

The Digital Skills Pathway for Shared Prosperity: Learnings and insights from three UK Community Renewal Fund pilots in England

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Acknowledgments

This report was prepared by Good Things Foundation and summarises lessons and insights from three pilots supported by the Combined Authorities of Greater Manchester, West Midlands, and North of Tyne, which were funded through the Government's UK Community Renewal Fund¹. We are grateful to the Combined Authorities, Local Authorities, Adult Learning Providers, Further Education Colleges, and the 82 Community Partners who worked with us to deliver and evaluate the pilot programme, with the support of Cambridge Policy Consultants. This report does not necessarily represent their views. All errors and omissions are our own.

1. The UK Community Renewal Fund is a UK Government programme for 2021/22. This aims to support people and communities most in need across the UK to pilot programmes and new approaches to prepare for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. It invests in skills, community and place, local business, and supporting people into employment. For more information, visit: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-community-renewal-fundprospectus>.

Summary

The following key messages and policy recommendations are set out in an accompanying briefing paper, [‘The Digital Skills Pathway for Shared Prosperity: What works and what next’](#), which also highlights the main lessons learned and impacts.

Key messages for future use of the Shared Prosperity Fund

- The Digital Skills Pathway is an effective model for improving digital inclusion in communities in support of shared prosperity and skills for local economic recovery.
- Digital inclusion support (devices, data, skills) through community organisations can transform the lives of those who face challenges in education, work, and life skills.
- Funding is the key to providing digital inclusion support. Without this, community organisations are unable to deliver tailored support to local people who most need it.
- Government investment in digital inclusion (national, regional, local) can be significantly enhanced by using the free support offered by Good Things Foundation through the National Digital Inclusion Network - enabling local partners to tackle digital access and skills barriers.
- Partnership working between Community Organisations, Adult Community Education providers and Further Education colleges ensures people have the opportunity to progress into further learning and employment. Local ecosystems of support play to the strengths of diverse providers.

Policy recommendations

- The UK Government should set a vision of shared prosperity and local economic growth which recognises the necessity of fixing the digital divide - addressing all three barriers of connectivity, devices, and skills.
- Shared Prosperity Funds and Adult Education Budgets should be used to drive digital inclusion, reach into communities, and fund those who know their communities best.
- Regional and local economic growth strategies and digital inclusion strategies should be developed (if not in place) and aligned, prioritising basic digital skills and access.
- Increase use of free resources offered by Good Things Foundation via the National Digital Inclusion Network: mobile data (National Databank), devices (National Device Bank), and resources and training to help people learn digital skills (Learn My Way).
- The UK Government should provide clear leadership on digital inclusion, with cross-department coordination, a new strategy for England, and co-investment in national, regional, and local digital inclusion initiatives.

1. Policy Context

Good Things Foundation was successful in securing funding for three projects under the UK Community Renewal Fund (UKCRF). Part of the Levelling Up agenda, this £220m 2021/22 fund, was a cross departmental initiative, designed to support people and communities in areas where there had previously been a heavy reliance on EU funding.

UKCRF invited proposals from a wider range of communities in need of additional support; ex-industrial; coastal; rural areas; and deprived towns. It was designed to be less bureaucratic than European Union Structural Funds, and more innovative and holistic in the projects it supported. Its purpose was to pilot programmes and new approaches which could support economic recovery, preparing the way for the development of both the 'Places' and 'People' portions of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

The UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) is a central pillar of the UK government's Levelling Up ambitions and a significant component of its support for places across the UK. It will provide £2.6 billion of new funding for local investment by March 2025, with all areas of the UK receiving an allocation via a funding formula rather than a competition.

UKSPF's interventions will be planned and delivered by Councils and Mayoral Authorities² across England, Scotland and Wales, drawing on the insight and expertise of local partners, including businesses, the voluntary sector and Members of Parliament, to target interventions where most appropriate. Management of specific interventions may be at Combined or Local Authority level.

The primary goal of the UKSPF is to build pride in place and increase life chances across the UK. Underneath these are three UKSPF investment priorities: communities and place; supporting local business; and people and skills. The priorities of the UKSPF are linked to four core outcomes:

- Boost productivity, pay, jobs and living standards by growing the private sector, especially in those places where they are lagging;
- Spread opportunities and improve public services, especially in those places where they are weakest;
- Restore a sense of community, local pride and belonging, especially in those places where they have been lost;
- Empower local leaders and communities, especially in those places lacking local agency.

Whilst the 'people and skills' interventions are the last to come on stream in 2024/25, lead Local Authorities have the flexibility to fund targeted people and skills provision now, where this is a continuing priority for 2024-25 and may be at significant risk of ending due to the tail off of EU funds. This flexibility may only be used where provision is currently delivered by voluntary and community organisations. In reality the ability of LAs to do so is limited by the funding they receive, and the fact that in areas of deprivation UKSPF may not fill the gap left by EU funding.

This report presents findings from the evaluation of three projects delivered under the UKCRF, through partnerships between Good Things Foundation and three Combined Authorities in England between 2021 and 2022. The report highlights evidence of the positive impact of a community-based pathway on supporting digitally excluded people's progression towards education, employment and wider health and social outcomes.

