

Final Evaluation Report

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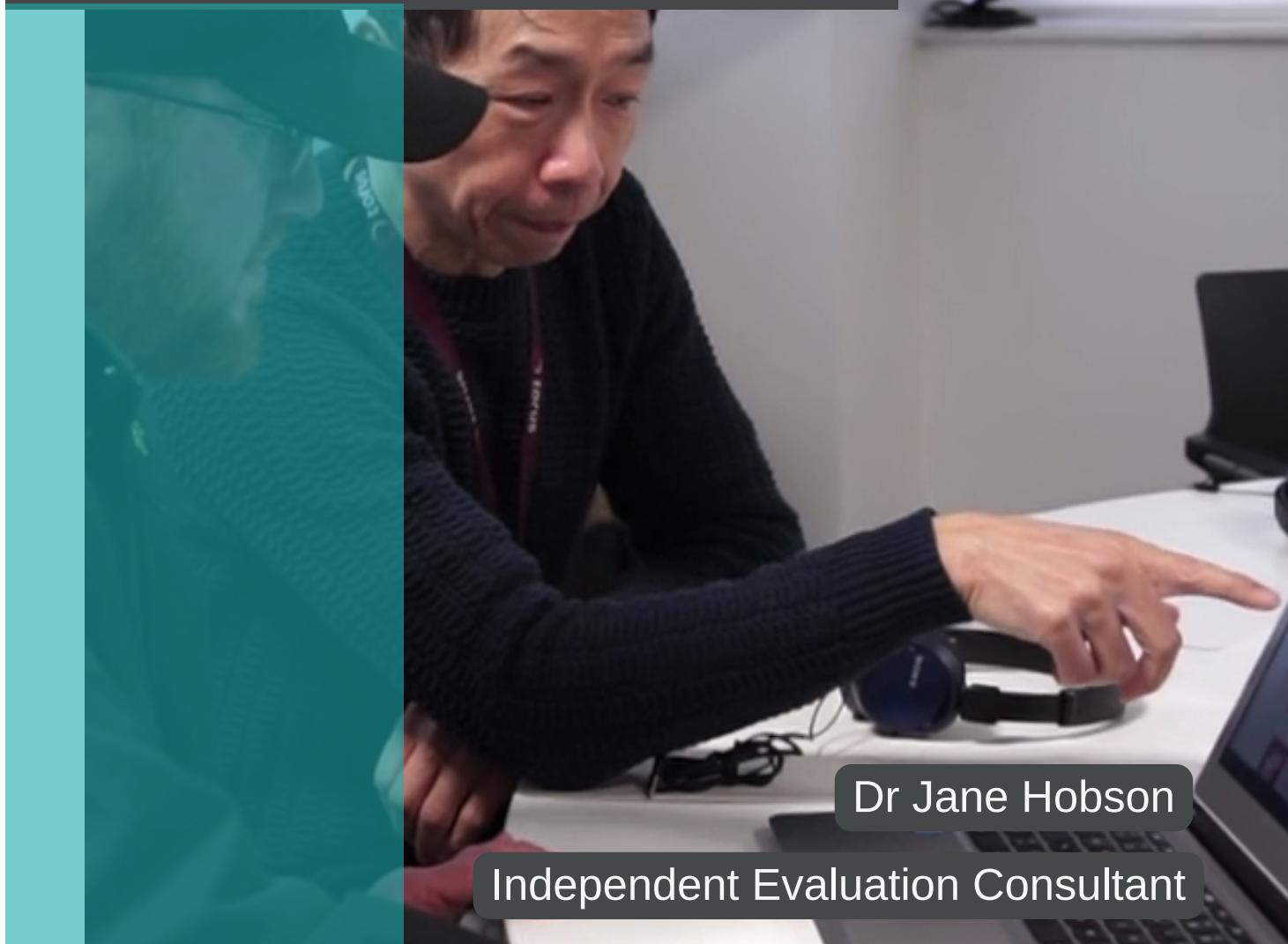


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Executive Summary

Include-IT Mersey is a Digital Inclusion project funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) and The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF), through its Building Better Opportunities (BBO) programme, providing support to digitally excluded, workless people across the Liverpool City Region to learn essential, basic IT skills to help them move into or closer to work. Commencing in 2017, the project was awarded £4,476,186 for the period February 2017 to June 2023, allocated in three phases.

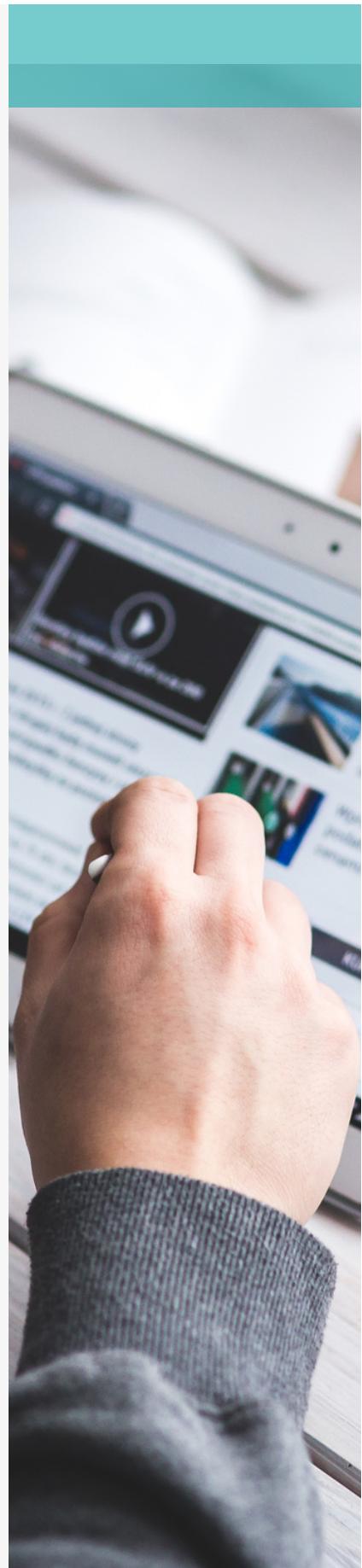
The project helps people to improve basic ICT and online skills, confidence and access to digital technologies, with the ultimate aim of supporting progression towards employment or further training, helping those furthest from the labour market to become more job ready.

Key Achievements:

Led by Sefton CVS in partnership with VOLA and 22 not-for-profit providers, by the end of delivery in March 2023, over its six years of operation, the project has:

- Recruited and supported 2,109 participants to develop basic digital skills: 103% of contractual target.
- Supported 1,056 people to move into employment, education/training, or active job-search, exceeding cumulative results targets by 15%; a surplus of 137 progression outcomes.
- Achieved an overall positive progression rate of 50%, rising to 53% when factoring in 55 additional training progressions, which could not be counted as 'ESF results' due to funding technicalities.
- Generated a conservatively estimated social value, by way of 'wellbeing' totalling £10 million, a social return on investment of £2.30 for every pound spent.

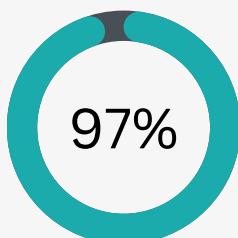
In recognition of its success in responding to the barriers created by the COVID pandemic, in 2020, the Include-IT Mersey partnership team was named Team of the Year at the Employability Awards run by ERSA, the UK's trade and membership body representing the employment support sector.



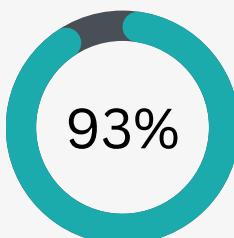


Key Findings:

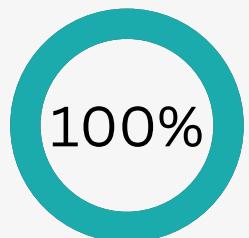
A survey of recent and current learners for the post lock down period (April 2021 to the end of February 2023) (n=137) found:



very satisfied or satisfied with the course overall



Digital Skills had improved



said 1-2-1 Tutor support was excellent



said they feel confident to use a computer



said they go on a computer more as part of work, training or studying



said they would be interested in going on a follow up course



go online more for leisure and to pursue hobbies

go online more to find jobs and training opportunities. **and 62% felt that they were in better position to apply for jobs or training.**



reported going online more to contact their GP or access health services

Key Success Factors

Ongoing, strong central project management:	Hyper-local reach through a network of trusted, community-based partners:	Positive learner experience & trust as the primary focus at the heart of delivery:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• High quality project management expertise.• Ongoing consistency of key team members throughout the project.• Strong project management, coupled with development of effective partnership working.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Delivery partners' commitment to the Include-IT Mersey aims and ethos.• Delivery partners' excellent reputations - well known and, most importantly, trusted in their local communities• Intensive and sustained tailoring of support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strong trust relationships have been fundamental to the project's success.• Small group sizes are vital to enable the development of friendships and peer support amongst learners.• Volunteering offers a real progression opportunity for learners.



Key Recommendations:

For the Include-IT Mersey Partnership - in the context of the forthcoming, UKSPF-funded continuation phase – the following actions are recommended:

- **Retain current management arrangements** - and share lessons learnt across the partnership and with wider stakeholders.
- **Maintain the current delivery partnership; and the skilled and experienced tutors who know their local communities**, the specific barriers people face, and who can offer a wraparound approach to skills training and wellbeing – not just solely focusing on employability.
- **Further involve learners in the ongoing review** and development of the delivery model.
- **Continue to rebuild and expand the Digital Drop-In network** and team of Digital Champion volunteers. Encourage learners to become Digital Champions and to consider careers in the sector, to support the continuity of lived experience in service provision.
- **Ensure continued flexibility and tailoring of funds** - leveraging complementary funds, where necessary, to enable learners' continued engagement, achievement and progression.
- **Retain and continue to build links with strategic partners**: to ensure that Include-IT Mersey continues to fill gaps and adds value to existing mainstream provision.

For funders, local and central government - in the context of the project's continuation, and in relation to community-based digital inclusion provision in general - the following considerations are recommended:

- Wherever possible, commit to **funding** successful projects like this **on a multi-annual basis**: it is clear from the evaluation that long-term funding has been a key contributor to its success.
- **Support and facilitate the development of improved links and progression pathways** between smaller community-based providers and mainstream Further Education provision.
- Use all potential funding flexibilities to **expand the availability of digital skills training to a wider audience of digitally excluded people**.
- More generally, **seek solutions to increase funding for localised, community-based digital skills provision; recognising the vital importance of small group sizes** as a key success factor in the development of funding models.
- **Maintain and develop existing digital support pathways in communities**; including **expansion of community-based digital facilities** and involvement of **volunteer Digital Champions**.



Identified Areas for Development:

- In conjunction with the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, maximise any UKSPF **flexibilities regarding participant eligibility**, to open up the project to a wider audience of digitally excluded learners, e.g. retired and digitally excluded people in employment.
- **Invest in CPD and training for tutors:** given some challenges in recruiting to tutor posts, opportunities to develop the existing workforce should be maximised.
- **Prioritise the building of awareness and networks between tutors, volunteers and onward progression provision.** This is especially important for all those with advice and guidance roles, particularly in providers with no in-house progression routes.
- **Improve the promotion and integration of Digital Drop-Ins**, through more localised publicity to raise awareness in local neighbourhoods and articulate the purpose and benefits.
- **Consider the opportunity to further develop more targeted courses, customised to specific demographic groups and needs**, for example: carers; specific ethnic minority groups; people with mental health/anxiety issues; people who are neurodiverse, or learning disabled; and specific geographical communities, especially ‘estate-based’ approaches.

01

1.1 Background



Operating since February 2017, Include-IT Mersey is a Digital Inclusion project funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) and The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF), through its Building Better Opportunities (BBO) programme to support digitally excluded, workless people across the Liverpool City Region to learn essential, basic IT skills to help them move into or closer to work.

Led by Sefton CVS, the project was awarded several BBO funding extensions due to sustained good performance, with the delivery programme finally concluding in March 2023. An adapted programme has recently been awarded £879,229 UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) funding by the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) to extend its delivery for a further two years, from April 2023 to March 2025.

Jane Hobson, an independent evaluation consultant, was appointed by Sefton CVS in December 2022 to undertake a summative evaluation of the delivery of the project's final phase of delivery: from July 2019 to its March 2023 conclusion. period. She was supported by a local research associate Liz Edwards, who undertook fieldwork comprising face-to-face and phone interviews with current and recent learners.

This report provides a commentary of the results of the external evaluation conducted between December 2022 and March 2023.

As the evaluation process progressed, it became increasingly apparent that the need to differentiate between pre and post July 2019 was overly complex and largely unnecessary, so much of this final report reflects on overall performance over the life of the project, though much of the feedback and case studies relate to delivery and participants engaged post July 2019.

1.2 Evaluation Methodology

An evaluation framework was agreed at the start of the process. This outlined the key evaluation questions, research tools and methods to collect primary and secondary data, with associated timescales. The project team requested a key focus on ‘learner voices’ throughout the evaluation process.

Recognition of the potential challenges of any research methodology, which included consideration of the impact of the extended COVID-19 pandemic lockdown periods, was also acknowledged, as was the potential need to adapt and flex any proposed methods throughout the research period. In practice, this did lead to an adapted methodology in which the following research techniques and tasks were employed:

- Desk-based research – including a review of the changing policy context
- Review of project monitoring and evaluation returns and quarterly monitoring information
- Online surveys with current and recent learners; and current and past volunteers (Digital Champions)
- Phone interviews with current, recent and previous learners and volunteers
- Face-to-face consultations with all delivery managers and (often separate) consultations with course tutors and delivery staff
- Face-to-face interviews with a sample of other stakeholders:referral partners, the LCR Combined Authority Digital Inclusion Lead, and host venues used for outreach delivery.
- Production of case studies.

1.3 Structure of the Evaluation Report

The remainder of the report is presented in the following sections:

Section 2: Policy Context & Delivery Format: this section outlines the changing digital policy context, nationally and within the Liverpool City Region (LCR). It also describes the challenging delivery landscape of the Include-IT Mersey project over the 2019-2023 period, and the adaptations made to continue to deliver through and post the COVID-19 pandemic.

Section 3: Project Performance: this section provides a qualitative assessment of project implementation related to management and delivery, including partnership working; learner progression and feedback. It also reviews implementation in relation to spend, achievement of outputs and outcomes against contractual targets, and progress in meeting the ESF cross-cutting themes of equality and diversity and environmental sustainability.

Section 4: Impacts for Learners: based on evaluation feedback from learners, and from delivery partners, this section describes the impacts of the project for current and previous learners.

Section 5: Learners' Digital Journeys & Voices: this section provides a qualitative overview of the digital journeys of the wide ranging learner cohorts engaging with the project. It provides a more in-depth review of the motivations and challenges facing learners of all types as they move towards their goal of digital inclusion.

Section 6: Impacts for Other Stakeholders: considers the outcomes and impacts for Digital Champion volunteers and for delivery partners in relation to their enhanced offers, reach and quality of provision; the development of the Include-IT model in relation to organisational development and further emergence of strong collaborative partnership working.

Section 7: Value for Money – the four E's assessment and social value: summarises the financial performance (Economy, Effectiveness, Efficiency and Equity), the added social value of the project and additionality generated.

Section 8: Success Factors and Recommendations for Future Delivery: this section reviews the project's key success factors, with lessons learned to inform future digital inclusion projects and programmes; and identified areas for development and improvement.



Policy Context & Delivery Format

02

2.1 Digital Policy

Profile of Digitally Excluded Adults – UK, 2021

In 2022 the Good Things Foundation updated its Digital Nation[1] infographic, profiling digital inclusion and exclusion in the UK. This includes analysis of the latest Ofcom data by Prof. Simeon Yates (University of Liverpool), the Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index and Essential Digital Skills 2021, external research and their own data insights:

- 10m people lack the most basic digital skills. This is the proportion of adults who do not have all seven foundation-level digital skills, as defined in the government's Essential Digital Skills framework. (Lloyds Bank UK 3rd Essential Digital Skills Benchmark 2021).
- 1.3m non-users are worried about data privacy and security. Of those who said they didn't use the internet in the past 3 months, 51% (1.3m) said they worry about having their identity taken or their privacy and security breached. (Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index 2021).
- 1.5m UK households have no internet access - 6% of households still did not have access to the internet in March 2021. (Ofcom, Adults' Media Use and Attitudes).

- 2m UK households struggle to afford internet access. This is based on the number of households who reported a problem with internet affordability in the month before the survey. (Ofcom, Affordability of Communications Services 2021).
- 14.9m people have very low levels of digital engagement (Lloyds Bank Consumer Digital Index 2021).
- 8.7m employed people (16% of the total adult population) have the Essential Digital Skill for Life (including the foundation-level skills) but lack the Essential Digital Skill for Work. (Lloyds Bank UK 3rd Essential Digital Skills Benchmark 2021).
- 42% of over-75 year olds in England are digitally excluded - they do not use the internet. (Age UK 2021, analysis of English Longitudinal Study of Ageing data).
- 67% of people said they would improve their digital skills if they knew support was available to help them if they needed it. (Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index 2021).

A significant number of people only use the internet in a ‘limited’ way - often reflecting a lack of affordable internet and/or digital skills and/or confidence and motivation. Analysis by Prof. Simeon Yates of Ofcom Adults’ Media Use and Attitudes survey data (2021 release) finds that, compared to extensive users, people who are ‘limited users’ are around:

- 4 times more likely to be from low income households (social grades D and E).
- 8 times more likely to be over 65 years old.
- 1.5 times more likely to be from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups.

Reasons people gave for not being online (people could select more than one):

1. 37% say they don’t have the right equipment.
2. 36% say it is too expensive for them.
3. 42% say they are not interested - ‘it isn’t for me’.
4. 46% say it is too complicated.

The Lloyds Essential Digital Skills Report 2021 estimated that there are around 11.8 million adults in the UK who are online but lack the essential digital skills for work. Research for the 2021 annual assessment saw digital adoption remain broadly flat. An estimated 41.9 million adults in the UK today have the Essential Digital Skills they need for day-to-day life. They are able to communicate, transact, problem solve, stay safe online and handle information. But one-fifth, (21%) of the UK population, circa 11 million, are digitally disadvantaged, lacking Essential Digital Skills for Life – with 91% of this group (c.10 million) lacking the Foundation Level. The number of UK adults with the Foundation Level has returned to the 2019 baseline:

- approximately 10 million are not able to access the internet themselves and lack the most basic digital tasks.
- 6.5 million cannot connect to Wi-Fi by themselves.
- 4.9 million cannot turn on a device and log into any accounts or profiles they have by themselves.

National Digital Inclusion Policy Developments

UK Digital Strategy[2]- Adult Basic Digital Skills

Current central government support and proposed activities to facilitate inclusion through digital skills include the following initiatives:

- The Department for Education (DfE) is providing essential digital skills training for adults through the Digital Entitlement, to equip adults in England with a full range of essential digital skills needed for life, work, and further study. This Digital Entitlement allows adults across England with no or low digital skills (below level 1) to study the new Essential Digital Skills Qualifications (EDSQs) for free.
- The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is supporting claimants in developing their digital skills through the Claimant Commitment. To support adults who are online but lack the essential digital skills for work, DWP is working to develop a framework to effectively identify claimants' digital skills levels and, where appropriate, refer claimants to foundation digital skills courses, Essential Digital Skills qualifications (EDSQ), and Skills Bootcamps. Bootcamps offer courses lasting up to 16 weeks and claim to offer a direct route to digital or technical roles for participants.
- The Government launched the level 3 'free courses for jobs' offer in April 2021. This gives adults aged 19+, who do not hold a full qualification at level 3 (A-level equivalent), access to fully funded courses to help them gain in-demand skills.

Liverpool City Region (LCR) Skills Strategy 2018-23[3]

In terms of digital access and inclusion, the pandemic has further exposed the digital divide for many LCR residents and the need for digital access and the benefits this brings academically, economically and socially. Recent information from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) shows that Liverpool City Region has a higher number of people not accessing the internet in the last 3 months than either the North West, or the country as a whole. In fact, access has declined since 2018.

Digital inclusion does not just encompass being able to access devices such as laptops and smart phones at a times when required, e.g. home learning; inadequate digital connectivity and data use access are significant barriers that prevent many residents from accessing education and wider services that they need. The final component of ensuring digital inclusion is equipping people with the digital skills required. Prioritising digital access and inclusion is a key component of LCRCA's plan for prosperity, and digital inclusion is now a priority set out in the Combined Authority's Corporate Plan[4].

[2] [UK Digital Strategy 2022](#)

[3] [Liverpool City Region Combined Authority Skills Strategy 2018-23](#)

[4] [Liverpool City Region Combined Authority Corporate Plan 2021-24](#)

Liverpool City Region Digital Strategy 2021-2023[5]

LCR Combined Authority produced a Digital Strategy and Action Plan for the whole Liverpool City Region for the 2021-23 period, working with the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and the six constituent local authorities. Two key sections of this Strategy are relevant to this evaluation: that of Digital Skills for Recovery & Growth; and Digital Inclusion.

Digital Skills for Recovery & Growth:

The main challenge and opportunity for change includes:

- Support for access to training in digital skills at all levels, from basic to post-doctoral, to deal with inevitable ongoing change and digitalisation, as equipping people with core digital skills is critical to helping people back into work, while also ensuring local businesses have access to the skilled and productive workforce.

Digital Inclusion:

The main challenge and opportunity for change identified:

- Recognition that digital inclusion is not only about physical access to the internet, but also having the skills, confidence and capability to do so. Low-income levels, unemployment, low skills and poor housing status are all factors that increase the likelihood of digital exclusion, and the LCR is characterised by above average incidences of all of these, hence digital exclusion and poverty being greater challenges here than many other parts of the UK.
- There is a fundamental challenge to be addressed i.e. the lack of both detailed, up-to-date baseline data related to digital inclusion, and a lack of a dedicated capacity and resources to map existing activities and gaps - and a linked absence of an organisation to coordinate these and develop & deliver a comprehensive range of high impact initiatives across LCR.
- There is a critical need across all these themes and priorities to closely and meaningfully involve the people and communities affected, which will require concerted thinking, coordination, communication and investment.

With the COVID pandemic impacts of 2020, however, there was recognition of the need to revise the Digital Strategy Action Plan to reflect the changed landscape brought about by that period.

LCR Digital Strategy Proposals, March 2023

Consultation[6] with the LCRCA Digital Inclusion Strategy Lead Officer in March 2023 provided an update as to the progress made to date. The following proposals are being developed:

- A Digital Inclusion Alliance – to establish an LCR-wide membership body looking to sign up members, for them to pledge a minimum standard of digital inclusion as integral to their working practices.
- Attached to this will be a marketing and communications campaign – through recognizable branding to encourage local people to develop their digital skills.

- A related, off-line campaign to encourage those who are not digitally connected to get online, by building awareness of the benefits of digital inclusion.
- Digital Champions model – to include many stakeholders – to enhance and develop existing good practice.
- Pilot initiatives: focused on better digital inclusion of older people, people with disabilities and black, Asian and minority ethnic groups (this is in its early stages of development).

