Digital Champion Programme Evaluation

Cohort 1 report – February 2024

Prepared for: Age UK

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Contents

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Project context: Digital Champion Programme

The Digital Champion Programme aims to tackle digital exclusion by improving digital skills of older people and loaning digital devices and connectivity to those who otherwise would not be able to access it. The Programme achieves this through recruiting and training Digital Champions, who support older people as volunteers to raise their awareness about the online world, motivate them to develop their digital skills, and provide them with the support to improve their skills and confidence using the internet. As part of the Programme, Age UK National is working with 40 local Age UKs/Cymrus over a period of 2022-2026. The Programme is delivered in two cohorts, each lasting 18 months.

All local Age UKs/Cymrus involved in the Programme deliver the following four services, recognised as key to tackling main barriers to digital inclusion:

- **Volunteer Digital Champions:** recruiting and training volunteers who support older people to improve their digital skills;
- **Awareness raising activities:** reaching older people at risk of digital exclusion to inform them about how digital technology can help them and encourage them to join the Programme;
- **Digital skills sessions:** supporting older people to develop their digital skills by providing flexible, tailored digital skills sessions that focus on what they want to learn and achieve;
- **Provision of technology and connectivity**: offering device loans and connectivity to those who otherwise would not have access, so that alongside access to a Digital Champion and digital skills sessions, they can try using technology and the internet to see if it might be beneficial to them.

Cohort 1 delivered the Programme between June 2022 and November 2023. Across 25 Cohort 1 partners, the following KPIs have been achieved:

KPI	Cohort 1 target	Actual achieved	%
1. Volunteer Digital Champions recruited	330	454	138%
2. Older people reached through Awareness Raising activities	57,796	63,477	111%
3. Older people supported through Digital Skills sessions	7,048	6,203	89%
4. Tablets distributed	250	299	120%
5. Older people engaged in tablet loan scheme	1450	680	47%

Table 1: KPIs achieved in Cohort 1 of the Digital Champion Programme

The report below presents evaluation findings based on Cohort 1 activities.

1.2.   Evaluation objectives

Age UK commissioned Research Works Ltd to conduct an evaluation of the Digital Champion Programme. The evaluation needed to provide ongoing learning during the project and evaluate its impact. To achieve this, the evaluation needed to answer the following main questions:

1.   Sustainable engagement and benefits:

1.1. How successful or otherwise is the Programme at encouraging older people supported to continue to engage with and use digital technology over the medium term (6-12 months)?

1.2. What are the enablers for this success or the disablers and barriers when not successful?

1.3. For whom the Programme is successful, how does it impact the day-to-day experiences/life of that person? e.g. wellbeing, money, access to services.

2.   High-risk beneficiary groups[1]:

2.1. How successful or otherwise are local Age UKs/Cymrus at identifying, engaging and supporting older people in high-risk groups to begin or further develop their use of digital technology in a confident and safe way?

2.2. What capabilities and adaptations of the general model, if any, is required for local Age UKs/Cymrus to support older people from high-risk groups to fully participate?

2.3. What are the experiences of older people from high-risk groups participating in the Programme, including the benefits and challenges they may experience?

1.3.   Evaluation methodology

The evaluation involved three research strands using the following methods:

Research with participants	Research with staff & volunteers	Monitoring data analysis
<u>Re-convened depth interviews with participants (Zoom/phone)</u> • 48 x initial interviews to understand experiences of the programme and aspirations (3-40mins) • 24 x follow-up, longer interviews to	<u>Group discussions (Zoom/Teams)</u> • 4 group discussions with Age UK partner staff (20 respondents in total, 90mins long per group) • 4 group discussions with Digital Champions (20 respondents in	• Utilising and synthesising information obtained through monitoring to complement qualitative research
		148 respondents involved:

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[1] 7 partners in Cohort 1 supported high-risk groups, which included: older people living on low income, those living alone; older people who were housebound; older people with mobility problems; and older people with dementia or memory loss. This report presents findings concerning the high-risk groups involved in Cohort 1, with the exception of older people with dementia and memory loss whose experiences of the Programme and the impact on them are explored in a separate evaluation. The report for this additional evaluation focusing on digital support for people with dementia or memory loss will be completed in spring 2024.

