their volunteer experience. Many reported how much their self-confidence and skills have improved, especially through providing one-to-one support to those seeking IT support. The experience has been valuable when applying for training courses, internships and employment.

By the final quarter of the project, Digital drop-ins were active in 23 venues:

- Halton: Widnes & Runcorn libraries
- Knowsley: Halewood, Huyton (2 sessions), Kirkby & Prescot libraries;
- Liverpool: Kensington & Norris Green libraries, Parklands library, Age Concern Liverpool;
- Sefton: Bootle library (x3 sessions); Formby library; Maghull Advice Centre; The Atkinson, Southport (3 sessions), Crosby library, Netherton Feelgood Factory;
- St Helens: Eccleston, Haydock, Moss Bank & Thatto Heath libraries, The Hope Centre, Newton-le-Willows library;
- Wirral: Birkenhead library.

Four drop-ins have temporarily closed, requiring replacement volunteers – Stockbridge Village library, Liverpool Central library, St Helens Central & Chester Lane libraries – with other new venues under development.

### **Summary**

Similarly to the BBO-funded phase, the project has continued to achieve high levels of outputs, outcomes and overall impact, meeting and, in many cases, exceeding the vast majority of its targets – both contractual and internal. Most importantly, the project has been the catalyst for life-changing benefits for many hundreds of digitally and socially excluded LCR residents.

## Section 4: Delivery & Management

This section provides an overview of project delivery and management and how this has evolved since the 2023 evaluation. It is based on interviews with Project Management Team members<sup>2</sup>, delivery partner managers and tutors<sup>3</sup>. It also includes learner feedback from course exit questionnaires and responses to an online survey conducted in Spring 2025.

### Central Project Management Team

Senior managers have continued to quickly react and deliver an adapted programme throughout this UKSPF-funded period, with strong leadership from VOLA. The project continued to benefit from a strong central management unit, led by a dedicated Project Manager, overseen by the Consortium Manager, supported by a small team, comprising quality, finance, admin and volunteer coordination.

Team capacity, in terms of the number of full-time equivalent job roles has fluctuated over the 2023-25 period, with some team restructuring to meet differing demands at different stages. This has continued to be managed by the Lead Body in a proactive manner to remain agile and responsive to need, whilst remaining efficient and achieving good value for money.

#### **Delivery Partners' working relationships with the central team:**

- A highly positive, collaborative working culture has continued from the BBO phase – with support tailored to meet the working practices, styles and cultures of individual delivery partners.
- Ongoing streamlining of the management approach to eligibility, registration and evidence requirements has been widely welcomed by delivery partners.
- The central team has been responsive to delivery partner staffing challenges including recruitment issues, sickness and the need for more intensive support to those new in post. Partners commented positively about the high levels of support provided to new tutors and other staff members by the central team, who have guided them in all aspects of the project.

Online survey responses from two delivery partners commented:

*"The IT-Include team are always available for support and will answer any questions raised quickly and in a positive professional manner. We have a good relationship with the team and they understand the challenges we face with our target groups of digitally excluded learners and particularly those from some of the most deprived areas. We have group meetings with the team and other partners on a regular basis."*

*"The Digital Inclusion team are very supportive. They have responded very quickly to any queries our organisation has had and all responses have been dealt with in a timely, professional manner. It has been a pleasure working with such a positive team who believe passionately in the role they play in ensuring communities have an opportunity to improve their digital skills and become more inclusive."*

### Project design adaptations: 2023-25

- **Reduced emphasis on employment as a key outcome:** to encourage wider engagement of older people, including the retired and those not seeking employment; and also digitally excluded people in employment. This shift from focusing on employability as a mandatory driver to recruitment and delivery has, as expected, resulted in greater numbers of older people and those

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> An online survey of all Delivery Partners was undertaken in March 2025, to which all partners responded. One-to-one interviews with delivery partners were also undertaken to review and discuss specific themes.

who are already working (often part-time) engaging with the project. But, importantly, there has continued to be a significant volume of learners who are looking for training and work.

- **Further relaxation of lower age limit down to 16+**, following previous strategic reductions in the BBO phase. Coupled with the ability to support retired learners, this has resulted in a much more mixed age range of learners.
- **Reduced registration burden:** with learners no longer being required to provide passports, birth certificates, benefits letters, or similar evidence; simply being asked for National Insurance documentation, age, address and an assessment of digital skills levels to prove eligibility. This was mentioned by the majority of delivery partners as a positive change to project administration. This has had a positive effect for both delivery partners and learners, as one delivery partner commented:

*"A valuable change is learners not having to prove eligibility by producing DWP information .... there is much reduced requirement over the last 2 years in terms of us needing to ask new learners for eligibility information such as proof of benefits and nationality. It is less onerous now as we are just required to ask for NI numbers. This in turn takes pressure off the new course recruits when they first show an interest in signing up and makes everything a bit more relaxed for them."*

Another responded:

*"Learners are more open and ready to learn as there isn't the need for asking for personal documents such as birth certificate and/or passports. This has made getting to know them a lot better as they are less apprehensive towards me as their tutor."*

- **A move to roll-on-roll-off delivery:** the majority of the delivery partners have now moved to 'ro-ro' registrations in order to include learners as soon as they wish to get involved, rather than having to wait for a fixed course start date. This reflects wider flexibilities generally within the project, as outlined above, with more flex around tailoring support to specific wants and needs of learners (outlined in section 5).

## Promotion & recruitment

A more varied approach to promotion and recruitment of learners has continued to evolve since the 2023 evaluation:

- More delivery partners now using social media routes to promote courses, initially introduced as a result of the lockdown periods. This reflects recognition of the fact that many digitally excluded people do actually use social media, often on their smartphones, but have few IT skills in relation to using computers, email, software packages, applying for jobs, or accessing public services and information online.
- Delivery partners have reported increased numbers of word of mouth referrals, reflecting the long-term presence of the project, which is now embedded in many community venues across the city region. Extended delivery over an 8-year period has positioned the project as being central to the digital inclusion offers across many communities.
- Courses have also been promoted through digital device and data incentives, usually on course completion - most recently provided through the CA's Digital Inclusion Initiative (DII), which has proved extremely successful for those delivery partners that have taken part.
- During 2024, the project joined forces with BBC Radio Merseyside and LCRCA DI team, taking part in several large-scale Digital Drop-In events at the station's base in Liverpool City Centre. Several staff and one of STEC's learners were also interviewed on the radio, which proved a good PR and publicity channel.

## More extensive community outreach provision

An additional development has been that of increased levels of hyper-localised delivery, with partners working with new learner groups and in new communities not previously involved. Working on a peripatetic basis, several partners have delivered at more outreach venues in digitally excluded areas than previously (see section 3). This is in addition to the WEA's longstanding, multi-borough outreach delivery role. For example:

- Rotunda's delivery at various venues across South Sefton, including St Leonards Youth & Community Centre in Bootle, the Irenaeus Project in Waterloo and Marine Football club.
- Greenbank have delivered several courses in Wirral Change, Wirral Mencap and Kensington.
- STEC in Belle Vale, Netherley and Huyton.
- Alt Valley Community Trust in Stockbridge Village.

## Customised Delivery

The overall delivery model has been highly responsive to various delivery partners' changing operating models and the needs of learners. Based on long-standing, trusted relationships between the central team and delivery partners, there has been a more relaxed approach to the fairly rigid delivery formats previously in place during the BBO phase, with partners being given more autonomy to respond to local learner needs as they present.

**Course content has been further customised and adapted**, with delivery partners able to tailor which modules to offer to learners, based on their prior learning, wants and needs. The majority continue to use Learn My Way as the central learning tool, **but with much greater use of supplementary and additional task-based materials** to help improve knowledge and understanding. These are usually provided in a tailored format, and often as group learning exercises.

For example, tutors support learners through handout exercises, tutorial videos and group quizzes to encourage participation. Q&A sessions are also provided, as are banking and shopping challenges, with online safety featuring heavily. Some tutors commented:

*"The structure of the LMW course is well designed. The layout of the course is very intuitive. Learners' progress is logged so they know where they are up to. They are able to complete the modules multiple times in order to reinforce learning. The course is up to date and relevant, covering most aspects of the digital world. Learners can pick and choose what modules they need to reinforce their skills on or have the ability to learn new skills. The length of the sessions is about right .... Learners with no previous skills are able to work through the course with the support and guidance of the tutor. Quizzes at the end of each module help reinforce their learning."*

*"I supplement the LMW course with ICT Word searches and Google search tasks. Technology is literally changing every week so this can be covered more than once. Apple & android phones differences are covered. Learners also ask for explanations of additional digital concepts and technology so I create specific sessions to accommodate this, such as explaining various social media platforms"*

*"Learn My Way is good as a starting point but does not always challenge them sufficiently. So I always incorporate additional and differential learning materials to supplement and complement the learning experience."*

*"I always place emphasis on what a learner should and should not do in order to reduce the likelihood of being affected by digital scams. We also have sessions on best email practice, NFC, QR codes, and the importance of backing up data online."*

**In contrast, two partners – EDT and Rotunda - no longer use the LMW package**, preferring to structure delivery through learner driven needs and practical, task-based approaches.