2 .List of Lead Authorities [available here](#).

2. Piloting a Pathway to Support Skills and Progression Among Digitally Excluded Residents

Good Things Foundation entered an application to the UKCRF fund in the three Combined Authorities in the summer of 2021. The three UKCRF pilots Good Things Foundation was successful in tendering for were in the West Midlands, the North of Tyne and in Greater Manchester. Through these programmes, Good Things Foundation set out to test that a pathway could be developed which would allow local community organisations to engage residents who were digitally excluded, receive support, and progress onto further informal or formal learning and improve their employability and life skills.

As the UK's leading digital inclusion charity, Good Things Foundation has worked over the past ten years to address the digital divide across the country. Our evidence shows that a lack of digital skills and access to the internet and devices are key barriers to digital inclusion.³ In turn, these barriers limit people's engagement in social networks, education and employment, and therefore, limit the empowerment of people and local communities.⁴ Our mission is for everyone to benefit from the world of digital. UKCRF was seen as an valuable opportunity to pilot an approach – the Digital Skills Pathway – that addressed inequalities and enabled local communities to thrive in the online world.

Local community organisations were identified with reach to people in communities likely to face digital skills and access barriers. Once engaged, beneficiaries were given – by local community organisations – the one-to-one and small group support they needed to gain basic digital skills, as well as access to a device⁵ and a six month connectivity data package. The programme also sought to test whether beneficiaries receiving that support could be encouraged to progress onto further informal or formal learning and/or to improve their employability and life skills (key outcomes of the future UKSPF fund). By encouraging partnerships between community organisations, adult and Further Education providers, the programme hoped to provide a smooth transition for the individual onto the next stage of the pathway.

The Digital Skills Pathway built on a tried and tested approach used by Good Things Foundation: to create impact at scale through our networked model, working with community partners across the UK to provide the resources and support they need to deliver digital inclusion to beneficiaries in their communities. In the UK, our National Digital Inclusion Network includes community and grassroots advocacy groups, small local charities, libraries, social enterprises, housing associations, other education providers, and local, regional and national public sector organisations. For the UKCRF Digital Skills Pathway, we worked with both existing Network partners – known as Digital Inclusion Hubs – and recruited new members, to meet the demands of the programme.

The key aspects of the support provided to those digital excluded included:

- Devices (tablets) and mobile connectivity data to help people overcome the access barrier for getting online;
- Support for people to gain basic digital skills to help them access a range of jobs and services where digital skills are required;
- Support for people to gain confidence, motivation and help to remove the underlying barriers to digital inclusion;

3. See: Good Things Foundation (2019). ['Future Digital Inclusion: Delivering Basic Skills for Those in Need'](#). Cebr & Good Things Foundation (2022). ['The Economic Case for Digital Inclusion'](#).

4. Good Things Foundation (2021). ['Digital Inclusion: A Roadmap for Combined Authorities'](#).

5. Devices were available to 63% of beneficiaries based on eligibility and funding constraints.

- Support to help people gain employability and/or life skills;
- Support to help people transition into further learning (such as progressing their learning to their local college).

2.1 Developing Partnerships with Community Organisations

82 Digital Inclusion Hubs – members of Good Things Foundation’s National Digital Inclusion Network – delivered the programme across the three Combined Authority areas.

Half of these Digital Inclusion Hubs had been involved in delivering previous Good Things Foundation projects and services and had some experience of delivering basic digital skills support. New Hubs received training and support from Community Engagement Managers, recruited by Good Things Foundation to share good practice and manage the delivery of targets at local level. Some existing Hubs were awarded Capability Grants to enable them to provide peer support to other Hubs.

The majority of Digital Inclusion Hubs were successful in meeting their delivery targets. Some Hubs who were new to the Good Things’ Network, who received less footfall and were less embedded in their communities, had their targets reduced. Some well-established Hubs were able to deliver at levels beyond their original targets.

2.2 Developing Partnerships with Further Education Providers

In each Combined Authority area, partnerships were developed with Further Education (FE) providers, to connect directly with the Hubs delivering digital support to residents. There were differences in the approach with FE providers across the three areas. For example, in the North East, Good Things Foundation worked with a single provider, Newcastle College, whose footprint extended across the North of Tyne. The delay to the award of these projects until November 2021 meant the withdrawal of one of the intended FE providers in West Midlands, Birmingham City College, who were subsequently replaced by South and City College, Birmingham. Overall, 12 FE providers were involved in the programme across the three Combined Authority areas.

A key component of the pathway was the concept that FE providers in the programme would work with Hubs to deliver a range of interventions designed to help participants progress.

These interventions included:

- Providing information, advice and guidance on local careers and job opportunities;
- Running familiarisation visits or tasters;
- Providing guest tutorials in those Hubs;
- Providing application support for courses and employability programmes.

Where effective partnerships were built, FE providers put in place a range of interventions and managed to encourage beneficiaries to progress onto courses, onto employability programmes, and even into employment.