understand impact (30-40mins) Observation & group discussions • 2 online and 2 f2f DG digital support sessions observed, followed by group discussions with participants (5 per group, 60-90mins long)	total, 90mins per group) Online feedback form • Sent to a wider range of volunteers (aiming for 40 completes)	• **68 participants** • **20 Age UK staff** • **60 volunteers/Digital Champions**

Table 2: Evaluation methodology

Qualitative research with clients

Cohort 1 qualitative fieldwork included 32 older people/ clients[2] who took part in the Digital Champion Programme (Cohort 1). The clients were interviewed using the following methods:

- 24 initial interviews with clients (30-40 minutes long);
- 11 follow-up interviews with clients (30-40 minutes long)
- 2 observation of digital skills support sessions, followed by 1 group discussion (5 clients) and 3 depth interviews with clients whose digital skills sessions were observed.

The sample was structured to include clients from both general and high-risk groups, as well as ensure a good geographic spread of partners involved, as shown in the table below.

Local Age UK	Initial depth interviews	Observation & group discussion	Follow-up interviews
General delivery groups			
Age UK Solihull	2	/	1
Age UK Lancashire	2	/	/
Age Cymru Dyfed	2	1 client	1
Age UK Milton Keynes	2	/	2
Age UK Devon	2	/	1
Age UK Hammersmith & Fulham	2	1 (5 clients)	1
Age UK Leicester Shire & Rutland	1	/	1
Age UK Lindsey	1	/	/
Age UK Isle of Wight	1	/	1
Age UK Redbridge, Barking & Havering	1	/	/

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[2] The term clients is used in the report to refer to older people who took part in the Programme.

High-risk groups			
Age UK Oxfordshire (older people living alone)	2	/	1
Age UK East London (older people living on low income)	2	1 (2 clients)	/
Age UK South Gloucestershire (older people who are housebound)	2	/	1
Age UK Portsmouth (older people living with mobility issues)	2	/	1
Total	24	8	11

Table 3: Qualitative client sample

Qualitative research with staff and volunteer Digital Champions

Qualitative research with staff and volunteer Digital Champions including 2 group discussions with staff and 2 with volunteer Digital Champions. The sample included diverse partners from Cohort 1 general and high-risk delivery groups, as follows:

Staff discussion group - General delivery:	No of staff involved
Age UK Devon	2
Age Cymru Dyfed	1
Age UK Lancashire	1
Age UK Milton Keynes	1
Age UK Norfolk	2
Age UK Hammersmith & Fulham	2
Volunteer Digital Champion discussion group – General delivery:	No of volunteer Digital Champions involved
Age Cymru Dyfed	1
Age UK Norfolk	2
Age UK Solihull	1
Age UK Milton Keynes	1
Age UK Lancashire	2
Staff discussion group – High-risk delivery	No of staff involved
Age UK Oxfordshire (older people living alone)	1
Age UK East London (older people on low income)	2

Age UK South Gloucestershire (older people who are housebound)	1
Volunteer Digital Champion discussion group – High-risk delivery	**No of volunteer Digital Champions involved**
Age UK Oxfordshire (older people living alone)	2
Age UK Portsmouth (older people who are housebound)	2
Age UK South Gloucestershire (older people who are housebound)	2

Table 4: Qualitative staff and volunteer Digital Champion sample

Online volunteer Digital Champion survey

In addition, 58 volunteer Digital Champions completed an online survey which was used to capture feedback from a wider range of volunteers and complement the data gathered through group discussions.

Programme reporting data analysis

Age UK National collected quantitative data in the form of monthly reports submitted by local Age UKs/Cymrus, that was pseudonymised and contained demographic information and data on each of the four areas of Programme delivery (volunteer Digital Champions; awareness raising activities; digital skills sessions; and provision of technology and connectivity). Quarterly reports that Age UK produced using this data were reviewed to pull out any information that could complement qualitative findings in this report.

2. EXPERIENCES OF PROGRAMME SET-UP

2.1. Client recruitment

Local Age UKs/Cymrus used varied methods to promote the service and recruit clients, which staff felt worked well to attract older people to the service. Those supporting high-risk groups also reported how they needed to adapt their approach to referral and marketing to target these specific groups.

Referral pathways

Many staff reported liaising with other local Age UK/Cymru services, as well as a range of partner organisations who could distribute the information about the service to their client base and provide referrals. Examples of partner organisations varied from sheltered housing schemes and GP surgeries to a local football club for people aged over 50. In addition, one local Age UK/Cymru used their extensive email distribution list, which included local councillors and NHS workers, to provide information about the service to organisations and staff who could then promote it with their clients.