A task force of 60 stakeholders, with sub-groups, is driving this strategy. The Include-IT Mersey Project Manager is involved in the taskforce and all of the sub-groups and is currently cascading information to Include-IT delivery partners and relevant VCFSE sector organisations. The aim is to link together key local and national networks and initiatives to ensure maximum LCR alignment, collaboration and impact, including VOLA and the Good Things Foundation.

National Building Better Opportunities (BBO) Evaluation – Spring 2022 Annual Report[7]
 The most recent evaluation report for the national BBO programme was published in Spring 2022 and provides an overview of the evidence gathered by ECORYS, the overall programme consultant. This report summarises the sixth annual report of the evaluation of the BBO programme, which launched in 2016. When the BBO programme launched, 133 projects received funding. To September 2021, collectively, those projects had supported 144,846 participants.

Key findings summarised in and derived from the April 2022 Annual Report:

- Analysis of programme MI data shows that to September 2021, 117,960 participants had left the BBO programme nationally, of which 73,287 (62%) left to a known and verified destination. 84% of those with a known destination achieved a key positive destination result, equating to an overall progression rate of 52% (i.e. 84% of 62%) in to work, education/training or active job-search.
- The impact of the pandemic has not been felt equally by everyone. Older people, young people, women, people with disabilities and ethnic minorities have become less likely to be in employment. The increase in economic inactivity for older people, young people and people with ill-health or disabilities is particularly concerning.
- BBO projects have been successful at engaging people with complex barriers to work. For example, 48% of participants were economically inactive when they joined the programme; 63% lived in a jobless household, 48% had a disability; and 41% were experiencing multiple disadvantage. COVID-19 saw barriers to work increase amongst BBO participants; the number of those economically inactive increased, as did those from jobless households and those experiencing homelessness.
- BBO projects worked hard to maintain referrals and engagement during the pandemic. Building relationships with new referral partners, adapting referral mechanisms to include online referral forms, and developing dedicated engagement roles or teams were all important to being able to continue to reach people during lockdown restrictions. As restrictions eased, outreach work and close working with partners such as Jobcentre Plus proved successful.

- New approaches to delivering support during the pandemic have remained as restrictions eased. The 2021 report highlighted how remote working and enhancing digital inclusion had been vital. These aspects of delivery continue, with hybrid models of support proving popular. Enhancing digital skills for participants remains a priority, as well as supporting other basic skills which will enhance that.

Although specialist approaches have been developed to support different target groups across BBO, there were common themes that are important regardless of the types of barriers faced by participants. BBO projects have:

- Provided flexible and responsive support, adapting to address emerging needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Put people first, tailoring support to address individual circumstances.
- Focused on building confidence, particularly as lockdown restrictions eased.
- Supported wellbeing by developing support mechanisms specifically to address increasing mental health needs.
- Encouraged and facilitated digital inclusion.
- Worked with employers to address stigma and find appropriate opportunities for BBO participants.

A focus on soft skills was reflected in benefits to participants. 68% of participants surveyed reported that they had improved their confidence as a direct result of taking part in BBO, and more than half (55%) reported that they had improved wellbeing.

One-third reported that they were more involved in their communities, which has proved particularly important following pandemic related restrictions. 71% of respondents were very confident or fairly confident that changes would continue in the future.

For the final year of the BBO programme, ECORYS recommended that funded projects could usefully focus on support for those groups who are at risk of withdrawing from, or being overlooked in, the labour market following the pandemic.

2.2 Include-IT Mersey Management & Delivery Arrangements

This section provides an overview of the Include-IT Mersey delivery model and its evolving nature: with a hugely challenging delivery landscape throughout this evaluation period, punctuated by a 14-15 month period of strict social distancing restrictions due to the pandemic, with its intermittent lockdowns (March 2020 to approximately April-May 2021) and enduring impacts for several months after. Overall, the Delivery Partnership continued to quickly react and deliver an adapted programme throughout, reflecting enormous resilience and collaboration, with strong central leadership from the central management team.

2.2.1 Central Project Management Team

The project has benefited from a strong and stable central management unit throughout, with the Project Manager, Deputy and several other project staff in post through the entirety of the project since it launched in 2017. Central project management roles have included quality, finance, MI/data admin, comms/publicity and volunteer coordination.

Team capacity, in terms of the number of full-time equivalent job roles has purposefully fluctuated over the course of the project, with some team restructuring to meet differing project management and administration demands at different stages. This has been 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.

For example, certain roles were scaled down towards the end of different phases and then scaled back up again following the award of BBO extension funding.

In October 2021 the team procured short-term Quality Management cover due to the long-term absence of the substantive Quality Coordinator due to a serious illness. This temporary team member worked with Project Manager to develop a streamlined performance assessment approach, providing essential support during a difficult period capacity-wise, with the role ending in November 2022.

2.2.2 Delivery Partnership

When the project commenced in 2017, initially, 22 organisations were members of the delivery partnership, 18 of which were involved in the delivery of front-line training and support services, with 3 involved in volunteer Digital Champion support and one providing Management Information System support.

As the project progressed, several organisations withdrew from the delivery partnership for a variety of reasons including competing business priorities, individual capacity or performance issues, various project roles becoming obsolete and wider financial difficulties with two sadly going out of business. Where necessary, resulting gaps in provision were absorbed by other delivery partners, with funding and delivery targets reallocated across the partnership.

By March 2023, 11 of the original 22 organisations remained members of the delivery partnership, (with 10 of these now committed to continuing in to the UKSPF extension phase).

2.2.3 Project Funding Allocations

In total, the project as awarded £4,476,186 funding for the period February 2017 to June 2023, allocated in three phases. Initially, the project was only planned to run from February 2017 to March 2019, with a funding allocation of £1.645m. Funding was subsequently doubled in spring 2019 to extend delivery until December 2021; with a further £1.185m allocated in May 2021 to further extend the project until June 2023. Each increased funding investment to extend the project was awarded as a result of continued good performance.

2.2.4 Include-IT Mersey Delivery Model & Adaptations, 2019-2023

Planned developments and improvements for Phase 2 of the programme from spring 2019 included:

- Improving access to IT for learners outside the formal course provision, through:
- Expansion of digital drop-in venues and Digital Champion volunteers; and
- Provision of more tablets and mobile data connections (dongles/ Mi-Fi units) to enable internet access at home.
- A centrally managed fund to which partners could apply for unforeseen or unusually high delivery costs such as childcare, interpreters, extra staffing support for learners with higher needs; learner expenses including travel, incentives and learning aids.
- Broadening geographical reach, by relaxing ward boundaries originally set in Phase 1 and targeting other areas of disadvantage or identified digital exclusion – e.g. specific BAME and economically inactive groups.
- Further relaxation of the lower age limit down to 30+, following the original reduction from 45+ to 40+.

Figure 2.1: Programme Delivery 2019 – 2023: The 3 sub-phases



July 2019 - to COVID Lockdown

From the conclusion of initial project evaluation in summer 2019 to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was only a relatively brief period in which to reflect on the findings and begin to implement recommended development and improvement actions. However, several positive service model developments were implemented.

These included the above-mentioned key actions to improve digital access; increase capacity to support learners incentives, expenses and higher need support costs; relaxation of geographical boundaries and age eligibility; and more proactive targeting of priority group learners, including the development of new referral partnerships. By the first quarter of 2020, there were 15 digital drop-ins operating across the city region, with plans for four more; and 46 tablets had been provided to learners.

An overall consolidation of the delivery partnership resulted from the withdrawal of Halton Borough Council in December 2019 and 3TC ceasing trading in February 2020. Despite the reduction in the number of deliver partners, overall performance remained firmly on target.

March 2020 – Spring 2021: COVID Pandemic Lockdown – Partnership Delivery Response

The COVID pandemic, with intermittent lockdowns and strict social distancing rules from March 2020 until Spring 2021, resulted in a highly demanding, 14-month delivery period.

Two delivery partners temporarily suspended project delivery during COVID lockdowns, closing venues and furloughing staff, one of which for just a month, early in the pandemic, and the other for a longer, 9-month period. In total, four project staff members were furloughed, all of whom worked only a percentage of their time on the project. This was due to a funding gap for the remainder of their (non-BBO funded) time, which rendered their posts financially unsustainable while COVID restrictions endured.

This highly unpredictable delivery period resulted in two core delivery activities:

Remote Course Delivery:

- From mid-March 2020 the team very rapidly scoped, researched and implemented a contingency response to change the delivery model, switching from face-to-face delivery to remote support methods.
- By the end of June 2020, 143 of the 170 learners on programme had engaged with the project remotely, to greater or lesser extents, 94 of which engaged online, with an upward trend in the number accessing Learn My Way as the quarter progressed. 27 chose not to engage remotely for a variety of reasons.
- Delivery staff were able to support learners through a variety of means, dependent on their access to internet and computer devices at home. Support took the form of both one to one and group online sessions, phone, text, email, WhatsApp, online learning support and/or the posting out of physical works packs, varying between deliver partner depending on organisational capacity, learner needs and abilities.
- A significant number of learners wanted to engage remotely but did not have the IT equipment to enable them to do so. In response, in Spring 2020, the Include-IT team sourced and provided suitable low-cost kit to these learners to enable their participation. This took the form of:
 - A tablet; similar to the existing approach employed on the project of providing tablets towards the end of the course as a learner incentive to aid retention; only provided earlier than previously to enable remote participation.
 - A data-limited sim card and Mi-Fi unit to enable internet access.
 - The central team also provided the same kit to course tutors to ensure their familiarity with it in order to appropriately support learners to set up and use it.
 - Overall, a range of barriers were overcome swiftly (procurement and supply issues) as the team developed and issued learner usage agreements and support materials, such as simple, 'how to' set-up guides.
- Although recruitment slowed significantly during the peak COVID period, particularly in the first 6-9 months, a total of 275 learners were recruited in the 15 month period April 2020 to June 2021, mostly (62%) over the period January to June 2021. The majority were provided with kit to help them get online at home aid remote delivery/ learning.



Case Study

Alt Valley Community Trust:

Several learners were already in the early stages of the course when COVID hit in March 2020. Courses were delivered over several venues across Liverpool including Croxteth Communiversity, Dovecot MAC and Breckfield Library. To maintain contact, the tutor set up tablets and Mi-fi to enable people to access the internet. He travelled around Liverpool dropping off hard copies of course exercises for learners to complete – leaving them at the end of their paths. He spent much of his time speaking one-to-one with learners (working from home), talking them through the course. He commented:

"Every day I would check online to see how my learners were progressing. If they weren't making progress, I would give them a ring to see how it was going. I'd talk them through it – got them online and help them get going. It did work. It wasn't as difficult as I thought it was going to be when we first went into lockdown. At first the kit was a nightmare – the Mi-fi – but after a couple of weeks we got it all sorted and up and running. We had a lot of Zoom calls with the Project Management Team, who were great, and also with learners."

Rotunda Community College:

Rotunda recruited new learners onto the course at the start of lockdown. The team drove around Liverpool registering learners on their front doorsteps, getting people to sign up. Rotunda advertised the course on social media. Throughout lockdown, Rotunda got referrals from across the city and, as a result, delivered to people across a far wider geographical area than usual. At the start of lockdown, tutors found that as people were at home, they worked through Learn My Way quickly as they weren't occupied with anything else - commenting:

"We had to do it differently. Learners didn't have Zoom or Teams. We used lots of verbal conversations using WhatsApp and phone calls – the majority of support was through that. WhatsApp photos and taking pictures and calls. We were supported by colleagues at STEC who we've worked with for years. They shared what they used: an Entry Level 3, British Computer Society (BCS), Computers and Online Basics qualification. Learners filled out a workbook and received accreditation and a certificate on completion. We flipped the model slightly to accommodate all the different learners' requirements. We delivered tablets to learners so they could access the online learning. It was tough – it felt like double the work it normally did, due to logistics."

Once assessed, the BCS booklet was returned to learners who continued to use it as a reference guide. Content developed through COVID from this resource is still in use now.

Remote Telephone Support Service:

- The team also developed a telephone support service for members of the wider public in place of the volunteer-led digital drop-ins, which were all suspended.
- The purpose of this initiative was two-fold; firstly, it was tested as a cost-effective approach to continued promotion and publicity of the project during the lock-down, with the aim of recruiting future participants. At the same time, the parallel aim was to provide much needed support to members of the public that needed basic IT support during the COVID crisis, but more as an urgent 'one-off', rather than wanting to enrol on a course.
- The service was trialled in Sefton and St Helens from the third week of April 2020, with the support of five Digital Champion volunteers, who were equipped with mobile phones to support their role.
- Referrals were made from relevant partner agencies with the purpose of the service being to help people with enquiries about getting online and/or using their digital devices (exactly as happened in the drop-ins). The LCR Combined Authority were extremely supportive of the initiative.
- The service was rolled out rapidly to other LCR boroughs at the end of April 2020, staffed by six volunteers.
- Given the rapid roll-out timetable and challenging operating environment, limited metrics were collected and no longer-term impact evaluation was undertaken due to the short-term, emergency nature of the service. However, quantitative delivery data provide the following information:
 - A total of 186 referrals were made by community partners including housing associations, Local Authorities, advice agencies and voluntary and community sector organisations.
 - Enquiries ranged from troubleshooting email account access issues, tablet set-up, challenges in setting up or accessing Zoom, barriers to wi-fi access, requests for help in accessing online shopping, health, welfare benefits and job-search.
 - Support usually entailed a one-off single intervention, though a small number of service users received support on multiple occasions.
- As a result of their endeavours and success in continuing to recruit, engage and support learners during the pandemic, in 2020, the Include-IT Mersey partnership team was awarded the Team of the Year Award at the Employability Awards run by ERSA, the UK's trade and membership body representing the employment support sector.

Spring 2021 onwards: Post COVID Lockdown Delivery Changes

- Dependent on delivery partners' individual operating situations, face-to-face course delivery recommenced across the 3-month period, April to June 2021.
- In common with many training programmes, there was a slow start to recruitment as lockdown restrictions lifted – with ongoing fear of COVID infection, especially amongst vulnerable groups and many learners who had suspended their involvement in 2020 decided against a face-to-face return to courses.

- Some of the delivery adaptations developed in response to lockdown challenges continued with the gradual re-launch of face-to-face training, through a blended mix of on-site and remote, online provision. By June 2021, however, the majority of delivery partners had reverted to on-site delivery, through small group work and some one-to-one support.
- Overall there has been a shift by some partners away from one-to-one roll-on, roll-off delivery models to a dominant model of small groups of 4-6 people starting at the same time. This was reflected in the new delivery formats adopted at Alt Valley Community Trust and STEC in Liverpool, and Independence Initiative in Sefton. Participants continue to use the Learn My Way platform to pursue their digital skills learning, with additional employability support and other elements of IT training provided both on and offline.
- By April 2022, extended eligibility to younger age groups was introduced for the final phase of delivery, reducing the minimum age limit from 30 down to 18 years old.
- Other partners also changed course hours and duration: often becoming more intensive in terms of hours per week and shortening the overall delivery period. For example, in response to learner feedback, STEC increased from 1 to 1.5 days per week, reducing the delivery period to from 12 to 9 weeks. Drop-in sessions were also held on Fridays to enable learners to catch up or practice as they wished. This enabled STEC to deliver 81 hours face-to-face tutor support and also speeded up delivery of courses, supporting progress towards performance targets.
- Similarly, some delivery partners shifted to offer a more focused, intensive approach for 2-3 days per week over a shorter number of weeks than previously. As a result, learners became quickly acquainted and started to develop supportive peer relationships, which, in turn, built confidence and self-esteem. The social element of the course was mentioned frequently by many learners in evaluation interviews. For example, from 2021 Rotunda delivered its course over 3 days per week for 8 weeks – over 4-5 hours per day, including free lunch, when learners sat together and socialized in the onsite café – this presented an important opportunity for tutors and learners to get to know one another. WEA delivery also operated in this way.
- Additional employability support elements have been introduced by delivery partners in response to changing recruitment practices: for example, online interview practice using Zoom and Teams.
- Torus continued to delivery jointly with St Helens Chamber, whose Careers Adviser regularly attended sessions to provide employability support. Torus also made extensive use of Digital Champion volunteers with one available to support learners at every session. The tutor made maximum use of his volunteers, providing them with clear guidance and regular updates on individual learner progress.
- More recently, St Helens Chamber started to provide employability support for learners at Independent Initiative in Bootle, to supplement the role of their own digital skills' tutor.
- A more flexible geographical reach was encouraged by the central team to expand availability to more excluded communities, through peripatetic outreach delivery at a larger number of community venues e.g. WEA extended its working model in Halton, Knowsley and Sefton – across a range of locations, as well as regular bases in Southport and Castlefields in Halton.

- The project received 100 free sim cards from Vodafone through their *charities.connected* initiative. Preloaded with 20GB of data, unlimited calls/texts and valid for up to 2 years, these were distributed to BBO participants, Digital Champion volunteers and other non-BBO learners to help get them online.
- The regularity and frequency of delivery partner performance review meetings resumed following interruptions due to capacity issues caused by the pandemic and the long-term sick absence of the project's Quality Coordinator. A new, streamlined approach to progress review meetings was subsequently developed and rolled out, providing accessible and comprehensive performance monitoring information.
- Up until 2023, the project continued to provide a tablet, Mi-Fi dongle and pre-loaded sim card/ mobile data to those participants that were not able to access the internet at home, to support their remote engagement and learning outside group sessions.
 - A precautionary pause to the provision of tablets in summer 2022 due to (subsequently resolved) audit issues caused a degree of confusion and disappointment amongst some participants. Although regrettable, this risk-based decision was unavoidable and the right course of action at the time. Following positive resolution of the initial audit issues, provision of tablets to eligible participants recommenced in September and continued to the project's conclusion in March 2023. From this point, shopping vouchers were also provided as an alternative for learners that already had their computer device at home.

2.2.5 Digital Champion Volunteer Activities

In total, 225 volunteers have been involved in supporting the project since the Digital Champion role was first launched in June 2017, not all active simultaneously. Digital Champion volunteers have run digital drop-ins, supported tutors in course delivery and/or supported project-related events. A total of 26 volunteers are known to have moved into work over the course of the project.

Accurate numbers about use of digital drop-ins since the beginning of the project are unavailable due to an absence of attendance statistics in the early stages and ongoing issues with the accurate recording of attendance figures by some volunteers, which underrepresents the true usage figures.

For the period July 2019 to April 2023:

- It is conservatively estimated that over 1,000 people have been supported by Digital Champion volunteers through digital drop-ins, including the 186 people supported through the COVID telephone support service.
- A total of 63 volunteers have been involved in either digital drop-ins or course delivery. This is considerably fewer than in the early years of the project due to the negative impact of COVID restrictions, forcing the closure of the drop-ins for over a year, which inevitably led to a significant number of volunteers disengaging and not returning once social distancing restrictions eased.
- Collectively, these Digital Champions provided approximately 3,300 hours of volunteering.

- As of the end of March 2023, 35 Digital Champions are actively engaged as project volunteers, most of whom dedicate 2-3 hours of their time per week either running one of the 13 digital drop-ins across the city region, or supporting course delivery.

Digital Drop-In Volunteer Support

- The concept is a simple one in which volunteer Digital Champions provide weekly support for a fixed couple of hours in community venues that are willing to host the service. Rooms 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.
- Pre-lockdown, digital drop-ins took place at 15 venues across the city region, six of which in the borough of Sefton, where uptake was much higher. This is perhaps due to the very strong local presence of Sefton CVS in the borough. The team struggled to find as many willing host organisations, or volunteers in other boroughs. The existing provision of digital drop-in facilities in local libraries across Halton, Knowsley and St Helens appears to have been an influencing factor. Drop-ins were also established in other venues, but often quickly closed to due poor uptake.
- The most common areas of support provided at drop-ins include 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 tablets, smartphones and PCs.
- Throughout COVID lockdown, all drop-in provision was suspended and switched to the previously described telephone support. Following the relaxation of social distancing restrictions in spring 2021, digital drop-ins remained closed until the autumn due to many venues not allowing group sessions to restart for several months, as an additional precautionary measure.
- Since then, efforts have focused on reopening existing drop-ins and developing new ones in other areas, whilst at the same time, recruiting new volunteers to replace those that withdrew during lockdown.
- Despite three personnel changes to the Volunteer Coordinator role in quick succession during 2022, significant progress has been made in reviving the service. The drop-in network has continued to expand further in recent months, even following the conclusion of course delivery in March 2023. In line with the LCRCA's aim to expand the availability of volunteer-led digital drop-ins, this is a key element of the project's UKSPF succession plans for the coming two years.
- New drop-ins have recently started at Birkenhead Library, Norris Green Library and the Feelgood Factory in Netherton, with plans in place to open several more over the coming months, most encouragingly, in previously underrepresented boroughs , including:
 - Knowsley – Kirkby, Prescot, Stockbridge Village, Huyton and Halewood libraries
 - Halton - Halton Lea, Runcorn and Widnes libraries
 - St Helens - Chain Lane Community Centre
 - New partnerships are also being developed with Carmel College, St Helens and St Marks Health Centre and The Life Rooms in Southport.

Course Delivery Volunteer Support:

- Throughout the 2019 to 2023 delivery period, Digital Champion volunteers have provided delivery partners with valuable course delivery support at the following locations:
 - Liverpool: STEC in Speke, where four volunteers are based
 - Halton: WEA, at Castlefields Community Centre, Runcorn (ceased January 2023)
 - St Helens: Torus, where five Digital Champions each support one session per week
 - Alt Valley Community Trust, Croxteth, Liverpool.
- There are fewer course volunteers generally, and digital drop-ins linked to courses than prior to the pandemic, due to the reduced number of volunteers since the 2020, reflecting a general trend of volunteers not returning to previous roles after the COVID lockdown.
- As of March 2023, six volunteers were actively involved in supporting course delivery, all of whom intend to continue in their roles into the UKSPF-funded project extension phase.

2.2.6 Digital Access: Provision of Tablets and Internet Access

The universal offer of tablets as an incentive to aid learning was first introduced in the second half of 2019, following learner feedback and recommendations from the initial project evaluation.

The provision of tablets, plus Mi-Fi dongles and sim cards/data, where required, was further expanded in response to the need to support learners remotely during the COVID pandemic.

Over the course of the project almost 30% of learners, 589 in total, were provided with a tablet (147), Mi-Fi/ mobile data (4), or both (428). The vast majority were provided post-COVID.

Had the offer been introduced from the beginning of the project, it is estimated that somewhere nearer to 50% of learners would have been recipients of the offer, based on the number of 589 representing approximately 50% of those learners recruited from the point the offer was introduced.

In addition to its value in supporting engagement and retention, feedback from recipient learners shows its crucial importance in enabling them to get online at home; as evidenced by the learner survey results and case studies.



