Digital Lifeline:
A Qualitative Evaluation

By Jane Mackey, Lauren Howe,
May Appleby and Dr Emma Stone

With Gosia Kwiatkowska, Ajay Choksi
and RIX Social Researchers,
University of East London

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LDE Learning Disability England | DU Digital Unite | VODG Voluntary Organisations Disability Group

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Executive Summary

Digital Lifeline aimed to use digital inclusion to alleviate the negative impacts of COVID-19 on people with learning disabilities by supplying 5,500 people with a Lenovo M10 tablet, 24GB data and basic digital skills training.

Digital Lifeline was an emergency response to COVID-19, which addressed a clear and pressing need. Without access to the internet during the pandemic, many people with learning disabilities experienced worsening mental and physical health; increased social isolation; and difficulty accessing essential services (ONS 2021; Seale 2020).

The programme was funded by the Department for Digital, Culture Media and Sport (DCMS), and delivered by Good Things Foundation, 146 community and coordination partners, and four specialist partners (AbilityNet, Digital Unite, Learning Disability England and Voluntary Organisations Disability Group).

In order to evaluate the short term impact of the programme, data was collected at baseline (when a beneficiary received their device), and around 2–4 weeks later. An **Interim Report** based on this data was published in September 2021. A qualitative evaluation was also commissioned to explore the longer term impact of Digital Lifeline. The qualitative evaluation aimed to:

1. Identify what constitutes meaningful digital inclusion support for people with learning disabilities;
2. Identify the ways in which this type of intervention supports the wider policy aim of reducing digital exclusion among people with learning disabilities;
3. Provide recommendations that inform organisations how to provide effective digital inclusion support for people with learning disabilities.

The findings from the evaluation demonstrate that Digital Lifeline has been a success, and highlight the considerable gains that can be achieved through true partnership working. Together, DCMS, Good Things Foundation, and its programme partners have delivered significant benefits for people with learning disabilities. Digital Lifeline has also shown what people with learning disabilities are able to achieve when given the right support.

Digital Lifeline has:

- **Provided 5,500 people with learning disabilities with vital access to a device, data and assistive technology**, which, in turn, has helped them to access online products and services that they would otherwise not have been able to access; 91% of beneficiaries surveyed in the first few weeks reported at least one positive outcome.[1]
- **Enabled people with learning disabilities to participate more fully in their local community and society.** Through the digital skills support provided, beneficiaries have developed the confidence and ability to use their tablet to speak to friends and family, learn new things, engage with their hobbies and interests, and participate in community activities. When surveyed, 64% of beneficiaries agreed that their digital skills had improved, and the qualitative evaluation confirmed that beneficiaries had continued to build their digital skills in the months following. Learning digital skills also helped some people feel empowered to try new things.

1 An impact survey was completed by beneficiaries 2–4 weeks after receiving the device. It covered questions on: hours of support received/provided; skills achieved and other outcomes. 4,759 beneficiaries completed impact surveys.

- **Helped to mitigate, or reduce, inequalities that people with learning disabilities experience in other areas of their lives.** Receiving a tablet has helped to reduce social isolation and feelings of loneliness by helping beneficiaries to maintain, deepen, or forge new connections with others. When surveyed, 52% of beneficiaries agreed that they felt less lonely as a result of receiving the device. Increased connection was also a key theme from the qualitative evaluation. People explained that receiving the device has helped them to feel happier, and more relaxed. Having a tablet also helped some to stay more active; 43 of the 57 beneficiaries we spoke to said they used their tablet for entertainment or doing fun activities.
- **Brought visibility to the needs and barriers faced by people with learning disabilities.** Through the collection of baseline and impact data, and the qualitative data collected as part of this evaluation, Digital Lifeline has helped to fill some of the gaps in knowledge relating to the experiences of digitally excluded people with learning disabilities.

The learnings from this evaluation are useful to policy-makers, funders and practitioners, and highlight a number of factors that are essential for providing meaningful digital skills support to people with learning disabilities:

- A long term connectivity solution that is affordable, and suitable for a person's needs;
- A device that is given, not loaned;
- Support to get online, provided by a trusted organisation or person;
- One-to-one support in the initial stages of digital learning;
- Personalised support that takes into account the needs of the individual;
- Ongoing support to repeat and build learning;
- Using 'hooks' (such as hobbies or interests) to encourage engagement;
- Using specialist support and assistive technology to aid learning;
- Encouraging people to take ownership of their learning;
- Support to help people and their support networks to stay safe online;
- Including families, carers and support workers in digital skills training.

Alongside the successes of Digital Lifeline, this evaluation has also highlighted that further intervention is needed in order to promote digital inclusion among people with learning disabilities.

Recommendations for Policy Makers:

- Embed digital inclusion into government policies and programmes to improve the lives of people with learning disabilities and disabled people more generally;
- Promote digital inclusion for those at most risk of being left behind in the new Digital Strategy — such as disabled people and people with learning disabilities;
- Recognise the value of community-based learning and development, and fund community organisations to help people build confidence and learn digital skills simultaneously;
- Take action to reduce data poverty and address barriers to device ownership;
- Address the data and knowledge gap in relation to people with learning disabilities. We still do not know enough about the digital experiences and barriers faced by people with learning disabilities and how this relates to wider characteristics of the population of people with learning disabilities.

Recommendations for Funders

- Take action to ensure that the beneficiaries supported through Digital Lifeline can continue to develop their skills;
- Fund more, and longer term, digital inclusion programmes to support people with learning disabilities;
- Invest in improving the digital access, skills and confidence of the social care workforce, disabled people's organisations and self advocacy groups;
- Provide funding to improve the digital access, skills and confidence of family members and informal carers, so they can, in turn, help the people they support to get online.

Recommendations for Practitioners

- Identify and address any organisational barriers to delivering digital inclusion support — such as gaps in digital infrastructure and/or a lack of digital confidence, motivation, and skills among staff and volunteers;
- Support staff / volunteers to be confident in encouraging people with learning disabilities to explore the full potential of the internet;
- Provide clear, accessible information about what digital and data support is being provided to avoid confusion.

Introduction

Being online has been a lifeline for many people during the pandemic. However, this has not uniformly been the case for the large number of people with learning disabilities many of whom are digitally excluded.

Fifteen percent of disabled people have never been online, and 35% of people with learning or memory disabilities do not have the Essential Digital Skills for Life. Without access to the internet many people with learning disabilities have experienced worsening mental and physical health; increased social isolation; and difficulty accessing essential services (ONS 2020; ONS 2021; Seale 2020; Lloyds Bank 2021b).

Digital Lifeline was an emergency response to this clear and pressing need, providing 5,500 people with learning disabilities with a Lenovo M10 tablet, 24GB of data, and support to use the tablet and make it more accessible. Devices, data and support were provided to people with a learning disability who were over 18, living in England, and digitally excluded. The programme was open to people living independently in the community, in supported living, or with family carers. The programme was funded by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), and delivered by Good Things Foundation, AbilityNet and other programme partners.

Since March 2020 Good Things Foundation had successfully delivered '**Everyone Connected**' (formerly DevicesDotNow) — securing donations to distribute devices, data connectivity and digital skills support to people who needed it. This 'Everyone Connected' model was the basis for the design of Digital Lifeline.

In delivering Digital Lifeline, Good Things Foundation led on partnership and project management; data collection and analysis; and recruitment, training and support for community partners. Good Things Foundation was supported in delivering Digital Lifeline by three categories of programme partners. Community partners identified eligible beneficiaries; distributed the devices and data to beneficiaries; and provided digital skills support to beneficiaries. Coordination partners assisted delivery; and received an additional grant payment to cover coordination costs (including engagement with beneficiaries, and the receipt, delivery and set-up of the devices on a larger scale). Specialist partners (AbilityNet, Digital Unite, Learning Disability England and Voluntary Organisations Disability Group) provided specialist support to beneficiaries, community partners, and coordination partners.

In order to evaluate the short term impact of the programme, data was collected at baseline (when a beneficiary received their device), and around 2—4 weeks later. The baseline survey collected information about demographics, goals and barriers. The early impact survey collected information about the type of support that had been provided, the skills that had been gained and other outcomes that had been achieved. Community partners were also invited to provide feedback on their experience delivering the programme via a short survey. An Interim Report based on this data was published in September 2021 (Good Things Foundation 2021a).

Digital Lifeline was set up as an emergency response, for delivery within a very tight timeframe. Therefore, while the data presented in the Interim Report is a helpful indication of impact, it is likely that it is an underestimate of what has been achieved through Digital Lifeline. For this reason, a qualitative evaluation was commissioned to explore the longer term impact of Digital Lifeline.

The qualitative evaluation took place between June and October 2021, and was led by Good Things Foundation, University of East London and RIX Social Researchers (peer researchers with learning disabilities).

The qualitative evaluation aimed to:

1. Identify what constitutes meaningful digital inclusion support for people with learning disabilities;
2. Identify the ways in which this type of intervention supports the wider policy aim of reducing digital exclusion among people with learning disabilities;
3. Provide recommendations that inform organisations how to provide effective digital inclusion support for people with learning disabilities.

This report explores the findings from this qualitative evaluation. The findings are based on[2]:

- A review of current academic, grey and policy literature;
- Focus groups and interviews with the people who received devices;
- Focus groups with the families / carers of those that received devices;
- Interviews with community partners who delivered devices, data and support.

2 For more information see the methodology section of this report.

The Context

What is a learning disability and how common is it within the UK?

A learning disability affects the way a person learns new things throughout their lifetime; it also affects the way a person understands information and how they communicate. People with learning disabilities can have difficulty understanding new or complex information, learning new skills and coping independently (NHS.co.uk n.d.). There are different types of learning disability which can be mild, moderate, severe or multiple and profound. The type of learning disability that a person has can impact the level of support they need (Mencap n.d.).

Data collected about the size and characteristics of the population of people with learning disabilities is inconsistent and incomplete. However, it is estimated that 1.5 million living in the UK have a learning disability (Mencap n.d.). An estimated 1.13 million people with learning disabilities in the UK are adults and 351,000 are children (Mencap n.d.).

What is digital exclusion?

Digital exclusion is about not having the access, skills, motivation or confidence to use the internet and benefit from the opportunities that digital provides (Good Things Foundation 2021c):

- **Digital access:** A person may be digitally excluded because they do not have an internet connection; do not have an appropriate device; do not have access to the assistive technology they need; or cannot afford to pay for a connection, device, or assistive technology.
- **Digital skills:** A person can be digitally excluded if they do not have the digital skills to get online. The Essential Digital Skills Framework outlines three categories of digital skills that a person may need. 'Digital Foundation Skills', underpin all essential digital skills (and include things like being able to turn on a device). 'Essential Digital Skills for Life', and 'Essential Digital Skills for Work' are the skills needed in a personal and work context in relation to: communicating, handling information and content, transacting, problem solving and being safe and legal online (Department for Education, 2019).
- **Digital motivation:** A person can also become digitally excluded if they are not motivated to get online.
- **Digital confidence:** A person may be digitally excluded if they do not have the self belief to be able to learn the skills they need to use the internet safely and effectively.

How does digital exclusion impact people with learning disabilities?

Disabled people make up a disproportionate number of those that do not have access to the internet. In figures released in 2020, the ONS estimated 15% of disabled people have never been online, whereas this figure was 3% among non-disabled people (ONS 2020). Among those with learning disabilities, digital access is unevenly distributed. Flynn et al. (2021) reported that people with profound and multiple learning disabilities have generally lower levels of internet access (57%) than people with learning disabilities who do not have profound and multiple learning disabilities (74%).

Poor accessibility can prevent disabled people from accessing the internet; and although more content is being designed to be accessible across devices, there is still evidence that a lack of online accessibility is a barrier for disabled people (Disability Unit 2021; Good Things Foundation 2016, Roscoe and Johns 2021; Scope 2020). Assistive technologies can be very helpful in making devices and technology more accessible. However the latest Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index (2021a) found that

these technologies are more likely to be used by people with already high or very high digital engagement, and are therefore being underused by those that could benefit the most from them. The barriers which may stop disabled people from using assistive technologies include: cost; a lack of awareness, inadequate assessment, and insufficient funding (Boot et al. 2018; Department for Work and Pensions, Disability Unit, Equality Hub 2021).

Alongside lower levels of access, disabled people are also less likely to have the Essential Digital Skills they need than the UK population as a whole: 35% of people with learning or memory disabilities do not have the Essential Digital Skills for Life; and 47% of people with a learning or memory disability do not have the Essential Digital Skills for Work. In the UK population as a whole these figures are 21% and 36%, respectively (Lloyds Bank 2021b).

People with learning disabilities can also feel less motivated and less confident about going online due to previous negative learning experiences; a fear of admitting gaps in their knowledge; and negative attitudes towards disabled people in society more generally (Chadwick, Wesson and Fulwood 2013; Good Things Foundation 2018). Online safety may also be a concern for people with disabilities – as it is for many people more generally (Stone, Llewellyn and Chambers 2020).

People with learning disabilities can need personalised and long term support in order to grow their digital skills, motivation and confidence (Good Things Foundation 2018; Newman et al. 2016). However, this type of support is not always readily available. Many people with learning disabilities can miss out on the life-enriching experiences that the internet provides because their carers, support workers or families are not willing, or able, to support them to use the internet (Bradley 2021; Chadwick, Wesson, Fulwood 2013; Chadwick, Quinn and Fullwood 2016; Good Things Foundation 2016; Newman et al. 2016; Seale 2020).

Why is digital inclusion important for people with learning disabilities?

It is important to promote digital inclusion among people with learning disabilities to:

- **Facilitate access to essential goods and services:** Society is becoming increasingly digital, and the ability to access public, voluntary and commercial goods and services is becoming more dependent on the ability to access and use the internet. Promoting digital inclusion is essential to ensuring people with learning disabilities are not locked out from accessing their basic rights and needs.
- **Promote active participation within society:** Digital inclusion is not just about being able to access the opportunities that the internet affords, but also being able to make the most of them. In this context, supporting people with learning disabilities to make more of the potential of the internet is vital for them to be able to 'participate, and live well and safely in a digital world' (Stone 2021).
- **Engender visibility and recognition in data driven decision-making:** Digital progress has meant that we are not just living in a digital society, but also a data society. In the context of algorithmic decision-making and online consultation, reducing digital exclusion is vital to ensuring that the needs of people with learning disabilities are surfaced and acted upon (Dencik, Hintz and Redden 2019; Ada Lovelace Institute 2021; Flynn et al 2021).
- **Reduce, or mitigate, wider inequalities:** Analysis of the demographics of internet usage has demonstrated a clear association between digital exclusion and other forms of exclusion (Yates et al. 2020). Therefore, it is important to promote digital inclusion, not just as an end in its own right, but as a way to minimise and address the wider inequalities that people with learning disabilities face.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

The impact of the pandemic has been disproportionately severe for people with learning disabilities, both in terms of mortality rate from the virus itself, and also due to the impact of lockdown and the requirement to shield (House of Commons, 2021). The higher rates of digital exclusion among people with learning disabilities were a contributory factor in this.

During the pandemic, many health services were only available online, and whilst some people with learning disabilities were able to use technology to access these services, many were unable to do so due to barriers such as lack of digital skills, a lack of in-home support and lack of access to technology or the internet (Cebr 2021; Sense 2021; Seale 2020). This had serious consequences for their physical and mental health. The ONS (2021) reports that disabled people were more likely to say that coronavirus had affected their health (35% for disabled people, compared with 12% for non-disabled people); their access to healthcare for non-coronavirus related issues (40% compared with 19%); and their wellbeing (65% compared with 50%).

Digital barriers also impacted the extent to which people with learning disabilities were able to connect with others, and access support during the pandemic. While many people relied on online video calling and social media platforms to connect with others during lockdown, this opportunity was not available to the high proportion of people with learning disabilities without the access, skills, confidence or motivation to use the internet. Seale (2020) reports that many people with learning disabilities found themselves disconnected from their family, friends, community and support services during the pandemic. This reduction or removal of support increased social isolation and uncertainty, and contributed to increased feelings of loneliness, and worsening mental and physical health among people with learning disabilities (Scottish Commission for Learning Disability 2020; Seale 2020).

What actions are being taken to address digital exclusion experienced by people with learning disabilities?

What policy responses have there been?

Digital Lifeline was set up by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport as part of a cross-cutting Government response to addressing the disproportionately negative effects of COVID-19 on people with learning disabilities. It was an emergency and stand-alone initiative but one that connects to a range of policy areas, in particular the Government's strategy on tackling loneliness (DCMS 2018) which recognises the power of digital inclusion in bringing groups of people together for social connections; and the recent Online Media Literacy Strategy (2021), which recognises the importance of helping people to understand about online safety, and build the skills to navigate the online environment in a safe way.[3]

A new Digital Strategy is being developed led by DCMS. This may provide a valuable opportunity to strengthen commitments to digital inclusion, including for disabled people and people with learning disabilities, and to recognise the critical role that digital inclusion can play in contributing to post-COVID-19 recovery and the government's levelling up agenda (Good Things Foundation 2021b).