> *"We created an email distribution list which had the councillors from all three counties, which we used for the pandemic, and advertised the scheme. From that we had most of the NHS put on to it, all the local council, and we've now got over 1,900 people on that distribution list, which we email daily or weekly about digital and other services. They then advertise it to their communities and put up posters or share it on their social media pages, which is then rolled out across that town or village."* [Staff]

Marketing

Marketing channels varied from local newspapers and magazines to Age UK digital channels, including local Age UK/Cymru websites and social media. Some staff explained that targeting local print media serving older audiences worked well, for example, the local Women's Institute magazine. In addition to print and online sources cited by staff in the qualitative sample, Age UK reporting data showed that local Age UK/Cymrus also used TV and radio adverts, leaflets and newsletters.

Some staff further highlighted particular formats they found worked well for marketing the service. For example, one partner used a question and answer (Q&A) format for their print media marketing rather than adverts. Each week the Q&A focused on a different topic, for example, how to use email, which they felt was effective in raising older people's interest in the service.

> *"Rather than just having it as an advertisement, we've done a Q&A. We used the most common questions for our members and we put together a tutorial, like how to create an email one month, how to book a doctor's appointment online. That's been good for us for getting the members in."* [Staff]

Awareness raising sessions

Most staff felt awareness raising activities were critical for successful recruitment of clients. These activities, as opposed to more generic marketing, involved conversations with older people around specific needs, interests and benefits they may have from using digital technologies.

Staff thought they needed to go to places where older people were and found that promoting the service in this way was fruitful. Across different local Age UK/Cymrus, staff visited and held awareness raising sessions at a range of different venues and activities, including: local clubs for older people, libraries, knit and natter groups, care homes, sheltered housing schemes, garden centres, luncheon activities and having a stand at local events or in front of supermarkets. Some also promoted the service to other local Age UK groups and Programmes for older people, including befriending, walking groups, memory cafes.

> *"We're finding we have to go to where the older people are. We're starting to look at garden centres and places like that. We're going to talk to the garden centre cafes to pop in once a month."* [Staff]

Staff explained they found it helpful to bring a tablet to these sessions, as they could then carry on conversations with individual people and show them how to do tasks they were interested in. Staff felt this practical demonstration helped raise interests and attract some people to the Programme.

Some volunteer Digital Champions also discussed awareness raising as part of the support they provided to older people. Respondents explained that often older people had little or no knowledge of the capabilities of the internet and the range of things they could do online. One volunteer therefore created a list of possible activities on the internet linked to different interests and aims, which they used with their clients to explain the possibilities and identify what they might be interested in.

Recruiting high-risk groups

Local Age UK/Cymrus supporting high-risk groups also shared their experiences with referral pathways and highlighted some additional routes for recruiting particular high-risk groups:

- **Housebound older people:** Local Age UK/Cymrus supporting housebound older people explained their clients were difficult to identify, as they were not 'out and about in the community'. Staff therefore heavily relied on referrals from social prescribers and their contacts with housebound older people. This referral pathway was found to be working well for recruiting housebound older people.

  Staff further felt that client recruitment was different for housebound older people than for older people in general. This was because they felt they needed to target older people's families, friends and neighbours more to identify and recruit housebound older people. They, therefore, targeted diverse community spaces where they could reach families with their marketing activities, including community centres, shopping centres, clinics.

  > *"Our high-risk group being housebound are really hard to get to and identify. So, we've gone down the route of social prescribing, going through social prescribers that have contact with these clients on a day-to-day basis. Lot of referrals are coming from there. When we do our awareness raising, we focus it on family, relatives, friends or neighbours that might know somebody that is housebound that could require support."* [Staff]

- **Older people living alone:** Local Age UK/Cymrus supporting older people living alone also used social prescribers, as well as hospitals and adult social care as referral pathways. Staff at these local Age UK/Cymrus also felt that targeting families or neighbours was perhaps more important for that group than in general recruitment.

- **Older people on low income:** Those supporting older people on low income pointed out that many of their clients came from low income groups in general, so did not feel that their recruitment was different than their normal recruitment practice. However, they did use some additional referral pathways. For example, older people on low

income were recruited through referrals from Citizens Advice and local community centres, as well as the internal local Age UK/Cymru information and advice service.