Project Performance

03

3.1 Management & Delivery

This section provides an overview of management and delivery of the Project and how this has evolved since the 2019 evaluation. It is based on interviews with Project Management Team members, and with delivery partner managers and tutors. It also includes learner feedback from course-completion evaluation questionnaire and responses received from online surveys of learners carried out in January-February 2023.

Working Relationships with the central Project Management Team:

- Ongoing, highly positive relationships exist between delivery partners and the central management team, which have continued throughout the life of the project.
- Excellent leadership by senior managers, based on a collaborative approach with delivery partners, enabled rapid response to the COVID lockdown, as previously described.
- A streamlined approach to eligibility, registration and evidence requirements was implemented during the lockdown, which was widely welcomed by delivery partners.
- The central team has been responsive to delivery partner staffing challenges including recruitment issues, sickness absence and the need for more intensive support to those new in post. Delivery 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.
- Administrative requirements (not least the need for continued submission of hard copy documentation to the central team) continue to be cited by delivery partners as overly bureaucratic, but many recognise that it is largely unavoidable due to the prescriptive nature of ESF audit requirements and, wherever possible, has been streamlined since Phase 1 of the project.
- A highly positive working culture has continued through to the final stages of project delivery – with support tailored, where possible, to meet the working practices and styles of each partner.

Recruitment and Marketing:

- Overall, a more varied approach to marketing and recruitment of learners has evolved since the previous evaluation, with some delivery partners often now using social media routes, initially introduced as a result of the lockdown periods and the increased use of Facebook by many older learners. Rotunda, for example, continues to use Facebook as an effective tool to promote and advertise their courses after initiating this in 2020 to recruit remotely during lockdown.
- Using Universal Credit registration requirements as a hook to engage learners is no longer as important a marketing tool as pre-2020, when it was a key motivating factor for many during the transition period from legacy welfare benefits to UC across the city region.
- Courses have been promoted through the use of incentives, usually on course completion, including tablets and Mi-Fl/data and also, more recently, shopping vouchers, which have proved valuable engagement tools, particularly given the current cost of living crisis.
- More place-based, collaborative recruitment working is also apparent in some localities including St Helens, where many learners were referred to Torus through the community outreach activities of St Helens Chamber, signposted to Include-IT after an initial session at the Chamber's Clickworks centre. Similarly, onward referrals happened the other way. This active, two-way signposting was commented on positively by both learners and delivery partners.

Flexibility in relation to local needs and delivery methods:

- The Include-IT Mersey delivery model has been responsive to various delivery partners' changing operational models, e.g. Independence Initiative's move towards a more community-based focus and Alt Valley Community Trust shifting to group-based delivery across multiple venues.
- Blended learning approaches post-COVID: in response to individual needs to isolate or 'shield' due to personal or household vulnerability to infection, various delivery partners supported learners to work through Learn My Way from home.
- Successful approaches have been implemented to the targeting of specific priority groups, including ethnic minority communities, learners with disabilities/ learning difficulties and older people. For example, Age UK Wirral; Granby Toxteth Development Trust (GTDT) tailored course delivery for the local Roma community; STEC targeting South Liverpool's Syrian and Afghan refugee community; and Greenbank's work with MENCAP.
- Related to this, where appropriate to learners' wants and needs, some partners flexed requirements for completion of all Learn My Way modules, focusing on specific elements such as Access to Public Services for more marginalised learners e.g. GTDT's Roma groups.
- Several partners have adopted a peripatetic approach through targeted delivery in a range of outreach community venues. This approach was most commonly deployed by the WEA, having a multi-borough delivery role, where provision frequently moved around different communities, responsive to emerging demand and referral agency requests. Similarly, Greenbank has delivered over an increasing range of venues across South Liverpool and Wirral in recent years; and Alt Valley Community Trust has operated across a number of bases in East Liverpool and more recently, in the Vauxhall area of North Liverpool.

Learner Progression:

- Since the 2020-21 COVID lockdown periods, many partners have worked to customise their training provision even more flexibly, in order to meet individual learner needs. With a more varied profile of learners with an increasing distance from the labour market, both wrap-around digital skills training and employability support has broadened, for example supporting learners to access Apps for local services and tailoring practice exercises to personal circumstances, e.g. jobs, volunteering, financial, leisure, health and care roles.
- Delivery partners have also recognised the value of encouraging learners who have completed the course to volunteer as Digital Champions, as has happened, for example in Torus, STEC and WEA. In total, 25 learners have moved on to become Digital Champions.
- There have also been several instances of positive onward steps of previous learners and volunteers moving on to become course tutors, with three Digital Champions (one of which also originally a learner on the project) and one further previous learner securing paid employment as tutors with project partners.
- Several delivery partners reported gaps in the provision of suitable ‘follow-on’ IT courses at Level 1 in their local areas, though the validity of these assertions is unsubstantiated through this evaluation process. Exceptions to this view were cited in St Helens and parts of North, South and the Granby/L8 areas of Liverpool, where progression opportunities were known to be available.
 - Given the mandatory availability of mainstream FE digital skills provision in every borough, perhaps the underlying issue could be a lack of consistency in availability of this provision at a hyper-local level in different areas; and the fact that people often lack the confidence to attend larger, mainstream settings and/or motivation to travel outside their local areas, which can be barrier to accessing mainstream provision.
 - Increased outreach delivery of mainstream provision in local community settings could be an option for exploration with strategic partners.
 - Also linked to this issue is a suggested need, in some cases, for improved knowledge and organisational links with local complementary progression opportunities. This is explored in more detail in section 8.3 of this report.
- With many learners now citing their wellbeing as a key motivating factor to participate, there is a need to consider this important element and build it into progression planning, beyond the core focus on digital skills acquisition and employment. The need for identification of all types of next steps for learners prior to leaving is now a broader based requirement (wellbeing and social inclusion, as well as employment/training), which needs to be consistently considered and promoted by tutors.

3.2 Participant Course Feedback

Ongoing evaluation feedback from participants, immediately post-course completion, has continued to show very high levels of satisfaction. Consistent with previous evaluation findings, learner feedback in relation to course management, delivery and impact has continued to be extremely high throughout – including the response to COVID lockdowns.

Table 3.1: Learner satisfaction on completion

Nearly all learners that completed the course and submitted a feedback questionnaire on completion rated the following areas as good, or very good:

Satisfaction Indicator	% of learners rated good or very good
1. The help it gave you to improve your IT skills	98.3%
2. The help it gave you to move towards employment	94.6%
3. Activities and resources	98.0%
4. How well staff communicated with you	99.7%
5. Support and guidance from staff	99.4%
6. Overall satisfaction with the course	99.7%

Source:Include-IT Mersey Performance Management Information, April 2023

Individual satisfaction measures since the initial 2019 evaluation are similar to their equivalent measures up until that point, with notable increases indicators 1 (+1.4%), 2 (+1.9%), 3 (+3.8%) and 5 (0.7%), demonstrating improvements in delivery, particularly in terms of the activities/resources used.

3.3 Project Expenditure

The Original Grant award of £1,645,300 was increased twice due to continued good performance, as outlined in the table below:

Table 3.2: Funding Awards

Date	Grant Award	Cumulative Total
February 2017	£1,645,300	
April 2019	£1,645,300	£3,290,600
May 2021	£1,185,586	£4,476,186

Table 3.3: Projected and Actual Expenditure: February 2017 to March 2023

	Forecast - to March 2023	Actual - to March 2023	Actual as % of forecast
Merseyside	£3,841,487	£3,751,041	97.7%
Halton	£574,313	£552,406	96.2%
Total	£4,415,800	£4,303,447	97.5%

Source: Include-IT Mersey Performance Information Data, April 2023

As shown in table 3.3, cumulative expenditure for the period February 2017 to March 2023 was £4,303,447, 97.5% of forecast. Projected expenditure to the 30 June 2023 end date is forecast to be £4,350,000, representing an approximate underspend of £127,000, or 2.8% of total budget.

Whilst it was clearly never the partnership's intention to not fully utilise the grant, various unforeseen events over the course of the project resulted in slippage in expenditure.

Considering the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on delivery (and therefore expenditure), coupled with the reduction in the number of delivery partners as the project progressed, such a relatively low level underspend is, in many ways, an achievement. This is testament to the ongoing responsive and professional financial management of the project's budget by the Lead Body.

Despite an ongoing underspend since the COVID period, the management team rightly continued to ensure prudent budget management to ensure good value for money, always mindful of avoiding unnecessary expenditure.

3.4 Outputs, Results and Wider Outcomes

Outputs & Results[8]

- In total, 2,109 participants were recruited and supported by the project over its six years of operation; 103% of contractual target.
- As shown by the below table 3.4, for the project/ city region as a whole, all output targets have been met, all bar one of which exceeded.
- Similarly, overall results targets for participants entering employment, education/training or active job-search have also been exceeded; cumulatively, by 14.9% across the three different types of result indicator, with an excess of 137 progression outcomes achieved.

[8] Definitions:

1.'Unemployed': not in work, but actively seeking work.

2.'Economically inactive': not in work, but not actively seeking/ available for work.

There is some variance between the Merseyside and Halton areas, for which ESF provides different levels of funding intervention and therefore require separate performance monitoring. However, the performance of the project as a whole across the city region is of most relevance and importance.

- This increases further to 192 (20.9% over-achievement) when factoring in 55 additional training progression outcomes that can't be claimed as 'ESF results' due to those learners already being engaged in other training when enrolling with the project (the ESF measure being the change in status from enrolment to exit), despite progressing to different training to that in which they were engaged on enrolment.
- Overall, contractual targets for education/training outcomes have been exceeded by 13% (25% when including the additional 55 'un-claimable' outcomes), unemployed participants moving into employment exceeded by 20%, and economically inactive job and job-search outcomes by 15%.
- In total, 252 job outcomes were achieved, comprising 178 learners that were unemployed and 74 that were economically inactive on enrolment with the project.
- The overall positive progression rate achieved was 50.1%, rising to 52.7% when factoring in the 55 additional training progressions that cannot be counted as ESF results.

Table 3.4: Project Performance vs Numerical Target, 2017-2023

Output Indicator	Achieved			Target			% Achievement of Target		
	Mside	Halton	Total	Mside	Halton	Total	Mside	Halton	Total
Total Starts	1841	268	2109	1777	264	2041	104%	102%	103%
Male	912	117	1029	889	132	1021	103%	89%	101%
Female	925	150	1075	888	132	1020	104%	114%	105%
Unemployed	916	102	1018	889	132	1021	103%	77%	100%
Economically Inactive	925	166	1091	888	132	1020	104%	126%	107%
Aged over 50	1098	134	1232	1025	139	1164	107%	96%	106%
Disability, learning difficulty or L-T health condition	755	166	921	650	152	802	116%	109%	115%
Ethnic Minority	230	8	238	165	12	177	139%	67%	134%
Result Indicator									
Education/training	424	90	514	381	74	455	111%	122%	113%
Unemployed into employment	161	17	178	134	14	148	120%	121%	120%
Economically Inactive into employment or job-search	325	39	364	257	59	316	126%	66%	115%

Source: Include-IT Mersey Performance Information Data, April 2023

Table 3.5: Priority Group Engagement vs % Target, 2017-2023

Output Indicator	Actual as a % of Starts			Avg LCR % Target
	M'side	Halton	Total	
Female	50.2%	56.0%	51.0%	50.0%
Economically Inactive	50.2%	61.9%	51.7%	50.0%
Aged over 50	59.6%	50.0%	58.4%	57.0%
Disability, learning difficulty or long-term ealth condition	41.0%	61.9%	43.7%	39.3%
Ethnic Minority	12.5%	3.0%	11.3%	8.7%

Source: Include-IT Mersey Performance Information Data, April 2023

- As the above table shows, for the project/ city region as a whole, target percentage engagement rates for all priority group learners have been exceeded, despite some slight underachievement in the Halton area in relation to over 50s and ethnic minorities (note the Halton ethnic minority target was only 4.5%, much lower than Merseyside, reflecting the borough's demography).
- The project has achieved its key priority of engaging older people, with 58% of participants aged over 50, rising to 73% for those aged 45+, the project's initial, internal primary focus.
- The project's other internal target concerning the engagement of Social Housing residents has also been met (target 50% / actual 50%).

Wider Outcomes: Self-Assessment of the Wider Impacts of Participation

The project was required to collect data from learners about 'wider impacts' of their participation (reduced isolation, improved social inclusion, access to local services) and to identify improvements that occurred in relation to a range of personal skills and attributes. Learners were asked to rate themselves before and after their training through entry and exit surveys, with any upward movement in their score counted as a positive outcome. A total of 1,773 leavers completed an exit survey over the six-year duration of the project.

All wider outcome targets for which contractual targets were set have been significantly exceeded.

Table 3.6: Wider Outcome Performance, 2017–2023

Outcome Indicator	Achieved		Target	
	Actual	%	No.	%
1a Participants who have moved to feeling more connected to their community	1,080	60.9%	1,013	50%
1b Participants who have moved to feeling more able to access local services	1,544	87.1%	1,330	65%
3 Participants who have moved to using the internet regularly to connect with people	1,467	82.7%	1,412	69%

Source: Include-IT Mersey Performance Information Data, April 2023

Wider outcomes, in terms of personal and social skills, for which no contractual targets were set include:

- 1,278 (72.1%) of the 1,773 leavers who completed an exit survey reported improved confidence
- 1,052 (59.3%) reported better communication skills
- 1,125 (63.5%) are more motivated
- 686 (38.7%) have better timekeeping

Source: Include-IT Mersey Performance Information Data, April 2023

3.5 National Building Better Opportunities Programme Comparator Performance

Include-IT Mersey performance monitoring data has been compared with published statistics for the overall BBO programme, nationally, to assess comparative local performance. Note: comparative national data is not publicly available for all output and result indicators.

Table 3.7: Include-IT Mersey vs National BBO Programme Performance

Performance Indicator	National BBO	Include-IT Mersey
Priority Group Engagement		
Female	49%	51%
Economically Inactive	48%	52%
>45s	35%	73%
>55s	16%	40%
Disability, learning difficulty or L-T health condition	48%	44%
Non-white/white British ethnicity (BAME)	22%	11%
Lacking basic skills	37%	54%
From jobless households	63%	72%
Multiple disadvantage*	41%	83%
Progression Results		
Progression to employment	22%	12%
Progression to education/ training	20%	27%
Progression to active job-search	9%	14%
Overall progression rate	52%	53%
Soft Skills Development		
Improved confidence	68%	72%
Improved wellbeing	55%	No comparator data

Sources: Include-IT Mersey Performance Data, April 2023 & [Building Better Opportunities National Evaluation, ECORYS, Spring 2022](#)

Note: The respective equivalence of the definitions of 'multiple disadvantage' between national and local calculations is unknown, so this comparison should be treated with caution.

Review of available comparator data in Table 3.7 informs the following analysis:

- **Priority group engagement:** Include-IT Mersey, as for the wider BBO programme nationally, has been successful at engaging people with complex barriers to work, with a high instance of engaging people with multiple disadvantage. With the exception of ethnic minorities and those with disabilities, learning difficulties or long-term health conditions, Include-IT Mersey outperformed the BBO programme nationally in relation to the engagement of other priority groups, significantly so for many output indicators.

- **Progression:** Include-IT Mersey achieved a similar overall progression rate to the BBO programme nationally, significantly outperforming it in terms of education/ training outcomes and for those moving from economic inactivity to active job-search, but vice versa for employment outcomes.
- **Employment outcomes:** three identified potential contributors impacting on the lower job outcome rate compared to the national BBO average include the:
 - Significantly higher age profile of Include-IT participants compared to the national BBO average, as shown by the figures in the above table.
 - High levels of multiple disadvantage experienced by Include-IT Mersey learners, which appear to significantly outweigh national BBO statistics.
 - Nature of the Include-IT Mersey project, in terms of its heavy digital inclusion driver, in some ways outweighing the hard job-outcome focus. Our understanding is that many other BBO projects were more heavily focused on supporting specific demographic groups into, or closer to employment, rather than having an overriding thematic focus, as was the case for Include-IT Mersey. It is questioned whether, perhaps, the driving force of a significant proportion of Include-IT Mersey learners may have been the digital skills aspect, more than a motivation to move towards work.

The learner survey data in section 4 appears to substantiate this assertion to an extent, with only 41% of survey respondents reporting a key motivation for their involvement as being the desire to get a job/training and the need to be able to use a computer achieve that aim.

- **Ethnicity:** though 2021 Census data shows that the Liverpool City Region has become more ethnically diverse over the last 10 years since the previous Census, 87% of the total number of LCR residents still identify as White. This is much larger than both regional and national averages and is significant in explaining the difference in ethnic minority group engagement rates between Include-IT Mersey and the BBO programme nationally.
- This measure changes if looking at Office for National Statistics (ONS) Labour Market data, which only surveys those over the age of 16. In terms of the LCR population aged over 16, the ONS says 93.8% White and 6.2% Ethnic Minority. This is considered a closer comparator measure for the purpose of this project given it only targets people 18 or over. Whichever set of statistics Include-IT Mersey is compared with, the results suggest that, overall, the project has been successful in supporting the engagement of participants from ethnic minority groups.

3.6 ESF Cross-Cutting Themes

The ESF programme has two key cross-cutting themes, mainstreamed across all partnership work and project delivery: firstly, Gender Equality & Equal Opportunities; and secondly, Environmental Sustainable Development. All BBO projects were required to prepare project-specific action plans relating to these two key themes. Key activities and successes related to these themes are outlined below.

3.6.1 Gender Equality & Equal Opportunities

Contractual E&D related targets and performance information is collected in relation to participants who are: aged over 50, from an ethnic minority community, or who have a disability, learning difficulty or long-term, work-limiting health condition, with actual and targets recorded in figure 3.8:

Figure 3.8: Equality & Diversity Outputs: Actual vs Target to Project-End:

All contractual E&D related targets have been exceeded, as demonstrated by the following table.

Priority Group	Target %	Actual	Actual %
Aged 50+	57.0%	1,232	58.4%
Disability, learning difficulty or L-T health condition	39.3%	921	43.7%
Ethnic minority	8.7%	238	11.3%
Female	50.0%	1,075	51.0%

Source: Include-IT Mersey Performance Information Data, April 2023

Engagement of participants with other commonly accepted indicators of disadvantage/barriers to progression, for which no contractual target was set are also high.

Table 3.9: Other Indicators of Disadvantage, 2017-2023

Indicator of disadvantage/barrier to progression	% of participants
Prior attainment below Level 2	44.4%
Lacking basic skills	54.2%
Homeless or facing housing exclusion	3.9%
Jobless households	72.2%
Single parent families	10.5%
Offending history	7.5%

Source: Include-IT Mersey Performance Information Data, April 2023

97.8% of the 2,109 participants supported possessed at least one of the above ten recognised barriers to inclusion and progression in the labour market; 82.8% reporting multiple, often, complex barriers.

These key E&D indicators have remained consistently high throughout the project and have sustained at roughly the same level for the last two years, demonstrating the partnership's continued collective strength in engaging a diverse range of disadvantaged people with varying barriers to inclusion. This reflects the types of marginalised and socially excluded people BBO was exactly designed to support.

Effective partnerships with specialist support agencies including addiction support, disability, ethnic minority (including Afghan and Romanian communities), and women-focussed organisations have continued to secure referrals of people with protected characteristics and other barriers to inclusion. The delivery partnership has developed and implemented a range of strategies to continually improve the balance of participants and representation of marginalised groups.

Women:

In terms of gender equality, the proportion of female recruits increased from 48.6% in July 2019 to 51.0% by the end of March 2023, its highest proportion at any stage of the project. Due to concerted efforts and resulting success of the partnership's efforts, engagement of this priority group has gradually risen by 7.7% from its March 2018 low-point of 43.3%.

Beyond the collective drive to recruit more women, specific examples of positive action taken by partners include:

- Torus Foundation promoted more female Digital Champions to demonstrate better representation of women and also offered basic E&D training to participants.
- St Helens Chamber staff attended Women in Construction courses to generate referrals.
- WEA developed a strong partnership with Tomorrow's Women Wirral delivering courses in-house to their clients.
- Rotunda's work with Jobcentre Plus to encourage more female referrals.

Other referral partnerships developed include: Kensington Women's Group; Halton Women's Centre; Swan Centre Sefton; Venus; and some Children's Centres.

Provision of childcare costs for learners was made available, but uptake has been limited; largely because most of the 'women only' courses were delivered in suitable centres, of which the learners were already service users and who were able to cater for their needs.

Ethnic Minority Learners:

In terms of ethnic diversity, the proportion of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) learners engaged across the city region increased from 7.4% in July 2019 to a high of 11.3% by March 2023. Delivery partners have worked hard to increase the number of minority ethnic learners. For example:

- STEC engaged with Baltic Group, Lithuanian Liverpool Labas; and works with Syrian and Afghan networks, recruiting several people living locally in a hotel in Speke.

- A female volunteer Digital Champion ran a successful Zoom session for Refugee Women Connect on basic email skills and safety for 10 women in summer 2021.
- Granby Toxteth Development Trust engaged two cohorts from the local Roma community (2021/22) with the help of their in-house Roma translator.

Despite endeavours to increase the BAME engagement rate in Halton, performance fell slightly short of target in this area (3% achieved vs target 4.5%). However, this is broadly in line with the borough's ethnicity demographic, with a 96.5% white British and Irish population (2021 Census data).

A partnership was developed with Halton Supported Housing's Refugee Resettlement Coordinator and a course initially started, but soon had to be cancelled due to a lack of interpreter support, with the original interpreter accepting alternative work elsewhere. Subsequent attempts to restart the group failed due to a combination of long-term staff sickness and COVID.

Economically Inactive Learners:

- Perhaps the most notable success in terms of targeted approaches to improve the engagement of priority group learners lies with the economically inactive cohort, which increased from a low of 21.3% in the early stages of the project in 2017 to 51.7% by March 2023.
- To enable this improvement strategy, key partnerships were developed with Jobcentre Plus, We Are With You, CGL, Transforming Choice, The Spider Project and a range of other organisations involved with supporting Economically Inactive people.
- The central management team delivered workshops focusing on approaches to engaging priority group learners, including guidance on assessment methods, correct classification of, and required evidence to prove economic inactivity and subsequent job-search outcomes.
- WEA provided bespoke courses at CGL venues, specifically for those recovering from addictions, where learners were supported both by their peers and specialist, recovery-focused key workers.
- To generate referrals of economically inactive clients, St Helens Chamber attended at least two UC claimant sessions at Jobcentre Plus each week and two Carers Allowance claimant sessions per month. They also made referrals to a two-day Mental Health First Aid course for those not quite ready to participate, as a preparatory tool to re-engagement with learning.
- There have also been examples of social prescribers referring learners as a stepping stone towards improved mental wellbeing.

Learners with Disabilities, Learning Difficulties and Long-Term Health Conditions:

- Mental wellbeing has moved centre stage in terms of delivery partner awareness and inclusion in project design and delivery, as outlined in Section 5.
- Improved referral partnerships have developed over several years, for example, with Ladders of Life; MENCAP Wirral, Kindred Minds and CGL - see Section 5.