With regard to disabled people, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Disability Unit and the Equality Hub published the National Disability Strategy in July 2021. This sets out the actions the government will take to improve the everyday lives of all disabled people across the UK. It outlines the aim for all government departments to embed approaches which: ensure fairness and equality; consider disability from the start; support independent living; increase participation; and deliver joined up responses.

3 This is linked to the Draft Online Safety Bill currently progressing through Parliament.

What practical responses have there been?

COVID-19 exposed the cost of digital exclusion more clearly than ever before, and necessitated action from across communities, corporates and civil society. The practical emergency response by actors across society has been impressive. However, many of these responses took place in isolation — and there remains a lack of a joined up approach.

Some of the practical responses taken include: the donation and distribution of new devices (e.g. Everyone Connected, Connecting Scotland, and Digital Communities Wales); the donation and distribution of refurbished devices (e.g. Reboot); the zero-rating of some educational, health and voluntary sector emergency websites (such as Citizens Advice); and actions taken by telecoms providers such as the introduction or improvement of voluntary social tariffs, removing data caps and donating sims / vouchers.

There have been very few nationally coordinated initiatives to address digital exclusion among people with learning disabilities. One such initiative is led by Mencap with support from Digital Unite and Good Things Foundation to provide devices and digital skills support to people with learning disabilities through Mencap's local and regional members. There have also been initiatives at county, city and community levels — for example 100% Digital Leeds is working with third sector partners across Leeds to improve digital inclusion and participation for people with learning disabilities and autism. However, provision is patchy and — in the context of the pandemic — Digital Lifeline bridged a major gap in national support for digitally excluded people with learning disabilities in England.

Delivering Digital Lifeline

Programme support provided by Good Things Foundation

Good Things Foundation is the UK's leading digital inclusion charity. In delivering Digital Lifeline, Good Things Foundation led on procuring devices and data; partnership and project management; data collection and analysis; the recruitment of community and coordination partners to distribute the devices and provide support; and providing training and support to these community and coordination partners. In a survey (n=50)[4] conducted with community partners in June 2021, most agreed that: the programme was well advertised and easy to apply to; that communication from Good Things Foundation was clear; and that the support provided by Good Things Foundation was helpful.

The role of community and coordination partners

In delivering Digital Lifeline, Good Things Foundation worked with 146 community and coordination partners, to identify beneficiaries eligible for devices; to distribute these devices to beneficiaries; and to provide digital skills support to beneficiaries. Some of the community and coordination partners funded through the Digital Lifeline had already been part of Good Things Foundation's **Online Centres Network**, while for others, it was the first time they had worked with Good Things Foundation.

Evolving the 'Everyone Connected' model, the Digital Lifeline Fund introduced the use of 'coordination partners' to increase the geographical reach of the programme, and to ensure that the programme could be delivered in the timeframe. Coordination partners assisted delivery and received an additional grant payment to cover coordination costs (including engagement with beneficiaries, as well as the receipt, delivery and setup of the devices on a larger scale). Over one-fifth of beneficiaries were supported by a coordination partner.

In a survey conducted with community partners in June 2021, all bar one said they had already supported people with learning disabilities prior to delivering Digital Lifeline; and a further 73% said they were experienced in supporting people with long term health conditions or disabilities in addition to a learning disability.

Nearly half (46%) of community partners said they provided care or support services (either in-house, in a specialised care facility, or through carers or support workers making home visits); 18% of community partners said they were specialist education providers; 6% offered community-based support; and 3% said they provided self advocacy or user led support.

The majority of community partners involved in Digital Lifeline (56%) said they were operating at a local level, enabling them to have strong ties to their communities. Over a quarter of partners (27%) said they had a national operation; and 7% said they are regional.

Digital Lifeline beneficiaries

Community partners identified beneficiaries who could benefit from a device through a range of methods including through their direct service delivery and through partnerships with other organisations.

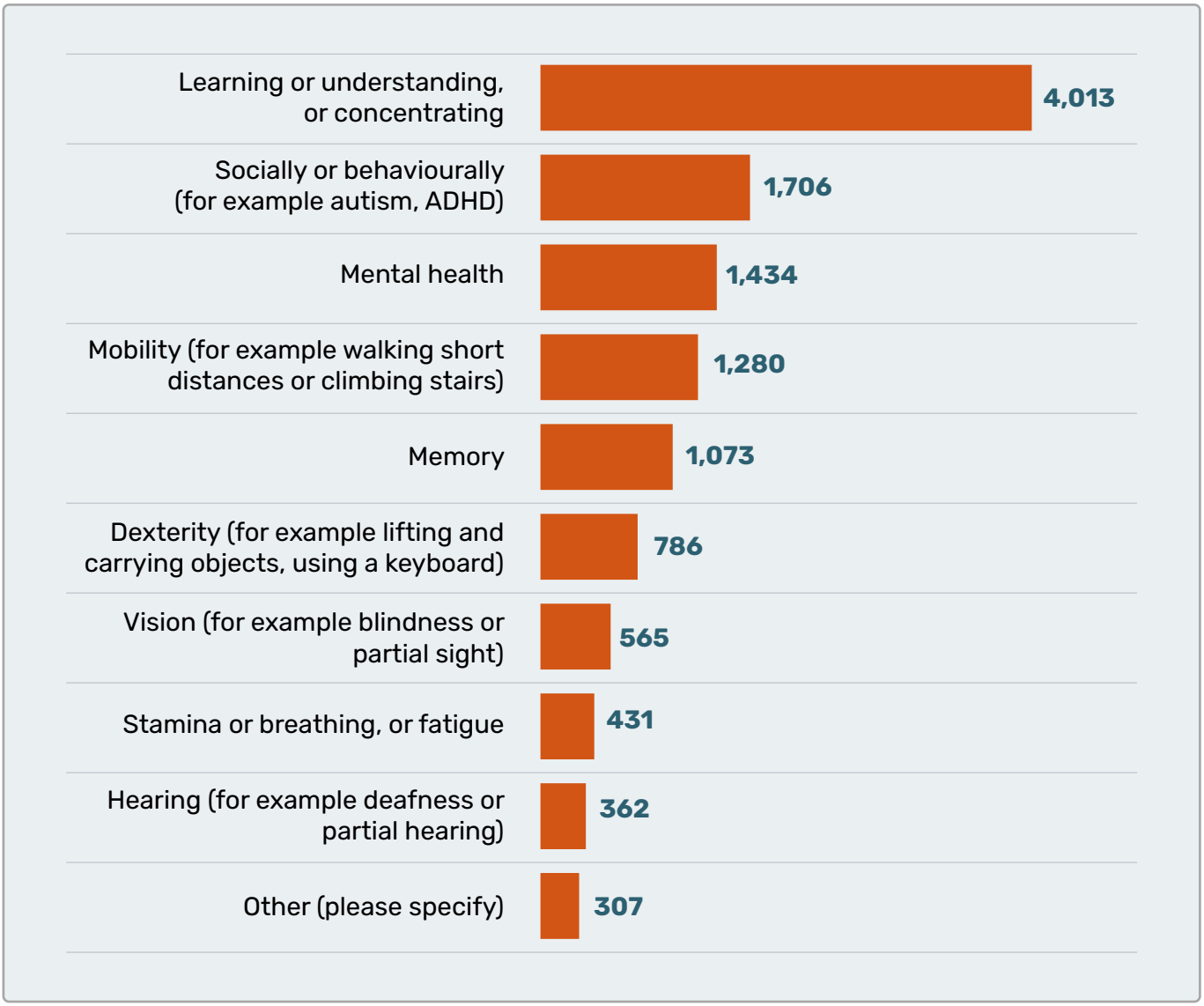
'We went through our database of clients that we were working with, targeted the ones that we felt were most isolated within that group, and then approached them, or their carers, to see whether or not a device like a tablet would help them to engage, or do shopping online, or whatever.'
(Community Partner)

4 The community partner survey captured the impacts of Digital Lifeline on beneficiaries and community partners, as well as feedback regarding the challenges presented by the programme. Community partners who had returned impact data by 10th June 2021 were invited to respond to the survey. Of the 126 community partners who were invited, 50 responded.

Reflecting the aims of the programme, baseline data (n=5,356)[5] found that most beneficiaries receiving devices reported having a learning disability (see Figure 1). A significant number reported additional impairments — for example, 32% said a condition or illness affected them socially or behaviourally; 27% said a condition or illness affected their mental health; and 24% said a condition or illness affected their mobility.

Fifty three percent said they had a condition or illness that impacted a little on their ability to carry out daily activities; 38% said they had a condition or illness that impacted them a lot.

Figure 1: Self reported conditions[6]



5 The baseline survey was completed by beneficiaries (with support from community and coordination partners) on receipt of their device. The survey covered beneficiary demographics, goals and barriers.

6 Beneficiaries could select more than one condition

Digital Lifeline benefited people from a range of backgrounds and demographics:

- People of all ages received devices: 41% of recipients were adults under 34 years old; 25% were aged 55 years or above. (Figure 2).
- More men received devices than women: 57% men compared to 43% women. Four people chose "I'd prefer to describe myself"[7] when asked for their gender (less than 0.1% of all beneficiaries).
- Most recipients (83%) were from a white ethnic group. A significant minority were from black and minority ethnic groups. (Figure 3)
- The majority of recipients reported living with adults other than a spouse or partner, in supported living accomodation or residential care. Very few lived with children. (Figure 4, page 15)

Unfortunately, due to a lack of data on the demographics of the population of people with learning disabilities, it is not possible to determine whether Digital Lifeline beneficiaries were representative of the population of people with learning disabilities as a whole.

Figure 2: Breakdown of Digital Lifeline beneficiaries by age

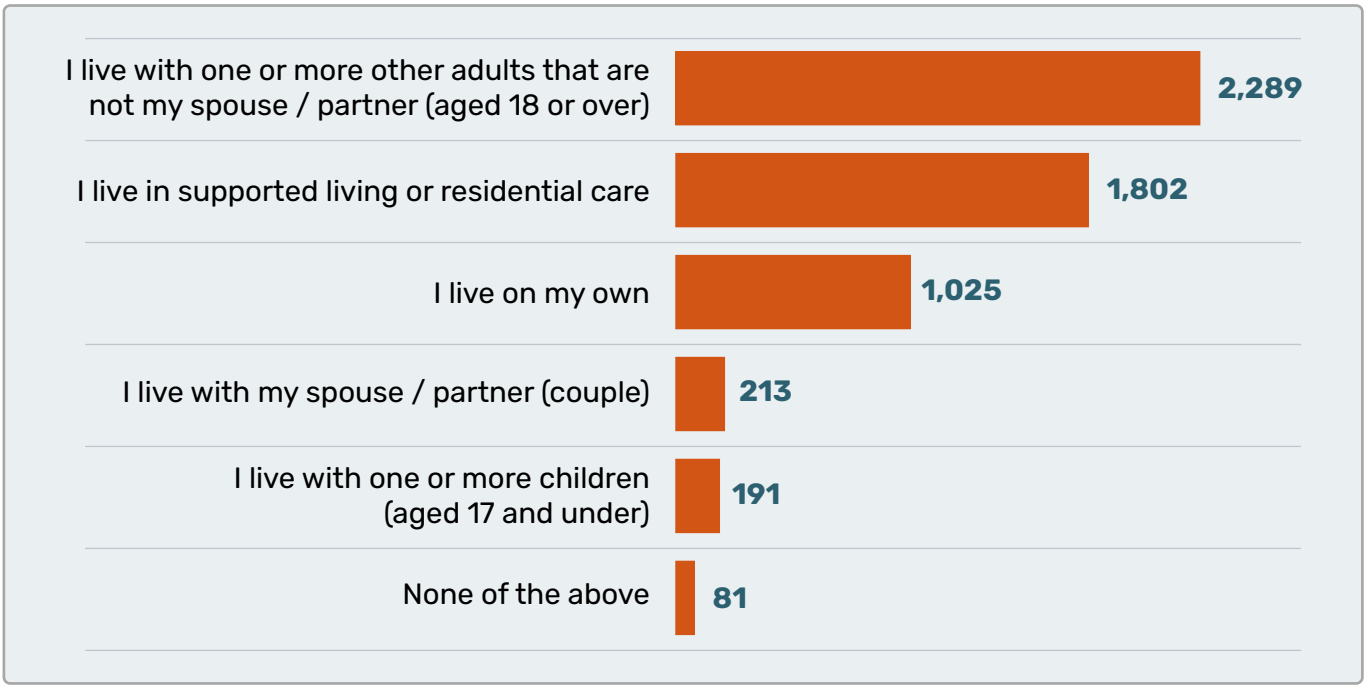
Age group	Share of Digital Lifeline Beneficiaries
16-24 years old	20%
25-34 years old	21%
35-44 years old	17%
45-54 years old	18%
55-64 years old	16%
65-74 years old	7%
75+ years old	2%

Figure 3: Breakdown of Digital Lifeline beneficiaries by ethnic group

Ethnicity	Share of Digital Lifeline beneficiaries
White	83%
Asian / Asian British	8%
Black / African / Caribbean / Black British	5%
Mixed	2%
Other	1%

7 This category could includes people who do not identify as either male or female

Figure 4: Breakdown of beneficiaries by household composition



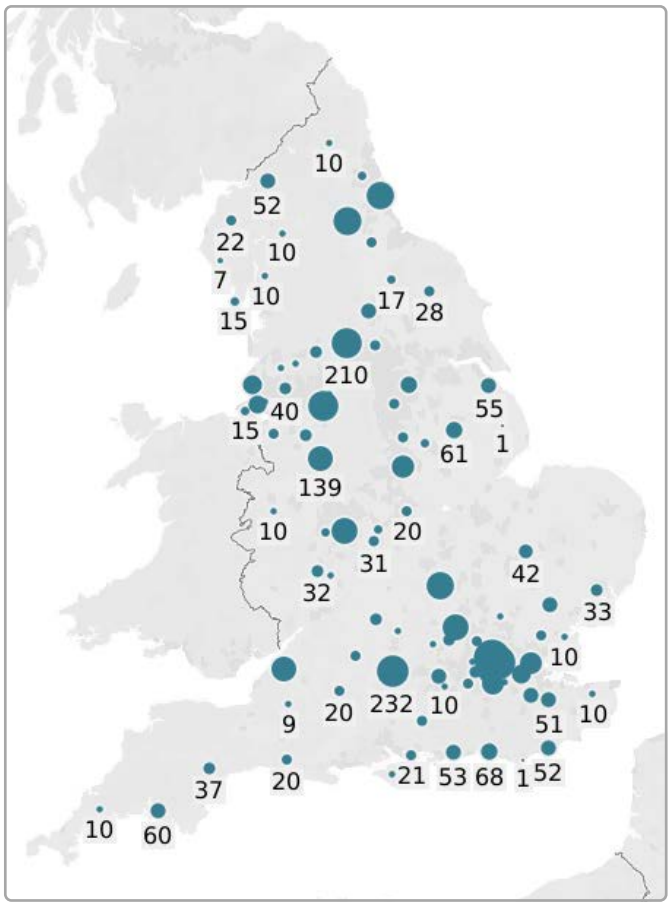
Beneficiaries were well represented in most areas of England. Figure 5 shows the number of baseline survey completions per Local Authority. The number of recipients is indicated by the size of the circle. Overlapping labels are omitted for clarity.[8]

The device distribution process

Devices were predominantly delivered to beneficiaries' homes by staff members or volunteers due to COVID-19 restrictions. Delivering devices by hand was beneficial as staff and volunteers were able to run through device setup and basics with the beneficiary upon receipt of the device. However, this was logistically challenging due to the time constraints of the project and, for those operating across a wider area, the geographic spread of beneficiaries.

Coordination partners were used where devices were being distributed across a wider geography — with logistics firms also sometimes playing a role if an organisation was operating across multiple locations. The use of coordination partners could add extra layers of complexity as

Figure 5: Geographic distribution of programme support



8 211 recipients did not have geographic data available from their community partners and some of the partners are national organisations so could have headquarters in London but distribute outside London, so this data is not fully representative of recipient locations.

it was important to have detailed record keeping processes in order to: stay on top of deadlines and follow-up with the recipients.