> *"We have referrals from our Information and advice workers and also Citizens Advice."* [Staff]

In addition, some of the local Age UKs/Cymrus supporting high-risk groups had to adapt the language used in their internal and external materials promoting the Digital Champion support, to make sure their referrals met the criteria:

- The local Age UK supporting older people living alone felt they needed to be very clear about this both internally and in the public-facing leaflets. For example, their leaflets included questions such as: 'Do you live alone?'; 'Do you know someone who lives alone?'
- The local Age UKs supporting housebound older people also felt they needed to specify this internally, but felt they needed to be careful how they phrased this criterion in external communications, as being 'housebound' could be defined and understood in different ways. They decided their external leaflets should ask if people were able to access community support and whether they needed in-house one-to-one support, rather than using the word 'housebound'.
- The local Age UK supporting older people on low income clarified the requirement internally, but decided against explicit references to low income in external communications. This was partly because their client base generally included people on low income, but also as they felt references to low income could potentially put off and offend their clients. They found their referrals met the thresholds for their service, even without this being explicitly mentioned in their marketing materials and outreach promotion.

2.2. Volunteer Digital Champion recruitment

All local Age UKs/Cymrus in this sample found volunteer Digital Champion recruitment extremely challenging but pointed out that those challenges were felt across the voluntary and community sector. Respondents cited various reasons behind those difficulties, including changes in volunteers' circumstances that made them stop volunteering, greater focus on paid employment in the current cost-of-living crisis, and volunteers having a wide choice of volunteering opportunities.

Over time, most local Age UK/Cymrus have recruited some volunteer Digital Champions, although many thought they needed greater volunteer capacity to be able to meet the demand for support. In one location, for example, staff were providing support as they were still looking for their first volunteers.

> *"Volunteer recruitment is hard though at the moment, we can't seem to keep people. A lot of students are going overseas, a lot of our Digital Champions are people we've had in the past, but without more of them we can't progress it much more."* [Staff]

"I find that people are now looking for more paid opportunities as opposed to volunteering opportunities, simply because of the way things are. That's another challenge." [Staff]

Local Age UK/Cymrus reported how they used varied routes for volunteer Digital Champion recruitment, with some targeting organisations that may have individuals with background in digital inclusion or technology on their staff. For example, some explained they liaised with libraries which held digital literacy sessions, local universities or University of the Third Age, local councils and businesses to identify and recruit such individuals. In addition, many promoted volunteer Digital Champion opportunities with this Programme on their website, social media or volunteer newsletter. One local Age UK also engaged their befriending volunteers to consider adding some digital skills support to what they do.

Some staff respondents also considered the impact of the language used to attract volunteer Digital Champions to this Programme. For example, a respondent explained they stopped using the phrase 'IT support' when promoting the volunteer Digital Champion role, as they were concerned it was putting potential volunteers off. Instead, they focused on having basic and specific skills, for example, knowing how to do online shopping, and enjoying meeting people, to attract more volunteers.

"We wondered whether the phrase 'IT support' was putting people off, especially because a lot of our volunteers are retirement age in the age bracket of the people we are supporting; so we are trying to change it to more of 'Do you have the basic skills, are you able to do online shopping, do you enjoy spending time with people' that kind of thing, because we are really struggling with volunteers." [Staff]

2.3. Staff training

Programme training and resources

For contextual purposes, the training and resource provision for the Programme is outlined below. All local Age UKs/Cymrus participating in the Programme were offered training at the outset of the Programme and provided the following resources:

- The Digital Inclusion Handbook (information, resources, example templates, tips and links to key documents)
- The Tablet Loan Scheme Pack (similar to the above)
- Links to Digital Instruction/ Making the Most of the Internet guides, which also included guides on how to make digital devices more accessible for people with disabilities and a glossary of online terms;
- The Tablet Instruction Pack (information for the client/recipient on topics such as loan information, the equipment on loan, how to explore the tablet, how to charge the tablet, etc.)
- Digital Champion Welcome Pack (information for Digital Champion Volunteers, for example, on what is digital inclusion, job description and responsibilities, top tips);
- Marketing materials, such as posters, feedback forms, referral cards:

- Project delivery forms, such as consent forms, learner records, loan records, digital champion records and monitoring templates where shared via email as part of the Data Sharing Agreements.