Priority Group Progression Rates:

Progression rates for priority group learners have mostly been comparable with the overall average rates for all participants, with women faring better than average across all three results categories, and ethnic minority work and job-search progression rates significantly higher than average. There has also been a notable recent increase in the progression rate of ethnic minority participants to education/ training outcomes in the final six months of the project.

The only exception to this largely positive trend is, perhaps unsurprisingly, job outcomes for learners with disabilities, learning difficulties or long-term health conditions, a regretful, but common national issue, which has been further compounded by the COVID pandemic.

Table 3.10 Priority Group Progression Rates

LCR/ Project Totals	% of Learners Progressing to:		
	Employment	Education	Job-search
Overall progression rate	11.7%	24.1%	13.7%
Female	12.0%	24.8%	13.9%
>50	11.2%	22.5%	12.3%
Disability, learning difficulty or long-term health condition	4.6%	23.5%	13.5%
Non-white/white British ethnicity	17.6%	23.9%	20.6%

Source: Include-IT Mersey Performance Information Data, April 2023

Due to the way the statistics are presented in the national BBO evaluation report, it is not possible to compare performance of priority group progression rates achieved by Include-IT Mersey to national BBO averages.

3.6.2 Environmental Sustainable Development

Key improvement themes over the 2019-2023 period have included:

Minimising Waste - a range of action plans have been developed to:

- Reduce use of single use plastics and recycle as much as possible, including all old IT equipment.
- Print only when needed and double-sided to reduce paper usage.
- 50 donated laptops were refurbished, which are now loaned out to a variety of organisations and learners, preventing them from going to landfill and improving digital inclusion.

Minimising Travel – including:

- Online staff meetings.
- Promotion of public transport and cycling, including the cycle to work scheme.
- Working from home and remote, online course delivery positively impacting on staff and participant travel.
- Provision of IT equipment to learners to get online at home.

Minimising Energy Use

- Building energy assessments were funded (through separate, non-BBO/ESF funding) for 17 VCFSE sector organisations (22 buildings), six of which were project partners. Age UK Wirral undertook an energy assessment, the results of which were considered by their Board and have resulted in more careful scrutiny of energy usage across the organisation, with plans to install new, energy-efficient boilers within the next two years.
- Several partners - for example, Alt Valley Community Trust, Everton Development Trust, Rotunda, and STEC - have had major building renovations, significantly improving energy efficiency: including installation of solar panels, double glazing and energy efficient heating systems.
- Alt Valley set up beekeeping facilities and have plans to plant 12 trees in their community garden. This will increase biodiversity in and around their site and have a positive effect on the environment.
- Rotunda fitted a smart sensor to their new boiler, which monitors temperature, only turning on heating if it gets too cold, thereby saving energy. LED light bulbs and improved lighting zones are also now in use to further reduce energy use.
- STEC created a wheelchair accessible community/memorial garden using a patch of donated land, which will provide wellbeing and volunteer opportunities. They have also received funding to build a workspace for their Green Energy Hub project. This, combined with the memorial garden is a £93,000 project with a focus on sustainable development in the community.

Supporting the Natural Environment

In response to the climate change crisis, Sefton CVS established a Climate Change Task Group, heavily driven by the Include-IT Mersey project management team. In addition to improving its own direct environmental impact, one of the main aims of the task group is to support other VCFSE sector organisations in becoming more environmentally sustainable and access funding to support improvement measures.

Examples of positive actions resulting from the Task Group include:

- A commitment to becoming a Net Carbon Zero organisation by 2030.
- Development of an improved environmental sustainability policy.
- Annual Carbon footprint measurement and reporting, with a sustainability action plan to drive improvements and Carbon Literacy training for task group members.
- Delivery of environmental sustainability workshops to project partners and other voluntary sector organisations.

Impacts for Learners

04

4.1 Introduction

The logic chain set out below describes the strategic objectives for the project, the resources deployed and the activities delivered to achieve the intended outputs, outcomes and wider impacts.

Figure 4.1: Include-IT Mersey Logic Chain

Strategic objectives	Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes	Wider Impacts
To improve digital skills and inclusion	£4.5m BBO/ESF funding, incl. 2 extensions	Engagement activities: digital drop-ins & referral partnerships	By March 2023: 2041 digitally excluded participants supported (2109 achieved)	Increased confidence, empowerment & inclusion to use ICT	Reduced unemployment and economic inactivity for socially excluded groups, incl. 50+, BAME, disability, learning difficulty & L-T health condition
To overcome barriers to employment & economic inactivity	Strategic partnership led by Sefton CVS/VOLA	Digital skills training programme	455 individuals progress to education or training (569 achieved)	Renewed motivation to learn	Increased levels of employment
To promote social inclusion & improved wellbeing	22 Delivery Partners 'Learn my Way' ICT platform & employment support Distribution of tablets and data to participants	Employability & progression support Digital Champion support roles & digital drop-ins Digital phone support service (COVID response)	148 unemployed progress to employment (178 achieved) 316 economically inactive progress to employment or job-search (364 achieved)	Increased confidence to assess online risk Better access to local digital services Improved digital skills leading to social, financial & health benefits Employment benefits: incl. employability skills Reduced isolation	Social Inclusion Connected communities

This section provides an assessment of the extent to which the project has achieved some of the more qualitative outcomes and impacts. Data to inform the findings and conclusion drawn has been gathered by the evaluation team through several methods, including:

- A survey of recent and current participants from the post-lockdown period, April 2021 to February 2023. Responses were invited through an online survey, with the option of phone interviews, depending on preference. Face-to-face interviews were also undertaken with current learners and some previous learners who were keen to participate, at 12 training sessions attended by the evaluation team. In total, 138 survey responses were recorded.
- Adoption of a more qualitative, in-depth consultation approach for previous learners who participated from July 2019 until the end of the COVID lockdown period (March 2021). Responses were collected through case study phone interviews. Given the lengthy time lapse of several years for those participating pre-pandemic, this revised approach was adopted following a minimal response to an initial online survey. This included:
 - A telephone survey of those that did respond to the online survey (10 of 22 respondents that wished to be consulted further).
 - A telephone survey of previous case study learners – to revisit and capture impacts over time.
 - Development of new case studies of learners who engaged through the COVID period and who had maintained some form of contact with their tutors.

This Wider Impacts section has also drawn on feedback from consultations with the central team, delivery partners, referral partners and other strategic stakeholders.

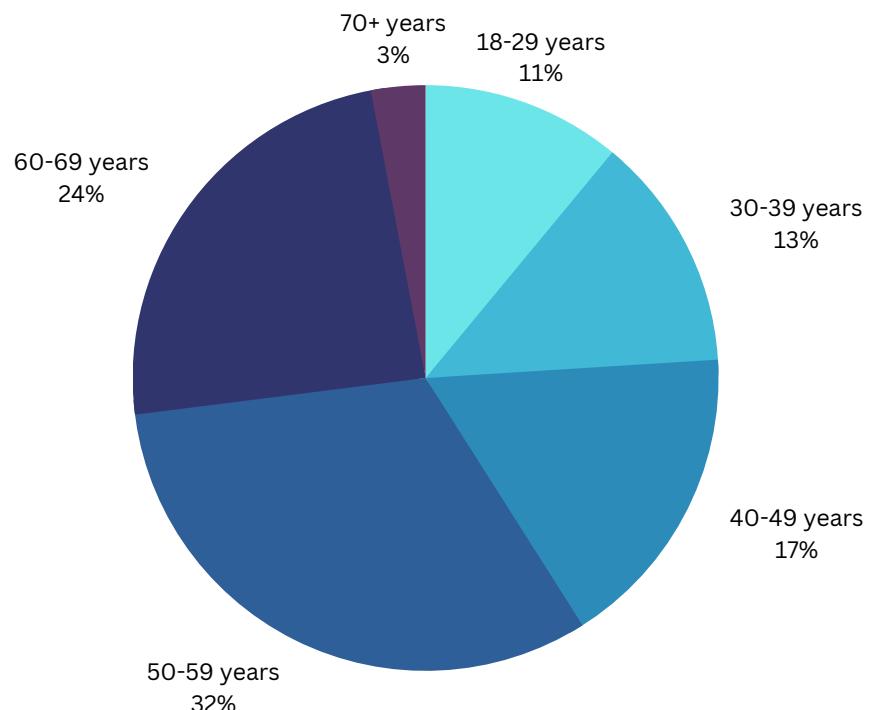
4.2 Learner Outcomes and Impacts

As context, it is important to recognise the very rapidly changed digital landscape in which the project is now delivered, in comparison with that of 2019 when the previous evaluation took place. Although there is a lack of available quantitative data, qualitative data from conversations with learners identified the following themes:

- The delivery context has evolved into one in which the majority of learners own and, to some extent, use a smartphone – a shift from the first evaluation phase of 2017-2019. However, availability of sufficient data to fulfil needs was cited as a common issue.
- A greater proportion of learners reported having access to broadband at home and far fewer report using library or community-based digital facilities. It is not known whether this is circumstantial to the individuals interviewed, or whether this may be a wider underlying trend.
- With the broadening of age eligibility (downwards), a smaller proportion of the overall cohort report having never used a computer. Many people under the age of 50-55 are likely to have had some exposure to even a basic form of IT training in their secondary education.

Characteristics of recent and current survey respondents – April 2021-February 2023

A total of 138 recent and current learners responded to the survey. This included learners who were involved from the end of lockdown, when face-to-face courses re-commenced.

Figure 4.2: Evaluation Survey Respondent Demographic Profile (n=138)**Learner Respondents' Age Profile:****Gender:**

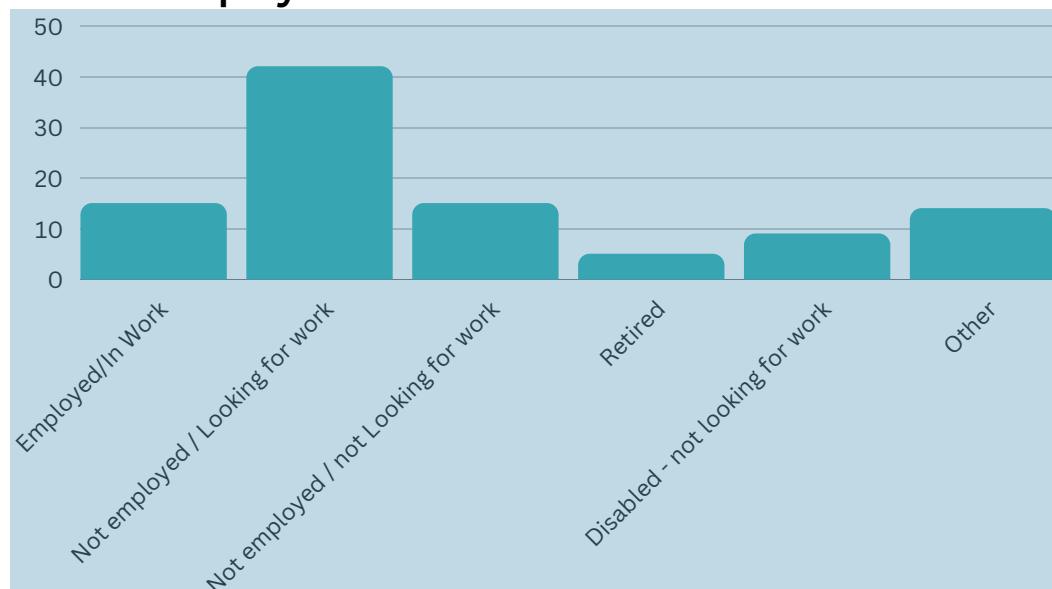
- 63% of respondents were female
- 36% male
- 1% preferred not to say

Disability or Long-Term Health Condition:

- 47% considered themselves to have a disability or a long-term health condition
- 53% did not

Ethnicity:

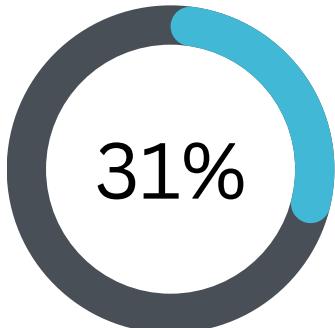
- 119 were White British
- 2 Black British
- 6 Asian British
- 2 Mixed ethnicity
- 7 other ethnic minority groups including Afghan, Eritrean & South African
- 2 non-respondents

Current Employment Status:

Other includes people now training, registering for full-time education courses, carers and people who were registering for self-employment

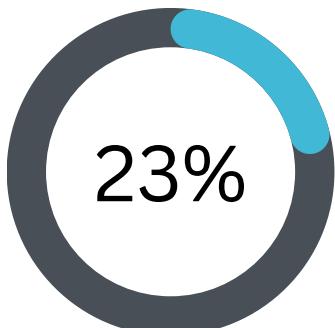
Learner engagement & satisfaction

Referral routes:



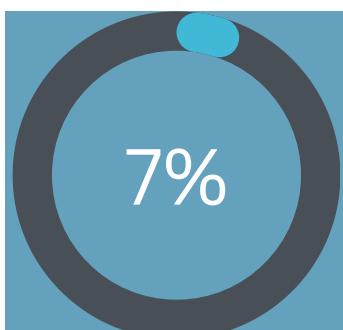
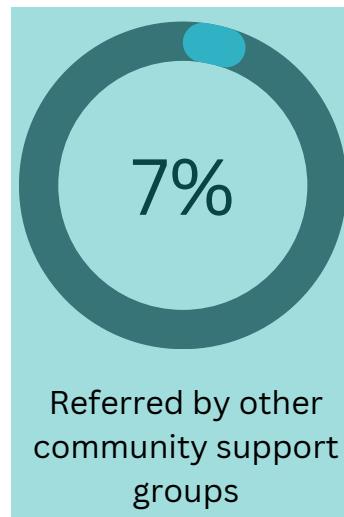
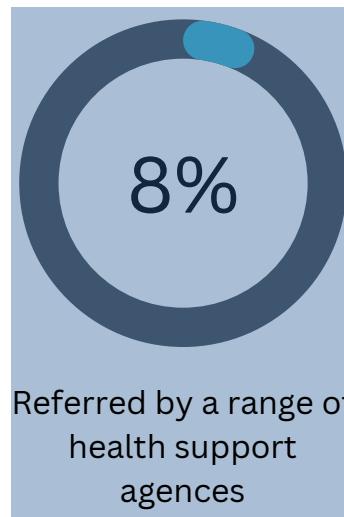
Jobcentre Plus

- Almost one-third of survey respondents found out about the course from Jobcentre Plus - referred by JCP Work Coaches, with whom most delivery partners have long-standing relationships.
- Overall, in comparison to the previous evaluation, far fewer learners reported that they had been mandated by JCP to attend the course (10%).



Word of Mouth

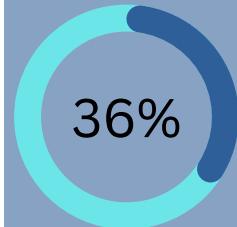
- Nearly one-quarter reported first hearing about the project through word of mouth - from family, friends, previous learners and others in their community (e.g. asylum seeker groups) - reflecting the strong local presence of delivery partners and the long-standing nature of the project.



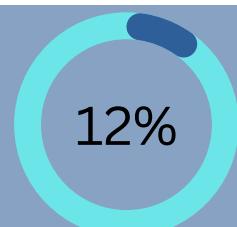
Motivation to get involved:

Wide-ranging motivations to engage with the project were cited by survey respondents.

Job/Training Info & Jobcentre Plus services



- Over one-third stated that they had needed to learn how to get information online about jobs, training and/or to access Jobcentre Plus.
- For many, this was the primary motivation for their involvement. Specifically, many older learners (>55) reported losing their jobs during COVID – most of which had not required any IT skills. Now, post-lockdown, they realised when working with Work Coaches the need to be online in order to access job opportunities. This represented many of the learners with self-reported 'non-existent' digital skills before enrolling.



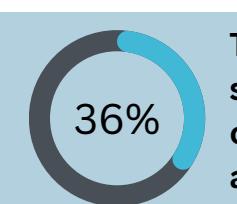
- Others stated that they needed an IT refresher course to be able to effectively access jobs and training information – as they had not used IT for many years and owned dated devices with out of date software.

Wanted to get a job/ training and needed to be able to use a computer:



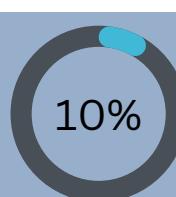
- A significant proportion reported being labour market returners, or unemployed who realised that they needed at least basic digital skills, not only to access information about jobs and training opportunities, but to also be able to meet basic job specifications in sectors such as social care, driving, retail and factory work – all of which had previously not required these skills.

- This was the case for people wishing to re-enter similar employment sectors and those wishing to (or required to, due to post-pandemic labour market changes) change sectors/ job types.
- A further group of respondents had decided to participate to enable them to fully engage with another training course or programme of study, which required them to train online, complete assignments and be conversant with Microsoft Office applications.



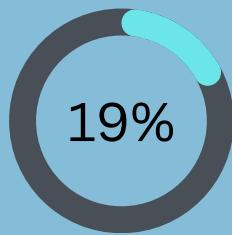
Thought that everyone else seemed to be able to use computers/ phones nowadays and wanted to be able to do the same:

- Many commented that they felt 'left behind' and were 'tech dinosaurs' – and for many, this was the primary motivation to get involved.



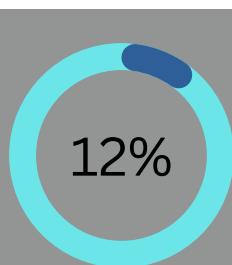
Reported social isolation as being a motivating factor for getting involved:

- Isolation from families and a feeling that there was a whole part of life they were missing out on by not being on social media, and not being able to communicate with others very well during lockdown was cited by several learners.



Wanted to be able to access services such as housing and GP/health services:

Many expressed their frustration at feeling excluded from being able to access many services: primarily NHS primary care services, banking, and their inability to respond to service requests to complete PDF forms – which was reported as happening frequently in day-to-day service access.

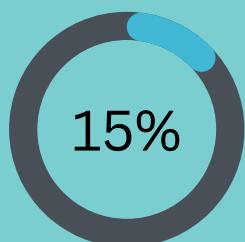


Specifically stated that they wanted to access a refresher basic IT skills course:

For many, the need to refresh their digital skills was often precipitated by some form of loss: of work, of a loved one/ someone they cared for, or changed health status, which had forced them into not working for some time.

- Many learners reported that they had not used anything more than their smartphone for some years and felt that they needed a refresher course. Many had previously completed basic IT courses at college many years prior (including CLAiT), or were self-taught but had little confidence or access to a computer to be able to re-learn skills. They were motivated by wishing to get into work or training, as well as recognising that they were missing out on being able to communicate and access services.

Learners' perceived digital skills levels prior to their engagement with the project:



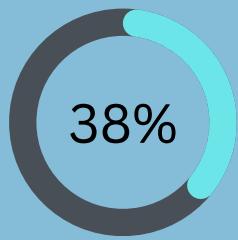
Reported non-existent digital skills when they signed up

- 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 previously mentioned shift in the digital landscape since the last evaluation.
- 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 - some of whom had lost their jobs during COVID lockdown.



Reported very basic digital skills

- Nearly half had previously used a computer, either in school, or in a job some time ago. Some did use a smartphone, but few for more than basic social media and messaging.
- Many reported their 'computer' skills as being extremely dated - often not having used them for 20 years since they last worked, or had previously completed a CLAiT course.
- Confidence to use a device was a key barrier - with many explaining that they were fearful about internet safety. lockdown.

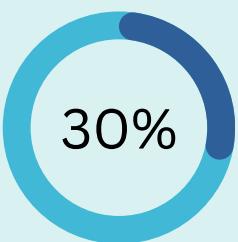
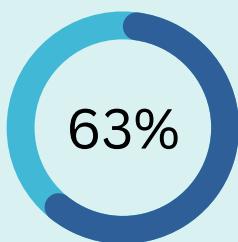


Reported that their digital skills weren't too bad but needed refreshing:

- Over one-third claimed to possess some digital skills gained previously - many of which were self-taught.
- Many reported having no access to a computer, or only very dated devices or software - making them 'very slow'.
- Similar to the 'basic skills' group above - there were very low levels of confidence generally amongst learners on registration and huge concerns about online safety.

Increased confidence in using digital skills on completion of the course:

93% of survey respondents reported an improvement in their digital skills as a result of their participation, with two-thirds saying they were a lot better.

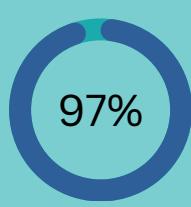


Digital skills 'a lot better' Digital skills 'a little better'

- 1% said they had stayed the same.
- 6% said it was too early into their course to say.

Learners' course satisfaction levels:

Reflective of ongoing learner feedback collected throughout the project (section 3.2), the 2023 evaluation survey also reported very high levels of learner satisfaction:



Were either very satisfied (83%), or satisfied (14%) with the course overall.



Reported that the one-to-one tutor support was excellent (85%), or good (15%).



Thought the employability elements were excellent (60%), or good (16%). This is a similar level to the previous evaluation and reflects the fact that some learners (11%) reported it was too early to comment on this, as it tends to be included at a later stage of the course.

For 10% it was not relevant, as they were not currently looking for work (usually due to ill health) and therefore didn't participate in this section of the survey.



Found the content of Learn My Way to be excellent (69%), or good (24%). 5% thought it was ok.



Found the venue easy to get to. 50% said claiming travel expenses was easy – 47% had not needed to.

Learners' course highlights:

Current and recent learners were asked, in an open survey question, to describe the two best things about the training. **Learning new skills** and **support from the tutor** were the most commonly cited factors, with 25% of responses positively referencing their experience with their tutor and 25% mentioning developing their IT capabilities as one of their most highly valued outcomes.

Other important aspects for learners included the **social benefits** of the group learning format (12% of responses) and the positive impact on their **wellbeing and confidence** (10%). In terms of course delivery, the **steady pace of the training** was mentioned as a strength in 10% of responses, with the **relaxed learning environment** also featuring in 8% of comments.

Of particular note are the learners' satisfaction levels with **one-to-one tutor support** and the content of **Learn My Way**: both key success factors in project delivery.

Satisfaction with tutor support:

Consultation about one-to-one tutor support found this to be highly rated by learners. The crucial role that tutors have played in achieving high levels of learner satisfaction and success has been consistent throughout the life of the project. Learners reported several specific factors highlighting the importance of the tutor role and their relationship with them as being key to their enjoyment and achievement:

- **A 'can do' culture:** many learners commented on the overall supportive ethos of tutors, which was important to them from as early as their initial registration in building trust and engagement. That learners could also progress at their own pace was also a key success factor for many.
- **Accessible and supportive coaching styles:** learners were also highly impressed with the training methods and approaches that tutors used in relation to digital skills training: that tutors were highly patient and relaxed in working with them one-to-one; that they were happy to repeat and return to learning points; and that they were empowering in their approach, which set learners at ease. A frequent comment was that tutors were good at 'explaining really complicated things in a really easy way.'
- **Holistic mentoring approach:** as important as the digital skills support was tutors' awareness of learners' circumstances and any challenges or barriers to participation they may have had. For many learners there were often key concerns in relation to:
 - Health conditions, which meant that getting involved in a group setting was difficult – especially for many with depression and anxiety.
 - Home circumstances restricting attendance or engagement – especially true for those with caring responsibilities.
 - Self-confidence and self-esteem: which, for many learners was very low, meaning that even coming through the door to attend the group was a significant challenge.