'I'd say about fifty percent of [the devices] were hand-delivered. The other fifty percent was sent by recorded delivery because of people shielding, their location, or not being able to get out to them because a lot of our services were actually off-limits because of lockdown.'
(Community Partner)

'We actually worked with partnership agencies. So we worked with an organisation that [...] runs a couple of supported living places, and they had quite a few candidates who they fed through to us.'
(Community Partner)

The device set-up process

The processes that community partners used to set up devices for beneficiaries varied. Larger organisations, and those with larger reach, tended to find it more efficient to pre-load devices with a standard set of apps and resources (such as links to **Learn My Way**[9] or their organisation website). In contrast, smaller community partner organisations, with a more local focus, often had conversations with individual beneficiaries before giving them the device (which enabled them to add a selection of apps tailored to beneficiaries' interests).[10]

'We ensured that we had the tablets set up with each person's own Google account. We connected the Mi-Fi straight away. All the apps were on there. The NHS app was on there. The video app was on there. The guide on how to use the tablet was on there. So what it meant for any user is once they connected the tablet up to the Mi-Fi device, they were able to access information straight away.'
(Community Partner)

Digital skill support provided by community partners

As part of their involvement with Digital Lifeline, community partners were funded £100 to provide basic digital skills support to beneficiaries. Community partners reported that the majority of the initial support provided to beneficiaries took place on a one-to-one basis — either remotely or face-to-face. Although the roll out of Digital Lifeline took place when COVID-19 restrictions were beginning to ease, many beneficiaries were still shielding, and many others still felt uncomfortable returning to group learning environments. Community partners were keen to provide support in an environment where the beneficiary felt safe, and one-to-one support was often the best way to meet this need.

The initial stages of support provided by community partners often focussed on the basics, such as turning on the device, connecting it to the MIFI unit and adjusting settings (e.g. changing the volume). Community partners commented that teaching beneficiaries these skills was often much easier to communicate one-to-one. One-to-one support in the initial stages was also beneficial in growing beneficiaries' confidence because it allowed them to ask questions in a non-judgemental environment and learn at their own pace. Several community partners we spoke to also noted that providing support one-to-one, helped them to understand the support needs of their beneficiaries better.

'A lot of the clients did need that one-on-one support throughout, one-to-one training and group sessions online.'
(Community Partner)

After the tablet was delivered to beneficiaries, and they had been shown the basics, many community partners provided a series of training sessions to further expand beneficiaries' skills. In many instances these training sessions were fairly informal, however

9 Learn My Way is an online platform run by Good Things Foundation offering free online courses to help people learn digital skills to stay safe and connected.
10 It is worth noting that not all smaller, local organisations had the capacity to take this personalised approach

a small number of community partners put together a more structured 'curriculum' of topics. Most community partners also provided support in relation to staying safe online — either through formalised training, sharing resources, or offering informal guidance.

'We gave out an easy-read staying safe online guide with every device, and then I said, "If you want further training, there's training resources available so you can book in with [name] or you can phone me and we can give you further training resources on that".'
(Community Partner)

Following the initial period of support, community partners tried to follow up with beneficiaries on a regular basis. Despite not being funded to do so, many community partners are continuing to support beneficiaries to use their device several months later — either through one-to-one support, group sessions or via providing 'troubleshooting advice'. A small number of community partners are also offering accredited IT courses.

'Because of the groups that we work with, we engage with them on a weekly basis anyway, it's easy for them to keep coming back to us. And that's the main thing, is providing that support once the project's finished.'
(Community Partner)

Community partners used a range of resources to support training sessions — but Learn My Way was the most mentioned among those we spoke to. That said, many community partners commented that Learn My Way, alone, was not sufficient to provide all teaching material — and that accessibility challenges made it challenging for beneficiaries to use Learn My Way for self-led learning.

During the delivery of the programme, 2,023 Digital Lifeline beneficiaries (37% of beneficiaries) logged onto the basic digital skills platform Learn My Way (provided by Good Things Foundation). Of those that logged in 371 (18%) started courses and 214 (11%) completed courses.[11] A substantial number of those not using Learn my Way said they were waiting for COVID-19 restrictions to ease fully before holding in person sessions using Learn My Way.

'So we directed people to Learn My Way, because we started drafting up resources and then we saw all the resources on Learn My Way, which were short bite-sized pieces, easy to use. So we directed people along with staff teams as well, because it was free to sign up to Learn My Way.'
(Community Partner)

The role of beneficiaries' wider support network

Families and carers could play a vital role in whether or not a beneficiary was able to take part in the programme, and the extent to which they were able to benefit from having the device and data.

Most families and carers were excited and engaged with the programme from the start — and in a small number of cases families and carers played a connector role, referring other beneficiaries into the programme. However, community partners mentioned that there were also a sizable minority of families and carers who did not immediately recognise the value that the device could bring to the person they supported.

'Families have referred other beneficiaries. They are important in providing care for people and have been very excited about this opportunity.'
(Community Partner)

Families, carers and support workers could also play a very important role in providing informal support alongside the support provided by community partners — particularly if a beneficiary had higher support needs. Beneficiaries with higher support needs tended to make more progress in their digital confidence, motivation and skills if they had families, carers and support workers who were able and willing to spend the time supporting them to use their device.

11 Based on analysis of Learn My Way usage

'We have such a broad range of customers. Non-verbal, blind, deaf. For someone like that, the carer does a lot. Carers do the physical facilitation of the device with a lot of customers. For more vulnerable customers, carers are highly involved.'
(Community Partner)

'I think it is very useful that people that are suffering from these mental disabilities have carers and family members that can also assist in building their skills [...] we noticed that working with this particular group, there's heightened anxiety and a need to constantly ask questions, not just at the times of designated support.'
(Community Partner)

Accessibility-related support provided by AbilityNet

AbilityNet are experts in supporting people with disabilities to use technology. As part of the Digital Lifeline, AbilityNet ensured beneficiaries and community partners had access to: specialist advice and assessments about how to adapt devices to meet beneficiary needs; additional assistive equipment; training and information on accessibility and disability related considerations of the project through resources such as their Helpline service.

AbilityNet supported 971 beneficiaries (18% of the total 5,500 beneficiaries) with an initial and follow up assessment(s) and, where required, additional assistive or adaptive technology to support them to use their device. 371 people (38%) of those supported received a full needs assessment and further advice, and 2,354 items of equipment were provided to beneficiaries (AbilityNet 2021).

AbilityNet (2021) noted that the biggest barriers faced by those they supported were inputting text, understanding text and operating the tablet. The most used adjustments to devices were Action Blocks, Voice Assistants and magnification. AbilityNet also provided assistive hardware including external keyboards, styluses and cases.

'The assessments were invaluable; I think that this should be used for all applicants as standard. Helped people identify things they needed – apps and extra equipment'
(Community Partner)

AbilityNet also provided training sessions to 121 community partners to help them better assist the people with learning disabilities they were supporting, and 101 community partners were also matched with a volunteer buddy to provide ongoing support beyond the project date (AbilityNet 2021).

'It has been said that they [AbilityNet] are at the end of the phone if we need anything further, which is very reassuring, especially as we are supporting 60+ individuals with devices just in our service area alone'
(Community Partner)

Digital champion online training support provided by Digital Unite

Digital Unite are specialists in digital champion training, and as part of Digital Lifeline they have supported community partners of Digital Lifeline to embed digital inclusion into their services. Through the Aspire platform, they have provided online training and content for digital champions to develop their own skills, and teach those skills to others.

By the end of October 2021, 69 community and coordination partners had accessed Digital Unite's platform, and 288 Digital Unite 'Champion' online courses had been completed. The top resources accessed by Self-Advocates have been: the one-to-one session plan template; 'Become a Zoom expert' lesson plans; 'Getting started with a laptop or desktop computer' and a video on tips for communicating with people with learning disabilities. The following were also among the top resources viewed by Digital Champions overall: simple activities to get someone with a learning disability started with digital skills; the one-to-one session plan template; getting started with a laptop or desktop computer; the learner planning and review sheet; and getting started with social media.[12]

12 Based on Aspire learning report, shared by Digital Unite: usage data up to end of October 2021

Only a small number of community partners that we spoke to as part of the qualitative evaluation had accessed support through Digital Unite. Many of the community partners we spoke to commented that the type of support that Digital Lifeline felt less relevant for the stage — as not all beneficiaries were at the point where they were able to teach others. Digital Unite also reported that even when the lead contact for a community partner was willing to engage with Aspire, they often needed time, and support, to engage others within their organisation to take the offer up.[13]

Among those who have accessed Aspire, there has been a high level of engagement with the learning content. Digital Lifeline learners spend longer exploring resources than the average Aspire user, and also report higher levels of satisfaction with the learning content. Ninety six percent of Digital Lifeline Aspire users recommend the training on the platform, and compared to the average learner, Digital Lifeline learners were more likely to say that: Aspire courses were relevant to their learning needs; Aspire courses had increased their knowledge; Aspire courses had increased their confidence; and that doing Aspire courses will help them to help others.[14]

'I've really enjoyed doing the Aspire courses. As I'm relatively new to the industry, I found that the platform was a great way to find the information that I needed, without feeling like it was a silly question!'
(Community Partner)

'Digital Unite was useful. Went on, looked at their courses and stuff and we ran through the Zoom session on there, and in fact I attended one of their seminars where they covered more about what they provide in terms of the service.'
(Community Partner)

Many of the community partners we spoke to were open to exploring Aspire in the future, and suggested Digital Unite's resources could be useful once beneficiaries had had the time to build their digital skills a bit more. Digital Unite will continue to provide access to the Aspire platform for community partners that were involved in delivering Digital Lifeline (and those that were unsuccessful in their funding application), until December 2021.

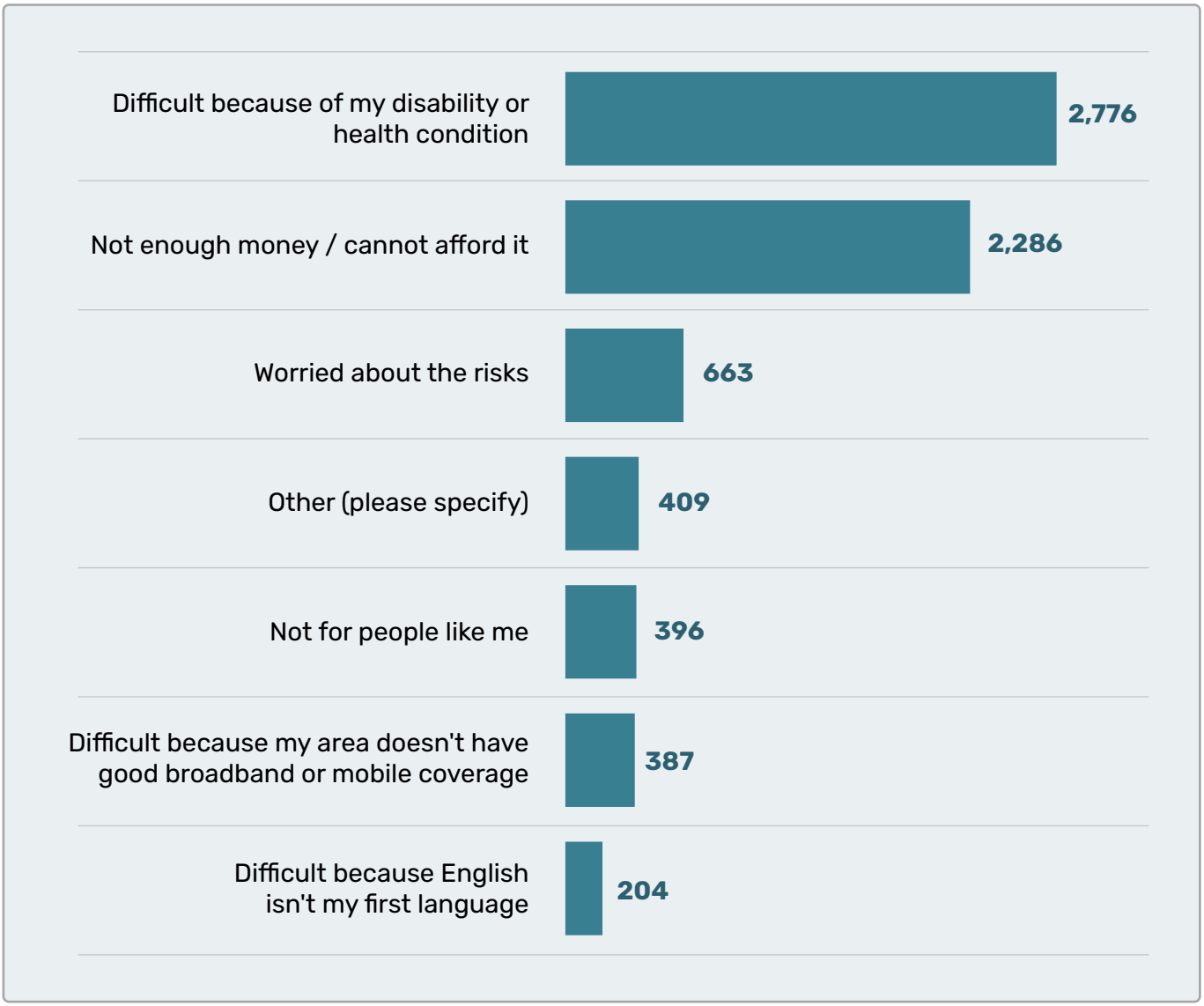
13 Based on Aspire learning report, shared by Digital Unite
14 Based on Aspire learning report, shared by Digital Unite: usage data up to end of October 2021

The beneficiary experience of Digital Lifeline

What barriers were beneficiaries facing to getting online?

The most commonly reported barriers to using the internet among beneficiaries were: having a disability or health condition (52%) and not being able to afford a device (43%). These reflect the aims and selection criteria for the programme – and were successfully addressed through the Digital Lifeline (Good Things Foundation, 2021).

Figure 6: Beneficiary responses to the question: What prevents you from using the internet/using it more at home?



What did beneficiaries want to use their device for?

When completing the baseline survey, beneficiaries were asked to select up to three goals for what they wanted to use their device to do. The most mentioned intended uses for the received devices were to: connect with friends and family; for interests and hobbies; and to connect with support groups or services (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Beneficiary responses to the question: What do you MOST want to be able to do when you get your device? (You can select up to three).

Desired outcome from using device	Number of Digital Lifeline beneficiaries
To connect with friends and family	3,628
For interests and hobbies	3,078
To connect with support groups	1,866
For learning or training	1,441
For information, help or advice	1,154
For my health and wellbeing	989
To make life easier (e.g. online shopping)	839
To learn how to keep safe online	522
For work or business	165
For money or benefits	127
To help or care for my family	52

How are beneficiaries using their devices?

As part of the qualitative evaluation, we followed up with 57 beneficiaries to understand the longer term impact of Digital Lifeline. The qualitative evaluation was conducted from July to October 2021 (which means that beneficiaries had had their device for several months).

Most beneficiaries we spoke to were still using their tablet regularly; and over half were using it at least once a day. The key activities that beneficiaries said they were using their tablet for aligned with their stated goals on receiving the device: the most common uses for devices were for connectivity and entertainment.

Many beneficiaries were using their tablets to connect with their families and friends, through video calls, or social media — and, among those who were not yet able to use their tablets for video-conferencing, many mentioned that this was the next thing they would like to learn.

'I was pleased to get the tablet to communicate with people on the tablet and get to know people. It gives me some independence.'
(Beneficiary)

'I know two young ladies have become very firm friends through that, and they talk about relationships and difficulties, and some quite serious stuff, but also light and fun stuff as well, so it's a genuine friendship that two people have formed, never having met before.'
(Community Partner)

Many beneficiaries were also using the tablets to explore their hobbies and interests. In some instances this entailed engaging with these hobbies and interests online; in others it could be searching for opportunities to engage with these hobbies and interests offline. A lot of the participants also mentioned the use of their device to stay active either via activities on Zoom such as Zumba classes or researching activities in the community and accessing those.

'It's helped us be active because we've looked up events around the city and then we go to them.'
(Beneficiary)

'I use it for drawing pictures and music, I have sensory apps that are downloaded. It means that I can now listen to music and I can do my sensory stuff.'
(Beneficiary)

Many beneficiaries also reported using their tablets for the purpose of learning. In some instances this could entail learning new digital skills, in other cases this could link to their engagement with hobbies or interests.

'I've been able to learn new skills and find things on my own.'
(Beneficiary)

'I'm particularly proud of learning how to search for music bands. Everyone should have their own device because it makes them feel confident.'
(Beneficiary)

A small number of beneficiaries used their tablet to access online health services, online financial services, online shopping, or for work or volunteering. However, these were not common activities among those we spoke to. As we will explore later, the gaps in current usage may not be due to a lack of motivation — but rather a reflection of factors such as the level of ongoing support a beneficiary has access to, what types of activities they are encouraged to explore, and whether or not they can continue to access the internet after their data allowance has run out.