Additional resources were provided at other points during the Cohort 1 delivery, in response to ongoing learnings from the Programme:

- Digital Champion training e-learning, comprising 9 modules and covering topics such as digital exclusion, best practice when working with older people, volunteers' technical knowledge, developing volunteers' soft skills, popular topics of interest for older people (August 2023)
- Guided Conversation Pack for managing discussions around the Tablet Loan Scheme (March 2023)
- Updated Marketing Materials (July 2023)
- Sustainability Pack (November 2023)
- A monthly newsletter that provides a round-up of the documents and discussions shared on the Teams channel for the Programme;
- Quarterly report 1-5 were shared at various points throughout delivery.

Staff experiences of Programme training and resources

Digital Champion Programme staff in this sample had mixed experiences in terms of the training they received or felt they needed. Staff were split in terms of whether they attended the Programme training on offer. Some who joined early in the Programme attended the training sessions organised by Age UK. Those staff found that the training provided was easy to follow and comprehensive, covering the different topics they needed to know about. The guides staff received to use with clients, for example, how to use emails and the internet more generally, were felt to be useful.

> *"I thought it was really good training. It was quite straightforward, quite comprehensive, explaining everything that was required. Easy to understand, it felt like you were going to get support."* [Staff]

However, there were a few staff respondents who did not attend the initial staff training. In this group, some missed the initial training as they joined later, so learned about their role through learning on the job. Others felt they did not need a generic training for their role on the Digital Champion Programme, because they had experience in similar roles before. Instead, they felt they needed other specific training to address the gaps in their knowledge, skills and experience. For example, some attended training in volunteer management, as that was the area where they needed to improve their knowledge. Those respondents stressed that training needs across different staff and partners would vary depending on their background and previous experience, as well as the specificities of their clients and areas.

Those supporting particular high-risk groups – specifically, older people on low income, people living alone and those who were housebound – also did not feel they needed any additional training to support these particular groups.[3]

A few staff respondents also discussed potential gaps in training and resources that were provided. Examples included: training on how to support visually impaired people; guidance for clients on how to switch on and navigate the tablet they loaned from Age UK; and explaining digital technology terminology older people may struggle to understand. Interestingly, each of these points featured in the resources that were already provided to local Age UKs/Cumrys. This raises a question whether staff were unaware of these resources or thought they should be expanded to include more detail. For example:

- It may be that staff thought that certain terms should be added to the glossary, e.g. one staff respondent said that terms such as 'double tap' needed to be explained;
- A staff member who thought that training for supporting visually impaired people was missing spoke about accessing this training through the Royal National Institute of Blind & Partially Sighted People (RNIB) and partnering with local libraries to access audio books. While Age UK provided resources and organised a talk on this topic, staff may have felt that specific training was required.

> *"There are certain things that clients don't understand, like the language, for example, double tap. If it could be simplified. I would show them and explain to them. It's language we're used to using, but for a novice user it's like, what's double tap? How quickly do I do it? How much pressure do I apply? I know it would be challenging to put that into a document, but maybe we could figure it out together. I'm sure others are having similar issues."* [Staff]

> *"We had to look elsewhere for training for those visually impaired, so we joined forces with RNIB and had sessions with them. We joined with our libraries for the borrow box training for people with the audio books and things like that."* [Staff]

To understand more about staff views on how these topics should be covered the evaluation of Cohort 2 Programme delivery may need to explore responses to specific resources and training in more detail.

Other issues that were noted in the context of Programme training and resources for staff included:

- **A template agreement for tablet loan:** A couple of staff thought that it would be very helpful if Age UK could provide a template for the tablet loan agreement that could be used by all local Age UKs/Cymrus with clients across the Programme. However, as this is an agreement between individual charities and clients, it cannot be legally provided by Age UK National.

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[3] This may be different for those supporting older people with dementia and memory loss, which will be covered in a separate, additional evaluation.

- **Easy access to resources and ideas shared by local Age UKs/Cymrus on the Programme:** Another couple of staff felt that accessing resources, ideas and experiences shared by other staff on Teams was not always easy. To make this more accessible, a newsletter was introduced in December 2022 that highlighted resources shared across the Network.

- **Easy access to Programme resources:** Links to key documents were included in the packs shared with local Age UKs/Cymrus, emailed to staff, and they were stored on the Programme Teams channel. However, a couple of staff felt that resources were not always easy to find and access, so it may be worth exploring this topic further in Cohort 2 evaluation to understand if anything can be improved.

- **Training for staff who join later:** A few staff who joined later did not attend the initial training but rather learned on the job. Local Age UK/Cymrus could be reminded in the future that new staff could watch the recording of the original training, if helpful.