*"We choose not to use Learn My Way, our approach is to give the learner direct, hands on experience of what they want to use. For example: If they want to know how to use email we set them up with one of our email account and teach them how to use it. If they want to learn how to go online and look for information we give them tasks that will make them go online and look for answers to questions we set them, simulate booking a train ticket, or airline flight, etc. If they receive medical prescriptions we show them how to order their prescriptions online. In terms of quality assurance we have a list of clearly defined outcomes which we know we need to achieve. Generally the Include-IT project has become more flexible in relation to use of LMW. We no longer have to use LMW to record progress of learners and this is welcomed by us."*

*"Students don't like Learn My Way in my classes - it's boring, it's not interactive. I don't think we'd keep the students if we were giving them that because they just sit there and then read off the screen....People want to be helped and be given tasks, not just read and then click a button occasionally.... I think it's good (that as a delivery partner) we've got freedom to meet the needs of our learners. We initially assess them when they first come in and find what they want to learn and then that's what we cover and they don't have to do the same thing. So it's not like 10 weeks of everyone doing the same topic every week. They can do their own thing. I can customise the tasks to whatever they want to learn. It's good that we've got a lot of freedom to help them."*

**Focus on Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a priority response to learner demand.** The LMW course now has a short module on AI. Some delivery partners – such as Torus Foundation – now include short introductory group sessions covering the practical applications of AI – including how to use AI to draft cover letters for job applications and current day to day use of AI.

*"A lot of learners do really want to understand how AI will actually impact them. What can they do with it and what they should be aware of, especially with scams. I've developed a small module to broaden learners' perspectives - with examples. Basically it's pretty much like a classroom session, getting everybody together asking their views as to what AI is, and does that impact on a normal consumer in society and what benefits can we all get from it. I give them examples of the tools they could use, for example Co-pilot and Gemini, which most people don't realise they've already got on their devices and that's kind of caught them by surprise. I am trying to demonstrate how that can be used positively for practical tasks such as drafting a covering letter for a job application, as opposed to having to wait for someone to help them do it. So that they can learn that AI can be a good thing."*

**Successful and potentially highly transferable approaches have been implemented to the targeting of specific priority groups**, including ethnically diverse communities, learners with disabilities/learning difficulties, and older people. For example, Greenbank College's work with Wirral Change, and Mencap; WEA's courses for with people in recovery with CGL in Runcorn; and STEC and Torus Foundation's courses in retirement and supported accommodation.

Greenbank College, in working with local partners Wirral Change, identified very high demand for digital inclusion training amongst the displaced Ukrainian and other ethnic communities.

#### **Greenbank College – support for Ukrainian Learners at Wirral Change**

Greenbank has been involved since the project commenced 2017 and has developed expertise in working with a wide variety of learners, including people with learning disabilities and those from different ethnic

backgrounds. UKSPF delivery has built on prior experience, continuing to work with these groups, including through a new relationship with VOLA member, Wirral Change, which has led to work with a group of Ukrainian learners.

This has proved to be a challenging learning curve for the tutor, host venue and for

learners themselves, but through innovating and adapting delivery approaches, many successful outcomes have been achieved. The key obstacle to learning for many was their very limited command of the English language. Support commenced in September 2023 with a wide range of learners, aged 18-80. A group-based approach was used, with the rate of progress varying between learners given the demands of translation for people who had virtually no English language skills.

The tutor and learners communicated through text translation throughout sessions with the support of the course sheets. Given the mix of learners, a flexible approach was adopted, with everyone completing a number of core Learn My Way units, with supplementary units chosen on personal preference and needs.

Many learners were highly qualified in their own fields but nevertheless realised the need to gain UK-based digital skills/ understanding, for example to be able to function in UK work environments.

The following solutions were tested and integrated by the tutor to support learners:

- Translation of online LMW course material through new screen reader technology purchased by Wirral Change, which was superior to using free translation app approaches.
- This assisted learners with not only their IT learning but also their English language skills. Learners were pleased to understand UK keyboard layouts and terminologies, which differed to their own language/ country, recognising the importance of knowing this, particularly in terms of employment opportunities.
- Production of handouts with QR codes for learners to scan to enable access to course module information in their own language. This overcame the challenges of different learners speaking various Ukrainian or regional Russian dialects as their primary language, which had not been immediately apparent at the outset of the course!

The tutor also linked up with the CA's Digital Inclusion Initiative to provide free tablets and mobile data, which proved highly beneficial for many learners, with one commenting:

*"The tutor was good and the course had a nice atmosphere. All students were from the same community and this gave me a chance for better understanding. Thanks for the opportunity to refresh my knowledge and to get a device."*

A total of 38 learners completed the training. Many have commented that, given the nature of their displacement from their home country, the course had been a good way to start to adapt and that it had made very positive impacts in terms of their mental health.

A high number responded to the evaluation survey, reporting extremely positive feedback:

- 100% were satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of the course
- 44% were already going online more to make GP/NHS appointments
- 33% now use email/ Zoom/ facetime to speak with family and friends
- 44% felt that they were now in a better position to search & apply for jobs
- 100% felt that their wellbeing had improved as a result of participating in the course:

*"I had only the mobile phone. Now when I have a tablet I am planning to start using it step by step. I go online with Zoom or Teams to study online courses.'*

The key outcome for most learners has been progress from being economically inactive to being more job-ready. Many are now actively looking for work and a couple have already been successful in securing a job. A couple have started college courses and some are on ESOL courses.

The tutor has also supported people to engage with JCP and provided wrap around IT support to assist learners to engage with other services.

## Section 5: Positive Impacts for Learners, Volunteers & Delivery Partners

This section provides an assessment of the extent to which the project has achieved its intended outcomes and impacts for learners and for volunteers. Data to inform the findings and conclusions drawn have been gathered through several methods, including:

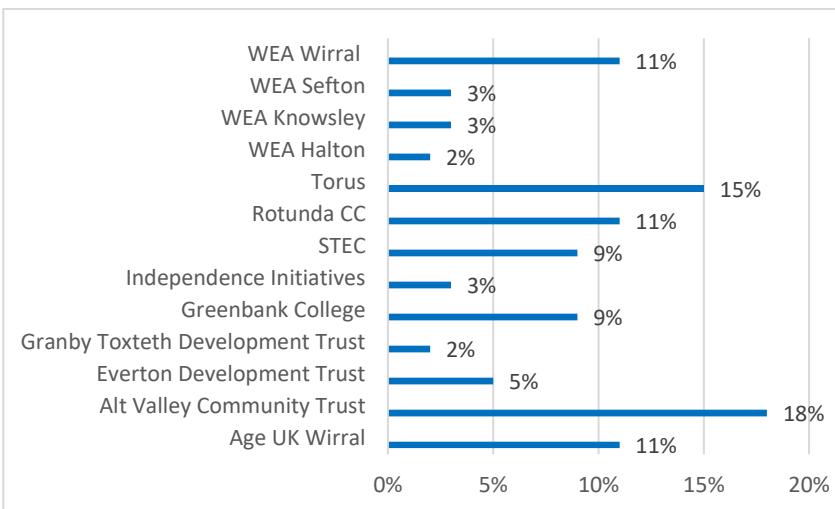
- Consultation with recent and current learners during February and March 2025. Responses were invited through an online survey sent direct to 425 learners for whom email addresses were held. In total, 104 survey responses were recorded and analysed.
- Review and development of existing case studies of individual learners, which have been included later in this section as evidence of emerging impact themes.
- The same was completed with current and recent volunteers, with 29 responding to the online survey and in-depth, follow-up interviews with a sample of 6 volunteers.

Identification of key themes has also been drawn from consultation with the central management team; and with delivery partners, through another online survey and follow-up interviews.

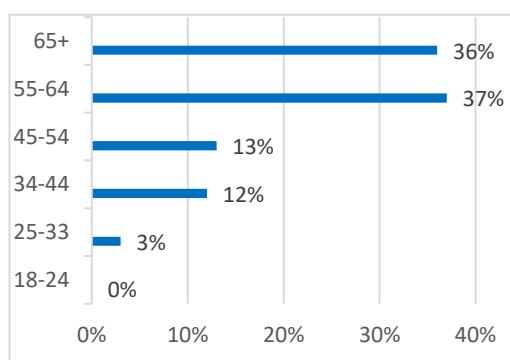
### Profile of learner survey respondents

The total of 104 responses to the online learner survey represents a statistically significant 24.5% response rate, which is considered good, especially given half of the learners contacted exited the programme at least 12 months prior to the invitation being sent.