'Zoom was new to a lot of people, and as we're coming up with the health appointments, they're being supported to use the device to talk to their GP locally.'
(Community Partner)

'He learnt how to repair bikes through using YouTube. And now he does a little bit of a repair on his friend's bikes for a little bit of pocket money.'
(Community Partner)

Case Study: Muhammad[15]

Muhammad's tablet allowed him to be more active, learn new things, become more comfortable with technology, grow in confidence and interact with others. He used his tablet so much he ran out of data.

When describing how he uses his tablet, Muhammad said, ***'it actually introduced me to a new hobby, which was drawing.'***

He also explained that he had used the tablet to join a drama group.

'In the drama group online, we were learning how to use a basic form of sign language to sing a song called Lean on Me.'

Muhammad also joined a shared reading group, describing it as 'sharing things from your life. It was intriguing and interesting for people to be able to relate to each other and have a chat.'

In addition to this, Muhammad also used his tablet to represent his organisation at a community organising conference, where he ***'talked about setting up groups to facilitate for people who have been stuck and have not been able to get out of their houses.'***

He said that ***'it felt good to be representing [my organisation]'***.

Case Study: Fatima[16]

Fatima uses the tablet for her job, which involves creating games.

'I use the tablet mainly for programs for creating games.'

She uses various programs, such as Sketchbook, Zoom and Photopea to create these games.

Even though Fatima has moderate communication difficulties, she is still able to use her tablet to pursue her passions through paid employment. Her story shows how important it is for people with learning disabilities to be trained and given opportunities for paid employment.

Beneficiary Feedback

All of the beneficiaries who gave feedback as part of the qualitative evaluation were happy to receive their device, and all except one had said that it made a difference to their life.

'It would be useful for everyone to have a computer.'
(Beneficiary)

'It was like a Christmas present for many of the people. And one of the questions we were asked, like, "Can we keep it?" It was just, "Of course. It's yours." I think it's made a huge impact on the people.'
(Community Partner)

Most beneficiaries had the appetite to continue using their device and were keen to expand their digital skills. Some of the activities that people wanted to learn included being able to access online health services, being able to pay bills online or access online banking, being able to

15 Names have been changed
16 Names have been changed

use the internet for online shopping, and being able to use the internet for work or volunteering.

'I would like to video call my family, do presentations on it and use it more for my volunteer role'.
(Beneficiary)

'I'd like to do online shopping and see if I could purchase a ticket for a football match.'
(Beneficiary)

'I want to settle my GP appointments and all of my appointments on my tablet but I just don't know how.'
(Beneficiary)

Although lockdown restrictions were loosening at the time of our research (July - October 2021), many beneficiaries and community partners commented that there was still a large need for the tablets because things wouldn't be going back to normal. A lot of beneficiaries were still cautious about the impacts of COVID-19 and were wary about leaving home. Both beneficiaries and community partners were also aware that many services would remain online even after the pandemic, and therefore that having a device and a connection remained very important.

What does meaningful support look like for beneficiaries?

Our research with community partners, beneficiaries and families and carers highlighted a number of learnings in relation to what constitutes meaningful digital inclusion support for people with learning disabilities. The successes of the support provided through Digital Lifeline were:

A new device that was given, not loaned:

Beneficiaries really valued having a device that was theirs and that they owned. This was partly because it made them feel valued and recognised as an individual. However, it was also because owning the device allowed them to practice and experiment without having to worry about breaking it or having to give it back. A new device could also help to alleviate fears around safety — for example, one community partner mentioned that beneficiaries became worried if they had opened the device packaging before giving it to them.

'Everyone should have their own tablet to keep in touch with their family.'
(Beneficiary)

'Oh, I think they've definitely felt – because, you know, to get that and to feel like it's yours and you own it, I think that's definitely given them confidence to use it more often.'
(Community Partner)

Support delivered by someone the beneficiary trusts:

Receiving support from someone that beneficiaries know and trust was often vital to their engagement with the programme. Community partners played a crucial role in encouraging beneficiaries to use their tablet, and provided a safe environment for beneficiaries to grow their digital confidence.

Being supported by someone they know and trust has also made it easier for beneficiaries to reach out to ask for advice or guidance when they get stuck. This was important because it helped beneficiaries to overcome barriers in their learning journey. Community partners noted that after receiving devices and becoming familiar with using them, many beneficiaries were initiating communication themselves, rather than waiting for staff members to check in.

Support tailored to the stage in the learning journey:

Community partners commented that one-to-one support was often crucial in the initial stages of digital learning, as it allowed beneficiaries to ask questions in a non-judgemental environment and to learn at their own pace. As beneficiaries became more confident, group training and support could also be effective to grow beneficiaries' digital skills and facilitate peer learning — but community partners noted that this was more effective later in a beneficiary's learning journey.

'That's been really useful, I think, because a lot of the people with autism or ADHD aren't able to do group activities or engage in group activities easily. So … we've learnt a bit about that so we'll actually do more one-to-ones with the people who need the individualised support.'
(Community Partner)

Personalised support that takes into account the needs of the individual:

Community partners noted that it was important to personalise support to the needs of the beneficiary, and that factors such as a beneficiary's support needs, accessibility needs, age, levels of literacy and understanding of English could influence how they provide support. For example, several of the community partners noted that older beneficiaries tended to need greater support to understand the value of using the internet than younger beneficiaries — which, in turn, meant that community partners needed to provide more upfront support to break down motivational barriers among older beneficiaries. Other community partners noted that beneficiaries with severe or profound and multiple learning disabilities could require a higher level of, more regular, one-to-one support, than those with mild or moderate learning disabilities.

'We did change our sessions, depending on, as I said, people with moderate learning disabilities, to those who are more severe. We had to change them and we had to, in a way, slow them down and we had to give more additional hours.'
(Community Partner)

Using specialist support and assistive technology to aid learning:

Community partners were pleasantly surprised by the extent to which assistive equipment helped beneficiaries to engage with their tablet. Community partners commented that assistive equipment and software was beneficial for all those using it — but were particularly surprised by the impact it had for people with higher support needs.

'Some of the accessibility tools as well, like having the screen reader and things like that, for people who can't read. That's been great. I know that one lady has been working with a volunteer, and she's managed to put an app for audiobooks on there. '
(Community Partner)

'AbilityNet has been great. They've given loads of training on the accessibility tools, they've been really helpful. We've been paired with a local volunteer coordinator there. He's answered some technical questions for me.'
(Community Partner)

Case Study: Lucy[17]

The first thing Lucy did with her tablet was install a braille keyboard on it. She said: ***"We looked on the internet at downloading apps that were accessible for the blind, we got it from AbilityNet, and we were able to put a braille keyboard on it so that I can type in braille. […] it is amazing."***

She is now using her tablet for social media, Google and checking the weather.

She expressed the difference that having a tablet with a braille keyboard made in her life, saying: ***"It's been brilliant. It's opened up a lot of opportunities to be able to look up certain things on the internet and look up things in more depth."***

She also expressed interest and enthusiasm in learning how to do new tasks, including shopping online, FaceTime, sending emails, and listening to music.

17 Names have been changed

Using hooks to encourage engagement:

Many community partners commented that linking digital skills training to the hobbies or interests of beneficiaries could help to overcome motivational barriers, and facilitate a fun way for beneficiaries to learn. For example, several community partners noted that using games and puzzles that were already familiar to beneficiaries (e.g solitaire or chess) were good ways to interest people in using a device, and build up skills such as using a touch screen in a fun and engaging way.

'So we've got people that have been downloading apps for entertainment, whether that's games or puzzles, or anything like that. People have been using YouTube for movies and entertainment. We've got people who are blind and non-verbal but they like to listen to music, so it's quite useful for them to have apps for music.'
(Community Partner)

Ongoing support to repeat and build learning:

Community partners noted that people with learning disabilities must be allowed to learn at their own pace, and that acquiring digital skills cannot be rushed. Building confidence by regularly using the device for simple tasks such as playing games is essential before beneficiaries can progress to more complex tasks like online shopping and online banking. Using a device has to become habitual to ensure beneficiaries have the confidence to explore the internet in different ways. Staff members, volunteers, carers and family members often have to actively encourage device use before it becomes ingrained in a beneficiary's routine.

'So that's something that we've instilled in the staff, is that we want regular and consistent use of [the device]. Persistency has definitely paid off. Because for a lot of our customers, you lose interest [...] it will be forgotten about and it won't be used.'
(Community Partner)

'So I'd say the motivation is there a lot of the time, but for a number of the beneficiaries, they still need prompting to remind them, and then they would be motivated. Like if you didn't say to them in the morning, "Oh, do you want to use your tablet today?" they might not think about it.'
(Community Partner)

Encouraging people to take ownership of their learning:

In order to ensure that beneficiaries realise long term digital skills gains, it is important that they are provided with the training to be able to use their tablet with as little support as possible. Community partners noted that it could sometimes be challenging to encourage people to take ownership of their learning, as they were used to having things done for them. However, community partners noted it was important to teach people how to do a task, and not do it for them. Beneficiaries needed to be shown how to do a new task and be given the opportunities to practice in different environments in order to embed their learning.

'People forget. Our guys need repetition and practice, and when they're not doing that all the time independently, because they're quite used to sometimes being dependent. I think sometimes some customers can get used to depending on other people to do things for them. So I guess it's remembering how to do very small things, sometimes, and that can be a barrier to progression as well.'
(Community Partner)

Support to help beneficiaries and their support networks to stay safe online:

Online safety could be a concern for beneficiaries, and their families, carers and support workers and many community partners developed online safety resources to allay these fears — either sending these resources out with the tablets, or uploading the resources onto the devices themselves. A sizable minority of community partners also provided online safety training to staff, volunteers, beneficiaries,

Case Study: Kobe and Charles[18]

Kobe and Charles are brothers. While they enjoy using their tablets and are quick learners, they both seem a bit afraid of technology.

The brothers rely heavily on their support worker and do not want to use their tablets independently because they are afraid of making a mistake with it. They do not want to bring their tablets home with them, so their tablets stay at the day centre.

When asked if there was anything they would like to do by themselves, the brothers replied: ***'We leave it where it is. No, it's quite complicated. We don't want to change it.'***

families and carers. Many of these community partners noted that it was important to provide this training to beneficiaries' wider network as well, as fears about online safety were not always coming from beneficiaries themselves.

'Anxiety [about online safety] is generally higher amongst people with learning disabilities than the wider population [...] and sometimes family members kind of feed those fears. "Make sure you're very careful, make sure ... Don't do this. Don't do that. Don't share your thing with that." And it just builds up this sense of something to be afraid of.'
(Community Partner)

'I'm not shopping online, I don't trust the internet. I'm a bit worried about getting hacked.'
(Beneficiary)

Including families, carers and support workers in digital skills training:

Beneficiaries often reaped greater rewards if they were able to practice their digital skills on a regular basis at home. As a result, the role of families, carers and support workers could often be very important in the extent to which a beneficiary was able to progress with their device — particularly for beneficiaries with higher support needs.

'I'd say, for certain people, I would arrange, when there was a family member or carer there, if that's what they needed. And that was the key to getting them on really, because some people just needed somebody there to help them.'
(Community Partner)

The extent to which a family or carer was willing or able to provide support was influenced by their engagement with the process; the time they had available; and their level of digital confidence, motivations and skills. While community partners could not influence the amount of time that families, carers and support workers had to provide support, they explained that including them in the digital skills support provided to beneficiaries could help to engage families and carers with the project, and grow their confidence in using the tablet.

What were the barriers to providing meaningful support?

As well as highlighting what worked well in the support provided by community partners, our research also highlighted a number of barriers that could stop community partners from being able to provide high quality support to beneficiaries. These barriers related to connectivity; confidence and skills gaps among those that support beneficiaries; and the timelines of Digital Lifeline delivery.

18 Names have been changed

Connectivity barriers

1. Lack of a sustainable data solution

As it has now been several months since beneficiaries received their device, some beneficiaries have now used up their data allowance. Beneficiaries who do not have access to WIFI in their homes, are using their devices for activities that require a lot of data, or are sharing the device with other people in their household are more likely to have used up their data allowance.

A significant portion of the community partners we spoke to mentioned that they had provided guidance to beneficiaries about the types of activities that required large amounts of data. However, this could restrict beneficiaries from exploring the full remit of activities available to them online — not to mention the fact that the activities that people were most likely to want to do were often data intensive (e.g. communicating with family and friends).

A small number of community partners have tried to set beneficiaries up with affordable data packages but these are not accessible to everyone, and community partners mentioned that one-time data top ups are not sustainable in the long term. A small number have also applied for grants to buy beneficiaries extra data, either through Good Things Foundation or other organisations. Where possible, community partners have also been directing beneficiaries to use public WIFI — though this has safety implications if beneficiaries are using unsecured public WIFI to make payments or input any sensitive information which could be hacked.

'Two particular customers then went in to buy their own data and if I recall, that wasn't very cheap, actually, for what we wanted to use because it became like a learning aid for her children as well. So they used to do online classes on it, as well as watch YouTube videos.'
(Community Partner)

'The data was sufficient – as it says it's for about two years - but it does depend on how you utilise it. My sister is quite good at limiting the amount of data she uses, she's got to know that because I said you've got to use it then turn it off then you will save the data.'
(Family / Carer)

2. Communicating data limits to beneficiaries:

Community partners noted that communicating what 'data' is and how it can be used was one of the most challenging topics to explain to beneficiaries. For example, several community partners mentioned that beneficiaries could become confused about the difference between the data amount (24GB), and the length of time the data was valid for (two years). Several of the community partners we spoke to had created information sheets about how data works, activities that use up data quickly, and what to do when data runs out — though these community partners mentioned that some beneficiaries still remained confused about what the data limit meant.

'I think the challenge is just sort of understanding about the data, understanding what that actually means – you know, about gigabytes and megabytes and all of that, and actually half an hour video messaging call will probably suck up this much.'
(Community Partner)

Confidence and skills barriers:

1. Safety concerns from family, carers and community partners, limiting beneficiary learning

A lack of confidence, or concerns about safety, could lead community partner staff and volunteers to restrict the learning of people with learning disabilities.

Community partners were provided with guidance on the approach that they should take to safeguarding and online safety[19] during Digital Lifeline. This guidance outlined that the Digital Lifeline project team and community

19 See: Digital Lifeline: Safeguarding and Online Safety Approach for more details.

partners were expected to acknowledge that device beneficiaries are adults, and that community partners were expected to support people to make informed decisions about what they access online.

In general, community partners followed this guidance. However, there were a few instances where there was evidence of staff and volunteers restricting beneficiaries' opportunities to receive and use their devices. For example, rather than providing online safety training to beneficiaries, one community partner mentioned that they were using the ability to be safe online as an eligibility criteria for the programme — during the risk assessment stage, they had considered a person's perceived tendency towards unsafe online behaviours (such as online gambling) in whether or not to provide them with a device. Another community partner mentioned that, rather than allowing beneficiaries to take their tablets home, they had felt it was safer to keep the tablets at their centre for beneficiaries to use there. Several community partners had also made a decision not to access support from AbilityNet and Digital Unite because they thought that beneficiaries would be uncomfortable receiving support from a stranger.

There were also instances where families and carers could act as gatekeepers to beneficiaries taking part in Digital Lifeline and making progress with their device. A significant minority of families and carers could underestimate the extent to which the person they supported would be able to learn new digital skills and benefit from having a device. Many families and carers also had concerns about online safety, and were worried about exposing the person they support to undue risks such as financial scams and bullying. Feedback from families, carers and community partners suggests that this may have been more of a concern for older family and carers than younger family and carers.

Often, the act of participating in Digital Lifeline helped to allay the misconceptions held by families and carers. However, in order for this to happen they needed to take part in the first place. Community partners commented that convincing reluctant families and carers to take part required a considerable investment of time (upfront and on an ongoing basis) — which was challenging given the short time frames of the project.

'I would say probably twenty percent of the beneficiaries, their family, were resistant to the tablets. We're still working with them to show them, give them the confidence in what a tablet is, what it can do and everything else like that.'
(Community Partner)

'I was worried that he would get confused when I wasn't with him, I was worried they may go to an unknown site.'
(Family / Carer)

2. A lack of digital motivation, confidence and skills among community partner staff and volunteers, and families, carers and support workers

The level of digital confidence and skills among community partner staff and volunteers could influence the extent to which they were able to provide meaningful support to beneficiaries. A significant number of staff and volunteers were not confident setting up tablets, let alone teaching others how to develop digital skills. In response to this, many community partners had encouraged staff and volunteers to participate in training courses with beneficiaries (where provided), and a small number had enlisted specialist IT support staff to train staff delivering Digital Lifeline.