  "I've not found the documents as easy to find. It would have been better if there was a toolkit of documents that were easy to find. There's a few different channels and ways of getting things. There're other people on here that manage lots of different services, so one location to just find everything would be good." [Staff]

  "With the Microsoft Teams, people are putting different bits on there, but if you're managing more than one project your team gets locked out, and you don't see any of the messages until you log back into the other team's account. So, a lot of people are missing what other organisations are sharing." [Staff]

2.4. Volunteer Digital Champion training and onboarding

Local Age UKs/Cymrus provided general volunteer induction and training, whereas Age UK National provided a Digital Champion Welcome Pack and access to a range of resources through the Digital Inclusion Network, where questions could also be asked on specific topics. In August 2023, the training for volunteer Digital Champions was expanded to include Digital Champion training e-learning. This e-learning training included 9 modules covering topics such as digital exclusion, best practice when working with older people, volunteers' technical knowledge, developing volunteers' soft skills, popular topics of interest for older people.

Volunteer Digital Champion training, onboarding and support were discussed in group discussions with staff and volunteers, but also with a bigger group of volunteers who completed the online feedback survey (No = 58). Survey results showed that the most commonly completed training involved general volunteer training, for example, in aspects of volunteering including safeguarding, equality and lone working. 79% of volunteers who completed the survey had that training, whereas 22% said they received specific Digital

Champion training provided by Age UK. In addition, 6 out of 58 respondents said they did not receive any training listed in the survey.

Chart 1: Volunteer Digital Champion training

While there was no explanation of why these 6 volunteers did not attend any training, it is worth noting that a couple of staff respondents reported challenges with getting geographically dispersed volunteers in rural areas to attend training in their office. When e-learning was offered, some volunteers struggled to complete that too. A staff respondent explained they then resorted to doing home visits to some volunteers, to deliver training that way. Barrers to volunteer Digital Champions completing training can be explored in the next stage of the evaluation further.

In group discussions, staff and volunteer Digital Champions described the following process for volunteer Digital Champion onboarding and initial training:

- Typically, most volunteer Digital Champions had a general volunteer induction and a pack, which covered topics such as safeguarding and lone working.
- In some local Age UKs supporting high-risk groups, volunteer Digital Champions were also given additional training explaining the role of Digital Champion and discussing different possible client scenarios, as well as given a Digital Champion volunteer pack.
- In all locations, volunteer Digital Champions then shadowed a member of staff or another experienced volunteer and observed how they supported clients, before starting to support their own clients.

Qualitative research and the survey suggested that most volunteer Digital Champions were satisfied that the onboarding process and general volunteer training went well and prepared them for their role.

> *"I did appreciate the documentation I got from [the local] Age UK regarding working alone, because that was something I'd never done before, all the other documentation. I was supported by them in the area that I was expecting to be supported in."* [Volunteer Digital Champion]

> *"I was given a good insight into what would be expected of me and what particular questions I may be asked."* [Volunteer Digital Champion]

In a couple of cases, however, volunteer Digital Champions highlighted areas of the onboarding process that could have worked better. For example, one volunteer reported there was a delay to start volunteering, whereas another felt that communications about the start date for volunteering could have been better. On the other hand, some staff also reported challenges in matching volunteer Digital Champions with clients, to fit within how far volunteers would travel and how much time they could commit. If challenges in matching were causing delays, these would be important to communicate to volunteers.

While general volunteer training was appreciated, volunteer needs for specific additional training varied greatly:

- For example, some with significant work experience in IT felt they did not need any technical training, but other volunteer Digital Champions wished they had some more training on particular technical topics.
- Training in teaching skills was another area mentioned as desirable by some, particularly those with IT background.
- Yet, others who volunteered in similar roles before did not feel they needed any additional training. They felt that learning through shadowing was appropriate for this role and pointed out that this kind of service required ongoing learning.

> *"I have no formal teacher training so feel I am lacking in this area, as well as in soft skills such as social skills. I worry that I use far too technical language and too high a baseline of expectations in my teaching having had decades of IT jargon soaked into my brain. I would like to have more sessions such as re-caps, evaluations, status reports and collaborative planning."* [Volunteer Digital Champion]

Such variations suggest that additional training should be tailored to the needs of different volunteer Digital Champions, with technical training in popular support topics and tips on teaching skills most needed.