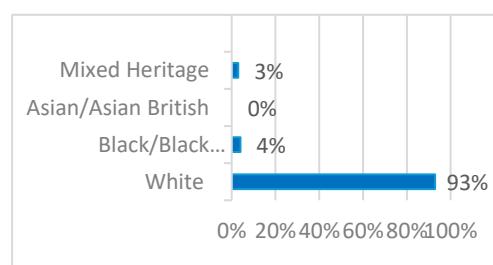
#### Survey Respondents' Host Course Venue:



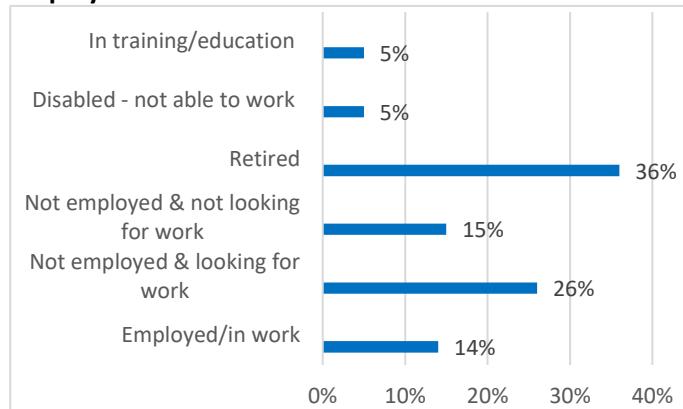
#### Age:



#### Ethnicity:



### Employment Status:



Female 52%

Male 48%

### Disability or long-term health condition:

56%

### Learners' motivations to sign up to the course

Wide-ranging motivations to engage with the courses were cited by survey respondents:

|  |   |
|--|---|
| 76% <p><b>Wanted to learn IT skills as they were unable to use the internet, computer or mobile</b></p> <p>Many commented that they feared using computers but realised they had little choice given 'the way society is going' – and for over three quarters of respondents, this was the primary motivation to get involved.</p>   | <p><i>"I always wanted to know about how to get online. A neighbour recommended the course to me as she was already on the course."</i></p> <p><i>"I never used IT at work. I have a laptop but nobody had showed me how to use it properly."</i></p> <p><i>"I just need to improve my digital skills overall, as well as improving my confidence."</i></p> |
| 62% <p><b>Reported that they wanted to know how to keep safe online</b></p>  | <p><i>"I had not really used a computer or the internet before I joined the course. I had a fear of going online."</i></p> <p><i>"I was so scared of fraudulent activities online, or making mistakes or being ignorant."</i></p> <p><i>"I wanted to be able to feel safer on social media, to be aware of scams and be more informed."</i></p>             |
| 53% <p><b>Stated that they wanted to refresh their outdated IT skills</b></p> <p>Many had previously completed basic IT courses at college many years prior, or were self-taught but had little confidence, or access to a computer to be able to maintain or re-learn skills.</p> <p>Often motivated by a desire to get into work or training, there was also recognition that they were missing out on being able to communicate online and access services.</p> | <p><i>"I joined the course so I could refresh my skills from 20 years ago. I know things have changed a lot since then."</i></p> <p><i>"Having been retired for a few years, I had lost confidence and could not keep up with the new technology."</i></p>  |

|  |   |
|--|---|
|  <p><b>48%</b></p> <p><b>Specifically wanted to get information/ apply for jobs, training or contact Jobcentre Plus</b></p> <p>Almost half reported being labour market returners, or unemployed, who realised that they needed at least a degree of basic digital skills, not only to access information about jobs and training opportunities, but to also be able to meet basic job requirements in sectors such as social care, driving, retail and factory work – all of which had previously not required these skills.</p> | <p><i>"I decided to attend this IT course because I needed a good, patient instructor who could teach me at my pace and allow me to develop a valuable network that can secure job opportunities for me."</i></p> <p><i>"I hadn't used Word or Excel for many years and needed to update my skills for employment opportunities."</i></p> <p><i>"I was referred to Age UK by Households into Work for help improving my IT skills to help me return to work following a prolonged period of not working."</i></p> <p><i>"Before the course I was worried about my lack of IT skills for MS Teams and social media, making it difficult for me to search and apply for jobs and attend job interviews online."</i></p> |
|  <p><b>44%</b></p> <p><b>Were motivated by accessing online information, advice and support, e.g. welfare benefits</b></p>  | <p>Few provided commentary on this motivation, but interestingly, in practice, this became the most cited use after course completion – with 67% mentioning this.</p>   |
|  <p><b>46%</b></p> <p><b>Wanted to be able to access services such as GP/ health and housing</b></p> <p>Many expressed their frustration at feeling excluded from being able to access NHS and other services, and their inability to respond to requests to complete online forms – which was reported as frequent occurrence in daily life.</p>   | <p><i>"I knew how to go online but my confidence was low and I wanted to learn more about searching for properties and looking for work eventually."</i></p>  |
|  <p><b>41%</b></p> <p><b>Wanted to be able to stay in touch with family and friends, with 36% wanting to be able to use social media</b></p> <p>Isolation from families and a feeling of missing out on a whole part of life by not being on social media to communicate with others was commonly cited, with several references to isolation in the COVID lockdown.</p>  | <p><i>"I felt isolated from not being able to do things like contacting family online or keeping in touch so I decided to learn some computer skills which is much needed by me. I have learning issues which makes it a lot harder for me."</i></p>  |
|  <p><b>34%</b></p> <p><b>Wanted to get online for leisure: watching TV; films; gaming; or to pursue hobbies &amp; interests</b></p>   | <p><i>"I used a computer for work, but since retiring my computer needs changed and I wanted to learn some new skills using the internet."</i></p>  |

## Perceived digital skills levels prior to engagement

|  |   |
|--|---|
|  <p><b>Reported non-existent digital skills when they signed up</b></p>                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Overall there were fewer learners than in the previous evaluation reporting completely non-existent digital skills on enrolment; which was confirmed by delivery partners generally. This reflects the shift in the digital landscape since the last evaluation.</li> <li>Those that did claim to have no skills at all were usually older learners, aged 60+ who had previously worked in unskilled or manual jobs.</li> </ul>  |
|  <p><b>Reported possessing very basic digital skills</b></p>                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Many reported their 'computer' skills as being extremely dated - often having not used them for as long as 10, or even 20 years, since they last worked.</li> <li>Confidence in using computers was a key barrier, with many expressing fears about internet safety.</li> </ul>  |
|  <p><b>Reported that their digital skills weren't too bad but needed refreshing</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Just under a third claimed to possess some digital skills gained previously - many of which were self-taught.</li> <li>Some had dated phones and tablets which prevented them from being able to progress, so they joined the course to get access to training on suitable devices.</li> <li>Similar to the 'basic skills' group - there were very low levels of confidence generally amongst learners on registration and huge concerns about online safety.</li> </ul> |

## Increased confidence in using digital skills on course completion

**100%** of survey respondents reported an improvement in their digital skills as a result of their participation, with over 80% saying they were a lot better.

|   |   |
|---|---|
|  <p><b>Digital skills 'a lot better'</b></p> <p>Very often linked to improved confidence gained through attendance – a huge proportion of respondents reported that they believed their IT skill were much improved.</p> | <p><i>"I have learned so much, I can now search the internet and I'm confident with online banking and much more."</i></p> <p><i>"I am more confident. I can send emails now. I am able to book appointments on the Internet."</i></p> <p><i>"I'm confident with IT now, especially with NHS website and banking."</i></p> <p><i>"I am looking forward to starting work which will involve using computer skills. The course has given me more confidence."</i></p> |
|  <p><b>Digital skills 'a little better'</b></p> <p>It should be noted that some respondents were yet to complete their course.</p>   | <p><i>"There are quite a lot of things I can now do on the computer and just need to carry on using it and not get frightened."</i></p> <p><i>"The more hands-on practice given to me by my instructor... the more I feel confident."</i></p>   |

## Overall satisfaction levels

Reflecting ongoing feedback collected by delivery partners, the evaluation survey also reports very high levels of satisfaction amongst learners, with **100% responding that they were very satisfied (88%) or satisfied (12%)** with the course overall.

## Course highlights

- **Relaxed delivery style**

Reflecting the findings of the two previous evaluations (2019; 2023), a key success factor for learners continues to be the relaxed, welcoming and informal approach provided. Learners reported being made to feel at home and welcomed by the tutors delivering their training.

Many found that they were able to relax at an early stage and that they very quickly started to enjoy meeting new people and chatting with them. The friendly atmosphere was reported by many as being essential in putting them at ease, particularly in the first few sessions - and this led to their confidence in learning in a new environment being greatly boosted, resulting in good early progress.

Travel expenses and lunch, where provided, were also highly valued by learners, as were opportunities for group working and peer support amongst groups.

### Case Study

Paul is in his mid-50s and from Anfield. Frustrated by his total lack of IT skills, he decided to ring around various colleges and training providers to find out what was available. He signed up for the Include-IT course at the Rotunda Community College. He was immediately put at his ease on arrival by the tutor:

*"I found the tutor, Mark, very helpful and welcoming – he created a very relaxing and easy environment to learn in."*

Having completed the course he now feels more confident about using computers:

*"I am more willing to 'have a go' in terms of learning how to use a computer – something I'd not managed before. Generally I'm less anxious when using computers now. Thank you to Mark for his patience and support."*

- **Tutor support – empathetic & tailored approaches**

Linked closely to the relaxed and informal delivery theme, many learners also reported that they highly valued the skills and patience of their tutors. Many felt that their tutor was empathetic and very quickly understood their specific motivations and challenges, leading to the provision of tailored support.