'So even though 50 percent were sort of confident and 50 percent not so confident, I would say, genuinely, it was really that sort of split which shocked me, because I thought our staff would all know how to use them.'
(Community Partner)

'So I would say, being honest, if you score it out of ten, I'd say, at the beginning, [staff] were about four, and by the end, they were probably about seven and eight. There's still a weird lack of confidence with IT, for some reason.'
(Community Partner)

Families, carers and support workers could also sometimes lack the skills needed to be able to support a beneficiary with their device. In fact, sometimes, the reticence of families and carers to take part in Digital Lifeline was not due to the perceived capabilities of the person they support, but due to their own abilities. Feedback from families, carers and community partners suggests that this may have been more of a barrier for older family and carers than younger family and carers.

'Certainly, there were parents who just never used a computer either and just weren't confident.'
(Community Partner)

Time and capacity barriers:

Time restraints could also be an issue for those supporting beneficiaries. Community partners were often delivering other services alongside Digital Lifeline, which could restrict their ability to provide digital skills support. Similarly, support workers often only had a limited time to spend with beneficiaries, and had to focus on their 'essential' care duties rather than providing digital skills support. Families and carers were also often juggling support alongside other employment, household duties and care for the wider family — which could limit the amount of time they could spend helping a beneficiary with their device.

'Unfortunately, yes […] that's around the capacity of the people in support positions and support roles, and their confidence to be able to impart the skills and techniques that people need to make the most of it.'
(Community Partner)

'I'm sad with the tablet because the staff at home aren't helping me.'
(Beneficiary)

Digital Lifeline Impacts

Early impacts for beneficiaries

An early impact survey was conducted with beneficiaries 2-4 weeks after they received their device. It covered questions on: hours of support received/provided; skills achieved and other outcomes. It was completed by 4,759 beneficiaries (87% of all beneficiaries), with support from community and coordination partners. Ninety one percent of beneficiaries who completed an impact survey reported experiencing at least one benefit from the programme.

The general outcomes participants were most likely to agree they had achieved were feeling more confident in general (68%), feeling their digital skills had improved (64%), feeling more connected (57%) and feeling less lonely (52%).

The digital skills which participants improved the most were using their device for interests and hobbies (37%), staying safe online (32%), finding information (25%) and video calling (22%).

The degree to which participants experienced benefits varied according to the amount of time they were supported, age, disability, ethnicity and household composition:

- Participants who received less than 1 hour of support were less likely to report that they had done something for the first time, felt more confident with a skill, or had experienced a positive outcome.
- Older adults (55 years and older) were less likely to report they had experienced a positive outcome, despite typically receiving more hours of support than younger adults. This may be due to a number of different factors — including the extent to which people had used digital devices before participating in Digital Lifeline and the skills and confidence of those supporting them.
- The Digital Lifeline programme appeared more beneficial for those who reported that their disability or conditions impact their lives a lot. People whose disability or condition impacts them a lot were more likely to agree that: their digital skills had improved; they felt more able to stay safe online; they felt more confident in general.
- People from minority ethnic backgrounds were more likely to say they had gained confidence through receiving the device than people from a white ethnic background. Specifically, they were more likely to feel confident in relation to: finding information online; finding help or advice they could trust online; using a device for interests or hobbies and using email or messaging apps. People from Asian ethnic backgrounds were more likely to say they felt less lonely than people from white ethnic backgrounds.
- Beneficiaries who live with a partner or with one or more children were more likely to experience positive outcomes than people in other living situations. People living alone typically reported worse outcomes than those living with partners or children, and better outcomes than those living with adults other than a partner, or beneficiaries in supported accommodation.

Longer term impacts for beneficiaries

Building on the early impact data the qualitative evaluation explored the longer term impacts for beneficiaries. The evaluation findings share similarities with what was reported by the early impact data, but highlight the strengthening of some of these impacts and the emergence of new impacts. The evaluation findings also highlight that there is still more work to be done to secure long term digital inclusion for people with learning disabilities.

Improved digital access:

All beneficiaries who were supported through Digital Lifeline had previously been unable to access the internet. Digital Lifeline was designed to address this lack of access through providing a tablet (chosen for value and accessibility) and connectivity; 971 beneficiaries were also supported to understand their accessibility needs and, where required, were provided with additional assistive or adaptive technology to support them to use their device.

In some cases, the tablet and data provided to a beneficiary was the first device and connection in the household, or the first device of its kind in the household. In these instances Digital Lifeline brought digital access not just to the beneficiary, but also to their family or wider support network.

'One woman who received the tablet has several children who are using it for school and she was absolutely in tears. She couldn't believe it and was absolutely overwhelmed, really.'
(Community Partner)

Improved digital skills:

The Digital Lifeline programme has helped many beneficiaries to improve their digital skills. Community partners have supported people to learn basic digital skills, and many beneficiaries now feel comfortable using their tablet to speak to friends and family, learn new things, and engage with their hobbies and interests.

'The biggest improvement is switching it on and looking at stuff. It sounds really basic, but it really is that basic for a lot of people who have not had access to this before.'
(Community Partner)

There was also evidence that the skills gained through Digital Lifeline went wider than just the beneficiaries themselves, and also extended to their wider support network. A sizable proportion of community partners were also providing digital skills training to families and carers; and some beneficiaries are passing on the skills they have learned to family and friends.

'Lately he is quite independent and is teaching my mother; they are both quite elderly, they are both in their 60s.'
(Family / Carer)

'My brother has involved my parents with it too. They are watching Islamic programmes. It has improved communication and they spend more quality time together.'
(Family / Carer)

Increased motivation and confidence to get online and do more things online:

Digital Lifeline helped many beneficiaries to become more motivated to get online, by showing them the value that the internet can bring to their lives. Community partners noted that they had seen a noticeable increase in the motivation of beneficiaries to use their tablet, and the vast majority of the beneficiaries we spoke to wanted to continue using and learning new things on their tablet.

'It makes me feel more confident.'
(Beneficiary)

'The confidence levels have just gone sky-high because I think to start out, they were apprehensive or reserved about participation. But you then saw, as more people would commit to using it more frequently [..] others getting excited and wanting to join in.'
(Community Partner)

Alongside improved motivation, Digital Lifeline has also helped beneficiaries to build confidence in their ability to learn new digital skills, and a small number had also developed the confidence to teach themselves and others. For beneficiaries who had become reliant on support, this growing sense of self-efficacy is particularly beneficial.

Digital Lifeline has also helped to promote increased motivation and confidence among the people in beneficiaries' wider support networks. A significant portion of families and carers noted that through participating in Digital Lifeline, they had gained a greater understanding of what the person they support is capable of, and a greater recognition of the value of the internet for them.

Furthermore, through providing support, many families and carers (particularly those who are older) had also been able to improve their own digital confidence.

Reduced feelings of loneliness and isolation:

Having access to a device and a connection enabled many beneficiaries to maintain, deepen or forge new connections with others. Beneficiaries have said that being able to communicate and connect with others achieved through Digital Lifeline, has helped them to feel less lonely and isolated.

During the pandemic many beneficiaries became disconnected from their friends and family leaving them feeling isolated and alone. Having a device and a connection allowed them to overcome this issue, through communicating with their network remotely.

'It's connected me to the outside world and made me feel less isolated.'
(Beneficiary)

'My tablet helps me stay connected. Everyone should have the opportunity to connect with friends.'
(Beneficiary)

As well as allowing beneficiaries to maintain social connections with their friends, family and wider support network, having a device and connection has also helped beneficiaries to deepen these connections. For example, several of the family members we spoke to commented that the device had been helpful in bringing their families closer together — either through providing the opportunity to share experiences, or facilitating greater levels of communication.

'We include him in group chats now. He uses it to involve more of the family, so it has improved their relationships. We are able to watch cultural programmes together.'
(Family / Carer)

'He will share videos and media with family and friends. They are now connecting more with each other.'
(Family / Carer)

For a small number of beneficiaries, having a device and data has also allowed them to connect with people in new ways, or communicate with people for the first time. For example, one community partner explained that assistive technology had helped some of the people they support to be able to speak.

'The block buttons they put on there where you can press and it says something – that's been quite empowering. And that has led someone to a device called – I think they call it 'GoLoCo' or something – 'Locos'. It is an expensive app, but what that does is, it's really clever — it's helping people to speak.'
(Family / Carer)

While the benefits of improved social connection were particularly beneficial during the pandemic, they still remain important even as lockdown restrictions have eased. A lot of beneficiaries are still cautious about the impacts of COVID-19 and are wary about leaving home — and therefore their device remains a vital source of helping people to communicate with others, and for guarding against feelings of loneliness among beneficiaries.

Improved health and wellbeing:

Having and using their device has had positive impacts on the wellbeing of many beneficiaries. Beneficiaries explained that receiving the device has helped them to feel happier and more relaxed. Community partners and family members have also commented that receiving the device has had a positive impact on beneficiaries' outlook and mental health. Beyond improvements in mental health, a lot of beneficiaries also noted that having a device had facilitated positive outcomes in relation to their physical and mental health by helping them to stay active.

'It's massively improved his confidence and mental health. He's got something to do now.'
(Family / Carer)

'I'm happier. I'm happy that I can look at Disney stuff myself.'
(Beneficiary)

'It makes me feel happy, It keeps me from getting bored. It relaxes me. It helps me calm down if I'm upset.'
(Beneficiary)

Greater independence and autonomy:

Beneficiaries really valued the opportunity to have a new device that was theirs to keep. Having a device that they owned gave beneficiaries control over what they used it for — they had the power and independence to use the tablet for things that interested them.

'Just to have the responsibility to look after my own tablet and keep it safe, It makes me feel good to have my own tablet so I can use it. The responsibility makes me feel like I can prove that I can look after other things.'
(Beneficiary)

'I don't have to use my mum's tablet anymore.'
(Beneficiary)

Beneficiaries were proud of the digital skills they had been able to learn, and through learning new digital skills many beneficiaries also developed an improved sense of their own abilities — which, in turn, helped them to feel empowered to try new things in other areas of their lives.

The benefits of this greater independence were positive not only for the beneficiary, but also for families and carers who no longer had to provide as much support. Families and carers also commented that they found it reassuring to see the positive impact the device was having for beneficiaries — demonstrating that Digital Lifeline helped to reduce not only the caring load, but the emotional load for families and carers.

'He's more independent. He's not constantly ringing for support. He can do online shopping now. He is able to contact the council about recycling collections'
(Family / Carer)

'At the start he asked a question first, now he tries it first then asks for help.'
(Family / Carer)

Case Study: Samara[20]

Samara was the most independent beneficiary who was interviewed. She was the only person who was able to set up the tablet independently.

If there is a task that she doesn't know how to do, Samara will use her tablet to research how to do it.

'I just search it up if I really need to know something.'

She uses her tablet for a variety of purposes, including YouTube, Google, online meetings, work, shopping online and taking pictures.

She expressed that having the tablet made a big difference in her life. She says that people with learning disabilities should all have their own tablet, explaining that: ***'People with learning disabilities have someone at home that can help them set up their device, and they can maybe try and see if they can access it themselves as well.'***

Even though Samara is a very independent technology user, she says that it is still important for people with learning disabilities to have a device, whether they need additional help or not.

20 Names have been changed

Improved ability to participate in society:

In some instances, receiving a device has helped beneficiaries to contribute to their local community. Several beneficiaries who were using their device for volunteering talked about the importance of giving up your time and using their digital device to access work and contribute during the pandemic. One beneficiary talked about how he had been invited to a community organising conference, and that his device has allowed him to play a role in providing support to people who had become isolated as a result of the pandemic.

'It was good to meet people who represented so many different organisations. We talked about setting up groups to facilitate people who have been stuck and have not been able to get out of their houses.'
(Beneficiary)

Greater recognition of the capabilities of people with learning disabilities among those that support them:

Many community partners commented that they were surprised by both the degree to which beneficiaries have been using their device, and the complexity of digital skills they have developed. As a result, Digital Lifeline has resulted in a reassessment of where they should be setting expectations for beneficiary learning. Now that they have a better understanding of the capabilities of people with learning disabilities, community partners are looking for future opportunities for the people they support to acquire and use technology.

'I guess it's don't underestimate people – give people the right information in the right format, then they can pick up and deal with anything really.'
(Community Partner)

Ensuring the legacy of Digital Lifeline for beneficiaries

Although Digital Lifeline had a significant positive impact for beneficiaries, there are still areas where barriers to digital inclusion remain, and there are also indications that further intervention is required in order to ensure that the positive benefits made through Digital Lifeline are sustained.

Digital Lifeline provided a device which the beneficiary could keep. However, the connectivity offered was limited. At the time of interviewing, a small number of beneficiaries have now run out of data, which could leave them relying on unsecured WIFI connections. Community partners also commented that a significant minority were restricting the activities they were undertaking online to save data. A sustainable connectivity solution is needed for beneficiaries to continue learning.

Furthermore, although Digital Lifeline has supported people to make considerable progress in the development of their digital skills, in most cases online activity has centred around social activities and entertainment. Only a small proportion of beneficiaries have developed the ability to perform more complex tasks such as using online health services, online financial services, online shopping, or using the internet for work.

We know that people with learning disabilities are more likely to experience certain types of social, economic and health exclusion, and that social, economic and health inequality is strongly correlated with digital exclusion[21]. Therefore, it is important to support people with learning disabilities to develop as wide a range of digital skills as possible in order to ensure that the inequalities they already experience don't become further entrenched.

21 See the Full Literature Review in the Appendix for more detail

The timing of the qualitative evaluation was conducted within a relatively short time after beneficiaries received their device (4-7 months), and therefore the fact that beneficiaries have not yet developed the skills to complete tasks such as online banking or online shopping, does not necessarily mean they won't do so in future. However, that being said, the findings from this evaluation highlight that, in some instances, there are external barriers which could limit the extent to which a beneficiary is able to develop these skills — such as lack of encouragement, support, motivation, or trust.

Action needs to be taken to ensure that all beneficiaries are able to continue their learning journey, so that the gains made through Digital Lifeline are equitable and long-term.

Impacts for community partners

The positive impacts achieved through Digital Lifeline weren't just for beneficiaries and their families; community partners also noted a series of positive impacts as well.

Greater understanding of specialist support available:

Digital Lifeline helped to highlight a range of specialist support that is available to people with learning disabilities that many community partners had been unaware of before. Through accessing this specialist support, community partners have been able to enhance the quality of their support provision, and are therefore better able to accommodate the needs of people with learning disabilities.

Several community partners commented that they are keen to continue developing their knowledge of the best ways to support people with learning disabilities, and are eager to establish long term partnerships with specialist organisations such as AbilityNet.

'As a centre, we've learned a lot more about how to plan our training sessions and how to support people with learning disabilities.'
(Community Partner)

Improvement in volunteer/staff skills & confidence:

The process of delivering Digital Lifeline highlighted many staff and volunteers faced digital barriers themselves. As many community partners were already providing digital skills training to beneficiaries, this provided an opportunity to upskill less confident staff and volunteers at the same time. A small number of the community partners we spoke to also mentioned utilising training provided by AbilityNet and Digital Unite to upskill their staff and volunteers.

'We had some staff who were really confident and really engaged with using the tablet, because they're tech people themselves and know how to use that. And then we had other staff who didn't want to engage at all because they're not tech-savvy. That's why we invited staff teams along to our training sessions as well as the beneficiaries, as well as other people, for them to gain those skills and upskill them.'
(Community Partner)

An improved support offer:

Digital Lifeline has provided the learning (and the digital infrastructure), to be able to improve their offer of support. For example, they are now able to:

Use the devices to complement face-to-face support:

The provision of tablets through Digital Lifeline has enabled community partners to use tablets as a tool to engage beneficiaries during face-to-face support. Due to the portability of tablets, beneficiaries have been able to bring tablets to community partners' services, allowing community partners to directly support them with digital skills — which they were not able to do before.

Use the devices to keep in touch with beneficiaries:

Tablet provision has enhanced communication between community partners and beneficiaries. Several community partners report that tablets are better for communicating with beneficiaries than phones because video calling gives more of an insight into a person's wellbeing; when video calling community partners are able to view beneficiaries' body language, appearance and surroundings. This information has enabled community partners to learn more about beneficiaries' circumstances and to tailor support to their needs better (though we should note it is important to guard against this level of interaction becoming intrusive).