The following topics for additional technical training and support were highlighted:

- **Age UK loan tablets:** The tablets made available through the technology loan scheme were Android. There were some volunteer Digital Champions who personally used Apple devices and were not familiar with Android devices in general, and the tablet used in the Age UK loan Programme in particular. They and staff managing the Programme felt it would be helpful to organise sessions where such volunteers could spend 2-3 hours getting familiar with the Android tablet used in the Programme.

  > *I was not introduced to the operating systems employed by the tablets loaned to clients. It would have been helpful to practice with them before meeting clients.* [Volunteer Digital Champion]

- **Popular devices, tools, apps and topics:** A couple of volunteer Digital Champions also welcomed more training that would cover popular areas of support they could often

encounter during volunteering. Examples included training in different popular devices, tools, apps and topics.

- **Access to external resources:** Those who had access to resources from Digital Unite or other external providers found them extremely useful. Others, with no such access, sometimes mentioned they wished they could tap into such additional support where they were unsure how to help clients with certain issues.

As the feedback above was given before the additional Digital Champion training was introduced as e-learning, it will be important to explore in Cohort 2 the extent to which this additional training addressed some of the needs detailed above.

Additional suggestions to improve volunteer Digital Champion training included:

- **Particular resources for volunteer Digital Champions:** A staff respondent mentioned there used to be a manual for volunteer Digital Champions that Age UK provided on another digital inclusion programme. They reported that volunteers found this manual helpful and were unsure why it was not provided anymore. It may be worth checking whether this old resource had any content that was helpful but is not covered in current resources for volunteer Digital Champions.

- **More tips for managing particular situations with clients:** A survey respondent thought there should be more standardisation in how volunteer Digital Champions respond to particular questions from clients. For example, there should be a standardised response and process where volunteer Digital Champions did not know an answer to a question in the first instance. Another respondent suggested volunteer Digital Champions would benefit from more advice on how to deal with client appointment cancellations.

    "I feel that there should be more of a standard base line for volunteers and trainers with regards to how to deal with some questions and queries from clients. For example, 'I don't know!' should be replaced by 'I'm not sure of the answer, let me see if a colleague knows.' Or alternatively, 'I will find out for you!' Not all queries can be settled during a session but every attempt should be made to clear it up, even if we need to email the client or discuss it with them at the next session. Even if it is a negative answer, such as 'Your version won't support this!'" [Volunteer Digital Champion]

2.5.   Ongoing support for volunteer Digital Champions

Qualitative research found that once volunteer Digital Champions started supporting their clients, many received regular communications from staff on the Programme and had touch points to meet staff and other volunteer Digital Champions. Some staff sent weekly emails to volunteer Digital Champions to ask how they were doing with their referrals and share any news and interesting information on digital technology and inclusion. Other ways of keeping in touch with volunteer Digital Champions varied and ranged from a WhatsApp group to a number they can call for support, coffee drop-ins every 4-10 weeks, or 'thank

you' events a few times a year. Staff and volunteer Digital Champions who accessed these kinds of support thought they worked well, as well as volunteer communications.

> *"We have a support network, a WhatsApp group and get together now and again for a chat with the existing volunteers and any new volunteers, so there's support around."* [Volunteer Digital Champion]

However, this may not have been a universal experience across different volunteer Digital Champions. For example, a couple of volunteers reported they had little contact with other volunteer Digital Champions and hadn't met any of them or visited the main office. Those volunteers would have appreciated more contact with other volunteers, including occasional meetings. Survey results further suggested some volunteers may not have accessed these forms of support. When asked what training and support they received as Digital Champions, 29% said they had a support network (for example, a Digital Champion WhatsApp group) and/or regular meetings with other Digital Champions and staff. This may mean that other volunteer Digital Champions accessed support in different ways, but it may also suggest that some may be missing out on support from other volunteers and staff.