2.3 Delivery of Support to Beneficiaries

The recommended approach in the Digital Skills Pathway for delivery of basic skills support was one hour per week over an eight week period. Most Hubs did adopt the suggested eight week approach, while some delivered through a more condensed one-to-two day programme. Whilst one-to-one support was suggested for the initial weeks, a small group approach was also commonly used.

3. Digital Skills Pathway - Impacts and Progression Summary

3.1 Beneficiaries Supported

In total, **5,347 beneficiaries** were supported through the Digital Skills Pathway programme between November 2021 and October 2022. Of these:

- **44%** were unemployed;
- **40%** were economically inactive;
- **16%** were employed.

This employment pattern was considerably different to the targeted levels as follows⁶ ⁷:

- **51%** unemployed;
- **20%** inactive;
- **30%** employed.

The number of economically inactive individuals who participated in the programme far exceeded expectations, whilst those in employment made up a much smaller proportion of beneficiaries than anticipated. This is likely to be reflective of wider trends of increasing numbers of people classified as 'economically inactive'⁸, but may also reflect the target communities for those network partners delivering the programme.

3.2 Summary of Progression

The programme delivered the following:

- **47%** (2524) beneficiaries were supported to progress onto further learning⁹, against a target of 32%;
- **15%** (821) of all beneficiaries were supported to search for jobs, against a target of 11% (only economically inactive beneficiaries were claimed in this target);
- **38%** (2021) were supported to improve their life skills¹⁰, against a target of 19% (only those economically inactive beneficiaries, or long-term unemployed were claimed in this target).

Overall 68% of beneficiaries achieved one or more of these targets.

In the West Midlands and Greater Manchester the number of beneficiaries engaged was in line with our target and all outcome targets were exceeded. In the North of Tyne, we engaged only 58% of the target for beneficiaries, but met 88% of our target for progression to learning, and exceeded the targets for jobs skills and life skills.

6. We set self-imposed targets based on our previous experience of delivering Government-funded digital inclusion and skills programmes, such as the Department for Education's [Future Digital Inclusion programme](#).

7. Percentages have been rounded.

8. See Office for National Statistics (2023). '[Labour Market Statistics Time Series](#)'

9. This includes 'intention to progress' as measured through our impact survey.

10. Life skills support is defined as additional support which improves confidence, resilience or motivation and may include communication skills, presentation skills, activities which reduce social isolation or encourage appropriate employment related behaviours.

There were variations in performance at Combined Authority level. Successful engagement of beneficiaries depended on the experience, capability and reach of Hubs. In the North of Tyne we initially struggled to get sufficient Hubs in all areas, with gaps in both North of Tyne and Northumberland. We ran a second campaign to fill those gaps, bringing on board more diverse community organisations as Digital Inclusion Hubs. They included a mosque, a women's refuge, and groups targeting the African and Roma communities. This allowed us a deep reach into these communities, although these Hubs were less experienced at delivering digital skills support and as a result, found the targets challenging to meet in a short period of time.

Beneficiary responses to the impact questionnaires provided insights beyond the UKCRF targets on how the projects had impacted on the lives of individual beneficiaries. On learning - **79%** were motivated to keep on learning. The most popular forms of further learning were informal learning (**39%** respondents), and non-accredited courses (**20%** respondents).

"I can use email, I don't feel isolated. I can attend online classes because I have child care issues. I have created a document for the first time and can send emails to my teacher about my homework. I can now access online learning."

Beneficiary, West Midlands

There were variations in performance at Combined Authority level. wMuch of the progression took place into learning within the existing Hubs. Some Hubs had concerns that beneficiaries were not ready to progress onto a course within a FE provider.

Hubs felt that for many beneficiaries (and particularly for Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic women) confidence was a key barrier to FE progression. However, they were positive about how the Digital Skills Pathway programme was helping to build confidence in this beneficiary group.

On employment - 44% respondents felt they had better employment prospects; 33% reported having applied for a job.

Some providers, like Manchester City College, did offer beneficiaries employment support programmes in addition to other general and vocational courses.

The value of basic digital skills and the opportunities they provide residents in terms of access to quality jobs and fair work has been clearly demonstrated, with many beneficiaries reporting that due to the support they received, they had already begun their journeys towards employment.

"It has enabled me to contact employers easily and to use emails. I now have websites I visit regularly and I know how to apply online and I find it easy. I feel much more confident and I feel more eager to get out and do things and to find work, which is proving difficult at my age but I am feeling enthusiastic."

Beneficiary, Greater Manchester

"The support has enabled me to complete a successful online application and I have secured a job at Aldi."

Beneficiary, North of Tyne

On life skills - For those residents who were not seeking employment or further learning the project has evidenced a real impact on their wellbeing, reduced isolation, increased confidence, and led to greater social inclusion (see more detail below).

On economic benefits - It has been hard to quantify the economic benefits residents have felt as a result of the support they have received in such a short period. Many of these benefits will only be realised long after the programme has finished.

4. Digital Skills Pathway - Impact

4.1 Impacting Key Groups

The Digital Skills Pathway activities effectively engaged those groups who could benefit significantly from the programme.