### Case Study

Chris is in his 20s. Born with cerebral palsy, he relies on a wheelchair to get around. His parents separated when he was a teenager and he currently lives in supported housing in St Helens. He has never had a paid job but had a short spell volunteering for a local charity and has a passion for politics and sports, especially rugby and football.

Due to his disabilities, Chris was illiterate on completing high school and only recently picked up enough courage and confidence to start learning English skills to help fulfil his dream of working in an office. He currently attends an English Functional skills course with St Helens College.

Referred to the project by Households into Work, Chris joined the course at Torus Central in St Helens. With his mobility constraints and learning difficulties, the small group session and specially adapted computer set-up (adjustable laptop stand, wireless mouse and headphones) made his learning much more enjoyable and comfortable. Although possessing a smartphone and tablet, which he is familiar with, he had never used a laptop, keyboard or mouse, which proved to be problematic at first.

Chris has a passion for learning and has been very determined to complete the course. The tutor made the topics easy to understand, using basic terms and examples relevant to his interests and needs. He was patient with everyone and made it more interesting with lots of examples and exercises to practice. Being in a small group with a relaxed environment, Chris felt his confidence had improved considerably as he was able to actively engage and share experience with other learners during group discussions.

He is now much more confident in exploring and applying for office based jobs and volunteering opportunities, which in the past he would have had doubts about.

Having recently completed the course and acquired a new laptop, Chris is now able to study at home by enrolling on online distance learning courses via the Open University - he has since completed a couple of courses in politics and law. Together with his improved confidence and ability to use the Google accessibility feature on his laptop, Chris' next goal is to enrol to a Diploma with the OU.

*"I highly recommend and am grateful of this course to anyone with no/ very few digital skills. I am now much more aware the IT skills needed to work in an office environment such as using a laptop and office programmes like Word, Excel and PowerPoint."*

- **Practical learning approaches**

Learners also reported finding the practical exercises set by tutors very helpful in building confidence and also motivating them to stay focused on their learning. Many people mentioned how these were repeated often in order to build confidence, and that the repetition was appreciated, especially by older people. Given the patience of the tutors in this process, learners reported feeling that the practical learning really motivated them to keep attending.

So many learners reported feeling more confident, even within a couple of sessions – and that the practical activities such as learning how to download and start to use a shopping or banking app, or setting up an email address for the first time was an important milestone achievement for them.

#### **Case Study**

On enrolling on the course at Age UK Wirral, Ms D from Wallasey had some previous knowledge and experience using digital devices, but the course proved to be extremely useful as a refresher to update and improve her knowledge and skills to support her ambitions for starting to apply for jobs, as well as supporting her children online. She said:

*"I wanted to improve my digital knowledge, which will allow me to assist my children with homework. It will also provide me with more confidence to find and apply for work."*

As part of the course Ms D received one-to-one tuition and a learner pack containing course-specific literature. Weekly feedback and progress reports helped her move towards her learning goals.

She successfully completed the online Learn My Way modules, completed several word processing and spreadsheet modules and learned how to use email.

In addition to refreshed digital skills, she also participated in employability skills training that included production of an updated CV, the employment process, and how to search and apply for jobs online.

She then registered with online job sites using her newfound knowledge and skills. This has enabled Ms D to apply for two vacancies so far. Briefly summarising her experience, Ms D said:

*"I have really enjoyed the course, I had a really good teacher. I have taken in a lot of information."*

- **Increased confidence** – course entry and exit data for the 522 learners that completed the course shows that **408 (78%) reported a general improvement in confidence**. On a scale of 1-5, the average confidence score on initial assessment was 2.76, increasing to 4.24 on completion, an increase of 1.48 (more than 50% increase).

Increased self-confidence was reported by the vast majority of survey respondents as a key highlight, not only in relation to technical IT skills, but also in general through attending the course, meeting new people and socialising on regular basis. The fear and anxiety felt by so many at the start, both socially and skills-related, was greatly overcome by the relaxed and supportive atmosphere.

**The highly positive impacts of increased confidence have been reported by a huge number of learners, as well as by delivery partners as a major factor in the overall success of the project.**

#### Case Study

Ms J is 64 and recently retired. She is looking to get involved in some volunteering. She heard about Include-IT Mersey at Change, Grow, Live (CGL) in Widnes, where WEA had been regularly providing courses. She believed her IT skills were quite poor and wanted to improve them. She enjoyed the Learn My Way course – both the content and the company of other learners. On completion she is more motivated generally in her day to day life, saying:

*"I'm really pleased to be able to use Teams meetings to join activities at CGL. I've now got access to the NHS app and know how to use it properly and it's also given me far more access to health services. So it's also helped my confidence generally – I'm very happy that I joined the course."*

#### Learners' suggested improvements to the course

Learners were also asked for their suggestions, through an open survey question, as to how Include-IT Mersey could improve or change, in terms of content or delivery, to aid future development. Over 50% of respondents reported that they were happy with the course as it was and did not have any specific elements they wanted to be changed.

Of those that did respond, common themes included:

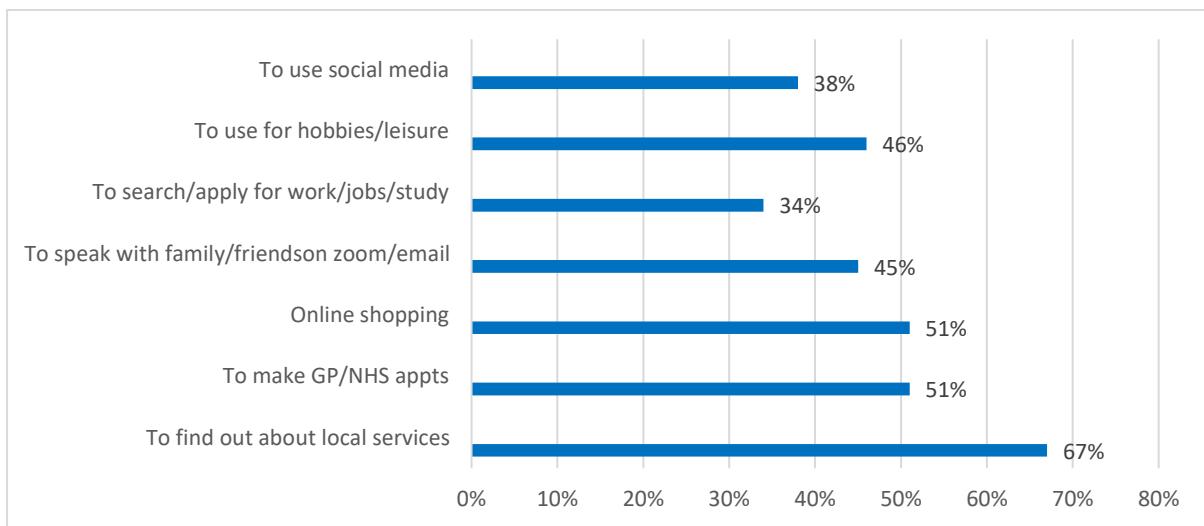
- Longer/less intensive course length – some courses have been delivered fairly intensively 1 or 2 days per week over a short period of a couple of months. A small number of learners found this method of delivery too concentrated for them and that they would like to have the option of an extended delivery period.
- Progression pathways to more training – a vast majority reported significant interest in further IT learning and many wanted to be able to access more advanced IT training locally delivered in a similar format: i.e. in relaxed, accessible community settings and free of charge. This was echoed by several delivery partners who believe there has been a decline in the availability of localised intermediate level IT courses across the city region generally.

## Reported IT usage post-participation

Overall, the vast majority of learners reported increased usage of digital skills on course completion.

|   |   |
|---|---|
|  53% | <p><b>Reported now using their digital skills a lot more as a result of their participation</b> – with 26% a moderate amount and 6% a little more</p> <p><i>"I am using my tablet a lot more and I use the Digital Drop-In sessions to use a computer. But I try not to use it too much because I will start to feel overwhelmed so I just use it for around 30 minutes a day."</i></p> <p><i>"Now that I have returned to work, I am using a computer and internet on a daily basis in my new job."</i></p> <p><i>"I independently use my computer now and always on the internet for either job applications, to access our NHS medical details, book for blood test, order my son's medication online, complete online courses required for jobs and download apps. I'm online a lot more."</i></p> <p><i>"I am now able to use my free tablet any time I like. I had never been online and did not have one before I joined the class."</i></p> |
|---|---|

## Reasons for use of computer/ IT device since course attendance



*"I mainly use Property Pool Plus to look for housing, I use it to browse the internet too and I like using Google maps to see the areas where I am applying to live."*

*"Enrolling myself for some academic online courses, socialising with extended family using TikTok, log in to Zoom meetings, email my banks concerning any concern or effective use of my bank apps etc. Helping my son with school assignments, etc."*

*"I am more likely now to use my laptop to do things that I used my phone for before and I feel more confident helping my children when they go online."*