Many delivery partners have adapted their delivery approaches to accommodate the multiple challenges often faced by learners:

- Several (paid) tutors were previously volunteers with the project: e.g. Independence Initiative, Torus and WEA. This progression brings with it substantial commitment, lived

experience and expertise to the role, which has proved extremely beneficial. Other delivery partners have been able to secure the support of tutors who are local residents, or are engaged in the community in other ways and able to relate well to the, often, more mature learners engaged by the project.

- Several partners have Digital Champion volunteers supporting the sessions, many of whom were originally learners on the course. These positive role models have created added trust.

Learn My Way and course content:

Ongoing development of the delivery programme has continued throughout, not least during the COVID period. Based around the [Learn My Way](#) digital skills platform, delivery managers and tutors have developed additional wraparound resources, practice exercises and set individualised tasks for learners. Particular elements mentioned by learners in relation to course content included:

Microsoft Office

- The three core elements of MS Office were mentioned by many as key skills they needed to learn and that had attracted them to sign up for the course. This included learners who needed to be able to compose letters and emails to apply for jobs; to be able to use Excel, PowerPoint and Word as a key part of jobs they wanted to apply for; to create documents as part of course work in vocational training they were planning to apply for; to write blogs, or for creative writing hobbies.
- Others needed to be at least proficient at a basic level in PowerPoint and/or Excel to apply for administrative posts in sectors they had already been involved with, e.g. older learners wanting to move into administrative roles in logistics, after many years of driving for a living:

"Now I'm doing letters, job applications, registered for eBay. Never thought I would be able to do everything I can do now!"

- Several learners signed up to the course to upskill generally in relation to Microsoft Office to cope with the IT demands of vocational training courses. This included a learner at WEA Knowsley, who went on to undertake a Level 2 Floristry course, only able to do so as a result of upskilling in MS Office applications, which assisted in the completion of assignments and presentations. Several learners had engaged with Teaching Assistant courses, sometimes delivered online. Having completed the Include-IT course, they stated that this had built their confidence, as well as digital skills, enabling them to research, create documents and presentations, and participate more fully.

Email drafting & management

- Another frequently mentioned section of LMW was that of email skills. For many, particularly older learners, this was the first time they had ever been able to assemble and send an email. Copying and pasting and adding attachments to emails were also mentioned often as being useful skills in assisting communications with both service providers and personal contacts, as well as in applying for jobs and training. For many this was a course highlight:

"I only used to do job-search online at the job centre, but now I am registered with a few job sites, put my CV on each of them and I can look through the vacancies and I know how to upload a covering letter with my application." – recent learner, Everton Development Trust.

Internet search

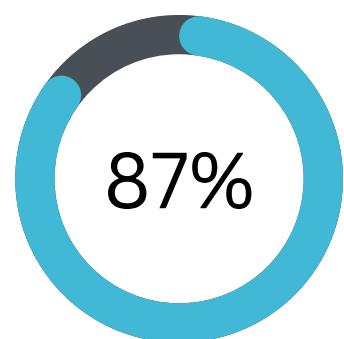
- Internet search skills were also frequently referenced. The need to access online job and training opportunities was a key motivating factor for many, as was the first time use of job Apps.
- For many learners this has become a life enhancing skill, a vital way of accessing information about community facilities, services and activities, in addition to job-hunting. It has also provided access to new sources of information for hobbies and leisure pastimes; and many also mentioned using basic shopping and social media sites such as Ebay, Amazon and Facebook.
- Some learners mentioned access to online banking, but there remain large numbers who continue to be highly fearful of internet security and scamming, and refuse to use it at all.

Digital involvement of learners post-course completion:

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



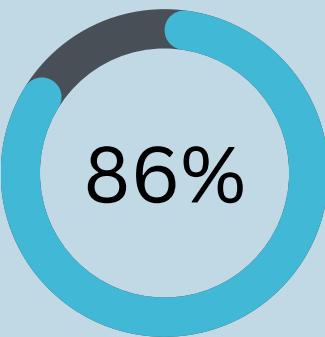
In terms of confidence to use their newfound digital skills, learners reported high levels of confidence across the spectrum of different uses:



Are more confident in using a computer

“The tablet I received has been a godsend – I’ve been able to carry on practicing. I’ve catalogued all of my photos now, which sounds like a small thing, but I am really grateful to know how to do it. I use Google a lot now too for checking information and I can also Skype with my family who live in Scotland.”



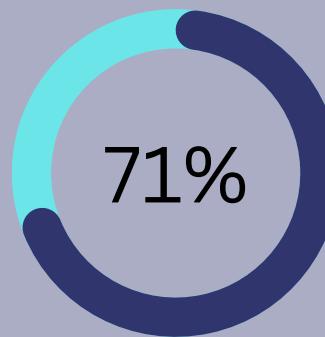


86%

Are more confident to go online to access information about local services

"Using online banking is brilliant - I was scared to use it before, but now it

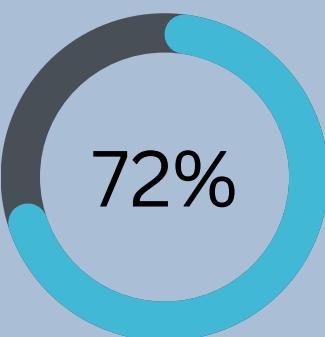
makes everything so much easier. I paid my friend the other day through online banking and she was so shocked that I could do it! It's just given me the confidence to have a go, whereas I wouldn't have done before. I also did my driving theory test online and passed for a motorcycle."



71%

Go online more to contact their GP or access health services

"I'm using the laptop a lot more, especially for support and information around my health issues. I'm not interested in internet banking or anything like that though. I have not been well since I had sepsis last year and need a lot of medication since coming out of hospital after my op. Sometimes I need to fill forms in. I can do this now! I use the internet and laptop a lot more now. I know how to search the internet safely and I can also order my prescriptions online and use other health services online too."

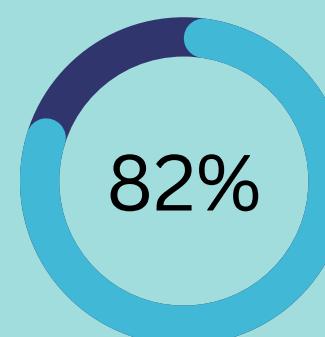


72%

Go online more to find jobs and training opportunities

"My main priority is job hunting & courses at present. I've applied for jobs online using the CV created on the course.

Things like online banking & shopping are things I want to do and the course has given me the confidence."



82%

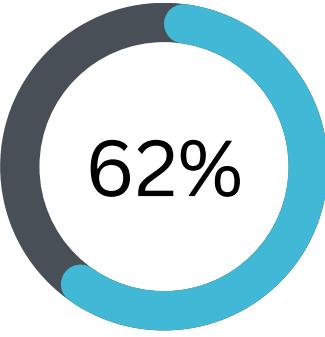
Go online more for leisure and hobbies

"I'm a lot more confident in navigating websites to research my hobbies & know more about online safety.

The course has helped with online banking, creating strong passwords for cyber security. I also use it for online shopping and I've realised can go online on the laptop to use Amazon Prime to watch films."

Impact on job application confidence:

Learners were asked if they thought they were now in a better position to apply for jobs or training, or would be once they had completed the course:



62%

- 62% felt that they were in better position, post course completion (42% a lot more and 20% a moderate amount).
- 17% said it was too early on in the course to be able to comment.
- 15% reported that they were not looking to return to work immediately as they were carers, or had health conditions which prevented this.

Key themes in terms of employability confidence included:

Job search/ applying for jobs and training online: learners felt more confident in being able to do this, having gained the skills to search job sites, use online Apps and submit applications:

- For many who have never had to use any form of digital devices for their work, there is now usually no option but to apply online for the majority of vacancies. Examples include those involved in practical trades and factory work, as well as gardening, retail and care work.

Online interview know-how: several learners had been coached in the use of Zoom and Teams to enable them to take part in online job and training interviews:

- WEA is one of several delivery partners who have added this element to their delivery offer, as so many employers are now using this approach at some stage of the recruitment process.

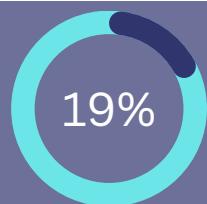
Improved English language: there were several examples of learners improving their English language skills through participation. These included Polish learners at Independence Initiative, who used Google Translate to help get through the course; Afghan learners at STEC and also at Rotunda:

- Learners from the local Roma community engaged by Granby Toxteth Development Trust benefited from the support of a Roma employee, who had previously been a learner at GTDT themselves, and was able to act as an interpreter to enable their involvement.

Additional skills: driving theory test; touch typing; extended support with use of PowerPoint and Excel. One learner commented:

"I already got a job due to the course and my tutor then helped me learn touch typing and I'm proud of myself with that! It's an excellent course for people with very little computer experience, it has helped me 100% and I would recommend it to anyone."

Reported employability activity:



Reported that they had been successful in finding a job:

"Whilst on the course I was given help and support to get my current job and since then have completed courses that has enabled me to cover a lot more job roles which, in turn, has enabled me a lot more working hours.

I returned to be self-employed as a hairdresser, which the course has helped me with. I also applied for some part-time jobs online. The tutor helped me to apply for my job and gave me some useful information about interview techniques."



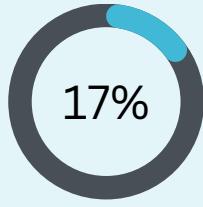
Were actively looking for work:

"The course helped with the college course I am now doing and job searching for when I qualify from college. It helped a lot with job searching and also completing tests for jobs in new areas."



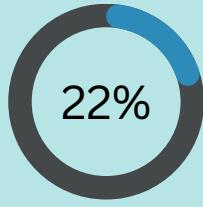
Had done, or were doing some training:

"I applied for a hospitality job through a job site while I was on the course. The job is at LFC and is totally flexible around my circumstances, it's brilliant! I probably wouldn't have applied if it wasn't for the course. I also did a paediatric first aid course at STEC after the IT course."



Were now volunteering in some capacity:

"I've done some volunteering at Rotunda and now been offered paid bank work in the Nursery there."



22% stated that it was not relevant to them:

As they were claiming welfare benefits due to ill-health and not currently able to work; others were carers and some had since retired.

"I'm just taking this one day at a time. Pleased to be out mixing with people. I've had a number of health issues since completing the course that mean I'm unable to work."

In terms of themes related to learners' journeys towards employment and training, the project was good at enabling respondents to **review their employment options and shift in occupational roles and sectors**: often motivated by changing health or family circumstances.

Shift from manual/ unskilled work to specific vocational training and work:

- After recently losing jobs during lockdown, many have needed to upskill in relation to digital skills, including learners moving from unskilled posts in hospitality and catering; and others having to retrain due to accidents or health problems. For example, a learner from Knowsley who, after an accident on site when painting and decorating, has been unable to continue and needs a less physically demanding job.

Mr R – Rotunda Learner

Mr R was referred to Rotunda by his JCP Work Coach: he was looking to increase his opportunities through upskilling. He left school at 15 to work on his family's market stall and although he held many jobs in labouring and construction over the years, now found himself out of work, with limited options due to his lack of qualifications and difficulties with English and IT. He described how much he appreciated the group learning environment and valued the support from the tutor, saying:

"Completing the course gave me a sense of achievement. It was great group and we all got a certificate at the end, it felt great! It has opened up a lot of options to me which were previously unavailable, but unfortunately has not led to a job yet."

After completing the course, Mr R has been pursuing employment in the rail sector and has attended a series of assessment tests as part of the selection process, something which he explained he would not have previously had the confidence to do. He continues with this action plan and described how, although not yet leading to a job, he was wholly positive about the training experience and explained how he wants to complete further training in English, as he didn't complete this at school.

Upskilling dated IT skills to remain, or return to their original employment sector:

Several learners recognised that they needed to update their skills if they wanted to return to their previous employment sectors or shift to a less active role. This was often the case for learners who had lost posts during COVID in the retail and logistics sectors.

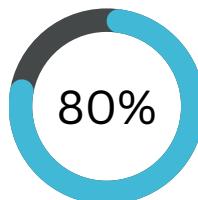
Shift from lived experience to formal occupation role:

Several learners wanted to use their skills gained as informal carers to move into social care roles.

Applications to more flexible and part-time posts:

Many learners referenced their wish to apply for roles with more flexible working hours, or to work from home in order to fit work hours around informal care roles with family members. Others in their 60s wanted to work fewer hours, especially where they had long-term health conditions: several mentioned looking for personal assistant roles to support people with disabilities and also cleaning and social care roles.

Interest in follow-on IT training courses:



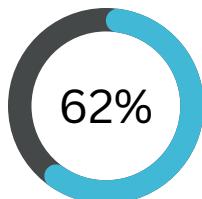
A large majority of respondents reported an interest in further follow-on IT training. Only 11% were not interested and 8% felt it was too early to decide.

Further areas of interest identified by learners included:

- 24% online safety
- 23% solving mobile phone issues
- 24% using mobile phone apps
- 20% anti-virus software
- 16% wanted more advanced training Excel; PowerPoint; and Word.

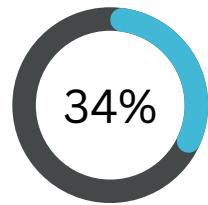
- Identified areas of interest in further training reflect on ongoing barriers to digital online engagement: cyber-security and fear of online scamming and fraud.
- Despite completing the course – which includes a module on online security and password safety – many learners reported remaining highly concerned about their online safety and resistant to using online banking and shopping online.
- Another key area of interest was that of more in-depth training in Microsoft Office applications. This was often related to employment or education/training goals; and also in relation to hobbies, such as creative writing.

Engagement with digital drop-ins:



Had not used digital drop-ins

- There was little awareness of the digital drop-in sessions amongst learners, with only 4% confirming they had accessed one and 34% having no awareness of them at all. This is partly due to them not being available in every area, though several delivery partners do run open-access drop-ins at their venues for wider community use, e.g. AVCT, EDT and GTDT.

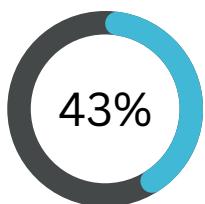


Had not heard even of them

- Some had heard about them, but did not feel confident to use them. One respondent reported that they were worried that the volunteer may not be as patient as the course tutor. Another was fearful of accessing somewhere else that was unfamiliar to them, as the drop-in was located in a different venue to where the training took place.
- There is a clear opportunity to better link up digital drop-in provision with the courses. There appears to be an appetite and need amongst learners for ongoing support, post-course completion, to continue to practice and develop their skills and receive help with new and emerging issues. This was particularly apparent with learners who completed their training some time ago.
- Many learners wanted to know more about the digital drop-ins. Several recent learners reported feeling comfortable staying in contact with their course tutor, which may provide an opportunity for better signposting to the drop-ins in the future.

Improvements suggested by learners:

Learners were 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.



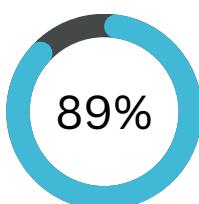
Nearly half skipped this question, indicating they did not have any specific recommendations for improvement.

Of those that did respond, common themes in terms of content were: requests for more training on **using different devices** rather than PCs/desktop applications and **more in-depth coverage of Excel and PowerPoint**.

- With regards to delivery, some respondents suggested more Zoom/online course delivery, that tutors set more tasks to complete at home and the possibility of evening sessions for those with daytime commitments.
- There were a small number of suggestions around improving accessibility for particular learner groups, ensuring barriers to learning (for example language abilities or visual impairment) are fully assessed and managed at the start of the course, with suitable adjustments put in place.
- Some suggested rolling out delivery of courses to specific learner groups, e.g. people with low confidence and learning difficulties was also suggested by some.

Wider Learner Wellbeing Impacts:

Current and recent learners were asked to report on to what extent they thought participation in the course had impacted their wellbeing:



reported that attendance had improved their wellbeing - 68% a great deal and 22% a little.

3% reported it hadn't made a difference and 4% said it was too early in the course to say.

Examples of comments made by learners:

- *"It's been important after lockdown to mix with people as I've been very isolated. This course has been an important step forward for me."*
- *"I felt at rock bottom but this helped me to get back on my feet and open doors for me."*
- *"I was on a downer anyway because of my job situation so this really helped."*
- *"Came at a really good time for me with my health issues – such a positive thing for me to do."*
- *"I have made friends with people who are on the course. I have now become a volunteer at the venue where the course is held."*
- *"This was a big thing because it really helped me build my confidence after COVID lockdowns and having a baby. I also had post-natal depression, so doing the course really helped me get out, meet people and feel confident in myself again."*
- *"It gave me confidence and it gave me freedom. I only wish I had found it sooner. I want to do more now."*
- *"The group were great and there was a social side - we were all going for lunch together, but then we went back into lockdown and we were gutted!"*
- *"Feel better getting out the house where I live with my mother – I come here twice a week."*
- *"I can be very anxious and was pretty depressed and the course helped me a lot. It gave me confidence in myself, to push on and do more."*
- *"I was struggling after lockdown, but this really improved my confidence."*

These wider impacts have always been an important feature of the project, and COVID lockdown brought these into even sharper focus as vital outcomes for all learners, both during and since.



Learners' Digital Journeys & Voices

05

5.1 Introduction

A wealth of qualitative data has been collected through this evaluation which, in total, has consulted with 160 current and previous learners and 22 volunteers – many of whom were previous project learners. This section further builds on learners' self-reported wider impacts (as outlined earlier) and provides a valuable, in-depth insight into the complex elements of learners' digital journeys. **This reflects the key evaluation aim: to listen and amplify the voices and lived experience of learners.**

The following collection of longitudinal learner journeys highlight the complexities of digital skills training, digital connectivity, a global pandemic and a cost-of-living crisis. These are reflected in the ongoing challenges facing many, to reach and maintain their goal of digital inclusion.

To recap on the methodology:

- Alongside online surveys, in-depth, individual telephone and face-to-face interviews were held with recent and current learners; and with previous learners who enrolled from July 2019 through to the end of lockdown period (April 2021).
- Similar interviews were held with a sample of previous learners from the first evaluation period to discuss if and how they had continued on their digital journeys since their involvement (including through and post COVID).

This resulted in the development of a suite of case studies, which are included as a separate Appendix to this report.

In this section the digital journeys of learners are considered from two key angles:

1. Digital Journeys: Learners' Course Motivations & Related Impacts: The primary motivation as to why they signed up for the course was explored and three key reasons emerged:

- Those who were determined to get into work or training and the course enabled them to create or develop a plan to do so quickly – in which digital training featured.
- Those who, although they wanted to get back or into some type of work, were also highly motivated by what they recognised as the need to access the 'digital age', as they felt left behind.

- Those who expressed a primary motivation to engage as a means of improving their wellbeing and connection with others.

2. Digital Journeys: The Lived Experience and Voices of Diverse Demographic Groups of Learners:

- In-depth conversations with learners uncovered the widely varying digital journeys people have experienced and continue to live, and also the fact that no-one's digital journey is linear.
- Consultation with previous learners (going back to 2017 in a small number of cases) were valuable in identifying the challenges that they faced and still face in using their digital skills on an ongoing basis. These conversations also inform the need for a continuum of assistance in any post-skills training, as outlined in the final section of the report.

Through these two lenses, the evaluation attempts to capture some of the wider impacts of the project, providing an opportunity for learners to communicate their own impact stories[9]

5.2 Digital Journeys: Learners' Course Motivations & Related Impacts:

That learners reported feeling more self-confident was a universal outcome for everyone consulted. Through in-depth discussions (using a series of discussion prompts), what emerged were some broad categories relating to learners' original motivations to get involved.

Learners tended to describe their increased self-confidence and self-esteem in relation to that initial motivation – and it also usually found them reporting on wider positive impacts that they had often not anticipated at the start of the course and were unexpected benefits to their participation.

Although by no means mutually exclusive, **three primary learner categories emerged** related to their initial digital training motivations. **A suite of case studies** relating to each of these categories can be found in the supporting Appendix, available at:

<https://includeitmersey.org.uk/>.

Group 1: Learners focused on accessing a rapid pathway to jobs and training

A significant number of learners articulated their motivation for enrolling on the course very clearly as that of achieving job or training goals. These were often highly motivated to achieve their employment aims, and were focused on removing the specific barrier of their lack of digital skills in order to move forward on their pathway.

Access to a rapid pathway to jobs & training	
Typical profile – these learners told us:	Their increased confidence and self-esteem related to:
<p><i>"I needed to be able to use job apps; apply online; do a Zoom job interview."</i></p> <p><i>"I needed to show an employer I can work a computer/use their equipment (e.g. social care; driving)." </i></p> <p><i>"I was already using the internet quite well, but I did learn a lot about using it for looking for jobs and registering with employment agencies, as well as using the NHS website."</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Searching and applying for work/training. • Interview confidence, including online interviews. • Ability to consider alternative job functions/ types. • Consideration of further vocational/digital training. • Maintaining a network of employability support & contacts.
What next after course completion? This learner group reported needing ongoing assistance with:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active, timely referral to a local, community-based Level 1 and Level 2 digital training courses with a similar delivery approach to Include-IT Mersey. • Linkage with ongoing employability support, as and when job and training opportunities arose. • Ongoing assistance with troubleshooting digital device challenges (passwords/ security, etc.) • More in-depth training (for some) around Excel and PowerPoint for use in business settings. • Many wanted maths/ English functional skills courses. • Confidence to apply skills acquired to bespoke software/ systems in new employment or training settings. • Signposting to further, industry-specific IT training pathways, e.g. digital marketing, data analysis, coding. 	

Group 2: Learners focused on online access to information and services

A second group of learners were primarily focused on being able to start to use a computer and access the internet to simply be able to function more effectively in everyday life. They realised that this would also improve their employment and training opportunities. Their digital journeys were often kick-started by feeling highly excluded and frustrated in terms of access to services and to what they now recognise as being 'normal' in relation to connecting with others socially.