Ethnic minorities and people with English as a second or other language:

- **Greater Manchester** - 73% of participants were from ethnic minorities compared to 26% in the local population;
- **North of Tyne** - 66% of participants were from ethnic minorities compared to 7% in the local population;
- **West Midlands** - 70% of participants were from ethnic minorities compared to 49% in the local population.

Not having English as a first language was experienced as a barrier to using the internet by 59% of beneficiaries in Greater Manchester, 48% in North of Tyne and 49% in West Midlands.

Those without access to suitable data and/or device:

The lack of affordability of a suitable device was a key barrier to using the internet for 83% of beneficiaries in North of Tyne, 80% in Greater Manchester and 72% in West Midlands.

In North of Tyne 80% of beneficiaries said they could not afford the cost of the data compared to 70% in Greater Manchester and 60% in West Midlands.

In addition, specific areas had success in engaging certain populations that were of interest:

- Those with no or low qualification levels - Greater Manchester residents, who have the lowest qualification levels of all Combined Authority areas, saw around 40% who accessed the programme with no or low qualification levels, compared to around 25% in the other areas;
- Despite having slightly lower levels of economic inactivity in North of Tyne (25% compared to 26% and 27% in other areas), 47% of participants in the area were economically inactive;
- The age structure of the working age North of Tyne population was older than the other areas, with 28% aged 55-69 (compared to 21% in West Midlands and 20% in Greater Manchester) despite this the age structure of beneficiaries in the North of Tyne was much younger than in the other areas and compared to the local population;
- Levels of baseline digital skills were significantly higher in North of Tyne than in the other CA areas with 75% able to use a mouse, keyboard or touch screen (compared to 58% in West Midlands and 52% in Greater Manchester). Although this does not reflect the level of skills in the local population it may reflect the disproportionate engagement of the younger segment of the population in this area.

4.2 Removing Barriers to Digital Inclusion

Evidence suggests that the core barriers to digital inclusion include the following¹¹:

- Access - to a suitable connection or a device;
- Skills and confidence;
- Motivation;
- Safety.

It is also widely understood that the benefits of being online can go far beyond these barriers to having benefits to happiness, health and wealth.

Through the delivery of the Digital Skills Pathway programme we saw impacts on all of these areas for the vast majority of participants¹²:

Access: 87% said they felt they now had a suitable device and / or data to use the internet;

Skills: 94% felt that their digital skills were better, and are able to search for information online (78%), use it for interests or hobbies (73%);

"The device and the data have helped me a lot. I can check and update my universal credit account regularly from my home as well as staying in touch with my wife and child in the middle east".

Beneficiary, Greater Manchester

Confidence: 92% felt more confident using the internet, and 92% felt more confident in general;

"Having been on maternity leave I had lost a lot of confidence. As a single parent with two young children, things are difficult. The course helped my confidence. I applied and got a new role with my employer."

Beneficiary, West Midlands

Motivation: 70% felt motivated to improve their health and wellbeing, and 79% felt motivated to keep on learning;

Safety: 86% felt more able to stay safe online;

Happier: 74% felt less lonely, 81% more connected with family and friends;

11. See [Dixon 2022](#), [Faith 2023](#), [Stone 2022](#), [UK Government 2017](#), [Walker 2022](#), [Yates et al 2021](#).

12. Baseline figures to contextualise some of the data: For **access** - can't afford suitable device (76%); can't afford data (67%). For **skills** - turn on a device (78%); use a mouse, keyboard, or touch screen (59%); connect to internet (36%). No baseline **confidence** nor **motivation** barrier measures available. For **safety** - concerned about internet safety (76%).

"Having internet and tablet has helped & changed life for me. I feel less lonely now and my mind has new focus. I am enjoying the apps I have on my device. It has become part of my everyday life."

Beneficiary, Greater Manchester

Healthier: 63% improved mental health, 48% improved physical health and 60% can manage their health or illness better.

"I can now manage my bad back health condition better. I have joined a walking group that needs me to communicate via WhatsApp"

Beneficiary, West Midlands

5. Factors for Success

There were three key aspects of the Digital Skills Pathway that contributed to the programme's success: we designed a programme addressing the core barriers to digital inclusion; our service provision was rooted in the local community; and we built strong partner relationships to enable the pathway to operate successfully.

5.1 Designing a Programme to Overcome Barriers

Designing the programme to address the core barriers to digital inclusion was a fundamental part of the success of our Digital Skills Pathway delivery. The impact data shown illustrates how, for the vast majority of beneficiaries, barriers to digital inclusion were addressed through the programme. Overcoming these barriers was fundamental in helping individuals to progress to learning, employment or life skills outcomes targeted by the funding.

5.1.1 Data and Devices

Access to a device and data should not be a barrier to digital inclusion and future digital inclusion programmes should include their provision, alongside support to learn digital skills.