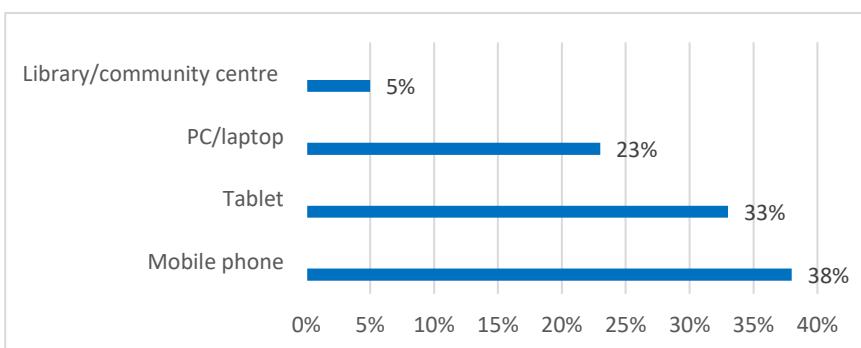
*"I now use Zoom for recreational purposes and job interviews, and use YouTube for hobbies. I know more about how to video conference using Zoom and I will be using this for meetings with my Housing Association. I hope to go online to contact my GP and make appointments."*

*"The Include IT course helped me search for jobs online, I was more confident doing online shopping following the course and I am now using MS Teams on a daily basis as I complete my training in my new job in the Civil Service."*

*"I have just been practicing spreadsheets. I will now be able to budget my bills when I move house shortly. I have recently been able to view my health records via the NHS website."*

*"I like to communicate with friends and family via email and video calls. I like to look for bargains while shopping online. I also order prescriptions and booked doctor's appointments online."*

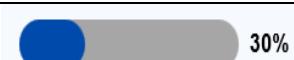
#### **Learners were also asked about which type of device they usually use to access the internet:**



Reflecting a change since the last evaluation (2023), more people are using their mobiles to access the internet, as well as tablets, which many received as part of the LCRCA Digital Inclusion Initiative.

*"I use my mobile phone for emails, and the Lloyds tablet I was given on the course. I now find it less stressful going online and carrying out tasks because I now know more."*

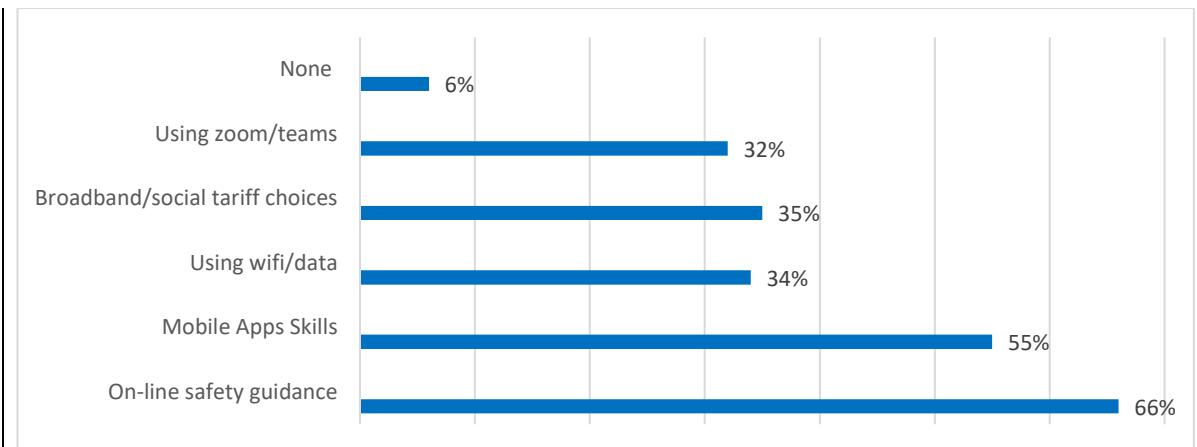
#### **Learner engagement with Digital Drop-Ins**

 30%  
**Of respondents had used one of the project's Digital Drop-Ins.**

This was far higher than reported usage in the previous BBO evaluation and generally, learners reported knowing about them, with only 8% stating that they had not heard about them (again, a marked increase on the last evaluation). Delivery partners often provide their own Drop-Ins as part of their wider service (aside from those facilitated by the project), with many learners tending to stick with those.

#### **Learner interest in further IT learning**

 88%  
**A huge majority of survey respondents reported being interested in further follow-on IT training.**  
Areas of interest identified by learners included:



- Two thirds of respondents agreed that online safety was a key priority in terms of further learning, and alongside that, how they could find out more about safe ways of downloading and using apps. This was a particular focus for many in relation to use of banking apps.
- Despite online security content already being included in the course, many learners reported remaining highly concerned about their online safety and resistant to using online banking.
- This fear appears to have diminished in relation to online shopping, however, with respondents generally starting to engage with this. Not least, this is driven by the two-tier pricing policies often operated by supermarkets, offering lower prices to those with an online registration/membership compared to those that just check-in as a guest. Many delivery partners cited this as reason for people realising that they had little choice in registering/ setting up the app in order to access cheaper prices.

Learners commented:

*"IT is advancing so fast, I feel more confident now and I would like to continue learning."*

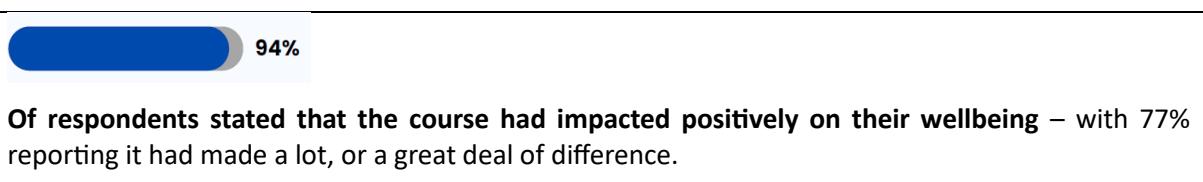
*"It would be nice to carry on learning, especially cyber security as there are so many scams and the scammers are always ahead of the game. It's moving forward with the times . I am more confident now. I use my apps now to book things, whereas I was anxious before."*

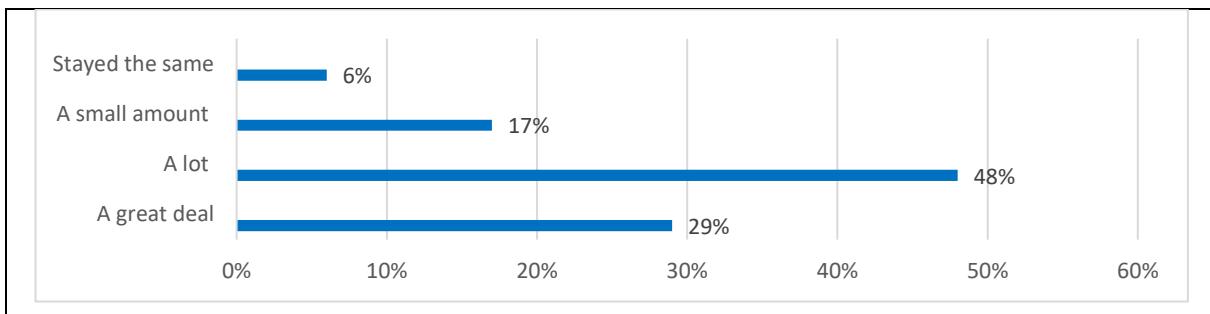
*"I'd like to learn how to design leaflets on Publisher, making the most of Facebook and Instagram, downloading apps and using them to their full potential, choosing and using booking platforms safely."*

*"I did the ECDL qualification after I completed my basic [Include-IT] course and I would be interested in other training at this level or higher, maybe in using applications like PowerPoint."*

### Impacts of participation on learner wellbeing

People were asked to report on to what extent they thought participation in the course had impacted their wellbeing:





Learners stated the following in relation to this impact:

*"The course promoted confidence & verbal communication as I had isolated myself. I have since joined other groups & use my iPhone to book things now."*

*"Made me realise I'm not past it and I am very capable."*

*"I used to feel isolated and reluctant to leave the house. Now I look forward to the IT sessions and meeting people."*

*"It has absolutely helped my wellbeing. I feel a lot happier and enjoyed being part of a group every week."*

*"I've experienced mental health improvement, and I'm taking steps to become less isolated."*