Being able to access 'daily life' services and information	
Typical profile – these learners told us:	Their increased confidence and self-esteem related to:
<p><i>"I want to start checking my bills online and use online banking. I'm not frightened of the computer anymore - I'm really pleased I've come on the course."</i></p> <p><i>"Everything is online – I've no idea how to do that."</i></p> <p><i>"I can't get an NHS appointment without filling a form in online."</i></p> <p><i>"I was a digital dinosaur – my grown up kids were sick of me asking them for help – I'm now accessing services such as housing and health through apps. The Include-IT course is an open door for my future - its working really well for me - by joining the groups it's helping me expand my networks."</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linkage to local services: e.g. more empowered in managing own health, like booking GP appointments & NHS App usage. • Accessing information online e.g. Council services; shopping; managing bills and money. • Pursuing hobbies and leisure interests online. • Thinking about volunteering or part-time employment options. • Being better connected to family & friends. • Managing money online: use of banking and smartphone payment apps; utility bills. • Using gov.uk services: citizenship information; accessing DVLA; driving theory information. • Housing services: checking and applying for accommodation on the Property Pool, reporting required repairs, etc.
What next after course completion? These learners reported needing ongoing assistance with:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immediately post-course: transferring skills learned on desktop device used in course setting to own device at home (often acquired after the course), particularly app-based devices, i.e. tablets. • Sourcing and setting up fit-for-purpose devices at home, including topping up data where no broadband is in place. • Ongoing support with keeping devices useable, e.g. unlocking devices where passwords forgotten, or there are software issues. • Managing online cyber-safety issues – there are still many who are very fearful of this, together with privacy concerns. • Access to free, local digital drop-in services, with the opportunity to maintain skills and stay up to date on key topics, rather than ongoing troubleshooting. • Support for those primarily using mobile phones to access emails and internet: challenges – data; screen size; overly complex systems on many apps (esp. verification processes). 	

Group 3: Learners motivated by personal wellbeing, empowerment and social connection:

A third, substantial group (and not mutually exclusive from the other two) is that of learners who were often some considerable distance from the labour market, but wanted to engage with the project to build their confidence and wellbeing.

Many identified their participation, primarily, as a means to provide some structure and activity to 'get them out of the house'; knowing that improving their digital skills was very likely to empower them, to give them a vital tool to help fulfil their aim of moving forward, towards improved wellbeing and confidence.

Often highly socially isolated, diagnosed with anxiety, depression and/or other disabilities, and in the context of the COVID lockdown and current cost of living crisis, increasingly higher numbers of learners relating to this digital journey profile have been engaged by the project.

Personal wellbeing, empowerment and social connection	
Typical profile – these learners told us:	Their increased confidence and self-esteem related to:
<p><i>"I need to do something – get out of the house – talk to other people – connect – achieve something like this."</i></p> <p><i>"I've suffered from depression and anxiety for years and haven't been able to work – this course is ideal for me."</i></p> <p><i>"It's a confidence thing because when I hear the word computer – I just freeze!"</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Successfully managing to attend and complete the course: regularly managing to leave the house, get out and participate in something interesting. • Developing peer relationships with other learners. • Starting to communicate with others online using social media and accessing the internet to research information. • Using IT and the internet for leisure and hobbies. • Thinking about volunteering options or other self-development courses.
What next after course completion? These learners reported needing ongoing assistance with:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active, timely signposting to suitable further IT training, other courses and opportunities, including wellbeing activities and volunteering to maintain momentum gathered on the course • Linkage with some form of digital drop-in service in their local community. • Maintaining ongoing social contact through regular attendance at local community activities, including meeting up with others who have also completed the course. 	

Ongoing digital journey requirements:

The high levels of interest reported by most learners about further digital support presents clear need and opportunity to enable access to the following:

Further structured, but differently themed digital skills training. For example:

- For different demographic groups.
- Using different devices: android/iPhone; tablets; laptops; use and management of apps.
- Work focused groups, concentrating on use of specific software commonly required in the workplace: e.g. Word/ Excel/ PowerPoint.

Expansion of a comprehensive digital drop-in network to more areas/ venues, which can:

- Offer basic device set-up, trouble-shooting with unlocking and password management.
- Offer more advice about software and online safety.
- Signpost to alternative, affordable local repair services for complex issues.

Suitable and affordable broadband:

- Affordability: advice about suitable broadband packages; social tariffs; Mi-Fi options.
- Set-up advice: support to access data (broadband; data purchase).
- Ongoing troubleshooting advice.

5.3 Digital Journeys: Lived Experience & Voices of Diverse Demographic Groups of Learners

This section presents emerging themes from a range of diverse demographic groups of current and recent learners who relayed their digital journey stories. It is also informed by consultation with delivery partners, Project Management Team members, pre-COVID learners (22) and volunteers, past and present (22).

A suite of case studies relating to learners in each of these demographic groups can be found in the supporting Appendix, available at <https://includeitmersey.org.uk/>.

Supportive and integrated responses for minoritised groups:

5.3.1 Neurodiverse learners:

Tutors have consistently adapted their training offer to meet learners' needs. One key success has been the flexibility for learners to engage with the Learn My Way training programme at their own pace. This has been vital for many learners who tutors assessed as having challenges with learning (be those formally diagnosed or otherwise).

The evaluation identified several positive responses to the learning needs of neurodiverse learners, all of whom may have differing needs in terms of learning styles and access to suitable training methods.

- More active referrals are being made between specialist neurodiversity support organisations and delivery partners, e.g. local social enterprise Ladders of Life, an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) support organisation, which has developed a close working relationship with Everton Development Trust (EDT).
- EDT staff have attended ASD awareness training run by Ladders of Life, which has helped to build a trusted working relationship – resulting in their clients getting involved in EDT's digital skills provision
- Several other delivery partners - including Independence Initiative, Bootle - have responded to specific learner needs through tailoring the content of the training course: both the LMW elements and wrap-around support - to suit the needs of neurodiverse learners. For example, adapting the learning environment and adjusting employability elements to include more focus on suitable volunteering opportunities in the first instance.

Learning Points:

- The project has offered a package of training which can be adapted to a wide range of learner needs. The opportunity for customised wrap-around elements, which can be integrated as the course progresses and as tutors get to better know the needs of individuals has been a great advantage in supporting neurodiverse learners.
- Planning for realistic and attainable onward progression is especially important for these learners, in relation to employability pathways, volunteering options, and access to local support agencies. Liaison with support staff (personal assistants) and/or family members, as appropriate, also needs to be part of this discussion with the learner.
- There is potential to expand tutor and volunteer Digital Champion training in relation to good practice in working with neurodiverse learners.

5.3.2 Older learners:

From its inception, the project's primary focus was on older people, over the age of 45. Older learners, particularly those over 60, reported the highest levels of 'non-existent' digital skills – with no-one currently in or above their mid to late 50s having accessed any form of IT education in secondary school. There were a range of motivations behind their involvement with the course:

- With the cost of living crisis and structural changes in the labour market, post-COVID, some reported that they needed to work for longer than anticipated and recognised that their lack of digital skills was significantly holding them back in the job market.
- Many reported that they had lost their jobs during COVID: having been in unskilled and manual jobs for many years, where they had not needed to use any form of IT whatsoever.
- Most recognised the additional benefits of being able to access online information and services, and communicate with others.
- Many commented that, for the first time they felt included in family and friends' networks – having been previously excluded due to not being social media users.

Learning Points:

- Case studies of several older learners highlight the dual benefit of increased access to the jobs market, as well as significant improvements to daily quality of life in accessing services and communication with others online.
- Many older learners acknowledged that they needed to learn 'just enough' IT skills to be able to apply for work, often in a new sector, or new role/ function and often, preferably with part-time hours – so follow-on training interest tended to be more muted in this group of learners.

5.3.3 Younger learners:

Based on feedback from learners and delivery partners, in 2019, a decision was made to reduce the (voluntarily introduced) lower age limit, opening the project up to younger people, first to 40, then to 30 and finally, in 2022, to 18 (funder's minimum age eligibility). This resulted in increasing numbers of younger learners registering with the project. Interestingly, despite their previous exposure to IT, e.g. in school, this group also benefited from attendance through the following ways:

- Development of Microsoft Office skills, including Excel and PowerPoint; and appropriate application of these in employment and training settings.
- Learning around IT protocols in business: i.e. how to compose emails and documents suitable for formal business communications. Younger learners reported possessing good social media skills, but very limited knowledge and skills in relation to the use of IT in more formal settings.
- Upskilling around word processing packages and digital skills more generally to enable them to embark upon training or employment routes with more confidence – and so removing one of their concerns about barriers to success.
- A general building of confidence from attending and completing the course: so building their social interaction skills and self-esteem, especially post-lockdown.

Learning Points:

- There is often a general perception that digital exclusion does not affect younger people and that they are competent IT users by default. In practice, this is not universally true, with a range of reasons why younger people may need support including: language barriers; ongoing functional skills barriers; a lack of work-focused IT skills; and a general lack of knowledge of expected professional working protocols, such as email communications.
- Include-IT Mersey can offer a first step for young people who may have disengaged with learning at school and offer confidence building, basic digital skills training and an all-important opportunity for social engagement, including inter-generational interaction.

5.3.4 Learning disabled learners:

Greenbank, a specialist in supporting people with learning difficulties and disabilities, has worked in partnership with MENCAP Wirral since 2021 offering courses to their clients at their central Birkenhead base. Key learning from working with the MECAP has identified that learners:

- Have felt comfortable to engage, as it has been delivered in a familiar and trusted venue, which they are confident in attending.
- Welcome the digital training as an addition to their weekly menu of activities. Learners were also involved in art and crafts, cookery classes and food hygiene training.
- Had support to control the environment in which they learned – for example, through access to adapted keyboards and screen displays; use of headphones; and also working from home, as required, if they felt more comfortable and it aided their learning.

- Often focused very specifically on elements most pertinent to them: PowerPoint; and internet search engine usage in particular. Several young male learners mentioned their interest in safely using the internet to research hobbies and leisure pastimes including local history and music.
- Felt empowered in their daily lives through their newfound ability to use the internet to search for services: for example, for the first time, being able to use sat-navs, purchase cinema and theatre tickets and plan trips out.
- Felt that improved digital skills had also improved other independent living skills, such as communications with their personal assistants about support plans and budgets using WhatsApp, and also using shopping sites online for the first time.

Learning Points:

- Course structure needs to be flexed to ensure sufficient time and customised content can be offered to individual learners, who often have very different starting points.
- The course has proved to be a powerful tool to empower learning disabled people and increase independent living skills: through use of apps such as maps and navigation, safe use of the internet to access information about local services, as well as enabling independent learning, and pursuit of individual hobbies and interests.
- Effective exit/onward plans for learners need to be factored into course support, for example progression to volunteering opportunities, or further help with IT training needs. Timing needs to be carefully considered, especially in terms of referral to FE/specialist college provision, which may have limited enrolment windows fixed around academic year timetables.
- Close links with specialist support workers at intermediate agencies such as MENCAP need to be maintained, with the additional time this takes suitably factored into tutor workloads.

5.3.5 Ethnic minority learners:

As one of its priority groups, the project has succeeded in meeting its targets in relation to the recruitment of ethnic minority learners. The evaluation has identified some new approaches to engagement by delivery partners in targeting specific minority groups, through:

- Liaison with referral agencies to publicise courses in communities which house hidden minority communities, for example in Speke, Halton and St Helens. This built on experience in the first evaluation phase when Torus worked with members of the newly arrived Syrian community. More recently this has been continuing with Afghan and Ukrainian learners.
- Women-only sessions, sometimes online: for example ,with partner agencies such as Refugee Women Connect.
- Direct targeting of a single ethnic group, tailoring content and delivery methods to their needs: as was the case for Granby Toxteth Development Trust (GTDT) in successfully working with several cohorts of L8's Roma community in 2021, complementing their wider role in supporting this significant local community (see case study).
- Individual tutor support, often using Google translate as a means to communicate more technical digital terms where language barriers exist.

Learning Points:

- One young Afghan learner registered for the course along with her aunt. She was signposted to the course prior to doing an ESOL course and, as a result, the course proved daunting, despite assistance from her aunt in terms of her language constraints.
- In a few cases, language barriers for both tutors and learners have been too great to overcome. This needs to be carefully considered in initial assessment. However, some learners have used the course as an opportunity to improve their command of the English language, alongside their digital skills and for those with sufficient confidence, this has been a positive experience (see Ms M case study).
- Targeted courses for specific ethnic groups, such as the Roma community, appear to have been well-received and successful in achieving positive outcomes. This is particularly so where delivery partners have a holistic, wider approach to working with specific communities. In the case of GTDT, the offer of digital training worked well as part of a wider package of advice and support, enabling them to further build trust and offer other practical assistance.
- In mixed groups where there are varying abilities in use of the English language, impact on the overall learning experience for all participants needs to be carefully considered and managed, particularly in cohorts that may have an intersection of complex learner needs. Whilst there are added potential benefits of building community cohesion and integration in mixed group settings, this needs to be balanced with the need to ensure provision of a quality learning experience and achievement of learning outcomes for all involved.
- There remains opportunity for delivery partners to work with Housing Associations, referral agencies and minority ethnic support groups to develop local offers. This could enable targeted outreach to engage and support through use of interpreters working with tutors. Discussion with a Polish support agency has suggested this may be the case in North Liverpool.

5.3.6 Women:

Many female learners identified experience of going through substantial life transitions, which had led to them signing up to the project. These included:

- Bereavement; divorce; relationship breakdown and domestic abuse.
- Other family changes including children moving onto secondary school and adult children leaving home, or going to university.
- Returning to work or training after a prolonged absence/time caring for others.
- Emergence of new health conditions, including diagnoses of chronic, long-term conditions, or as the result of accidents.

Women learners reported the following benefits of getting involved:

- The one-to-one support from tutors was welcomed – in terms of a supportive mentoring approach, which many did not have access to elsewhere.
- Several commented on the fact that the holistic tutor support, plus the training content provided them with a way of practicing mindfulness – by being focused on a specific activity that distracted them from other challenges of daily life.

- For others, participation represented a new start and a sense of empowerment, after a transitional life event: bereavement; illness; maternity, redundancy, workplace bullying, relocation; and in one case, surviving and relocating from an abusive relationship (see case study).
- In all cases, women emphasised the importance of attendance in building their self-confidence and self-esteem – that they had needed to get out of the house to socialise and interact with others, and learning new skills in addition was an added bonus.

Learning Points:

- The positive impact on female learners is significant due to well-known issues around gender inequality in the employment market; the gender pay gap, inflexible working practices, prevalence of discrimination and harassment and the undervaluing of women's work, including unpaid domestic labour and caring responsibilities - with women seven times more likely to be out of work for these reasons[10].
- Course involvement resulted in many women feeling more empowered to take control of key areas of their lives through, for example: online banking; managing their relationships; accessing support, relocating elsewhere and applying for training and jobs – often in new sectors and using their new digital skills.
- These unanticipated benefits were, for many, the highlight of participating in the course. It is structured and formatted in such a way that doesn't feel overwhelming and is ideal for many tentatively 'dipping their toe' in the water again.
- This appears to have been of particular value to older women in their late 50s and 60s who lost jobs during COVID lockdowns, but who needed to continue to work for financial reasons. Many commented on the need to be able to prove to employers that they have digital skills and this training has enabled them to do that.

5.3.7 People coping with mental health challenges:

Delivery partners have reported high levels of poor mental health amongst learners: especially anxiety and depression; responding through a range of support mechanisms specifically to address increasing mental health needs, including:

- The holistic approach of tutors – who take time to get to know learners.
- Use of one-to-one volunteer support to respond and keep track of individual learner needs and progress.
- Small group size of 5-6, with continued delivery even in the event of low attendance – this approach and continuity of tutor support is valued by learners – "not like other courses"
- Supportive tutor approaches re attendance and contact when absent – encouraging learners to continue even if struggling to attend each week. Understanding, supportive and encouraging relationships between tutors and learners has been of key importance for many.

- Learner peer relationships and support – emerging as a key success factor in this evaluation. Through smaller group sizes, learners are able to get acquainted more easily and so look forward to attending, with confidence and relationships growing with each successive session.
- Active referral of more learners to other community-based support and leisure services.
- In response to learners' variable mental wellbeing, some delivery partners are building more flexibility into delivery, for learners who may sometimes want or need to engage remotely from home, or work at a much slower pace.
- Provision of a free lunch, enabling learners to sit and chat and get to know one another.
- For some, there may be a need to build self-confidence simply to be able to attend the course in the first place. Where it is felt that it is too early for certain people to cope with the course, St Helens Chamber has started to refer them to a 2-day, in-house Mental Health empowerment course, prior to them engaging with the project.

Learning Points:

- The need for agreed, rapid next steps into other training courses or activities emerged as an important requirement for learners with poor mental health. Avoidance of any substantial time-lag at key transition points was recognised as being crucial in maintaining positive momentum, as several learners talked about the risk of 'going back to old habits' of not engaging with anyone at all if not having a clear progression plan on completion.
- The majority of delivery partners are recognised community anchors, providing a range of activities and services. Course attendance is often a starting point for learners' ongoing, wider engagement with local services. Many maintain contact after course completion, popping in to say a general hello, or with specific digital, employability or other queries and support needs. Some progress to further IT or other training, or access leisure activities and other services as a result of their initial participation.
- The importance of this type of provision as the first rung on the ladder for engaging socially excluded people in the community should not be under-estimated, with positive 'spin-off' benefits in so many areas.

5.3.8 Carers:

A substantial number of learners reported having current or recent experience of acting as informal carers for family members. Learners identified as carers in a number of ways:

- Some who had, until recently, been in a caring role but no longer were due to bereavement and needed to gain some digital skills to enable them to return to work after a substantial absence.
- Those who had a continuing role as a carer, but had identified a need to do the course to help them move into some part-time work, training or volunteering alongside - this included several kinship carers looking after children full-time.
- And some who wanted to use their previous informal care experiences and skills to become part of the care sector and needed some basic digital skills to be able to apply.

Specifically, learners who were also carers reported:

- The need for courses to have some flexibility in terms of scheduled hours, as early start times were often difficult to juggle with care responsibilities.
- That the course represented some important self-care time for them, which was often in short supply.
- That learning to use communication tools such as email, WhatsApp and social media was of huge importance for those restricted in their ability to socialise and mix outside their own homes due to their care commitments.
- That access to online health and social care services was especially beneficial to not only the carer, but also of major benefit to those they cared for.
- That the training had opened up opportunity for them to volunteer in roles that were both enjoyable and most importantly, flexible, fitting around their carer role (see case study).

Learning Points:

- Impacts of digital skills training for carers appear to be substantial – not only for themselves, but for all household members – as well as for previous carers looking to re-integrate with jobs or training.
- For current carers, provision needs to consider the option of co-ordinated respite support where required, to enable regular attendance.
- There is potential for Include-IT Mersey (and others) to work in partnership with carers' support agencies to develop customised courses, with content relevant to carers' roles; and provision of wrap-around support where required. This could involve targeted support in accessing relevant care services, respite/ support routes[11].

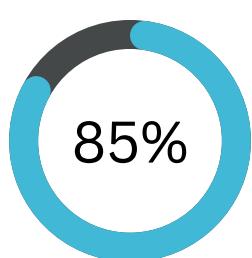
Impacts for Other Stakeholders

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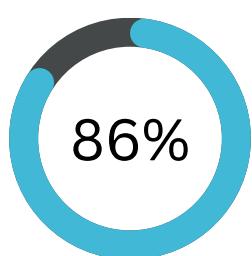
6.1 Impacts for Digital Champion Volunteers

Volunteers have played a vital part in the development of the project over its lifetime: both as Digital Champions supporting course delivery but, more so, in running standalone digital drop-in sessions, usually located separately to course provision. As outlined in section 2, there have been various iterations of the overall delivery model and COVID lockdown resulted in the loss of many volunteers who had previously been involved long-term (as in common with many volunteer programmes).

Consultation through an online survey and more in-depth phone interviews with 14 (out of 16) current, and 8 previous volunteers, identified the following:

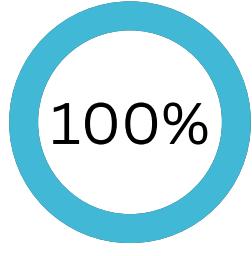


... of 14 current volunteers who responded to the survey reported that they were **very satisfied or satisfied** with their volunteering experience to date. They had found out about the opportunity through a range of routes, including Include-IT training providers, where many had previously attended the course themselves (31%); through an advert or feature (23%); volunteer opportunity databases and local CVS's (23%). The remainder heard through word of mouth.



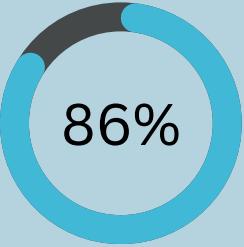
... of all current and previous volunteers consulted found their **induction training** extremely (43%) or very **useful** (43%) and the same percentage **felt appreciated** by the Volunteer Co-ordinator. A previous volunteer commented:

“All of the help provided by the Include-IT Mersey team throughout the whole period I volunteered with them was absolutely spot on. I received the right amount of support from the Volunteer Co-ordinator, Lauren, and we communicated after each session regarding the number of attendees, etc.”



As for the previous evaluation, the **main motivation to get involved remains the wish to share IT skills with others** (100%). 86% also wanted to help and support people in the community and 69% wanted to socialise with others. 36% of current volunteers also wanted to gain some current work experience and 29% to develop some teaching skills.

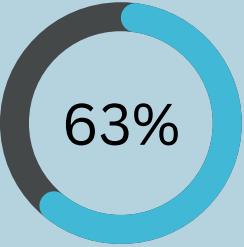
... of current course volunteer respondents reported they had **gained new skills**; 21% a great deal and 29% a lot. These included:



- Being able to work with people with diverse needs.
- Improved teaching skills.
- Communication skills – including the ability to explain complex tasks in a straightforward way.
- Working on different platforms, software and devices.
- 86% is comparable to previous volunteer surveys undertaken in 2018-2019, in which 86% of a larger sample of 84 volunteers also reported improved skills

... of survey respondents reported having **increased self-confidence**, especially when talking with people, and increased patience when supporting learners and tackling language barriers. This is, perhaps surprisingly, lower than the 2018-19 surveys, when 81% reported improved self-confidence. One course-based volunteer who had previously been a learner with the project commented:

"I feel a lot better in myself – I have a lot of structure in my week now, I get out and about a lot more. Previously I didn't like public transport, I've got over that now. Volunteering has improved my wellbeing massively. It's really rewarding to help other people and share a bit of knowledge, and it's benefitting me at the same time."

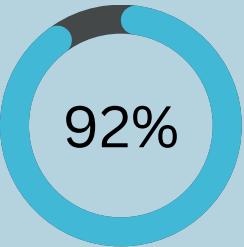


63%

A digital drop-in volunteer also explained:

"Holding tablet sessions at The Atkinson Library in Southport helped me build on my existing IT skills and knowledge, whilst learning and developing new skills and a greater understanding of tablet technology, etc. Guiding others in their learning also helped develop my own self-confidence and on a personal level, helped me meet people as I had recently moved into the area."

However, overall, course-based volunteers more commonly reported a boost in skills and self-confidence as a result of their involvement than digital drop-in volunteers, who, generally, didn't feel that their volunteering had particularly improved their skills or self-confidence, which most felt were already robust!



92%

... reported that it was a **good way to contribute to their local community**; and 69% that it was a sociable role, which enabled them to make regular contact with others.