Around two thirds of beneficiaries were provided with a device (a tablet) and data package, as part of the programme. All beneficiaries completed an eligibility survey but not all those eligible for a device and data package could be issued with one. Digital Inclusion Hubs were allocated sufficient devices for up to 63% of their target beneficiaries, and in most Hubs, demand exceeded supply. Allowing the Hubs flexibility to manage their allocation appeared to be beneficial, as they knew their clients well and were able to prioritise effectively. Hubs were advised to be cautious about issuing devices to beneficiaries in week one, to ensure they had a reason to return to receive the support they would need to use the device effectively.

The provision of devices and data was viewed by all Hubs as essential to supporting progression as the majority of beneficiaries were limited by only having smartphones and/or limited data. Hubs were very positive regarding the impact of the devices on progression and commented that they helped to give the beneficiaries independence and the ability to research their future options.

"I had no experience [with] computers. I have learned to apply for jobs, to send emails and to carry out online training. I have learned to use the device. I am now happier and more confident to apply for jobs."

Beneficiary, West Midlands

As a core element of Good Things Foundation's strategy, the National Device Bank and Databank support an entitlement for all those who are digitally excluded to receive the access they need to get online.

5.1.2 Skills using Learn My Way

Starting with basic digital skills builds confidence and supports progression.

A lack of digital skills is a key barrier to progression, and enhancing these can support learning and access to employment opportunities. As beneficiaries become more digitally competent this opens up new opportunities (and wider skills needs, such as interview techniques and further training).

The vast majority of both new and existing Digital Inclusion Hubs (over 90%) reported using Learn My Way to deliver the digital skills training - Good Things Foundation's free online learning platform, hosting over 100 modules for learning basic digital skills, and staying safe and connected online. This was mirrored in the beneficiary survey, with 89% of beneficiaries having recalled using Learn My Way. Learn My Way was especially helpful to those new to digital skills delivery and was praised by both Hubs and beneficiaries for allowing support to be tailored to their needs.

"Learn My Way was always pretty good at leading the learner through the basics but it has got much better at being flexible so that the learner can pick and choose the modules that they find more interesting to their circumstances."

Digital Inclusion Hub, West Midlands

"Doing it at my pace on Learn My Way has really helped. I enjoyed going over things several times as this stuck in my head."

Beneficiary, Greater Manchester

On average beneficiaries completed 13 modules. New Hubs had a particularly high completion rate with an average of 18 modules completed per beneficiary.

5.1.3 Meeting Specific Needs

A key tool for engagement is ensuring that digital inclusion provision and progression is tailored and meets the individual's needs.

Beneficiaries were looking for a variety of different outcomes:

1. Employment, including returning to work as children got older. Informal learning to support jobs was more of a motivator (even for those looking for work), as well as using this as an opportunity to find better or more suitable work to suit their current circumstances;
2. Helping their children learn;
3. Improving/ learning English.

Hubs successfully built these needs into their delivery, ensuring that beneficiaries achieved a wide variety of their desired outcomes.

"As the full time carer for my disabled spouse, it is really difficult to commit the time for a site based course, but the support has helped me to find ways to support my mental health and find and do online courses."

Beneficiary, West Midlands

On average beneficiaries completed 13 modules. New Hubs had a particularly high completion rate with an average of 18 modules completed per beneficiary.

5.1.4 ESOL and Translation

Supporting ethnic minority beneficiaries often requires translation which comes at a cost.

Not having English as a first language was experienced as a barrier to using the internet by 59% of beneficiaries. This was particularly a challenge identified for the use of Learn My Way, as a high proportion of beneficiaries required language support to use it. This was a particular issue for Hubs that lacked translation support. There was some evidence that some Hubs found ways to translate the materials, but these methods were not widely known across all of them.

“Most of our beneficiaries have some issues with English and ‘digital’ English is full of technical terms that beneficiaries may never have come across. We pre-load shortcuts to Google Translate so they can access support straight away. Even if we did translate Learn My Way we are not helping the beneficiaries’ wider need to get better at English so focusing on coping strategies makes more sense”

Digital Inclusion Hub, North of Tyne

5.2 Provision Rooted in Communities

The hyperlocal approach – using community partners to engage beneficiaries from their communities – was successful for delivery of the Digital Skills Pathway. The knowledge and expertise of these local Hubs allowed delivery partners to respond to the specific needs of their communities and the target audience. High-performing Hubs reported having a steady stream of beneficiaries and a good reach into the communities they serve.

5.2.1 Trusted Face and Place

A trusted face and place are important to those who are faced with multiple barriers to digital inclusion.

A significant proportion of Digital Inclusion Hubs had a strong existing presence in their local communities, experience in digital skills provision and were part of Good Things Foundation’s National Digital Inclusion Network. Hubs used a range of channels to raise awareness and engage with potential beneficiaries – websites, leaflets, and networking with other service providers were used by most. Word of mouth, referrals and drop-ins (when beneficiaries had visited the Hub for other reasons) were most often cited as the primary route for engagement. Only a small minority of Hubs used paid advertising as a way of engaging beneficiaries. Some newer Hubs were able to access communities that were difficult to reach, building on their existing presence and relationships within their communities.

5.2.2 Community Knowledge and Experience Supports Delivery

Having a mix of Hubs of different types and sizes, including those serving niche communities, is important to reach those who are digitally excluded.