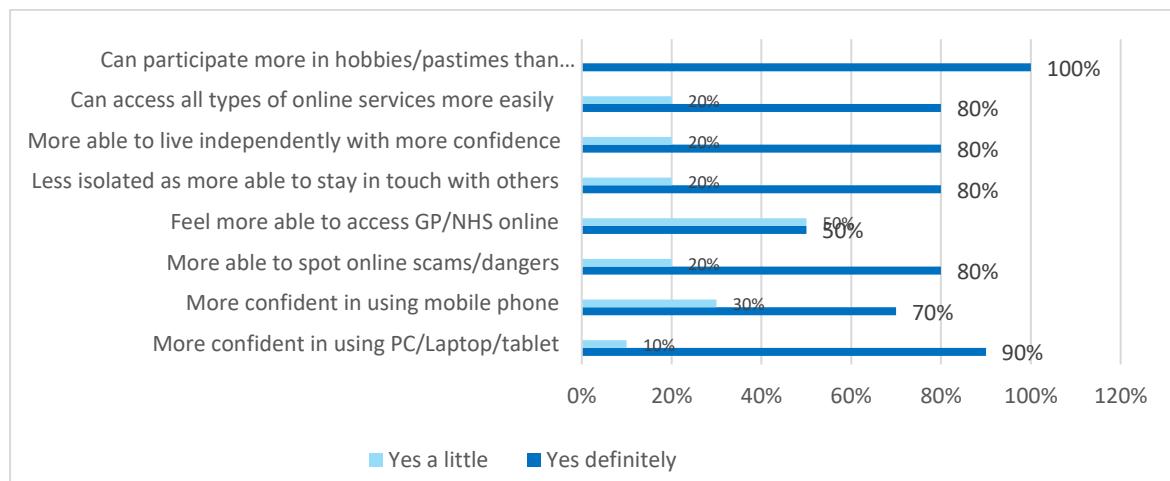
*"I really like socialising with the people at the centre and other people in the group. I've met some lovely people on the course. I meet them outside of the course often, we always keep in touch."*

*"I feel less isolated and more confident as I get to go out of the house and talk to people."*

Similarly, delivery partners were also asked about their perceptions of the impact of the course on learners' wellbeing, with highly positive responses about the impacts on many aspects of people's lives – not just IT skills. As one tutor commented:

*"The key impact of participating in the project includes: increased all round confidence, plus confidence in using the computer – with the gaining of digital skills enabling them to be part of the digital society we live in today, which is adding structure and improved wellbeing to their lives."*

**Learners reported the following benefits:**



These wider impacts have always been an important feature of the project, and this evaluation has brought them into even sharper focus as vital outcomes for all learners.

## Impacts for Digital Champion volunteers

Volunteers have played a vital part in the development of the project over its lifetime: both supporting course delivery, and in running Digital Drop-In sessions, usually located separately to course provision. Despite the previous loss of volunteers as a result of COVID restrictions, this element of the project has been rejuvenated over the 2023-25 period, with recruitment of many new volunteers and establishment of a large number of new Digital Drop-Ins across the city region, many of which located in libraries – building productive relationships with Local Authority library teams.

Consultation through an online survey of volunteers, either currently involved, or have been over the last 12 months, identified the following:

|   |   |
|---|---|
|  90% <p>Reported that they were <b>very satisfied</b> (69%) or <b>satisfied</b> (21%) with their volunteering experience to date.</p>  | <p>Volunteers had found out about the opportunity through a range of routes, including Include-IT delivery partners, where some had, themselves, previously attended the course (11%); through a local advert or feature (25%); volunteer opportunity databases and local CVS's (25%); and the same number through social media. The remainder heard through word of mouth, or through JCP or college employment advisors.</p>  |
|  86% <p>Found their <b>induction training</b> extremely (34%), or very <b>useful</b> (52%), and 93% <b>felt extremely or very appreciated</b> by the Volunteer Co-ordinator.</p>   | <p>One volunteer commented:</p> <p><i>"The induction session was very informative, very easy to understand and very clear about how everything was going to work and all of the safeguarding options."</i></p>  |
|  86% <p>The main <b>motivation to get involved</b> remains the wish to share their IT skills with others.</p>  | <p>59% stated that they wanted to get out and about and meet more people through volunteering.</p> <p>79% stated they wanted to support people in the community.</p> <p><b>Higher than reported in previous evaluations, 41% wanted to gain work experience</b> and 28% to develop teaching skills, reflective of the younger demographic of volunteers.</p>  |
|  79% <p>Of volunteers reported <b>gaining new skills</b>: 32% a great deal; 18% a lot, and 29% a moderate amount, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved social and listening skills</li> <li>• Improved tutoring/ teaching skills</li> <li>• Communication skills – including the ability to explain complex tasks in a straightforward way.</li> </ul> | <p>A volunteer at Bootle Library Drop-In commented:</p> <p><i>"I have improved my listening skills in order to find out what the IT problem is when learners come in – as well as better tutoring skills so I can show learners how to do things for themselves. I can now build their confidence so they won't give up and then they can do sort any IT problems at home without asking for help from anyone else."</i></p> <p>Another reported:</p> <p><i>"I've now got better training skills. Also improved communication skills and I'm far more patient and empathic. It's also helped to improve my technical skills."</i></p> |

|   |  |
|---|--|
|  <p>83%</p> <p>Reported increased self-confidence, back up to the levels reported in the 2017-19 evaluation, following a dip in the 2019-23 phase.</p> <p>31% reported self-confidence increasing a great deal, reflective of the younger demographic of volunteers in this phase of the project.</p>  | <p><i>"It has gotten me more comfortable with social interactions."</i></p> <p><i>"I am feeling slightly more part of my local community."</i></p> <p><i>"It has proven that what I am good at in helping people to get things done if they have any problems that they can't sort themselves."</i></p> <p><i>"This has increased my self-discipline and confidence to work with diverse groups and individuals. I've gained valuable experience supporting others and it's made a positive impact on my personal growth and development."</i></p> <p><i>"This opportunity has pushed me out of my comfort zone as an international student, and has helped me interact with locals and people of different ages."</i></p> |
|  <p>90%</p> <p>Reported that it was a good way to contribute to their local community.</p>   | <p>52% stated that it was a sociable role, enabling them to make regular contact with others.</p> <p>For 24% it has been a route into further volunteering or training.</p> <p>21% reported that it had been a route into paid employment.</p>   |
|  <p>92%</p> <p>Felt they were making a <b>positive difference</b> to the people they assist (72% 'a great deal', or 'a lot').</p> <p>For example, one Digital Drop-In volunteer commented of his role:</p> <p><i>"I am making a positive difference by being able to pass on my skills in IT to others. People often ring up the library to ask if I am going to be in on the day I volunteer before they visit: they have the confidence to come in and see me to solve whatever problems they are having."</i></p> <p>Some current Digital Drop-In volunteers, however, reported that there were currently very few people attending their sessions, which was disappointing for them, personally, in terms of being able to contribute something. There appears to be a difference in satisfaction levels between those volunteers involved in busy Digital Drop-Ins, compared to those involved in quieter ones.</p> <p><b>Overall, 88% of volunteers felt that the sessions could be advertised more effectively so that more people are aware of them.</b></p> |  |
|  <p>85%</p> <p>The <b>key improvement wanted</b> by volunteers is <b>improved advertising</b> to raise awareness of the Drop-Ins amongst the local community.</p>  | <p>Also, when asked how their volunteering experience could be improved:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 31% wanted to volunteer for more hours</li> <li>• 15% wanted more training</li> <li>• 12% wanted to link up with other volunteers more</li> <li>• 8% wanted more frequent contact from the Volunteer Coordinator, though the vast majority were more than satisfied.</li> </ul>  |

 90%

Overall, the vast majority of **current** volunteers confirmed that they are extremely likely (41%); very likely (21%) or somewhat likely (28%) to continue to volunteer as a Digital Champion in the future. The 10% who will not be continuing are mainly university students moving into work placements, or leaving the region on completion of their studies; or those moving into employment.

The following case study highlights one volunteer's experience of her involvement at a local library<sup>4</sup>.

#### **Mrs D – Volunteer Digital Champion - Knowsley**

Mrs D has been volunteering at Halewood Library since June 2024, where she has developed a good working relationship with the library team. Finding out about the opportunity through the local Volunteer Centre, she found the application process straightforward and the induction session useful.

She supports 5-6 people, on average, at each session, with participants including regular, as well as occasional visitors. Although open to all, in practice, there are two main groups: older people and young people (aged 18-24). Demand has been driven by the closure of the local authority One Stop Shop, where people were previously able to pay bills and seek advice.

**Older people often visit the library to access the Warm Hub and, as result, some have started to attend the Digital Drop-In.** Their main motivations for getting involved have been that of finances and health appointments. Mrs D commented that a common issue is lack of access to local bank branches, which is forcing older people online. Many request support to navigate banking apps on mobile phones, which is often the main device used to get online. Others need support in order to pay Council Tax and other bills online, and to use the NHS app.

**Young people, many of whom attend the DWP Job Club in the same building,** use the library's IT suite to search for jobs and update UC activity journals. There are no dedicated IT support staff and there is limited capacity to amongst library staff to provide IT support. Mrs D often provides guidance on how to login and use printers, commenting: *"There's a presumption by Job Coaches that all young people can do these things, but it's not the case. Literacy levels are often poor, so they need support."*

Given the nature of the support requested, Mrs D is highly aware of safeguarding and privacy issues and the need to set boundaries in relation to the types of support she can and can't provide. Many people ask her to lead them through paying bills and accessing bank accounts, which, beyond advising on the basics, she has to request that people ask family members for assistance. Support is confined to trouble-shooting barriers to getting online and guiding people in accessing information and suitable apps. She regularly searches for information and local agencies to refer users on to.

Given the demand, Mrs D sometimes has to turn people away at the end of the session and believes that local demand is such that additional volunteering hours would be beneficial. She would also welcome up-to-date signposting to other Digital Drop-Ins and DI Hubs locally.