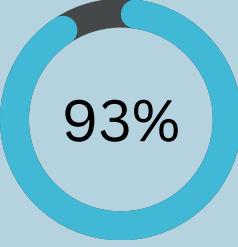
For **15%** it has been a **route into further volunteering or training**.

23% reported that it had been a **route into paid work**, as some combined employment with their volunteering role.

In total, over the course of the project, 26 Digital Champion volunteers are known to have moved in to paid employment whilst volunteering.

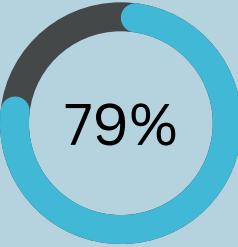
... felt they made a great deal, or a lot of **positive difference** to the people they are assisting. A course-volunteer at Torus commented:

"The most rewarding part of volunteering is seeing people genuinely begin to enjoy technology rather than feeling anxious or afraid. The skills taught can be used throughout life & help them get jobs as a direct result - learning how to make online job searches and applications etc. For some of them, even just having the routine/ community atmosphere of the classes is extremely beneficial in improving their social skills & again helping them get a job."



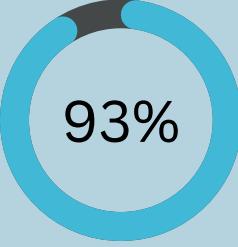
93%

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. Where people were turning up to access advice, numbers were usually no more than 2-3 per session and these could often be regular attendees. 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.



79%

In terms of further support from the Volunteer Co-ordinator, 79% reported that the current approach was working fine for them. A couple reported that they would like to have more volunteer hours and be involved more, and also have more training in their role. One respondent wanted to be more linked up with other volunteers.



93%

Overall, the vast majority of current volunteers confirmed that they are extremely likely (64%) or very likely (29%) to continue to volunteer with Include-IT Mersey in the future.

6.2 Volunteer Profiles

- Extremely positively, increasing numbers of Include-IT learners are now moving on to volunteer as Digital Champions – primarily with delivery partners where they completed their training. This is particularly prevalent within Torus and STEC.
- Overall, the demographic profile of volunteers has been, and remains to be retired males, aged over 50. There are noticeably fewer female volunteers – and relatively few young volunteers (again reflecting the general volunteering profile nationally, post-COVID).
- In contrast to the overall demographic however, and over several years, some younger international students based in Liverpool have volunteered with the project – reflecting good links made with Liverpool University. The importance of community volunteering in their own cultures was referenced by several of these volunteers. They have successfully volunteered in course and digital drop-in roles with Alt Valley Community Trust and currently at drop-ins based in Bootle Library and the Strand Shopping Centre.

- Another exception to the typical volunteer demographic profile is a current course volunteer based with Torus, who is currently studying for a Master's degree in Law at Liverpool University. She got involved in her hometown of St Helens as she has siblings who are visually impaired and recognises the importance of digital inclusion for everyone – including those with disabilities.

Mr M, Digital Champion – Bootle Life Rooms

Mr M has been volunteering as a Digital Champion since 2018, after working for Scottish Power for 40 years, where part of his role included training staff to use digitised meter reading equipment. As a volunteer he has put this experience to good use. He runs the digital drop-in at the Life Rooms, co-ordinating a weekly 2-hour session.

At Bootle Life Rooms, people can use the booking system to access computers, to learn and practice new IT skills, as well as request support from the volunteer to help with any specific challenges they have. As a volunteer he has supported hundreds of people to learn how to use a keyboard; get online; learn new digital skills, including word processing and getting to grips with Excel; download and use mobile Apps; and help to set up new laptops, tablets and phones. A common request is for assistance to unlock computer and phone passwords – a big problem for many. He commented: *“I’m enjoying it – it keeps me busy. I’m giving something back and helping people develop their IT skills – from very basic ones to more advanced. It also helps me keep my own digital skills up to date since retiring – as people bring all sorts of devices in that I have to get to grips with. People do appreciate it and I’m glad to pass my skills on to help them learn something.”*

Mr T, learner, now Digital Champion - STEC

Mr T was one of the first learners to complete the Include-IT Mersey course back in 2017-18 and has been involved as a Digital Champion at STEC ever since. An adopted Scouser, originally from Newcastle, he is now a familiar face to many in Speke as he's been volunteering there for so long and supported many learners.

He got involved as a Digital Champion when the team at STEC suggested it to him and he attended the volunteer training with Lauren, which was really helpful, covering do's and don'ts, as well as safeguarding and boundaries. He feels the volunteering support continues to be well organised.

Mr T had previously taught on a variety of courses and has a variety of experience:

“I’m a DJ and have always taught people how to DJ; and also used to teach people how to use machinery in factories; and been an instructor in the sea cadets - I’ve been involved in that over the years. The important thing in this volunteering is putting things in layman’s terms so people understand it. It’s no good talking technical to people, cos they are not going to get it.”

He volunteers usually once a week, but if the tutor has a bigger class he'll come in to help out. He enjoys the positive feedback he regularly receives about the course when he's out and about, which reinforces the positive experience and value of volunteering for him. Being involved over many years, his voluntary role has been a two-way process (as it is for many Digital Champions): it's built his own self- confidence, as well as providing him with a route to give back to the community of Speke.

It's a win-win as Mr T also regularly works through the Learn My Way package as a way of updating his own digital skills and so he's aware of new elements as they are developed. He finds the package works for most people who, although often a little hesitant for the first few weeks, then get into it: *"The great thing about Learn My Way is that it's always evolving – such as the online banking section."*

He values the volunteering role as it gives him routine, structure and focus and enables him to use his skills in supporting people. He feels he is really giving something back to the community – especially post lockdown:

"The most enjoyable element is the social aspect and passing on skills – people who come on this course really want to come here and learn. So, it's a case of helping them to do that! For years many people have been told they can't learn, but on this course they can and do!"

Mr D, learner, now Digital Champion - Torus

In his 50s, Mr D is a Digital Champion with Torus, volunteering twice a week at St Helens Central. Originally a learner on the Include-IT course at the end of lockdown, he got involved to refresh his IT skills, after a long period of unemployment due to anxiety and depression.

He found the course useful in developing his IT skills and building his confidence, helping him structure his week, and get out and about. On completing the course, his tutor, James suggested he volunteer as a Digital Champion:

"When I finished the Include-IT course, I thought it would be a shame to go back to my old routine, especially with all the courses on offer, so I kept the ball rolling and signed myself up for another course at Clickworks, and also became a volunteer. It was nerve-wracking at first – I couldn't have done it in the past. And James [the tutor] is a fantastic support, I can't praise him enough really."

Mr D has been a Digital Champion since March 2022. He has ongoing support from his RESTART coach and has completed his Level 1 Essential Digital Skills Qualification. He also volunteers at the HoneyRose Foundation charity in its IT department. Being involved with Include-IT has given him momentum to get involved and to keep going with it.

Volunteering, and attending the volunteer socials that Include-IT offer, has built his self-confidence and reduced his anxiety generally, and enabled him to start thinking about applying for IT or admin jobs in the near future:

"I feel a lot better in myself – I have a lot of structure in my week now, I get out and about a lot more. Previously, I didn't like public transport, I've got over that now. Volunteering has improved my wellbeing massively. It's really rewarding to help other people and share a bit of knowledge, and it's benefitting me at the same time – I love it."



6.3 Impacts for Delivery Partners

Further expanding on the findings of the 2019 evaluation, over the last four years, involvement in the project has continued to benefit delivery partners in a number of ways; enabling them to:

- Enhance their offer, reach and quality of provision.
- Use stability, structure and support to innovate.
- Build strong collaborative partnerships.

Enhancing the offer, reach and quality of provision – by:

- **Embedding the digital offer at a local level:** ensuring that a basic digital skills element continues to form an integral part of their overall offer as community anchor organisations. This provides a valuable entry point for many to engage for the first time, building individual and peer group confidence; and leading to uptake of other training and support services. Rotunda commented:

“The BBO groups are always a weird demographic: of age groups and abilities. By the end of the course it’s always good to see them sitting together having a brew – through having the breaks together it encourages them to form those relationships. If they get on with the people they are working with, if they enjoy themselves, they are going to keep coming back, aren’t they?”

- **Developing specific referral routes for minoritised groups:** there are many instances of delivery partners expanding links with referrals agencies, for example Alt Valley with We Are With You, EDT with Ladders of Life and WEA with CGL, to name but a few. This has helped to engage with many learners they had not previously been able to get through their doors.
- **Extending support pathways for those wanting to move towards the labour market:** by providing a gateway to vocational training and building learners' confidence to apply for jobs previously disregarded. The employability element of the course is delivered in a variety of ways, with the overall model enabling partners to adapt how they deliver this element to suit different learner cohorts. For some groups, employability input is focused in a final few intensive weeks of support, whereas in others it is started earlier and delivered more progressively. Several providers have started to include training in the use of Zoom and MS Teams to raise learners' confidence to take part in online job interviews, providing help to set up user accounts and mock interview practice.
- **Achieving continuity of provision:** long-term funding and a flexible model has changed many learners' attitudes towards training courses and providers in general. Long-term availability over a six-year period has supported providers to further develop relationships with their communities and develop greater levels of trust with local learners. This is reflected by the high levels of word-of-mouth recommendations by learners who have completed the course.
- **Creating opportunities for new volunteering roles** for learners and other local people.
- **Participating in cross-partnership quality improvement activities:** independent scrutiny and observation of the quality of delivery by the central team, with encouragement and support to continuously improve, including facilitation of the sharing of good practice and learning amongst partners.

Using stability, structure and support to innovate – by:

- **Encouraging delivery managers to test out new organisational working models**, focussing on the development of community-based, responsive models. The context of funding extending beyond typical annual regimes and a supportive central team both acting as enablers in this respect. **A good example of this is Independence Initiative.**

‘The Indy’ is a long-established addiction recovery charity, based in Bootle. It has been involved with Include-IT Mersey project from the start, as a small-scale provider specifically delivering to its own service users who lived locally in their supported accommodation. This was initially offered as a one-to-one, roll-on roll-off model.

After lockdown, during which time the charity had not been able to deliver any one-to-one training at all, it decided to take the opportunity to revise its delivery model, in consultation with the central management team. Over time it had become apparent that their resident service users were often unable to maintain regular attendance, which made ongoing delivery unsustainable.

As a result, it has now moved to a 12 week x 2 day per week group delivery model, working with the wider community to offer the course to all who are eligible. This supports the Indy’s wider aims of integrating its services into the local community, raising its profile and use of its facilities.

A new tutor commenced in post after COVID and more recently, St Helens Chamber’s Careers Adviser has been involved to offer support around jobs and training. The new tutor was previously a Digital Champion volunteer and she is now reaching out to residents and stakeholders in the Bootle community to engage new learners. The Include-IT training offer is just one of the wider service offers now integrated into the Indy’s new community-based model, which also includes a new food Pantry and warm hub. The Indy’s Learning Co-ordinator commented:

“This has been an informed root and branch transformational change. Our digital inclusion work with Include-IT Mersey has enabled us to provide a clear offer to the wider community in Bootle, which is much needed. It has enabled us to get out and engage with local people – many of whom need to get online as soon as possible to access all sorts of services and support.”

- **Improved confidence to rapidly flex and customise delivery models and content** to effectively respond to the needs of different cohorts and individual learners – in relation to course duration; delivery timetables; and supplementary course content.
 - There is widespread recognition amongst partners that Learn My Way can be ‘mundane’ in isolation and needs to be complemented by a range of exercises and activities to put learning into practice and to focus on specific elements or themes of interest. Growing tutor confidence in providing supplementary content has led to improved learning experiences.
 - Delivery over an extended period has resulted in many tutors now having comprehensive catalogues of activities to respond to learners’ different circumstances and requests.

- In addition, this longevity has developed tutors' confidence to deliver the course, becoming highly familiar with the content and fully 'owning' its delivery. Rotunda commented:

"It's a lovely course and it's seeing how small steps for learners make a difference and how happy they are at the end of it. It's the little wins! Internally for us it's fantastic to deliver and externally, the fact that learners are all looking for the next digital training course to join, is testament to the impacts that the project has had."
- Over the last year Rotunda has introduced the approach of working with learners on a range of different devices, such as iPads, tablets, PCs, laptops and smartphones. This ensures familiarity, confidence and ability to transfer between different devices without feeling daunted, which can be particularly useful post-course completion when people often need to use different devices at home, or elsewhere.
- Some tutors have been able to respond to requests for support with personal laptops, for example, by assisting learners to set up Cloud accounts to overcome issues with outdated software. However, technical barriers to ongoing digital access following course completion, often due to dated or broken devices, remains a key stumbling block for many.

Building strong collaborative partnerships – by:

- **Developing long-term, trusted relationships** with the central management team.

Speke Training & Enterprise Centre's CEO commented positively on the rapid and ongoing strategic support that the central management team provided in the early stages of lockdown and the impact that this had for them as a community anchor organisation:

"The Project Manager provided a strategic steer to us through early lockdown. That had a major organisational impact on us – he urged continuity of service and that was very important. I told my Board that to interrupt service would be counterproductive. This was in March 2020."

- **Growing community-based partnership working:** long-term joint working has evolved between several delivery partners, host community venues and, in addition, various referral agencies. In this way, the Include-IT offer has become established in local communities where there has been an absence of anything similar. Examples include WEA provision at Northwood Community Centre, Kirkby, and the Old School House in Huyton.

A case study of this type of delivery model is outlined below:

WEA delivery at Castlefields Community Centre, Runcorn

WEA has been delivering the Include-IT course at local authority owned Castlefields Community Centre since 2017. Consultation with the Centre Manager, who has been in post throughout, highlighted the value the Include-IT course has brought to the centre and wider community, commenting of WEA:

"WEA works well with us and the Acorn Adult Learning Centre opposite: they refer learners to each other – learners from Include-IT go over there to their maths and English and here to do IT. There are a lot of people around here who need to get into work – they come in to use our PCs.

We get referrals by email from lots of partners - including JCP and Halton People into Jobs - and I forward those on to WEA. This has been more recent – emailing the centre directly."

The Centre Manager promotes the course through Halton Council website, Twitter and a large banner outside the centre. WEA pay for room hire and bring their own laptops to use for the course. PCs are also available for general use in the foyer and this enables previous learners to stay in touch, as they come in to use them as and when necessary. The WEA also links in with other service providers running sessions at the centre, such as CGL, Open360 and Bridge Builders, which provides support for people around wellbeing.

"I think local people feel more comfortable with the Include-IT training being here. It's open to everyone and it's relaxed. We get to know the learners who come in and build up a relationship with them. There's people who've been on that course and still come into the centre afterwards – often coming in on the days that WEA are here, even though they have completed their course. They know that help is still there. It's worked so well, and what a great group of people! People are so grateful for something to go to and to give them a bit of structure in their life."

Value for Money and Social Value



7.1 Value for Money Assessment

The National Audit Office (NAO) uses three criteria to assess the value for money of government spending i.e. the optimal use of resources to achieve the intended outcomes:

- **Economy:** minimising the cost of resources used or required (inputs) – spending less.
- **Effectiveness:** the relationship between the intended and actual results of public spending (outcomes) – spending wisely.
- **Efficiency:** the relationship between the output from goods or services and the resources to produce them – spending well.

In addition to the three primary 'E's, a fourth 'E' is also relevant to this project:

- **Equity:** the extent to which services are available to and reach all people that they are intended to – spending fairly. Some people may receive differing levels of service for reasons other than differences in their levels of need.

Economy

The project has been delivered within budget. Expenditure to March 2023 was equivalent to 97.5% of forecast, with projected spend to the June 2023 end date forecast to be 97.2% of overall available budget. The project has therefore been economical by definition.

Continuous review of management and delivery approaches has enabled ongoing refinement of the delivery model, with frequent budget reprofiling occurring in tandem. Quarterly financial monitoring and review processes have continued to identify areas of variance from budget, with required adjustments implemented where necessary.

Where slippage in expenditure has occurred, the primary aim, throughout the entirety of project, has been to reallocate unspent funds to frontline delivery, enabling the partnership to support even more participants than contractually required.

Staffing capacity, in terms of time allocated and costs charged to the project have been continually reviewed and flexed where necessary to meet demand and anticipated workloads. Examples include the Project Manager and Deputy, whose fixed percentage time allocations to the project have fluctuated up and down at different stages depending on expected workload. There have been similar examples in a number of delivery partners, for example Greenbank, GTDT and STEC.

Also, where necessary, in instances of long-term sickness absence, short-term, replacement cover by self-employed associates has occasionally been used where this is considered a more cost-effective approach. An example of this is the Quality Coordinator role in the central management team.

Effectiveness

Overall, the project is judged to have been highly effective in achieving its desired outcomes.

Core Outcomes

Building Better Opportunities (BBO) projects are required, as a condition of ESF funding, to capture and report achievement against three key objectives. These relate to learner progress into or towards employment within 28 days of leaving the project – specifically, whether they move:

- Into employment, including self-employment
- Into education or training
- From being economically inactive when joining, to actively job-searching on exiting the project. (Economically inactive meaning not in paid employment and not actively seeking, or available for paid employment, e.g. due to ill-health or caring responsibilities).
- Overall, progression targets were exceeded by 14.9%, cumulatively, across all three types of results indicators, albeit with one below target for the Halton area. The following table shows performance for each result indicator across each 'Category of Region' (Merseyside/Halton) and for the project as a whole:

Table 7.1 Results: Performance vs Target

Result Indicator	Actual			Target			Actual as % of Target		
	Mside	Halton	Total	Mside	Halton	Total	Mside	Halton	Total
Education/training	424	90	514	381	74	455	111%	122%	113%
Unemployed into employment	161	17	178	134	14	148	120%	121%	120%
E.I. into work or job-search	325	39	364	257	59	316	126%	66%	115%
Overall	910	146	1056	772	147	919	118%	99%	115%

Wider Outcomes

A further expectation of BBO projects was for participants to benefit more widely from the support they receive, achieving softer outcomes such as increased confidence, social inclusion and improved wellbeing.

As detailed in Table 3.6, the project's three wider outcomes indicators – specifically, participants (a) feeling more connected to their community; (b) feeling more able to access local services; and (c) moving to using the internet regularly to connect with people – were all significantly exceeded, by between 11% and 22% individually.

Christy Ryder, Digital Lead at the LCR Combined Authority commented:

"Include-IT Mersey brings massive value. Its network of partners is located in areas where people need digital support. People need access to skills support, to kit, and to that trusted person in the community. So, the accessibility and the reach of the project, especially throughout COVID, has been invaluable. The fact that the team has developed an informed model over several years, is going to be really important in terms of scaling up and coordination. All of the activities they have been involved in have been good practice and provide learning for others – it's really important! The linkages that the Project Manager has been able to facilitate between the Combined Authority and community sector partners to get communications out about digital support has been really important."

Efficiency

- **Comparison to contractual targets:** ongoing monitoring and review of expenditure, and careful reallocation of slippage, primarily to frontline delivery functions, has enabled the project to support 3% more participants than contractual target and to exceed all priority group engagement targets, some by up to 34% - see Table 3.7.

Overall outcome/result targets for participants entering employment, education/ training or active job-search have also been exceeded; cumulatively, by 14.9%.

Therefore, Include-IT Mersey is deemed to have been efficient in relation to the economical use of funding to achieve the desired BBO outcomes set by its funders.

- **Comparison to National BBO programme and individual BBO projects:** as identified in the 2019 project evaluation, there still remains a lack of any meaningful, publicly available comparator information with which to assess project efficiency in terms comparison with other BBO projects, or the overall programme nationally.

It is understood that the national BBO evaluation did not attempt to assess the economic value of the programme, nor undertake a programme-wide value for money (VFM) assessment. This was due to the wide variety of intervention approaches of different BBO projects making it challenging to calculate and compare at a programme level.

The only available figures relating to economic value are in the fourth annual national BBO evaluation report (2020). These related to some local BBO project evaluations that included a financial dimension, but a variety of different assessment approaches were used by each project and are therefore not directly comparable; and they are likely to be out of date now anyway. Consequently, it has not been possible to compare financial efficiency and VFM against other BBO projects, or the overall BBO programme nationally.

- **Comparison to the wider ESF programme:** similarly to BBO, there appears to be no publicly available data yet for the 2014-2020 ESF programme; and comparison to the 2007-2013 programme would be meaningless due to significant changes in the economy, labour market and general society since then, largely as the result of the global pandemic and ensuing financial crisis.

Furthermore, there would be no meaningful value in comparing BBO-funded projects to average unit cost/ VFM measurements of ‘general’ ESF provision due to the ‘specialist’ ESF Investment Priority (IP) that BBO is funded under. IP 1.4: Active Inclusion - is focused on promoting equal opportunities and active participation, supporting people with multiple and complex barriers to participation, offenders, and other marginalised individuals.

By the very nature of its focus and the demographic groups it seeks to engage, funding under this Investment Priority tends to carry a higher equivalent notional unit price than ‘mainstream’ ESF provision. Therefore, it is inappropriate to draw direct comparisons between the two.

However, in relation to IP 1.4 results targets in the overall ESF Operational Programme, **Include-IT Mersey compares favourably**, as the following table shows:

Table 7.2: Performance vs ESF Investment Priority 1.4 Results Targets

Result Indicator	ESF IP 1.4 Target	Include-IT Mersey
Participants in education or training on leaving	16%	24.4%
Unemployed participants in employment, including self-employment on leaving	16%	17.5%
Inactive participants in employment, or active job-search on leaving	29%	33.4%

Conclusion on project efficiency

Due to the lack of available comparator data, it is difficult to robustly assess the efficiency of the project in relation to others, as to whether it has been more or less expensive than similar projects in other areas.

However, on the basis of the favourable comparisons drawn in relation to overarching ESF Operational Programme targets and the project’s individual contractual targets, Include-IT Mersey is deemed to have been cost-effective and efficient in the management and use of its resources to achieve the desired results.

This is a significant achievement in the context of the difficult operating environment for a large part of the delivery period, with the long-lasting effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic and impact of the financial crisis.

Equity

At 83%, the engagement rate of participants with multiple disadvantage are high and compare favourably with national BBO programme averages.

As described in Section 3.6.1 and seen in Tables 3.7-3.9, priority group engagement rates are strong, with all contractual targets exceeded, including engagement of women; Economically Inactive; those aged over 50; people with disabilities, learning difficulties or long-term health conditions; and ethnic minorities.

Furthermore, in terms of geographical reach, participant monitoring data shows that targeted approaches to publicity, engagement and delivery have been highly successful in penetrating areas of known deprivation and digital exclusion.

With this in mind, the project is judged to have been equitable in terms of its availability and reach into marginalised communities/ people, including those with protected characteristics.