The presence of an existing network of Hubs was important in enabling delivery to be rolled out at pace. However, there was evidence that community organisations who were new to digital skills delivery were also able to reach their target engagement and meet their progression targets.

Many beneficiaries who took part in the programme had English as their second language. Hubs that were rooted in their communities and had multilingual staff were well-placed to deliver support to these beneficiaries. For others, drawing on the knowledge and lived experience of volunteers had beneficial outcomes:

"We have been lucky with our IT trainer being able to support learners as part of a wider group because most learners have problems with English language. Providing one-to-one with professional support is not feasible within the budget. So we use volunteers and have found some of those who have completed can develop their skills further by coming back and supporting the new learners through the process."

Digital Inclusion Hub, West Midlands

5.3 Building Partnership Working

Partnerships, referral routes and cross-programme support have been key to the success of the programme.

5.3.1 Local Authorities Facilitating Partnership Delivery

Providing a forum through which to join up disparate initiatives at a hyperlocal level is important to avoid duplication and maximise funding impact.

In some areas of delivery there was good involvement in the project from the Local Authority leads. Colleagues from all levels of delivery from the Local Authorities, Digital Inclusion Hubs and Further Education providers were invited to meetings throughout the programme. Where multiple UKCRF projects were operating in similar areas, leads were brought together to raise awareness of projects operating across the area and maximise the potential for cross-project working.

5.3.2 Building Connections Between VCSE and FE Providers

Keeping an open mind to partnerships with voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) and FE providers was key to the success of the programme.

The challenges and opportunities came from both sides:

Digital Inclusion Hubs (VCSE): There was evidence that some Hubs worked effectively with FE providers, while others struggled to see the purpose of their involvement, or felt threatened by them. Some Hubs felt that FE provision was a step too far for many of their beneficiaries who lacked the confidence to go into FE, and were more comfortable in a community or adult learning setting.

Where effective partnerships were built, FE providers put in place a range of interventions and managed to encourage beneficiaries to progress onto courses, onto employability programmes and even onto employment.

FE Providers: FE providers felt they benefited from the project, creating relationships with community providers that would carry on beyond the lifetime of the project. Most FE providers felt the project had helped them gain better insight into the communities these

these providers serve, and that this would impact their provision going forward. They also felt that working together as a group had helped them share best practice on how best to meet the needs of those potential learners who were both socially and digitally excluded.

5.3.3 Digital Inclusion Hubs Working Together

Bringing Digital Inclusion Hubs together to share good practice led to improved delivery and peer support.

There was significant expertise held within some Digital Inclusion Hubs that it was valuable to share with others both experienced and new to the Good Things Foundation model. Fortnightly meetings, organised by the Community Engagement Managers brought Hubs together to share good practice and resolve queries that had arisen. As a result many Hubs built relationships that will be maintained after the end of the project, and there was even evidence of cross-referrals between them.

5.3.4 Other Routes For Referral

Working with partner organisations who could refer into the programme was a core enabler of success.

There was evidence that Hubs were getting a considerable number of referrals, mostly via existing referral routes - there was limited evidence of new referral routes. Where new referral routes were set up as part of the programme, they took time to get up and running and the true benefits of these may only be realised in the future. The investment required in establishing these referral routes meant that they often took second place to ensuring sufficient eligible beneficiaries were recruited in the short time available.

5.4 Case Studies

Case Study 1 - Adeela from Get Set Academy, Greater Manchester

Before visiting her local Hub, Get Set Academy, Adeela was unemployed and had no intention of looking for work. However, she was aware how important digital skills were becoming and wanted to join a programme where she could meet new people and acquire new digital skills at the same time. Adeela enrolled onto the Community Digital Skills Pathways project after hearing about it from a friend.

Adeela began attending one-to-one sessions with a tutor. Although she had a tablet at home, it was mainly used to take photos and call family - beyond that, Adeela lacked any further digital skills. Adeela also feared for her online safety, having heard many negative stories of scammers online.

Adeela was assigned to a group session that provided simple tutorials via Learn My Way. Tips and tricks were also shared within the group, not only by the tutor but by other participants. This improved her digital skills immensely - Adeela can now confidently use a mouse and keyboard at home.

Adeela came across a job in a local warehouse and thanks to her new skills, she was able

to apply. Adeela was successful in her application. The job required a basic knowledge of Excel and Word, which her local hub supported her with. “[This experience] has helped me regain confidence, and I’m now able to put these skills to use in my new job” says Adeela.

The role requires Adeela to use a tablet to ensure the right products are being shipped and make note of shipping requirements - Adeela wouldn’t have been able to do this prior to enrolling on to the programme. This is a fantastic achievement and everyone at Get Set Academy is incredibly proud of everything that Adeela has achieved.

Case Study 2 - Halima from The Chinese Centre, North of Tyne

Halima is a young woman who left Sudan and came to the UK five years ago to accompany her husband. During a COVID-19 lockdown, Halima attended The Chinese Centre where she was registered on Learn My Way and also received maths and IT learning support via Zoom. Halima made fantastic progress with her English language while developing her digital skills through Learn My Way, including courses designed to help her find a job online.