Mrs D is highly positive about her volunteering experience, commenting:

*"This has been an amazing experience to date and generally this approach needs to be expanded. It's been a huge learning curve for me, realising just how digitally excluded so many people actually are. This is often due to disabilities, neurodiversity, poor literacy and the challenges for them to use devices which are not accessible to them – such as people hard of hearing. I'm respectful of these challenges. People now often have no choice but to go online as there's no other way to pay bills or access services. I'm pleased to be able to regularly volunteer here and build up trust with people."*

<sup>4</sup> Further volunteer case studies are included in Annex 1

## **Wider impacts for delivery partners**

Wider impacts have emerged as a result of delivery partners' involvement in the project, including:

**Improved levels of organisational awareness of the barriers to digital inclusion:** including common and emerging needs amongst local communities, and how to support them.

For many partners, their involvement has provided a flexible tool with which to engage digitally excluded service users and the communities in which they operate. Over time, and through working within the context of shared learning across the delivery partnership, this has led to the following:

- **improved understanding of the reasons for and impacts of digital exclusion** on the communities they serve.
- **unified determination by all partners to 'make this happen'** in terms of finding ways to remove and break through barriers to digital inclusion, through new and innovative approaches – both at a structural and individual level – working to improve IT skills levels and access to computers and the internet.

*"It has opened up our organisation to the community more and we are very well placed to help that community. We have been able to reach people that we didn't think we would have been able to help beforehand. Learners are gaining knowledge on how to use different devices and we are connecting with our community and showing them how they can also connect, both online and in person, to their local community."*

### **Provision of more flexible and individualised digital skills support:**

All delivery partners acknowledge the benefit of their involvement in enabling them to further develop their digital skills offer – becoming increasingly tailored to respond to the varying needs of different people.

Over years of refining their offers, they have adapted working approaches to tackling the barriers people face to becoming and staying digitally included. This includes barriers facing people with learning disabilities; people for whom English is a second language; people with limited literacy skills; and people who may simply find leaving their home to attend a course highly challenging.

**Everton Development Trust** - reflective of their involvement since 2017, commented:

*"The basic requirements of the Include IT project make this model flexible enough for us to be able to respond to the individual needs of each of our learners - this is the most important thing to us. None of our learners want a rigid syllabus in which a lot of elements may not be relevant to them. They are more confident when they are able to have a say in what they are going to learn. The project has been of real benefit to our learners and also to our organisation in terms of engagement of people into their own IT journey. Include-IT provides a valuable element of our approach in that it is an entry point for people with very limited IT skills."*

*We often identify potential learners who come into our Digital Drop-In base here - who we get to know when they are trying to, for example, print off tickets - and start to get them to consider their options. The roll-on-roll-off individualised approach works well for them. The project enables us ...to make a more structured, meaningful offer to learners with very limited IT skills. It's often the start of a learning journey for people, many of whom then continue with us onto higher level qualifications. It's a good starting point for a steady cohort who move onto foundation level and up to ICDL and Levels 2/3."*

**Alt Valley Community Trust reported:**

*“Being part of the Include-IT Mersey project has had a big impact on our organisation. It has allowed us to reach and support adults who previously lacked essential digital skills, particularly those over 50, who were struggling with technology and to some extent have been left behind in the digital world. Through the course, we’ve been able to provide structured training, tailored to learners’ individual needs. This has culminated in learners gaining confidence in using the internet, online services, and digital security.”*

**Torus Foundation commented that:**

*“The project has helped our organisation to deliver basic, essential IT skills classes to those residents that are digitally excluded. Apart from improved IT skills, it has helped their employment/ work opportunities and improved health & wellbeing such as confidence, reduced social isolation, etc, which are the core objectives of Torus Foundation.”*

## The emergence of LCR’s digital inclusion ecosystem – project alignment

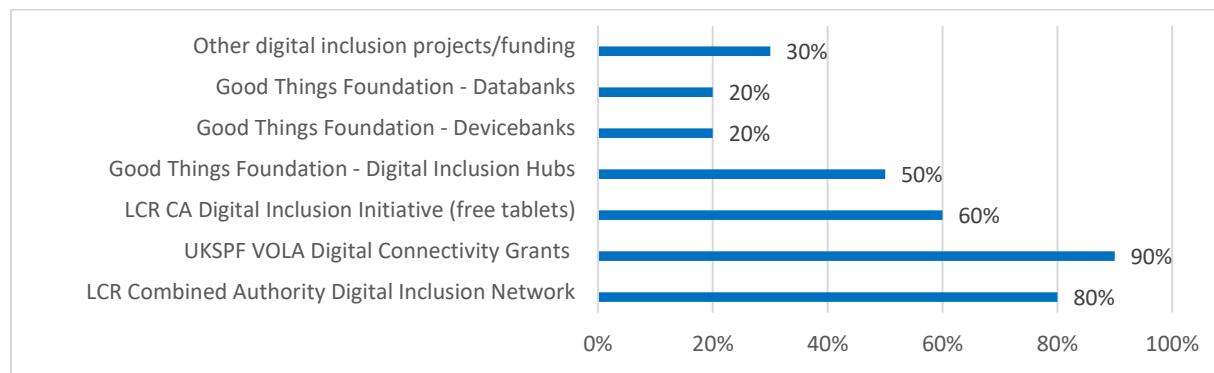
### Networks

VOLA continues to enjoy a **close working relationship with the LCR Combined Authority**, with management of not only the Include-IT Mersey project, but also the UKSPF Digital Connectivity Grants programme and an employment support project (The Progress Partnership). The team regularly contributes to the CA-convened Digital Inclusion Network, which has been a valuable publicity route and means by which to engage with other organisations with an interest in digital inclusion.

### Complementarity with a wide range of LCR digital inclusion initiatives

In their long-term roles as digital inclusion service providers, **VOLA and delivery partners are firmly embedded in the foundations of the wider LCR digital inclusion ecosystem**. Partners are all well networked in their local areas and most with the Combined Authority’s DI Team and wider DI Network. Many have been recipients of UKSPF Digital Connectivity Grants to improve their IT infrastructure; and over half have also engaged with the LCR DI Initiative to distribute free tablets and mobile data.

Responses to the online survey highlight the high levels of involvement in complementary DI initiatives across the partnership:



Overall, project delivery partners, working together with VOLA, have pushed forward since 2023 to help create the foundations of a more coordinated digital inclusion response across the Liverpool City Region - with many taking advantage of new grants and initiatives to help combat the widespread negative impacts of digital exclusion.

## Section 6: Project Success Factors & Recommendations

Overall, building on the previous six years, the 2023-25 phase has continued to deliver a well-managed, efficient and effective project, which has over-achieved in relation to its UKSPF targets, producing high levels of positive outcomes and wider impacts.

### Success factors

Over the last 8 years, the project has been highly successful in helping to overcome barriers to digital inclusion for thousands of LCR residents, promoting social inclusion and improved health & wellbeing alongside the improvement of digital skills. In this latest two-year phase alone, 638 people have been supported through training courses, with an additional 2,000 recorded attendances at Digital Drop-Ins. The project's achievements have been made possible through several key success factors:

**Strong project management and relationships between VOLA's central team, delivery partners and the LCRCA to facilitate the introduction of:**

- **Further flexibilities in relation to participant eligibility**, opening up the project to a wider audience of learners, e.g. retired, younger and digitally excluded people in employment.
- **Provision of a flexible roll-on-roll-off format by an increased number of partners**, allowing learners of all motivations and skills levels to join when they wish – and pausing learning, where required, to meet other challenges and commitments people may face in terms of caring roles, health, work or other personal circumstance.
- **Streamlining of paperwork, evidence and monitoring requirements** wherever possible, to minimise the administrative burden on delivery partners/ tutors.

**Effective delivery model design - flexible content and format, with the following core approaches:**

- **Small, relaxed group working**: usually 5-8 people – facilitating not only a better learning environment, but also social interaction, with high levels of one-to-one support provided.
- **Personalised learning**: through high levels of tutor expertise and experience in providing customised learning offers – primarily based around Learn My Way, and increasingly supplemented with other learning resources and group discussions around topics such as online safety; mobile phone apps; MS Office applications; and AI.
- **Adaptable delivery timetable**: to meet learners' needs - with delivery partners flexing their approaches in supporting learners who may need a longer period to complete the training, or pause their participation due to other challenges and commitments.

**A more integrated support offer:**

- Include-IT has become embedded within a broader offer of personalised support by several delivery partners, e.g. a one-stop referral/menu approach in which wider support can be accessed, with tutors enabling learners to get involved with, for example: employment support programmes; health & wellbeing services; basic/functional skills support; vocational training; and volunteering – or simply linking up with leisure and social opportunities.

**Focus on holistic outcomes and personal progression:**

- Improved wellbeing, self-confidence and self-esteem have been central outcomes for many learners – both in relation to digital skills and more generally – the community-based delivery approach being an important success factor in building self-confidence. Reduced social isolation is also a key benefit for many, with peer and group support bringing structure and opportunity for social interaction.