Key Enablers:

The following elements have enabled the partnership to be equitable in its provision:

- Detailed 'pre-launch' planning, in conjunction with strategic Housing Association partners: to identify priority geographical areas, selected by combining Housing Association intelligence (data concerning locations with the highest concentrations of digitally excluded tenants) with Indices of Multiple Deprivation rankings of Lower Super Output Areas.
- Specialist providers within the delivery partnership, e.g. those specialising in supporting disability/ learning difficulty, addiction, minority ethnic communities and older people.
- Provision of a ring-fenced budget for supplementary costs associated with supporting people with additional needs, e.g. childcare, signers, interpreters. Also, provision of other key enablers, including travel and lunch expenses, kit and connectivity for those who needed it.
- Development of effective partnerships with specialist support agencies including addiction support, disability, ethnic minorities and women's organisations.

7.2 Social Value

Historically, the project has used the HACT Social Value Bank to quantify the added social value of activities undertaken. For continuity and to enable comparison across the whole delivery period, the Project Management Team agreed that the best approach was to continue to use this tool through to the end evaluation. The management team still uses values from v4 of the HACT value calculator, as more recent versions no longer enable free access for Charities to access.

Since the project started, based on a limited number of indicators used, Include-IT Mersey has created a conservatively estimated social value, by way of ‘wellbeing’ totalling £10,014,000; a social return on investment of £2.30 for every pound spent[12]. This is attributed to the following impacts:

- £3,304,168: 2,109 people who have attended general work-related training to help find a job.
- £2,760,472: 1,144 people who now have regular access to the internet that didn’t on enrolment – this equates to 71% of 1,611 learners who said they didn’t have the ability (kit and/or skills) to access the internet on enrolment that did on completion.
- £3,218,652: 278 people progressing to employment (full-time, part-time and self-employment), including 26 volunteers
- £731,025: 225 people who volunteered at least once a month.

7.3 Additionality and Wider Links

The Project Manager has developed a close working relationship with the LCR Combined Authority (LCRCA), increasingly recognised as a ‘go-to’ person in relation to community-based Digital Inclusion.

The team’s growing reputation in the local DI sphere led to the undertaking of a number of short-term, parallel projects between 2020 and 2022.

- The first of these focused on the distribution of tablets and mobile connectivity to 320 digitally excluded households during the COVID pandemic.
- The second, a research project, focused on mapping local community-based Digital Inclusion provision, priorities and practices; including the development of an online map of digital hubs and training across the city region. Research findings and recommendations have informed the city region’s refreshed Digital Inclusion strategy, which is being driven forward by the LCRCA Digital Inclusion team, supported by the recently formed LCR DI Task Force, of which the Project Manager is a member.

The PM has also developed close links with LCR Connect, the Combined Authority’s flagship digital connectivity project, being the first recipient of support through its Social Value fund to refurbish 50 old, gifted laptops; and now sitting on its Social Value Steering Group.

Effective links have also been developed with the local Digital Inclusion team at the Cheshire and Merseyside Health and Care Partnership (HCP), with the Deputy PM regularly attending its Digital Inclusion Group. This has led to mutually beneficial partnership working, most notably the sharing of key Digital Inclusion intelligence. It has also contributed to the development of improved links between the Combined Authority and HCP around the DI agenda.

Success Factors and Recommendations for Future Delivery

08

8.1 Why has the Include-IT Mersey project been a success?

8.1.1 Ongoing, strong central project management:

- The Include-IT central team has provided high quality project management expertise and experience, developing and implementing fit-for-purpose delivery approaches, monitoring and compliance systems, with an ongoing approachable and positive working culture.
- From the project's commencement, including throughout the challenging period of the COVID-19 pandemic, right up to present day, the team have demonstrated strong leadership capabilities, developing effective and efficient working relationships at all levels – including with delivery partners, funders and other strategic and operational stakeholders.
- The ongoing consistency of key team members throughout the entirety of the project has been a significant strength and benefit, both in operational and strategic respects. Their many years' collective experience of managing large-scale ESF projects has been of particular benefit at an operational level to the successful, compliant delivery of the project.
- Throughout the 2019-23 delivery period (key focus of this evaluation exercise), the team has provided high quality monitoring, assurance and support functions to delivery partners – through fit-for-purpose planning and management processes, which has enabled successful responses to:
 - The wide-ranging impacts of prolonged periods of COVID lockdowns and social distancing requirements, both for its own team, delivery partners, learners and volunteers.
 - Transition to the return to face-to-face delivery and the new 'normal' following the pandemic.
 - Substantial changes in LCR labour markets and changing learner circumstances.
 - Staff changes and challenges – both within the central team and those of delivery partners, especially throughout the pandemic.
 - Ongoing compliance and audit requirements.

8.1.2 Hyper-local reach through a network of trusted, community-based partners:

- The delivery partnership was initially formed to include a wide range of partners which have a presence and reach in known areas of disadvantage and digitally exclusion.
- Partners are well known and, most importantly, trusted in their local communities and/or by their particular client groups. Word-of-mouth and local trust are key in attracting new, and often reluctant adult learners through the door. As the feedback from learners has shown, many would simply have never considered doing a course at a mainstream setting.
- Where outreach provision has been delivered, this has always been done in conjunction with other local known and trusted community organisations, never delivered in generic function suites or overly-corporate settings, as this is known to be off-putting for hesitant learners.

8.1.3 Delivery partners' commitment to the Include-IT aims and ethos, through:

- Close and productive working with the central team to maintain and improve learner support.
- Always putting learners first, tailoring support to address individual circumstances.
- A focus on building confidence to support retention, achievement and progression of learners.
- Effective approaches to keeping learners engaged: including the development of varied 'wrap around' resources to enhance the digital skills training and employability offers, through which tutors have responded to learners' individual and evolving needs.
- Flexibility: with successful responses to changing circumstances, including:
 - Substantial changes in local labour markets, including the increased use of online recruitment practices; and required digital competencies of job seekers & employers.
 - Changing learner circumstances related to long-term health conditions, especially mental wellbeing post-COVID, and the need to develop a more flexible and personalised offer to suit individual needs and ambitions.
 - Adaptation and customisation for specific learner needs, including people who are neurodivergent, those with limited English language &/or general functional skills.
 - A move to more hybrid, blended learning models, which have been hugely positive for many who are some distance from the job market.
- Several delivery partners have developed valuable new service approaches through alignment and integration of the Include-IT model into their own wider service offers, acting as a valuable 'hook' or 'carrot' in attracting people through the door. This has enabled them to recruit many learners who would otherwise have been unlikely to consider participating.

8.1.4 Positive learner experience & trust as the primary focus at the heart of delivery:

- Strong trust relationships have been fundamental to the success of the project, both between delivery partners and the central team, but equally importantly, between learners and tutors. In particular, the impact of COVID and its consequent social isolation on individuals' wellbeing has been a significant issue. Many 'post-pandemic learners' have perceived the social and confidence-related outcomes of participation as important, if not more so, than the digital and employability support. Central to this is the positive relationship tutors are able to quickly build with learners.
- Related to this is the importance and benefit of small group sizes in enabling the development of friendships and peer support amongst learners. Many learners and tutors have commented on how the opportunity to meet regularly with the same group of people, to share time, lunch, a coffee and to 'get out the house' is highly valued, even more so in the current cost of living crisis. The structure, format and culture created over time has produced a working model which is recognised as 'different' by many who have completed the course.
- A further development has been the importance of volunteering as a real progression opportunity for learners, with increasing numbers responding to requests to become Digital Champions on course completion. This has presented an important steppingstone for some learners to continue to build self-confidence, gain experience in skills-coaching and consider other job opportunities and career paths. A few have even gone on to paid employment with delivery partners, as tutors.

8.1.5 Development of strong and effective partnerships:

- The management team and delivery partnership have worked hard to develop effective and mutually beneficial working relationships with strategic and operational stakeholders. These include Housing Associations; the Combined Authority; Local Authorities; referral organisations such as Jobcentre Plus; voluntary sector service providers; and community settings for outreach delivery.

8.2 Lessons learned to inform future digital inclusion projects and programmes

In the context of future continuation of Include-IT Mersey and community-based digital inclusion provision in general - the following considerations and actions are recommended:

8.2.1 For funders, local and central government:

- Wherever possible, commit to support this long-established project on a **multi-annual funding** basis to retain all that makes this highly successful.
- **Encourage and facilitate existing neighbourhood level referral networks**, which are based on trust between partners, through widespread awareness of a delivery model that is known to work for people.

- **Support and facilitate the development of improved links and progression pathways** between smaller community-based providers and mainstream Further Education provision.
- **Use all potential flexibilities to expand the availability of digital skills training to a wider audience of digitally excluded people**, including the retired and people in employment, particularly those in low skilled and/or low paid roles. Development of essential digital skills is wider than the employability agenda alone.
- More generally, **seek solutions to increase funding for localised, community-based digital skills provision**. Local, trusted places that are accessible for reluctant adult learners, where they can feel comfortable, grow in confidence, meet peers from their neighbourhoods and start to connect with what's happening locally.
- **Recognise the vital importance of small group sizes** as being a key success factor in this type of provision, ensuring funding model planning assumptions adequately factor this in – with optimum group sizes of 4–8 recommended.
- **Support the expansion of community-based digital facilities and Digital Champion involvement** to support the public through digital drop-ins – with the LCRCA and Local Authorities providing a strategic coordination role. In addition, communications support would be welcomed to help publicise facilities and maximize use.
- **Maintain and develop existing, trusted digital support pathways in communities**, many of which have taken years to establish – especially where there are tried and tested, customised approaches for specific priority groups such as women, ethnic minority groups and people with learning disabilities.

8.2.2 For the Include-IT Mersey Partnership:

In the context of the forthcoming (UKSPF-funded) continuation phase, the following actions are recommended.

Positives to maintain and further develop:

- **Retain the current management arrangements** and share lessons learnt to date across the partnership and with wider stakeholders.
- **Maintain the current delivery partnership; and the skilled and experienced tutors who know their local communities**, the specific barriers people face, and who can offer a wraparound approach to skills training and wellbeing – not just solely focusing on employability.
- **Further involve learners in the ongoing review and development** of the delivery model. Actively listen and act on learners' feedback to drive improvements to meet their needs, desires and aspirations, particularly where things aren't working as well as they could.
- **Continue to rebuild and expand the Digital Drop-In network** and team of Digital Champion volunteers. Targeted work, already under way, to increase availability in Knowsley, Halton, St Helens and Wirral should be maintained.

- **Lived experience** – continue to encourage learners to become Digital Champions and, where appropriate, to consider careers in the sector, to support the continuity of lived experience in the provision of services.
- **Continued flexibility and tailoring of funds** - leveraging complementary funds, where necessary, to enable the continued engagement of a wide range of people and to assist achievement and progression – including provision of refreshments, travel expenses, digital kit and adaptations for involvement, which have all been key enablers to date.
- **Retain and continue to build links with strategic partners:** to ensure that Include-IT Mersey continues to fill gaps and adds value to existing mainstream provision. Build on existing relationships with key stakeholders, including the LCRCA; Local Authority Adult Education and Digital leads; Jobcentre Plus; NHS; and other specialist support agencies.

8.3 Identified areas for development and improvement:

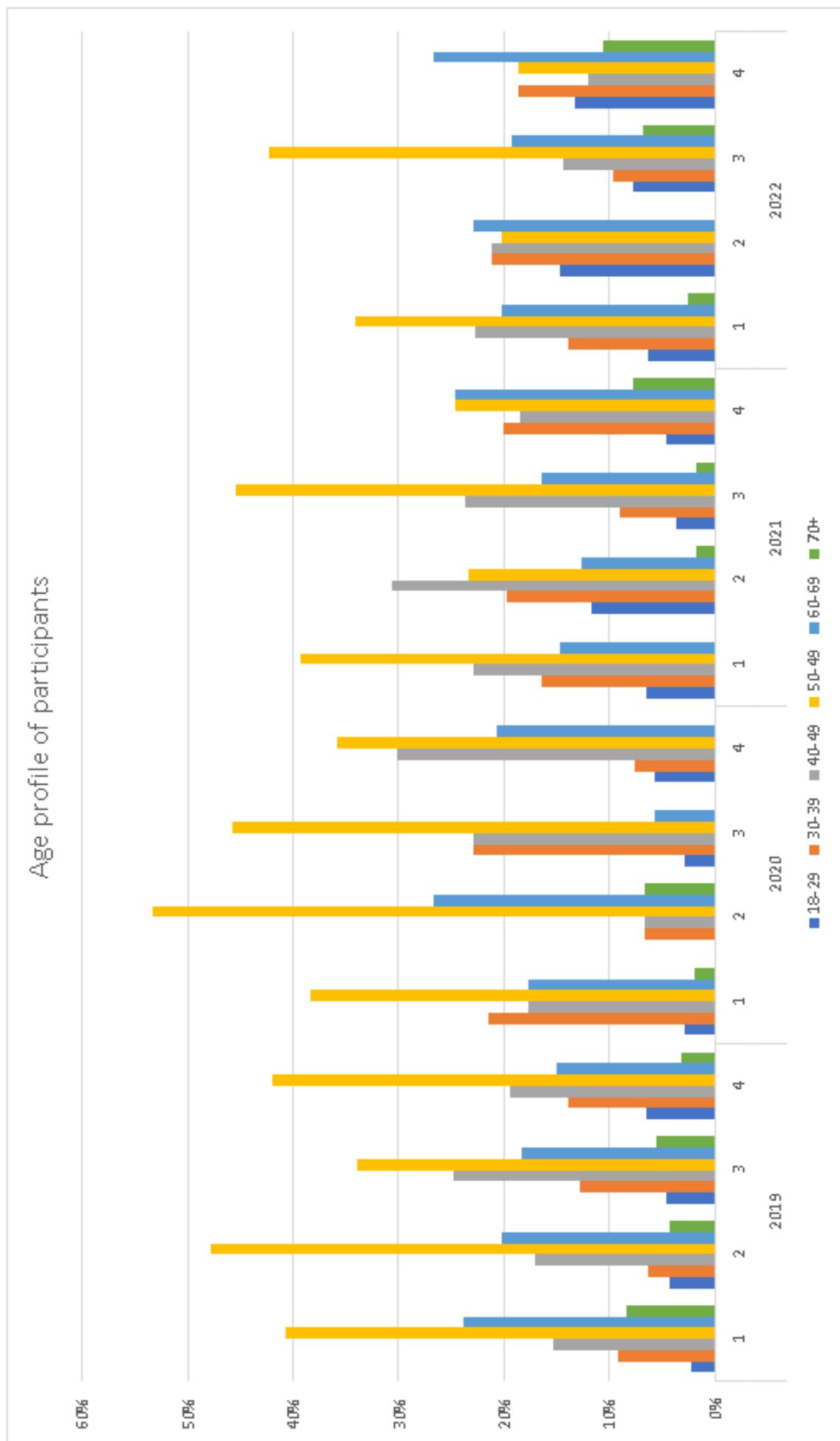
- In conjunction with the LCR Combined Authority, **maximise any UKSPF flexibilities regarding participant eligibility**, to open up the project to a wider audience of digitally excluded learners, e.g. retired and digitally excluded people in employment.
- **Streamline paperwork and monitoring requirements** wherever possible, to minimise the burden on delivery partners and tutors.
- **Invest in CPD and training for tutors:** given some challenges in recruiting to tutor posts, opportunities to develop the existing workforce should be maximised. This will support the development of key worker skills and abilities to effectively manage caseloads without becoming overburdened, and to stay up to date with recognised best practice.
- **Prioritise the building of awareness and networks between tutors, volunteers and onward progression provision.** This is especially important for all those with advice and guidance roles, particularly in providers with no in-house progression routes:
 - The need for effective, active onward signposting of learners to suitable, higher level digital skills progression opportunities remains a priority.
 - Learners' interest in further digital skills training has been substantial. Facilitation of appropriate progression routes can only be achieved by increased staff/ volunteer awareness of availability of local provision, both in-house to the partnership and externally through other FE providers. Access to information about current local training offers appears to have been a challenge not only for learners, but also for some tutors and volunteers.
 - It is accepted that the vast majority of learners feel comfortable with their Include-IT training provider and that several have in-house training progression routes. However, it is important to ensure that learners do not become overly dependent on the 'safety net' of key workers in their Include-IT provider.

- Consider the opportunity to further develop more targeted courses, customised to specific demographic groups and needs, for example:
 - Carers: who may want to become more competent in using the NHS app; online carer services, and use digital communication to reduce isolation.
 - Specific minority ethnic groups, e.g. Roma & Polish communities, perhaps with a focus on accessing public services.
 - Targeting of specific geographical communities through, and with Housing Associations – especially ‘estate-based’ approaches.
 - People with mental health/ anxiety issues: combining wellbeing-focused wraparound support and training tutors and support staff in good practice approaches.
 - People who are neurodiverse or learning disabled – upskilling staff and/or working with specialist support agencies – with a focus on digital skills for independent living, such as independent travel using apps; use of NHS apps; communication with support workers, etc.
 - Targeting those who are nearer to the labour market, whose key motivations are acquisition of job-related IT skills, e.g. job-search, applications/interviews, MS applications.
 - Specific vocational routes: ‘fusion skills’ - as referenced in the 2019 evaluation report – combining digital skills training with specific vocational areas e.g. driving; health and safety; health and social care; retail; warehousing; introduction to coding – for high demand sectors.
 - Online money management skills: e.g. online banking; using cost comparison sites; digital tools to help budgeting.
- Digital Champion Volunteers:
 - There is an acute need for **improved promotion and integration of digital drop-ins**. This is important for learners to ensure their digital journeys continue, both as they train and, particularly, on course completion.
 - More generally, there is a need for **more localised publicity to raise awareness** in local neighbourhoods and articulate the purpose and benefits of digital drop-ins. This could be best achieved in conjunction with local partners and other voluntary/ community networks.
 - Building on recent recruitment successes, priority should continue to be placed on further **rebuilding the Digital Champion network** to pre-COVID levels, following the devastating impact of the pandemic on volunteer numbers.
 - Within this priority, there remains opportunity to increase volunteer involvement in **supporting course delivery**.
 - Prioritising the **involvement of younger volunteers** could help with supply and capacity issues; and would help to make the project more intergenerational. Existing partnerships with local universities could be developed further to support this.

Annex 1: Partner Delivery by Borough: 2019-23

Borough	Delivery Partner	Course venues (2019-2022)	Current Venues (2023)
Knowsley	WEA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Old School House, Huyton Northwood Community Centre, Kirkby Kirkby Job Centre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Old School House, Huyton Northwood Community Centre, Kirkby
	STEC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Belle Vale Children's Centre Netherley Youth & Community Initiative New Hutton Centre, Halewood 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> STEC, Speke
	Big Help Project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kirkby Job Centre St George's Church, Huyton The Bridge Centre, Norris Green (Liverpool) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A
	Alt Valley Community Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kirkby Job Centre The Craft, Stockbridge Village The Gate, Page Moss 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communiiversity, Croxteth Dovecot MAC Vauxhall Neighbourhood Council
Halton	Halton Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kingsway Learning Centre, Widnes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A
	WEA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Castlefields, Upton & Ditton Community Centres, Runcorn Masonic Hall, Widnes Community shop, Runcorn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Castlefields Community Centre, Runcorn
Wirral	Greenbank	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wirral Multicultural Centre, Birkenhead MENCAP, Birkenhead 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MENCAP, Birkenhead
	Age UK Wirral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Johnson Foundation Centre Birkenhead Library Rockferry Library Seacombe Library 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meadowcroft, Bromborough
	WEA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tomorrow's Women Wirral, Birkenhead CGL, Birkenhead Spider Project, Birkenhead 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A
Sefton	WEA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bootle Library Netherton Feelgood Factory St Leonard's, Bootle Southport Community Centre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Southport Library Bootle Strand Netherton Feelgood Factory
	Independence Initiative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Indy, Bootle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Indy, Bootle Community by Nature, Bootle
Liverpool	Alt Valley Community Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dovecot MAC Communiiversity, Croxteth Breck Road Library Vauxhall Neighbourhood Council; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communiiversity, Croxteth Dovecot MAC Breck Road Library
	STEC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> STEC, Speke Garston Children's Centre Noah's Ark Centre The Reach, Speke 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> STEC, Speke
	Rotunda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rotunda Community College, Kirkdale 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rotunda, Kirkdale
	Everton Development Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EDT, Everton 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EDT, Everton
	Granby Toxteth Development Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Park Road Job Centre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> GTDT, Lodge Lane, Toxteth
	Greenbank	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reader Organisation, Calderstones Park Kensington Community Learning Centre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kensington Learning Centre
St Helens	Torus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fire Fit Hub Toxteth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A
	Torus/St Helens Chamber	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Torus Central 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Torus Central

Annex 2: Age Profile of Learners 2019-2023



Annex 3: List of Consultees:

160 x	Learners	138 current / 22 previous
22 x	Volunteer Digital Champions	14 current / 8 previous
Name	Position	Organisation
Barbara Cook	Senior Manager	Age UK Wirral
John Edgar	Tutor	Age UK Wirral
Lesley Baugh	Education Manager	Alt Valley Community Trust
Neil Wilcott	Tutor	Alt Valley Community Trust
Dave Westhead	Tutor (ex)	Alt Valley Community Trust
Bernard Jordan	Manager	Everton Development Trust
Peter Jordan	Tutor	Everton Development Trust
Lindsey Guy	CEO	Granby Toxteth Development Trust
Chris Starkey	Company Secretary	Granby Toxteth Development Trust
Erin Williams	Tutor	Granby Toxteth Development Trust
Anne Kinsella	Education Manager	Greenbank College
Christopher O'Toole	Tutor	Greenbank College
Paulene Connell	Deputy CEO	Independence Initiative
Dea Weston	Tutor	Independence Initiative
Ann-Marie Hutton	Operations Manager	Rotunda
Natalie Myles	Tutor	Rotunda
Stuart McGrory	Project Manager (I-IM)	Sefton CVS
Andrew Coulson	Deputy Project Manager (I-IM)	Sefton CVS
Josie Barrow	Quality & Admin Officer (I-IM)	Sefton CVS
Gail Badley	Volunteer Coordinator (I-IM)	Sefton CVS
Lauren Jones	Volunteer Centre Coordinator	Sefton CVS
Mark Ord	CEO	Speke Training & Education Centre
Paul Wilson	Learning Curriculum Manager	Speke Training & Education Centre
Mike Unsworth	Career Development Manager	St Helens Chamber
Ruby O'Brien	Guidance Services Team Leader	St Helens Chamber
Mark Jory	Digital Inclusion Manager	Torus Foundation
James Ng	Tutor	Torus Foundation
James Pickup	Tutor	Torus Foundation
Graham Barker	Area Education Manager & Digital Curriculum	WEA
Linda Bennett	Tutor	WEA
Steven Garnett	Tutor	WEA
Catherine McVitie	Tutor	WEA
Alison West	Centre Manager	Castlefields Community Centre
Andrew Williams	Chair	Ladders of Life
Christy Ryder	Programme Manager - Digital Inclusion	LCR Combined Authority
Sally Ross	Community Regeneration Officer	Magenta Living

CONTACT US



0151 920 0726 ext 213



includeitmersey@seftoncvs.org.uk



3rd Floor Burlington House,
Crosby Road North, Waterloo L22 0LG



includeitmersey.org.uk



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