'It's amazing, just calling someone in their house. You can kind of see behind them what their kitchen's like, or you ask them to take you for a tour. And they think, oh, you're just looking round the house or you just want to see it, but what you're looking for are dirty clothes – do you know what I mean? And actually someone's appearance tells you a massive amount.'
(Community Partner)

Providing a hybrid model of support:

Prior to COVID-19, several community partners' services relied on an ability to provide face-to-face support, such as day services and support worker visitations. During the pandemic, many of these services had to be put on hold — and communicating with beneficiaries was challenging due to many of them not having a device or an internet connection. Thanks to Digital Lifeline, community partners now have the ability to offer a hybrid model of service delivery that includes remote and face-to-face support.

The ways in which community partners are planning to implement a hybrid model of delivery vary. In some instances it may entail allocating particular support sessions or activities to be done online and others face-to-face; in other cases it may entail allowing beneficiaries to choose how they participate in a support session or activity.

Having the opportunity to engage with community partners' services remotely is positive for beneficiaries — particularly those that are continuing to shield. By having the option to choose how they access support, beneficiaries are able to access services in a capacity that they are most comfortable with, enhancing community partners' support offer and enabling them to engage with more beneficiaries.

'So where we've been a face-to-face provider in the past [...] it's allowed us to focus on the benefits of virtually meeting with somebody and seeing somebody. There's a benefit to it [...] because not everyone wants to meet face-to-face. So it's being able to offer the same service but in different formats and, hopefully, there's like a format for everyone, so it allows us to work with more people.'
(Community Partner)

Wider programme learnings

While community and coordination partners reported that, overall, it had been a positive experience to participate in Digital Lifeline, many also commented that it had been a challenging programme to deliver. Their feedback highlights key areas to consider for improving future interventions of this kind.

The challenges to delivering Digital Lifeline included:

The timeframes were too tight:

The most common challenge reported by community partners was meeting programme deadlines. Community partners struggled to coordinate device distribution, data collection, and the provision of support within the programme timeframes, and this had a number of implications for the extent to which positive outcomes could be achieved for beneficiaries.

The challenges associated with the timeframe of the programme include:

1. Difficulties engaging the underserved

Although everyone who was supported through the programme was digitally excluded, there were indications that the timeframe of the programme may have made it more difficult to engage the particularly underserved. There is also the possibility that devices were not issued to people who would have needed a lot of time and support to use them.

'If we had had longer [...] we could have done a deep dive into every single service, into every person we supported to see [...] if they've got phones or if they have their own tablets or computers, and of those that don't, how and if they could benefit.'
(Community Partner)

'We wanted people who were already keen to learn but didn't have, like I say, either the capacity for the staff to support them in a more intense way, or just didn't have the equipment.'
(Community Partner)

2. Difficulties providing support around programme deadlines

Many community partners commented that, in the initial stages, it was difficult to have the time to provide meaningful support to beneficiaries alongside their other commitments. Community partners had to identify beneficiaries, set-up devices, distribute devices, provide support, and capture baseline and impact data, all within the period of a few weeks. Many community partners commented that they had to focus on performing the tasks that would allow them to meet their KPIs, which sometimes meant they couldn't spend as much time providing support to beneficiaries as they would have liked. Community partners commented that future funds should recognise that more time is needed to support people with learning disabilities — especially those with more complex support needs.

'I mean, you had a ten-week timeframe from start to finish and a lot of the people that we supported, it's their first experience of digital skills. You know, you have learning disabilities so you have to take things slowly with them in a lot of cases, and we weren't able to do that and we felt as though we were rushing people because we had set timeframes where we had to have the baseline. We had to have the evaluation done by this time. We've got to fit in the training within this window. So that has been really, really difficult around the timeframes of that.'
(Community Partner)

3. *Difficulties accessing the specialist support offer*

Many community partners found the number of support offers they received during Digital Lifeline overwhelming. Whilst community partners appreciated the offers of support, the volume of offers caused community partners to be unsure of what was being offered, and also meant that some offers of support passed them by — for example, several of the community partners we spoke to were unaware of Digital Unite or that support was available from them despite the promotion of this.

'It felt like we were overwhelmed with offers of support. Because it was AbilityNet and these other organisations ringing us up, saying, "Look, we can help you, we can help you." It's kind of like, it's almost going to be too intense and too quick.'
(Community Partner)

'We didn't use Digital Unite, but we used AbilityNet quite a lot. We had additional assessments done for particular individuals where there were additional issues and problems... I think it was just our time. You know, because of the timescales of the project. Going forward we probably will be looking to use Digital Unite and moving forward with them.'
(Community Partner)

4. *Difficulties collecting baseline and impact data*

Many community partners also commented that it was challenging to coordinate the administration of the baseline and impact surveys alongside the distribution of devices and provision of digital skills support. Many also commented that the data collection points were too close together, making recorded impacts less meaningful. Some were worried that this would result in an underestimate of the true impact of Digital Lifeline.

5. *Difficulties allocating staff / volunteer resource*

Many community partners commented that tight timeframes meant Digital Lifeline required a great deal of staff and volunteer time. Several mentioned that they had to allocate staff and volunteers to the Digital Lifeline at the expense of other services. Moreover, numerous community partners noted that they had only managed to deliver devices in time due to the work of unpaid volunteers, and one community partner brought staff off furlough to ensure funding requirements were fulfilled.

'And I feel like it probably could have been done in a better way, had it not been so time-pressured … I think if we had somebody dedicated to doing that role, then that's kind of easy, but we don't at the moment. So you're kind of having to drop everything else that you might be delivering in that two weeks to try and meet those deadlines.'
(Community Partner)

The grant of £100 per person was not enough to cover the cost of supporting people with learning disabilities to learn digital skills:

Community partners are aware of the value of providing ongoing digital support and, as a result many are providing support to beneficiaries that was not covered by the grant payments received as part of Digital Lifeline. A small number have applied for funding to make digital skills part of their service provision and one organisation even secured funding for a full time digital inclusion officer. However, many are providing additional support unfunded.

'It's not just with this project. With many projects, there's no sustainability plan following on from there. And look, I understand, [...] that priorities change, funding runs out for certain things, but I think if it was a little bit longer that would've been good.'
(Community Partner)

The use of coordination partners was not enough to alleviate the challenges of geographical reach, given the timeframe:

Coordination partners were used to increase geographical coverage, and to ensure that the programme could be delivered in the timeframe. This was essential in some areas, but added extra layers of complexity in other areas — which resulted in delays to delivery. Using coordination partners opened up more lines of communication between community partners and beneficiaries, which could make following up on their needs and prompting them to complete impact surveys more difficult.

'People who were delivering it were in various places all around the country. So there were some logistical [issues]. So all [the tablets] came centrally here to me and then I sent them up to [...] four other locations. And then they just drove to places and gave them to the people who got them.'
(Community Partner)

Some community partners did not have the digital infrastructure to coordinate the efficient set up of devices:

A sizable minority of community partners did not have fast enough WIFI at their centre to set up the device, and, as a result, staff and volunteers often had to set up the device, download apps and complete any updates at home. Updates could use up a lot of data so staff and volunteers wanted to avoid doing these tasks using the beneficiaries' data allowance.

'We were all taking them home to our own personal WIFIs and setting them up, because each one did take quite a while – because every one that came in, you then had to upload with the latest operating system.'
(Community Partner)

'The internet's really, really poor in this office. Like setting them all up, charging them all up and then installing all the updates and then installing all the apps, it took a lot longer than it should have or it could have.'
(Community Partner)

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings from the evaluation demonstrate that Digital Lifeline has been a significant success, and highlight the considerable gains that can be achieved through true partnership working. Together, DCMS, Good Things Foundation, and its programme partners have delivered significant benefits for people with learning disabilities. Digital Lifeline has also shown what people with learning disabilities are able to achieve when given the right support.

Digital Lifeline has:

- **Provided 5,500 people with learning disabilities with vital access to a device, data and assistive technology**, which, in turn, has helped beneficiaries to access online products and services that they would otherwise not have been able to access. When surveyed a few weeks after receiving their device, 91% of beneficiaries reported at least one positive outcome.[22]
- **Enabled people with learning disabilities to participate more fully in their local community and society.** Through the digital skills support provided, beneficiaries have developed the confidence and ability to use their tablet to speak to friends and family, learn new things, engage with their hobbies and interests, and participate in community activities. When surveyed a few weeks after receiving their device, 64% of beneficiaries agreed that their digital skills had improved, and the qualitative evaluation confirmed that beneficiaries had continued to build their digital skills in the months following. For more independent beneficiaries, the enhanced sense of self-efficacy beneficiaries have gained through learning digital skills has helped them to feel empowered to try new things — such as participating or volunteering in community groups, or taking on responsibility for activities that would have previously been carried out by a family member or carer.
- **Helped to mitigate, or reduce, inequalities that people with learning disabilities experience in other areas of their lives.** Receiving a tablet has helped to reduce social isolation and feelings of loneliness by helping beneficiaries to maintain, deepen or forge new connections with others. When surveyed a few weeks after receiving their device, 52% of beneficiaries agreed that they felt less lonely as a result of receiving the device; and increased connection was also a key theme emerging from the qualitative evaluation. Reduced feelings of loneliness and isolation have resulted in improvements to beneficiary wellbeing; beneficiaries explained that receiving the device has helped them to feel happier, and more relaxed. Having a tablet has also helped a lot of beneficiaries to stay more active (43 of the 57 beneficiaries we spoke to said they used their tablet for entertainment or doing fun activities), again bringing positive benefits to their health and wellbeing.
- **Brought visibility to the needs and barriers faced by people with learning disabilities.** Through the collection of baseline and impact data, and the qualitative data collected as part of this evaluation, Digital Lifeline has helped to fill some of the gaps in knowledge relating to the experiences of digitally excluded people with learning disabilities.

22 An impact survey was completed by beneficiaries 2–4 weeks after receiving the device. It covered questions on: hours of support received/provided; skills achieved and other outcomes. 4,759 beneficiaries completed impact surveys.

The learnings from this evaluation are useful to policy-makers, funders and practitioners, and highlight a number of factors that are essential for providing meaningful digital skills support to people with learning disabilities:

- **Access to a sustainable internet connection:** The 24GB provided as part of Digital Lifeline is a great start, but is not sufficient for long-term digital inclusion. People need an affordable data connectivity solution, providing sufficient data for their needs.
- **A device that is given, not loaned:** Being given a device to own helps people to feel valued and encourages greater levels of experimentation. Specifically, owning the device allowed beneficiaries to practice on the device without having to worry about breaking it or having to give it back.
- **Support provided by a trusted organisation or person:** Receiving support from someone that a person knows and trusts helps them feel more comfortable, and is likely to facilitate learning.
- **One-to-one support is very important (at least initially):** One-to-one support can be crucial in the initial stages of digital learning. As people become more confident, group support can also be effective.
- **Personalised support that takes into account the needs of the individual:** A person's support needs, accessibility needs, age, levels of literacy, and understanding of English can all influence what type of digital skills support they need.
- **Ongoing support to repeat and build learning:** People with learning disabilities must be allowed to learn at their own pace, and acquiring digital skills cannot be rushed. Building confidence doing basic tasks is essential before people can progress to more complex tasks.
- **Using hooks to encourage engagement:** Linking digital skills training to hobbies or interests can help to overcome motivational barriers, and facilitate a fun way for people to learn.
- **Using specialist support and assistive technology to aid learning:** Assistive equipment and software was beneficial for all those using it, but particularly for people with higher support needs.
- **Encouraging people to take ownership of their learning:** In order to ensure that people realise long-term digital skills gains, it is important that they are provided with the training and accessibility adjustments to be able to use their tablet with as little support as possible.
- **Support to help people and their support networks to stay safe online:** Online safety could be a concern for people with learning disabilities, as well as their families, carers and support workers. Allaying these worries can often be essential in persuading people to get online.
- **Including families, carers and support workers in digital skills training:** The role of families, carers and support workers can be very important in helping people with learning disabilities to embrace digital, but encouraging families, carers and support workers to engage with digital can often require addressing their own skills, confidence and motivational barriers.

Alongside the successes of Digital Lifeline, this evaluation has also highlighted that further intervention is needed in order to promote digital inclusion among people with learning disabilities.

Recommendations for Policy Makers

- **Embed digital inclusion into government policies and programmes to improve the lives of disabled people:** Digital inclusion and the impact of digital exclusion must continue to be considered in actions and initiatives to improve the lives of people with learning disabilities and disabled people more generally, including delivery of the new Disability Strategy. This is both to prevent inequalities from widening and to maximise the benefits of digital inclusion for independence and participation.
- **Promote digital inclusion for those at most risk of being left behind in the new Digital Strategy.** A new Digital Strategy is being developed, led by DCMS. This is a valuable opportunity to strengthen commitments to digital inclusion, including for disabled people and people with learning disabilities, and to recognise the critical role that digital inclusion can play in contributing to post-COVID recovery and the levelling up agenda.
- **Recognise the value of community-based learning and development, and invest in community organisations:** Hyperlocal organisations are often best placed to help people build confidence and learn digital skills simultaneously. These organisations require access to specialist training and support (for example, on accessing available assistive technology such as screen readers or braille keyboard) to maximise impact when supporting people with learning disabilities.
- **Take action to reduce data poverty and address barriers to device ownership:** People with learning disabilities need a long term and affordable solution to the device and data connectivity barriers which many still face. Emergency provision of free data allowances is vital but more action on long-term solutions is needed. Many also need access to hardware (devices, assistive technology) that meets their needs and may be more expensive.
- **Take action to address the data and knowledge gap in relation to people with learning disabilities:** We still do not know enough about the size and characteristics of the population of people with learning disabilities, or the digital experiences and barriers faced by people with learning disabilities. This gap needs to be addressed in order to ensure that we understand how successful a policy intervention has been in reaching the population of people with learning disabilities. It is also important in ensuring that products and services are designed to meet the needs of people with learning disabilities, and that digital inclusion support (both in-person and online) is effective.

Recommendations for Funders

- **Take action to ensure that the beneficiaries supported through Digital Lifeline can continue to develop their skills:** Although Digital Lifeline has supported people to make progress in the development of their digital skills, in most cases online activity has centred around social activities and entertainment. Digital Lifeline beneficiaries now need to be provided with the resources and support to continue their digital learning journey so they feel comfortable doing more complex tasks safely such as using online health services, or using the internet for work or volunteering.
- **Fund more, and longer term, digital inclusion programmes to support people with learning disabilities:** Supporting 5,500 people with learning disabilities to become digitally included is a good start, but many people with learning disabilities are still digitally excluded — 15% of disabled people have never been online, and 35% of people with learning or memory disabilities do not have the Essential Digital Skills for Life (ONS 2020; Lloyds Bank 2021b). A longer timeframe would allow delivery organisations to spend more time identifying those most in need and providing them with support, and more time to access specialist support. This would also ensure that beneficiaries have time to develop a range of digital skills (beyond social activities or entertainment).

- **Invest in improving the digital access, skills and confidence of the social care workforce, disabled people's organisations and self advocacy groups:** The organisations supporting people with learning disabilities can often face digital barriers themselves (such as a lack of digital infrastructure, and a lack of confidence, skills and motivation among staff and volunteers). Investment is needed so organisations can have the time to access available training and support so they can build their own capabilities and confidence - enabling them to support others.
- **Provide funding to improve digital access, skills and confidence of family members and informal carers:** Family members and informal carers are often crucial in supporting people to learn digital skills and apply these in their everyday lives, especially where people have complex impairments. So it is vital to ensure that family members and informal carers can also access support to develop their own skills and confidence.

Recommendations for Practitioners

- **Identify and address any organisational barriers to delivering digital inclusion support:** Gaps in digital infrastructure and/or a lack of digital confidence, motivation, and skills among staff and volunteers can be a barrier to delivering meaningful digital inclusion support to people with learning disabilities. Practitioners need to identify and address these barriers through investment, training, and/or partnership working. This includes promoting and tapping into existing resources, networks and helplines - including many which are free to access (such as AbilityNet's helpline and Good Things Foundation's network and Learn My Way tool).
- **Support staff / volunteers to be confident in encouraging people with learning disabilities to explore the full potential of the internet:** A lack of confidence and/or concerns about online safety can lead staff and volunteers to restrict the learning opportunities, independence, and choice of people with learning disabilities. Staff and volunteers should be provided with the resources, knowledge and support - and time - to be able to help people with learning disabilities to reach their digital potential.
- **Provide clear and transparent information about what is being offered:** People need clear, accessible instructions about what digital and data support is being provided (or not) to avoid confusion. Easy read and audio-visual resources were well-received, but not always comprehensive. This was evident in the misunderstanding of a minority of beneficiaries about the difference between data allowances (24GB) and period of validity (2 years).

APPENDIX: Methodology

This report contains quantitative data collected during the delivery of Digital Lifeline and qualitative data collected as part of the longer term evaluation.