In February 2022, the UKCRF Community Digital Skills programme enabled The Chinese Centre to provide Halima with a tablet with a sim card and free data to facilitate her job hunting and college presentations. After this initial support, the hub invited Halima to help new learners on the programme who struggled with English and required bilingual support.

Halima is passionate about helping others and through volunteering with The Chinese Centre both her digital and communication skills improved. The Hub then decided to employ Halima as a part-time bilingual supporter and they consider her to be a great digital ambassador for her community. These outcomes were made possible through the UKCRF programme in terms of digital skills support, device and free internet data.

Case Study 3: Shukri from TLC College, West Midlands

Shukri is a Syrian refugee who arrived in the UK in 2018. His local Hub, TLC College, was providing him with support to settle in the country as part of the Syrian refugee support programme. Shukri joined the Digital Skills Pathway project in May 2022 to help him take the next step in his digital skills journey. Through the project he has developed basic IT skills including; how to send and receive emails; how to use social media; and how to conduct job searches.

Following the project, Shukri planned to take an accredited ICT course as well as ESOL classes with the Hub, in an environment where he feels comfortable.

He is really happy with his experience on the project and grateful to all the staff involved at TLC College. He’s delighted to be able to progress onto further learning and to have the benefit of a device and the connectivity to support the next stage of his learning journey.

“I like coming to TLC because I can learn things that help me with learning computer and English”. Shukri.

6. Building on this Approach for Future Success

6.1 Overcoming Barriers

As the above evidence demonstrates, overcoming barriers to digital inclusion can support progression. However, these approaches add additional cost to the delivery that is often borne by the Hubs. Good Things Foundation recognises the importance of overcoming these barriers and using this as a foundation for the Digital Skills Pathway was key to our success.

Here are additional considerations that could be built into future pathways that would enable the success of programmes going forward.

The cost of serving hard to reach communities and those with specific needs must be reflected in programme funding, including the true cost of engaging beneficiaries, as well as supporting them.

Whilst community partners are a low-cost solution to bridging the digital skills gap they are often living hand to mouth and rely on volunteers and peer networks to operate effectively. Overall, Digital Inclusion Hubs reported that providing learner-led support required more than the funding provided by the project of approximately £120 per beneficiary - typically 20-30% more depending on the extent to which their beneficiaries had other barriers to learning. In some areas the low funding levels were cited as a barrier to engaging a wider variety of community partner organisations.

The delivery of the programme also highlighted that the demand for suitable digital devices in communities exceeded the expected levels, and could not be fully met through the Digital Skills Pathway programme. This indicates that future programmes to remove barriers to digital inclusion must have suitable resourcing to meet fully the needs for digital devices and data in communities.

Building in translation support will ensure more populations can access progression routes.

Much translation support is hidden within Hubs, being addressed using expert staff or volunteers, informally translating where it is required. Whilst some FE providers offered ESOL learning alongside employability training, demand for ESOL learning often outstrips supply. Considering how this informal support can be formalised, funded and this expertise can be recognised could enable even greater outcomes in the future.

Increasing the duration over which support is provided for some beneficiaries.

The recommended approach in the Digital Skills Pathway for delivery of basic skills support was one hour per week over an eight week period. Adopting this approach allowed Good Things Foundation to arrive at a funded value per beneficiary supported. Most Hubs did adopt the suggested eight week approach, some delivering through a more condensed one-to-two day programme. Whilst one-to-one support was suggested for the initial weeks, a small group approach was also commonly used. Some Hubs did not feel the approach recognised the additional support hours required for those with other barriers to learning (limited English language skills) or those very unfamiliar with IT concepts who took longer to develop their understanding.

6.2 Community-Rooted Provision

The pilots indicated how a local experienced presence, with knowledge of the specific needs of those communities, is key to the success of the programme. Ensuring that the challenges related to delivering to these populations are recognised and supported,

as well as considering how to build diversity into the pathway will be key for future successful delivery.

Recognising the challenges of a disjointed funding approach.

Hubs rely on multiple funding streams to support residents to learn basic digital skills. Current funding is often short-term and linked to other projects, and not specifically awarded for the delivery of digital skills. It is important to recognise that many organisations bid for funding speculatively and a change in staffing prior to, or during, the project can have a dramatic impact on their ability to deliver their contractual obligations. A small number of Hubs had their contracts for delivering the Digital Skills Pathway significantly reduced, or removed, for a failure to deliver against their contract. In some cases this was due to a change in staffing, in others it was due to conflicting priorities and insufficient time and/or people resource to devote to the delivery of the project.

The breadth of organisations is key to broadening the reach of programmes.

It is important for future funding to be targeted at areas of greatest need. In areas with high levels of digital exclusion, there may be an insufficient supply of established delivery organisations to meet potential demand. Consideration needs to be given to target communities and how best to access them, in terms of both the location of support and the specialist resources required to deliver it. The evaluation of the Digital Skills Pathway programme highlighted that formal adult education provision through FE institutions was not considered suitable for all people who wanted to progress towards further learning or employment. Supporting the delivery of digital skills and other learning in community settings is important in addition to formal education.