## Launch of the National Digital Inclusion Action Plan, February 2025 – implications for Include-IT Mersey and the LCR digital inclusion ecosystem

In February 2025, the national Digital Inclusion Action Plan<sup>5</sup> 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:

- 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 significant strategic policy development, the following recommendations** are based on potential opportunities for creative collaboration with LCR digital inclusion stakeholders – building on the significant experience and expertise embedded in the Include-IT delivery partnership.

---

<sup>5</sup> [Digital Inclusion Action Plan, February 2025](#)

## **Recommendations for operational and short-term priorities**

**Immediate review of coverage across Halton, Knowsley and St Helens:** with the withdrawal of Torus Foundation and the WEA at the end of the 2023-25 delivery period, there is an immediate requirement to appoint a replacement(s) to ensure continued availability of provision in these boroughs, either from within the existing partnership, or by drafting in new providers.

**Enhanced promotion of Digital Drop-Ins:** as strongly recommended by Digital Champion volunteers, to improve community awareness and uptake. With DDI venues being dispersed across the city region, hosted by external organisations, it is recognised that this is not something that can be achieved by the Include-IT team in isolation, but will be better achieved through liaison between the Volunteer Coordinator and host organisations, who need to be more proactive in local promotion of the sessions. Suggested approaches to explore include:

- Localised promotion to service providers at both borough and sub-borough (community) levels, including Local Authority & NHS services, Housing Associations, and VCFSE organisations – targeting service providers working in areas of close proximity to the Drop-Ins.
- Promotion through the LCR Digital Inclusion Network.
- Host organisations social media and other communication channels.

**Strategic collaboration between VOLA and the LCRCA Digital Inclusion team to support progression of city region DI priorities and promotion of DI information and support.** For example:

- Updating of the Digital Inclusion Hub database/ map to include databanks and devices banks linked to the Good Things Foundation – capitalising on the CA's recent data sharing agreement with GTF.
- Collation and dissemination of regularly updated information on basic and next-steps ICT training (L1/2) across the LCR boroughs, alongside Include-IT Mersey and other Digital Drop-In services.

**Increased sharing of innovative approaches, good practice and training resources to facilitate more cohesive delivery across the delivery partnership,** for example:

- Online money management skills: e.g. online banking; cost comparison sites; digital budgeting tools.
- Sector-specific apps, e.g. universal/ standardised apps used in the care sector.
- Online security.
- Artificial intelligence.
- Successful approaches to digital skills delivery for ESOL learners, e.g. using AI or QR codes, as used by Greenbank with Ukrainian learners.

## **Recommendations to support future strategic investment & model development: medium-term, 2026 onwards**

To facilitate alignment of the project with digital inclusion priorities and 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 & Digital Inclusion teams: to review options for the integration of digital inclusion into its future, post-UKSPF Investment Strategy for 2026 onwards. Enabling digital inclusion 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.

- Opportunity also exists 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.

Include-IT Mersey, alongside VOLA’s UKSPF Digital Connectivity Grants programme provides 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 central government innovation funding 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.

**Without the significant level of UKSPF investment, continuation of the project beyond March 2023 would have been highly unlikely, as opportunities to access funds on a similar scale are extremely limited. Sefton CVS on behalf of VOLA, the Include-IT Mersey delivery partnership and all the communities we serve would like to formally thank the LCR Combined Authority for its continued commitment and support in enabling the partnership to continue to its mission of combatting digital exclusion.**

**Dr Jane Hobson**  
**April 2025**

## Annex 1: Additional Case Studies: Digital Champion Volunteers

### Ms N – Moss Bank Community Library, St Helens

This volunteer has been providing a regular couple of hours' support a week at Moss Bank Library since Summer 2024. She found out about the opportunity through a family member and applied. She found the application and interview process simple and easy to navigate, with the induction session comprehensive and useful, including safeguarding and privacy issues and how to deal with them.

Ms N has an undergraduate degree in Cyber Security and is studying for her MSc in Cyber Threat Intelligence and Forensics. She has helped her grandparents and their neighbours for years with their IT queries and was keen to extend this to a volunteering role, which she knows will also assist her with employment in the IT sector in the near future. She enjoys providing help to people who use the Digital Drop-In at the Library.

Although user numbers aren't high, Ms N feels like she's making a difference. Usually, a couple of people attend each week, plus a married older couple who attend regularly, with whom Ms N has built up a good relationship, having first come in for assistance with setting up a new phone and tablet.

Ms N works with people by demonstrating what they need to do for a specific task, then switching the device off and asking them to try to repeat the task. She first developed this approach when supporting her grandparents and finds it builds confidence and skills.

Examples of requested areas of assistance include ordering items on Amazon; searching the Council website, e.g. for bin collection days; downloading and using the NHS app; and use of emails, especially on smartphones, and often in relation to applying for jobs. When registrations require personal information and passwords, she asks people to type in their own details so privacy is not compromised.

Developing an ongoing relationship with people has built their confidence in relation to their IT skills. Ms D has also built good links with the library staff who are supportive of her session, signposting people to her regularly. Together they have added the specific session time to the Include-IT banner on display in the library – and they would like additional advertising to let more local people know about the Drop-In sessions.

Ms N commented:

*"I'm really enjoying this role – I can see people are getting a lot from my support for them and it's good to meet up weekly with people who need support. It's also going to help me when I start to apply for jobs in IT later this year."*

### Ms M, Liverpool Central Library

Ms M is an international student studying computer science in her second year at Liverpool University. She was keen to gain some experience volunteering to improve her skills in relation to supporting people who are digitally excluded and to gain some work experience in relation to her degree.

She found out about the opportunity through an online search and made contact with the Volunteer Coordinator in March 2024 to find out more. She discussed her study commitments and agreed a September start date to coincide with her course timetable. Following her induction she started to volunteer at Central Library for 2 hours each week, initially on Mondays and then shifting to Fridays in her second semester, to fit with her lecture commitments.

Ms M enjoyed the one-to-one induction, which put her at ease, covering a range of useful issues and answering her queries as to how she would be assisting people at the Drop-Ins. She is based on the

first floor of the library in the computer section and is visible to passers-by. A large Include-IT banner is also located there along with leaflets advertising the Drop-In.

Over the first few months she provided advice and support to an average of 2 to 3 people per week – with one regular attendee who was setting up a travel guide business. Ms M supported him with use of software to produce marketing and to set up his email accounts and Facebook page. She has also supported others with queries about use of software packages, Google maps and Publisher.

She has become more confident in working with people, taking care to understand exactly what they want to accomplish, showing them how to undertake tasks and then asking them to do similar, providing extra support where needed. She has also supported others with queries about use of software packages, use of Google maps, and Publisher.

Disappointingly, since the start of 2025 attendance numbers have dropped – on average only 1 per session. Given that the Drop-In is situated on the first floor, Ms M thinks it probably needs more advertising around the city centre to attract people into the library. She commented:

*"I have seen how useful this type of support is for people who are not currently using IT – more advertising would be good to get more people into the session. This experience has helped me massively as well – with my confidence in supporting people who need help. And also with my people skills."*

Ms M has secured a position with a large biopharma company in London for her degree placement in the 2025-26 academic year and believes that this role helped her hugely in achieving this.

*"The volunteer manager has been really flexible from the start of my volunteering – adjusting my start date, my volunteering day and finding me a nearby venue to fit in with my course timetable and workload. This – and the fact that it is a short-term commitment – has made my experience with Include-IT ideal for me as I'm juggling a really demanding course timetable and study commitments. I am so pleased I have been involved in this since September and as an international student, it's also been great to meet some local people in Liverpool and to support them."*

## Annex 2: List of Consultees

In addition to the 104 learners, 29 volunteers and 10 delivery partners that responded to their respective online surveys, the following people were interviewed in-depth.

| Name                | Position                          | Organisation                     |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Peter Jordan        | Tutor                             | Everton Development Trust        |
| Erin Williams       | Tutor                             | Granby Toxteth Development Trust |
| Christopher O'Toole | Tutor                             | Greenbank College                |
| Rob Benson          | Digital Inclusion Team Manager    | LCR Combined Authority           |
| Tara Jussa          | Digital Inclusion Project Officer | LCR Combined Authority           |
| Claire Inglesby     | Quality Assurance Manager         | Rotunda Community College        |
| Mark Howarth        | Tutor                             | Rotunda Community College        |
| Maxine Ennis        | CEO                               | Rotunda Community College        |
| Ms D                | Digital Champion Volunteer        | Sefton CVS                       |
| Ms L                | Digital Champion Volunteer        | Sefton CVS                       |
| Ms M                | Digital Champion Volunteer        | Sefton CVS                       |
| Ms N                | Digital Champion Volunteer        | Sefton CVS                       |
| Beth Cropper        | Volunteer Coordinator             | Sefton CVS/ VOLA                 |
| Joe McNulty         | Project Manager                   | Sefton CVS/ VOLA                 |
| Stuart McGrory      | Consortium Manager (Snr PM)       | Sefton CVS/ VOLA                 |
| James Ng            | Tutor                             | Torus Foundation                 |
| Linda Bennett       | Tutor                             | WEA                              |