Qualitative Evaluation

The qualitative evaluation was comprised of four key elements:

A literature review of current academic, grey and policy literature

From June – July 2021, Good Things Researchers conducted a literature review of current academic, grey and policy literature in order to highlight and provide context on the need for a programme that addresses digital exclusion experienced by people with learning disabilities; and to inform the design of the primary research.

Interviews, focus groups and easy read survey with beneficiaries

Good Things Foundation partnered with University of East London and RIX Social Researchers (peer researchers with learning disabilities) to conduct qualitative research with beneficiaries. Feedback from beneficiaries was collected via interviews and focus groups conducted over Zoom. An easy read survey was also sent to beneficiaries who wanted to give their views but were unable or not confident enough to participate in the interviews and focus groups.

University of East London and RIX Social Researchers carried out 14 interviews and 5 focus groups between July – October 2021, collecting the views and experiences of 57 beneficiaries (14 interviewees, 13 focus group participants, 30 surveys). Beneficiaries were recruited via the community partners who supported them. Accessible information sheets and a consent form were shared with participants prior to the research so they could make an informed decision about whether or not they wanted to participate.

The interviews, focus groups and easy read survey explored: how the device, data and support had or hadn't helped beneficiaries; what the device, data and support had enabled them to do; their experience of the device, data and support they received; and their future goals involving digital skills.

Interviews with community partners

Between August and October 2021 Good Things Foundation researchers conducted 15 online interviews with community partners to understand their experience of delivering Digital Lifeline and give their perspective on the value of the programme for beneficiaries. Specifically the interviews explored: how the devices had or hadn't helped beneficiaries; what the device and data had helped beneficiaries to do; the key areas where they had provided support; the challenges they had experienced in delivering Digital Lifeline; how delivering Digital Lifeline had impacted their service provision; and how delivering Digital Lifeline had impacted their understanding of the needs and capabilities of people with learning disabilities.

Focus groups with families and carers

In September 2021 Good Things Foundation researchers conducted two focus groups with families and carers to understand the impact of Digital Lifeline on beneficiaries' wider support network. Twelve family members and carers took part in the focus groups. Participants were recruited via community partners. Information sheets and a consent form were shared with participants prior to the research so they could make an informed decision about whether or not they wanted to participate.

The focus groups explored: how the device, data and support had or hadn't helped beneficiaries; what the device, data and support had enabled beneficiaries to do; the family / carer experience of supporting beneficiaries; and the family / carer experience of receiving programme partner support.

Case study: The value of peer research

Digital Lifeline gave RIX Research the opportunity to conduct inclusive research fully online for the first time.

Each co-researcher had different skills and abilities and different needs. The research team worked together, with support staff and families, to ensure that they co-researchers had access to an online computer, decent sound, a quiet environment and on hand technical support should that be required. Additional technologies (such as specialised headsets) were also purchased for some individuals.

The co-researchers were involved in all parts of the project and each had an opportunity to carry out an interview and / or focus group. For each interview or focus group, two co-researchers were paired with the academic researcher or the research assistant. All sessions were video recorded and then reviewed by the group, discussed and analysed. This process was captured in a Wiki (an accessible, easy to use, password protected, website that can be public or private).

The experience of carrying out inclusive research online was a novel one for all of the research team, and they needed to be reflective and adaptable to changing needs and situations. All co-researchers enjoyed taking part in the research project and being part of the team. This project gave them the opportunity to do something meaningful for the learning disability community, while also being properly rewarded for their work.

'It was great, I loved it, I never thought I could do it. Now I know I can. I want to be part of the next project tool.' – Co-researcher

'***It was great. I loved it.'*** – Co-researcher

'It meant a lot to me. It gave me purpose and satisfaction. I proved that I could do it on my own without carers. I think it is important that people with learning disabilities are involved in research. People with learning disabilities want to talk to other people with learning disabilities. They can be honest with us. We understand them better.' – Co-researcher

'I loved it too. It means that I could work and do interesting things. I have never done that before.' – Co-researcher

'Being part of the Digital Lifeline project made me feel good, be polite, and confident. I can do it.' – Co-researcher

Quantitative data

Data collection and outcomes measurement to understand programme impact comprised three key elements:

Baseline questionnaires completed by beneficiaries, with the support of their community partners, upon receiving their devices

This used GSS harmonised questions to ensure that survey results could be compared with other data sources and that the wording of questions aligned with government standards and definitions, where appropriate. The survey covered beneficiary demographics, goals and barriers. Demographic questions included age, gender, disability, ethnicity and household composition. The data in this report is based on 5,356 completed baseline surveys.

Impact questionnaires completed around 2-4 weeks after learners received devices

This survey was completed by beneficiaries 2-4 weeks after receiving the device. It covered questions on: hours of support received/ provided; skills achieved and other outcomes. The data in this report is based on 4,759 completed impact surveys.

Community partner survey

The community partner survey captured the impacts of Digital Lifeline on beneficiaries and community partners, as well as feedback regarding the challenges presented by the programme. Community partners who had returned impact data by 10th June 2021 were invited to respond to the survey. Of the 126 community partners who were invited, 50 responded.

Data collection procedures were delivered in accordance with GDPR regulations and a data impact assessment was carried out and approved. This included the requirement of informed consent from beneficiaries to collect baseline and impact data. The consent was produced in an Easy Read format by Learning Disability England.

APPENDIX: Full Literature Review

What is a learning disability?

A learning disability affects the way a person learns new things throughout their lifetime; it also affects the way a person understands information and how they communicate. People with learning disabilities can have difficulty understanding new or complex information, learning new skills and coping independently (NHS.co.uk n.d.). There are different types of learning disability which can be mild, moderate, severe or multiple and profound. The type of learning disability that a person has can impact the level of support they need (Mencap n.d.).

The approaches used to understand learning disability are varied, and have changed over time. Historically, learning disability tended to be defined using a medical model of disability (which described people as being disabled by their impairments or differences). However, the social model of disability (which emphasises that people are disabled by barriers in society, not by their impairment or difference) is now more widely used (Scope n.d.).

As recommended by government guidance (Cabinet Office and Disability Unit, 2021), this evaluation report will be guided by the social model of disability. The social model of disability helps us to recognise the barriers that make life harder for disabled people — which in turn helps to identify what needs to be done in order to give disabled people more independence, choice and control (Scope n.d.). In this report we explore the barriers that people with learning disabilities face in getting online; how Digital Lifeline worked to reduce the barriers to digital inclusion for people with disabilities; and the digital barriers that are still to be resolved.

How common is learning disability within the UK?

Data collected about the size and characteristics of the population of people with learning disabilities within the United Kingdom is inconsistent and incomplete. Public Health England notes that 'no government department collects comprehensive information on the presence of learning disabilities in the population and learning disabilities are not recorded in the Census of the UK population' (Public Health England 2016).

Gaps in the data mean there is no definitive record of the number of people with learning disabilities in the United Kingdom, and there is also very limited information on the demographics and characteristics of people with learning disabilities. However, estimates can be made using the data that is available (such as the number of people with learning disabilities who have accessed health or social care services).

It is estimated that 1.5 million living in the UK have a learning disability (Mencap n.d., NHS n.d.). An estimated 1.13 million people with learning disabilities in the UK are adults and 351,000 are children (Mencap n.d.). Previous calculations estimated that 59% of working age adults with learning disabilities in England are men and 41% are women (Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities, n.d.), and previous estimates have put the number of people with learning disabilities from black and minority ethnic backgrounds at at least 60,000 (Burke, C-K., Ong 2021, L; Gill and Badger, 2007).

What is digital exclusion?

Digital exclusion is about not having the access, skills, motivation or confidence to use the internet and benefit from the opportunities that digital provides (Good Things Foundation 2021c).

Access: A person may be digitally excluded because they do not have an internet connection; do not have an appropriate device; do not have access to the assistive technology they need; or cannot afford to pay for a connection, device or assistive technology.

Digital skills: Having the means to access the internet is not enough, a person also needs to be able to use it. The Essential Digital Skills Framework outlines three categories of digital skills that a person may need. 'Digital Foundation Skills', underpin all essential digital skills (and include things like being able to turn on a device). 'Essential Digital Skills for Life', and 'Essential Digital Skills for Work' are the skills needed in a personal and work context in relation to: communicating, handling information and content, transacting, problem solving and being safe and legal online (Department for Education, 2019).

Motivation: In order to make the most of the internet a person needs to understand its value and how it is relevant to their lives; therefore, a person can also become digitally excluded if they are not motivated to get online.

Confidence: A lack of confidence can also be a barrier to getting online; a person may be digitally excluded if they do not have the self belief to be able to learn the skills they need to use the internet safely and effectively.

Digital inclusion and digital exclusion are not binary categories, the digital divide occurs along a spectrum. Yates et al. (2020) argue that 'it has become very clear that the digital divide is not simply between those who are "offline" and "online" but must also consider those who use digital systems for limited purposes or have only limited digital skills'.

Just as the digital divide is not binary, it is also not static. The journey to digital inclusion is not one way, and a person's risk of digital exclusion can vary depending on their personal and environmental situation at the time. Digital progress can also change the context for what it means to be 'digitally included' and, therefore, where someone falls in the digital divide.

How does digital exclusion affect people with learning disabilities?

Disabled people make up a disproportionate number of those that do not have access to the internet. In figures released in 2020, the ONS estimated 15% of disabled people have never been online, whereas this figure was 3% among non-disabled people (ONS 2020). Among those with learning disabilities, digital access is unevenly distributed. Flynn et al. (2021) reported that people with profound and multiple learning disabilities have generally lower levels of internet access (57%) than people with learning disabilities who do not have profound and multiple learning disabilities (74%).

Poor accessibility can prevent disabled people from accessing the internet. Although more content is being designed to be accessible across devices, there is still evidence that a lack of online accessibility is a barrier for disabled people (Disability Unit 2021; Good Things Foundation 2016; Roscoe and Johns 2021; Scope 2020). In an audit of website accessibility across local councils, Scope found that 9 of the 10 largest councils in England are failing to meet basic website regulations (Scope 2020).

Assistive technologies can be very helpful in making devices and technology more accessible. However the latest Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index (2021a) found that these technologies are more likely to be used by people with already high or very high digital engagement, and are therefore being underused by those that could benefit the most from them.

One of the barriers which may stop disabled people from using assistive technology is cost. This is partly because assistive technology is an additional cost on top of buying a device and paying for a connection, but also due to the fact that disabled people are more likely to be living on a lower income (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2021; Boot et al. 2018). Beyond cost, the barriers to using assistive technology may also include lack of awareness, inadequate assessment, and insufficient funding (Boot et al. 2018; Department for Work and Pensions, Disability Unit; Equality Hub 2021).

Alongside lower levels of access, disabled people are also less likely to have the Essential Digital Skills they need than the UK population as a whole. Of the 11 million people in the UK who do not have Essential Digital Skills for Life, more than half are living with an impairment (Lloyds Bank 2021b). Specifically, 35% of people with learning or memory disabilities do not have the Essential Digital Skills for Life; and 47% of people with a learning or memory disability do not have the Essential Digital Skills for Work. In the UK population as a whole these figures are 21% and 36%, respectively (Lloyds Bank 2021b).

Motivation can also be a barrier to digital inclusion for disabled people, and those with learning disabilities in particular. French, Quinn and Yates (2019) explained that a lack of interest can sometimes mask issues surrounding a person's self-efficacy and their capabilities. In support of this, Good Things Foundation (2016) reports that people with learning disabilities can sometimes be reticent to engage with digital skills training for fear of admitting gaps in their knowledge.

People with disabilities may also lack the confidence to learn new digital skills due to previous negative learning experiences; the limiting perceptions of people who support them; and negative attitudes towards disabled people in society more generally (Chadwick, Wesson and Fulwood 2013; Good Things Foundation 2018).

Online safety may also be a concern for people with disabilities — as it is for many people more generally (Stone, Llewellyn and Chambers 2020). Stone, Llewellyn and Chambers (2020) note that disabled people may be more at risk from online harms due to a lack of website accessibility; digital skills gaps; health conditions which affect cognitive ability; and the fact they may need to share personal details with partners, family members, friends and carers. Disabled people also observe more online abuse than non-disabled people, and they may also be at risk from 'mate crime' (Davidson et al. 2019). In some instances, this can make disabled people become more cautious about being online, and in other instances it may drive them away altogether (Davidson et al. 2019; Good Things Foundation 2018).

People with learning disabilities can need special, personalised and long term support in order to grow their digital skills, motivation and confidence (Good Things Foundation 2018; Newman et al. 2016). However this type of support is not always readily available. Some of the reasons for this are due to cost, time and digital infrastructure constraints (Good Things Foundation 2018). However, gatekeeping can also be an issue for people with learning disabilities. Many people with learning disabilities can miss out on the life-enriching experiences that the internet provides because their carers, support workers or families are not willing or able to support them to use the internet. This may be because the carer, support worker or family members do not have the skills to be able to do so. However, it can also be because they think that the person they support will not benefit from using the internet; is not capable of using the internet; or would be put at too much risk from using the internet. (Bradley 2021; Chadwick, Wesson, Fulwood 2013; Chadwick, Quinn and Fullwood 2016; Good Things Foundation 2016; Newman et al. 2016; Seale 2020).

Why is digital inclusion important for people with learning disabilities?

Access to goods and services:

Society is becoming increasingly digital, and the ability to access public, voluntary and commercial goods and services is becoming more dependent on the ability to access and use the internet. The pandemic accelerated digitisation in all areas of our lives and made digital inclusion more important than ever. In this context it is essential to address the high levels of digital exclusion among people with learning disabilities in order to ensure they are not locked out from accessing their basic rights and needs.

Active participation within society:

Digital inclusion is not just about being able to access the opportunities that the internet affords, but also being able to make the most of them. Chadwick, Wesson and Fullwood (2013) highlight that the internet offers people opportunities for increased social contact, identity development, and the chance to practice self determination and self-advocacy. However, while this is true, internet usage data suggests these benefits are not being universally realised — and that many disabled people are only using the internet for limited purposes.

Data released in 2020 by the ONS (2020a) estimated that disabled people were less likely to have used the internet in the last three months, and data analysis by Yates et al. (2019) has also shown that people with health conditions are more likely to use the internet for limited purposes than those without health conditions. In this context, supporting people with learning disabilities to make more of the potential of the internet is vital for them to be able to 'participate, and live well and safely in a digital world' (Stone 2021).

Visibility and recognition in data driven decision-making:

Digital progress has meant that we are not just living in a digital society, but also a data society. Dencik, Hintz and Redden (2019) highlight that the 'processing of data from across our lives can fundamentally shape social relations, the kinds of information valued, and what is "knowable"'. The Ada Lovelace Institute (2021) argues that this can have significant impacts for people who are digitally excluded because 'the digital divide has an onward effect on who can be represented by, and has agency to shape, data-driven technologies'.

The increasingly digital nature of consultation further compounds this risk, because it means that people who are digitally excluded (and people with learning disabilities in particular) are less likely to be heard (Flynn et al 2021). In this context, combatting digital exclusion among people with learning disabilities is vital in order to ensure their needs are surfaced and acted upon.

Reducing, or mediating, wider inequalities:

Analysis of the demographics of internet usage has demonstrated a clear association between digital exclusion and other forms of exclusion. Non-users, and those who use the internet in limited ways, are more likely to be older, in social grades DE[23], have left school at 16, and live in areas of high deprivation (Yates et al. 2020).

Massimo Ragnedda (2017) has emphasised the need to understand that 'the possibilities that the internet offers to citizens in economic, political, social and cultural areas are not exploited by everybody in the same way. The Internet influences possibilities for citizens to improve their life chances, but in a vicious circle, based on their original social position' (Ragnedda 2017 in Carmi and Yates 2020).

23 Where the chief income earner in a household in a semi-skilled or unskilled manual occupation, lowest grade occupation, or is unemployed.

We know that people with learning disabilities are more likely to experience certain types of social, economic and health exclusion. Therefore, given the correlation between digital exclusion and social, economic and health exclusion, it is important to promote digital inclusion, not just as an end in its own right, but as a way to minimise and address the wider inequalities experienced by people with learning disabilities.

How does digital inclusion and exclusion impact the economic, social and health inequalities experienced by people with learning disabilities?

The intersection between digital inclusion and economic inclusion

How do people with learning disabilities experience economic inequalities?

Disabled people are much more likely to be living in financially precarious situations than non-disabled people. Half of all people in poverty either have a disability themselves, or live with someone who does (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2021). In part this is due to the costs of disability related expenditure (people with disabilities spend, on average, £583 a month on costs linked to their disability) (Scope 2019). However, lower rates of (well-paid) employment, and a greater reliance on state benefits can also be contributory factors.