In commissioning future digital inclusion interventions Combined and/or Local Authorities need to make funding streams accessible and attractive to a wider range of organisations, including those outside the traditional adult education system. This may require investment in on-the-ground resources to engage community organisations and build their capacity and capability to support local residents to take their first steps online.

Ensuring programmes are sufficient in length to allow for engagement and impact.

The delivery of the Digital Skills Pathway programme was only initially planned to run for five months, from February to June 2022. The majority of Digital Inclusion Hubs felt this gave them insufficient time to build effective relationships with potential referral partners, or to develop a wider range of engagement approaches. Ideally funding programmes need to offer delivery organisations the security of a three-to-five year funding period. This would allow them to recruit, train sufficient staff/volunteers and to invest in resources to meet their targets. It would also allow Combined and Local Authorities to measure the long-term impact of interventions and evaluate the return on their investment in digital skills.

6.3 Partnership Working

A core element of the funding for the Digital Skills Pathway was to establish connections between organisations to facilitate progression. As evidenced above there were some great examples of a partnership approach enabling beneficiaries to progress.

Building in sufficient time for relationships to be established.

As demonstrated above, good working relationships take time to establish. Both sides

need to see the value of the relationships and this needs to be built through experience. Ensuring programmes recognise the time and skills to establish these relationships will support future successful delivery.

Encouraging and rewarding partnership working between organisations needs to form part of any regional digital inclusion strategy.

Local and Combined Authorities should consider how they fund future collaboration between the FE sector and VCSE providers, focusing on utilising the providers' resources to provide services, such as adult IAG, and more delivery located in the heart of communities. There is potential for funding to be used to encourage Hubs to progress learners onto the next stage of their journey when they are ready.

6.4 Policy Recommendations

As set out in our Executive Briefing¹³, there are a number of policy recommendations which emerge from the Digital Skills Pathway pilot findings. For future success, we recommend:

- A vision of shared prosperity and local economic growth which recognises the necessity of fixing the digital divide - addressing all three barriers of connectivity, devices, and skills.
- Shared Prosperity Funds and Adult Education Budgets maximised to drive up digital inclusion, reach into communities, and fund those who know their communities best.
- Regional and local economic growth strategies and digital inclusion strategies are developed (if not in place) and aligned, prioritising basic digital skills and access.
- Increasing use of free resources offered by Good Things Foundation via the National Digital Inclusion Network: mobile data (National Databank), devices (National Device Bank), and resources and training to help people learn digital skills (Learn My Way).
- Stronger UK Government leadership on digital inclusion, with cross-department coordination, a new strategy for England, and co-investment in national, regional, and local digital inclusion initiatives.

13. [Good Things Foundation](#) (2023)

Appendix: Targets and Outcomes by Combined Authority area

Table 1: Summary of Participants in the Digital Skills Pathway Programme

	Target	Contracted as of July 22	Actual to end October	% of target
West Midlands	2100	2195	2099	99.95%
Economically Inactive	420	439	678	161.43%
Unemployed	1050	1097.5	1051	100.10%
Employed	630	658.5	370	58.73%
North of Tyne	2000	1315	1158	57.90%
Economically Inactive	400	263	563	140.75%
Unemployed	1000	657.5	346	34.60%
Employed	600	364.5	249	41.50%
Greater Manchester	2100	2130	2090	99.52%
Economically Inactive	420	426	937	223.10%
Unemployed	1050	1065	929	88.48%
Employed	630	639	224	35.56%
Total	6100	5640	5347	87%
Economically Inactive	1240	1128	2148	173%
Unemployed	3100	2820	2326	75%
Employed	1860	1692	843	45%

Table 2: Summary of Key Outcomes Against Targets for the Digital Skills Pathway Programme

Combined Authority	Learning target	Learning actual	Learning % target	Job search target	Job Search Actual	Job search % of target	Life skills target	Life skills Actual	Life skills % target
West Midlands	640	1222	191%	210	261	124.29%	368	667	181.25%
North of Tyne	600	528	88%	200	259	129.50%	420	500	119%
Greater Manchester	756	774	102%	252	301	119.44%	440	854	194.09%
Total	1996	2524	126.45%	662	821	119.44%	1228	2021	164.58%

Table 3: Summary of Impacts by Participant Groups as % of Digital Skills Pathway Programme Targets

	Greater Manchester		West Midlands		North of Tyne	
	Target	Impact	Target	Impact	Target	Impact
Learning (all)	36%	31%	30%	47%	30%	34%
Job skills (economically inactive)	60%	70%	50%	57%	50%	65%
Life skills (economically inactive & unemployed)	30%	63%	30%	43%	-	-
Life skills (unemployed)	-	-	-	-	22%	8%
Life skills (unemployed)	-	-	-	-	50%	106%
Any of the above impacts (all)	60%	66%	60%	71%	60%	66%

Source: Good Things Foundation Impact Survey returns to 20th October 2022.