Although many people with learning disabilities would like to find work, only 6% of adults with learning disabilities in England[24] are in paid employment (NHS Digital 2020). This is a much lower rate of employment than for both UK adults as a whole (82%), and disabled adults as a whole (52%) (Department for Work and Pensions and Department of Health and Social Care 2019). When in employment, disabled people are more likely to be working part time, and are also likely to be paid less than non-disabled people (ONS 2019a; Powell 2021). Among those with learning disabilities, people with mild learning disabilities are more likely to be employed, than people with severe learning disabilities, or people with profound and multiple learning disabilities (Emerson and Hatton 2008).

The factors that are likely to contribute to the lower rates of (well-paid) employment among people with learning disabilities are multi-faceted and overlapping. They include: lower qualification levels; skills gaps; inaccessible application processes; the limited availability of employment support; lack of reasonable adjustments; lack of flexibility among employers; the limiting attitudes of employers; and a lack of accessible or assistive technology (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Assistive Technology 2021; Department for Work and Pensions, Disability Unit, Equality Hub 2021; Allcock, 2019; Mencap 2019a; Redley, 2009; Tinson et al., 2016).

Given that people with learning disabilities are less likely to be employed, are more likely to work part time, and are more likely to have a low income, state welfare and benefits are often vital for their financial security. However, evidence suggests that in some instances they may find it difficult to access their entitlements. Disabled people may face barriers including complex benefit assessments; a lack of accessibility (both online and offline); managing state entitlements alongside fluctuating working hours; a worsening of their condition due to stress associated with completing benefit assessments; and difficulties finding supporting evidence (Department for Work and Pensions, Disability Unit, Equality Hub 2021; Allcock 2019).

Disabled people have also faced challenges due to the recent changes to the benefits system. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2021) reports that the transition from Disability Living Allowance to Personal Independence Payments has been a very stressful process for many, and has resulted in 'a striking increase in the number of appeals that claimants have won when challenging Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) decisions'. The introduction of Universal Credit has also created difficulties,

24 Who are known to adult social care services

such as the five week wait to receive payment. Among those that remain on 'legacy benefits' there have also been financial challenges, such as their exclusion from the £20 uplift during the pandemic.

The pandemic has further increased the financial precarity experienced by many people with disabilities: 37% of people with disabilities reported their outgoings had increased during the pandemic; and 46% of disabled people used at least one form of debt between March and November 2020 (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2020; Turn 2 Us 2020). Cautious estimates by Atay, Vaid and Clayton (2021) suggest that disabled people accounted for 65% of the fall in employment during the first and second quarters of 2020, despite only accounting for 13% of those in employment.

How does digital inclusion intersect with economic inclusion?

Being online is becoming increasingly essential to finding, and thriving in, well-paid employment. Even before the pandemic, at least 82% of jobs required digital skills (DCMS 2019); and during the pandemic the importance of having digital skills only increased — research by World Skills UK, Learning and Work Institute, and Enginuity (2021) found that 92% of businesses now want a basic level of digital skills from employees. CEBR (2018) highlights that being online can help people to find appropriate jobs quicker, and more efficiently; and that 'given the fast pace of digitisation it would not be surprising to have the majority of companies only accepting online applications over the next decade'. Having basic digital skills can also help someone to earn more; manual workers with high or very high levels of digital engagement earn £421 more per month (ca £5k per year) than manual workers with less digital engagement (Lloyds 2021b).

Working in a more digital way also has the potential to bring specific benefits to people with disabilities. Research by Atay, Vaid and Clayton (2021) found disabled people who were able to work online generally enjoyed and benefited from working from home. Working from home helped disabled people to arrange their days around their health or care needs, and most research participants wanted to continue working from home at least a day a week if not more (Atay, Vaid and Clayton 2021). Supporting this, a poll commissioned by the TUC (2021a) found that 90% of disabled workers want to continue working remotely after the pandemic eases.

However, there are also indications that some employers may be reticent to make the reasonable adjustments required to support disabled people to work from home. Research by the TUC (2021b) found that over four in ten disabled workers said that their employer had only implemented some, or none of the different / additional reasonable adjustments they had requested during the pandemic; and research by Leonard Cheshire (2020) indicated 42% of employers were discouraged from hiring disabled people due to concerns around supporting them properly during the pandemic. The increasing digitisation of the employment market also raises serious concerns for people with learning disabilities who are unable to access or use the internet. Without addressing digital exclusion among people with learning disabilities there is the potential for them to become even further removed from the labour market.

Beyond employment, the ability to manage money and access financial support is also becoming increasingly reliant on being online. In the financial sector, the provision of services is moving away from local bank branches to online provision through internet banking; in its Digital Strategy, DWP (2021) set out its plans to make Universal Credit the first truly digital welfare service; and in sectors like telecoms and energy, the ability to choose the best deals, rates and plans is becoming reliant on being online.

The increasing digitisation of financial services has the potential to bring significant benefits for people with learning disabilities. Online services open up the opportunity to engage with

a service via a range of channels; they provide the opportunity to access a service anytime and anywhere, without having to travel; they remove the barriers presented by inaccessible buildings; and they can also bring considerable time savings. The growing provision of online financial services also provides people with a wider range of choice and the opportunity to seek out the best deals, unconstrained by location.

However, as key financial services are moved online, people with learning disabilities who don't have digital access, or the digital skills and confidence to use these services, will find it difficult to manage their finances and access their entitlements — which could further entrench the economic exclusion they already experience (Sanders 2020). The evaluation of the HMCTS Digital Support pilot highlighted that accessing state entitlements, or accessing government services online, can be particularly challenging and anxiety-inducing if the process is high stakes for the person in question (Good Things Foundation, 2020a). This is a finding supported by research by Storey (2020), which explains that by the end of 2018, 54% of people who made their Universal Credit claim online still found the process difficult, with 52% of disabled people saying they needed assistance to use the online service.

The relationship between digital inclusion, social inclusion and loneliness for people with learning disabilities

How do people with learning disabilities experience social inequalities?

People with learning disabilities can face barriers to participating within their communities and society, and can have fewer opportunities to build meaningful relationships with their peers. Research by Mencap (2016) suggests that 1 in 3 young people with a learning disability spend less than 1 hour outside their home on a typical Saturday.

People with disabilities can struggle to access social and leisure activities for range of reasons including: financial constraints; a lack of inclusive activities; a lack of understanding from staff on how to support people with disabilities; a lack of transport; a lack of accessible information; inaccessible venues; and concerns about other people's views (Disability Unit 2021; Sense 2021; Charnley et al. 2019, Mencap n.d.). Having the right support is also very important, particularly for those with profound and multiple learning disabilities, who have smaller social networks and rely more on family members for social interaction than people with milder learning disabilities (Kamstra et al. 2015; Mencap n.d.; Sense 2021).

Social exclusion can also result from negative attitudes towards disability within society more widely (Tan & Wilson, 2019; Scior and Werner, 2016). Research by Scior and Werner (2016) indicates that attitudes to people with learning disabilities are improving, but that some confusion and negative perceptions remain. 'Children and adults with learning disabilities are still frequently excluded from various fields of life, activities and opportunities, regularly have to face name-calling, bullying and being stared at, and are frequently the targets of hostility' (Scior and Werner 2016). Just 8% of disabled people 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that the views held by members of the public about disability are generally helpful for disabled people (Disability Unit 2021).

The higher rates of social isolation experienced by disabled people mean they are more likely to experience loneliness than non-disabled people. The ONS (2019b) reports that 13% of disabled people say that they feel lonely "often or always"; this is almost four times that of the number of non-disabled people who report being lonely "often or always". In a survey conducted by Mencap (2019b) 24% of people with a learning disability reported feeling lonely "a lot".

Emerson et al. (2021) report that the prevalence of loneliness is a significant driver of poor wellbeing among disabled people, and that those most likely to be impacted are disabled

people who are younger, economically inactive, living in rented or other accommodation, living alone and with low levels of access to environmental assets.

How does digital inclusion intersect with social inclusion and loneliness?

Bradley (2021) highlights that 'using technology in the right way can mean that disabled people have more opportunities to participate, online and offline'. Being online can provide people with learning disabilities with new ways to engage through providing them with the opportunity to express an alternative identity, opening up opportunities it would otherwise be hard to access; or providing the opportunity to have a private life separate from their carers (Bradley 2021; Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2008). Being online can also help people with learning disabilities to enhance and deepen their offline participation within society through helping them to build social capital, connectivity, social engagement, and community attachment (Sanders 2020).

However, despite this potential, the pandemic highlighted that digital barriers mean that many people with learning disabilities are not at the stage where these benefits can be realised. While many people relied on online video calling and social media platforms to connect with others during lockdown, this opportunity was not available to the high proportion of people with learning disabilities without the access, skills, confidence or motivation to use the internet. Seale (2020) reports that many people with learning disabilities found themselves disconnected from their family, friends, community and support services during the pandemic. This reduction or removal of support increased social isolation and uncertainty, and contributed to increased feelings of loneliness, and worsening mental and physical health among people with learning disabilities (Scottish Commission for Learning Disability 2020; Seale 2020).

The relationship between digital inclusion and health inclusion for people with learning disabilities

How do people with learning disabilities experience health inequalities?

People with learning disabilities experience significant health inequality. On average, people with learning disabilities have a life expectancy of approximately 16 years lower than the general population (NHS Digital, 2019). In 2020, 50% of the deaths among adults with learning disabilities were due to avoidable medical causes (University of Bristol 2021).

Among those with learning disabilities, life expectancy varies according to a person's level of impairment. Between 2018 and 2020 people with profound and multiple learning disabilities were 6.4 times more likely to die between the ages of 18-49 than those with mild learning disabilities; and those with severe learning disabilities were twice as likely to die than people with mild learning disabilities (University of Bristol 2021).

People with learning disabilities can struggle to access timely, appropriate and effective health care (Doherty et al. 2020; Emerson et al. 2012; Emerson and Baines 2011). In some instances the barriers that people with learning disabilities have are about poor diagnosis, or identification procedures. Health or social practitioners may fail to recognise that a person with a learning disability is unwell; may fail to make the correct diagnosis, or may not identify that a person has a learning disability (Heslop et al. 2013; Tuffrey-Wijnes et al. 2013; Allerton and Emerson 2012, Mencap n.d.). Due to resource constraints, healthcare providers can also lack the specialist training, knowledge and communication skills needed to support people with learning disabilities, and provide adequate aftercare (Doherty et al., 2020; Sowney & Barr 2004, Mencap, n.d). In addition, people with learning disabilities can also be shut out from decision-making about their health, giving them less input into the type of care they receive (Doherty et al. 2020; Ferguson, Jarrett and Terras, 2011).

How does digital inclusion intersect with health inclusion?

The pandemic prompted a large increase in the use of digital tools within healthcare. Bibby and Leavey (2020) report that the implementation of the national lockdown in March 2020 resulted in the number of online consultations doubling from 900,000 to 1.8 million.

The use of digital tools within healthcare has the potential to provide benefits for people with learning disabilities. Digital healthcare services provide the opportunity to access healthcare without having to travel or see a healthcare professional face-to-face — which in turn facilitates cost and time savings — and is beneficial for those that are shielding, or those facing accessibility barriers to attending in person. The use of digital tools within healthcare also presents an opportunity for people with learning disabilities to have more choice and control over their health. And, in other cases, digital tools can help to open up access — for example, through facilitating online self-help, and reducing stigma barriers (NHS Confederation 2020).

However, in order for people to realise these benefits, they need to have the access, skills, confidence or motivation to use the internet. For people with learning disabilities who are digitally excluded, the increasing use of digital technology within healthcare risks further entrenching the healthcare inequality they already experience.

The risks associated with moving digital services online was evident in the experiences of disabled people (and people with learning disabilities), during the pandemic. During the pandemic, many health services were only available online, and whilst some people with learning disabilities were able to use technology to manage their health and wellbeing during the pandemic, many were unable to do so due to barriers such as lack of digital skills, lack of in-home support and lack of access to technology or the internet (Cebr, 2021; Sense 2021; Seale 2020).

This had serious consequences for their physical and mental health. The ONS (2021) reports that disabled people were more likely to say that coronavirus had affected their health (35% for disabled people, compared with 12% for non-disabled people); their access to healthcare for non-coronavirus related issues (40% compared with 19%); and their wellbeing (65% compared with 50%).

What actions are being taken to address digital exclusion experienced by people with learning disabilities?

What policy responses have there been?

Digital Lifeline was set up by DCMS as part of a cross-cutting Government response to addressing the disproportionately negative effects of COVID-19 on disabled people. It was an emergency and stand-alone initiative but one that connects to a range of policy areas, in particular the Government's strategy on tackling loneliness (DCMS 2018) which recognises the power of digital inclusion in bringing groups of people together for social connections; and the recent Online Media Literacy Strategy (2021), which recognises the importance of helping people to understand about online safety, and build the skills to navigate the online environment in a safe way.[25]

A new Digital Strategy is being developed led by DCMS. This may provide a valuable opportunity to strengthen commitments to digital inclusion, including for disabled people and people with learning disabilities, and to recognise the critical role that digital inclusion can play in contributing to post-COVID recovery and the government's levelling up agenda (Good Things Foundation 2021b).

With regard to disabled people, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Disability Unit and the Equality Hub published the 'National Disability Strategy' in July 2021. This sets out the actions the government will take to improve the everyday lives of all disabled people across the UK. It outlines the aim for all government departments to embed approaches which:

25 This is linked to the Draft Online Safety Bill currently progressing through Parliament.

ensure fairness and equality; consider disability from the start; support independent living; increase participation; and deliver joined up responses. A priority is to make access to public services as smooth and easy as possible. The strategy references the importance that digital services can play in increasing accessibility, and that some disabled people may struggle to use these services. In recognition of this, the strategy outlines that the government will provide significant support for innovation in the development of assistive and accessible technologies, and also to improve access to their use. The Disability Strategy (2021) also references that the continued implementation of the Public Sector Bodies Website Accessibility Regulations will help to improve the accessibility of online content.

Digital inclusion is a devolved policy area and Digital Lifeline was an England initiative. However, it is worth briefly referring to responses elsewhere in the UK. In Scotland, 'Connecting Scotland' has been a major initiative, set up during the pandemic to provide devices, data and digital skills support to adults in partnership with SCVO; this recognises digitally excluded disabled people as a priority group for support. In Wales, 'Action on Disability: The Right to Independent Living', was launched in 2019, and includes commitments to work with older people and disability organisations to support digital inclusion activities, primarily through Digital Communities Wales, led by Wales Cooperative Centre. Meanwhile, the Northern Ireland Executive began work on a new Disability Strategy for Northern Ireland in September 2020.

What practical responses have there been?

COVID-19 exposed the cost of digital exclusion more clearly than ever before, and necessitated action from across communities, corporates and civil society. The practical emergency response by actors across society has been hugely impressive. However, many of these responses took place in isolation — and there remains a lack of a joined up approach.

The practical responses taken include:

- Donation and distribution of new devices (for example, Everyone Connected, Connecting Scotland, and Digital Communities Wales);
- Donation and distribution of refurbished devices (for example, Reboot);
- Zero-rating of some educational, health and voluntary sector emergency websites (such as Citizens Advice);
- Actions taken by telecoms providers such as the introduction or improvement of voluntary social tariffs, removing data caps and donating sims / vouchers;
- Research, such as the Coronavirus and People with Learning Disabilities Study led by University of Warwick and Manchester Metropolitan University - designed to systematically and responsively track the experiences of adults with learning disabilities through the pandemic.

There have been very few nationally coordinated initiatives to address digital exclusion among people with learning disabilities. One such initiative is led by Mencap with support from Digital Unite and Good Things Foundation to provide devices and digital skills support to people with learning disabilities through Mencap's local and regional members. There have also been initiatives at county, city and community levels - for example 100% Digital Leeds is working with third sector partners across Leeds to improve digital inclusion and participation for people with learning disabilities and autism; and Nottinghamshire County Council is working with Nottingham Mencap to provide devices and support for people accessing health and social care services. But provision is patchy and - in the context of the pandemic - Digital Lifeline bridged a major gap in national support for digitally excluded people with learning disabilities.

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Good Things Foundation is a leading digital inclusion charity working in the UK, Australia and beyond. Good Things Foundation works in cities, towns and communities to help people thrive in a digital world. Through our network of partners in communities across the UK, we help people gain the devices, connectivity, support and skills they need to improve their lives, participate in society and benefit from the digital world. The research team working on the evaluation of Digital Lifeline were: Jane Mackey (Senior Evaluation and Research Manager); Lauren Howe (Research and Data Officer); May Appleby (Research and Data Administrator); Steph Libby (Data Analyst); and Dr Emma Stone (Director of Evidence and Engagement).

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For more information about Digital Lifeline, contact Good Things Foundation:

hello@goodthingsfoundation.org

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