> *"I wasn't aware of who else was involved in my area. It's only this evening that I've seen two other colleagues and I think the opportunity to meet with the employed staff perhaps once a month or so just to have a chat and coffee and get some sort of guidance on various things would be helpful."* [Volunteer Digital Champion]

In addition, volunteer Digital Champions highlighted some other areas where support could be improved too:

- Volunteer Digital Champions stressed the wide range of issues they could be asked about by older people and that helping resolve some of these issues involved considerable research on their part. Some wondered what resources or help was available to Digital Champions and wished there was someone they could turn to help them support clients. Some wondered if Age UK National's IT department provided any support to Digital Champions. Others, who had used Digital UK or AbilityNet were very positive about support and resources they accessed and thought these should be made available to other volunteer Digital Champions.
- A volunteer also felt there should be more clarity around the range of issues they could be asked to help with and tasks that may be too specialist for them to support clients with. For example, this volunteer Digital Champion had a client who run a charity and wanted support with search engine optimisation so the charity website was more prominent online. The volunteer thought this was a very specialised area they were unable to support the client with, nor did they think that should be their task. It would be useful to re-iterate to local Age UKs/Cymrus to clarify for their volunteer Digital Champions the boundaries of what they can be expected to support with and the kinds of topics that steer into technical support rather than digital inclusion support.

3. EXPERIENCES OF PROGRAMME DELIVERY

3.1. Client motivations and barriers for joining the Programme

Clients had a range of motivations for joining the Programme, which stemmed from both positive and negative feelings and experiences linked to digital technologies. Most recognised at least some benefits they could have from using the internet and digital technologies, so had things they specifically wanted to learn which motivated them to join the Programme. Key benefits clients wanted included:

- **Convenience and practical help:** some wanted to be able to do online shopping which they thought would be much easier than having to physically go out to shops, particularly at times when going out was difficult (for example, during bad weather or the Covid-19 pandemic). Others were aware that digital technologies could provide practical help in some situations, for example, if they were able to use maps when walking and driving.

- **Independence:** many clients felt that knowing how to use the internet and their smartphone or a tablet would make them more independent. These clients typically depended on family, friends or staff at a retirement home for tasks they needed to do online. They felt frustrated about being dependent in this way and also did not want to burden their friends and family any longer. They wanted to learn how to do certain things online so they were more independent.

"It has helped me with a lot of things that I used to struggle with. I used to bother my children a lot... But I have learnt from them [Age UK] and when I discuss with my age group, they are like, 'Wow, how did you get to know that?'" [Client]

"It has genuinely had a sizeable impact on my life. Instead of going to third parties - this place is staffed 24 hours a day and I've had to go to the housekeepers and say, 'Can you do this, can you order this, can you book me a doctor's appointment?' - now I can do that all by myself. Aren't I a clever boy?" [Client]

- **Social contact:** Some clients also wanted to be able to keep in touch with family members or reduce their social isolation. For example, a couple of clients living alone and feeling lonely hoped that being able to use the internet and apps on their smartphone might help them have more social contact. Where support was provided in the format of group sessions, clients also liked that this gave them opportunities for socialising.

  "I've got a grandson in Australia so I'd love to 'Zoom' him." [Client]

  "Well, I was hoping I could get in touch with some people like me that live alone and we could correspond, whether by telephone or internet. I'd like to know how to use Skype." [Client]

In addition to these positive expectations around the benefits of digital technologies, some clients' motivations stemmed from more negative experiences and feelings linked to not being online. Clients listed examples where they were left feeling frustrated or worried because of this, for example:

- not being able to secure early Christmas shopping slots;
- worrying about emails from energy companies which they struggled to keep track of;
- not being able to contact customer services where companies only communicated by email;
- not being able to join gym membership without an email;
- feeling cut off from other, younger people (including family) because of not using digital technologies and not being able to participate in conversations about that / feeling 'stupid' because of that.

These and similar negative experiences made some clients feel they should try to improve their ability to use the internet and digital technologies.

  "I've lost the early Christmas shopping slots now because I'm not there on technology. It's things like that when you feel that I need to be able to do it with confidence." [Client]

  "Basically, I've got quite a lot of gas, electricity, they kept sending me these messages, saying you should do this and do that. I don't know what to do… it was really worrying me. [Age UK] talked me through, they helped me to do quite a lot on it." [Client]

"There are a lot of developments since I did a [computer] course about nearly 20 years ago. I was being left behind… Instead of being part of the world, I was standing apart and watching it going round without me." [Client]

In addition to these motivations, some clients were prompted to join the Programme by getting a device they did not know how to use. This was a noticeable pattern of family buying digital devices for older people, for example, a smartphone or Kindle, which in turn prompted a decision to try and learn how to use those devices (although, not always immediately).

Staff and volunteer Digital Champion observations echoed what clients said about their motivations for joining the Programme. They cited similar motivations and drivers prompting older people to engage with the Digital Champion Programme and use digital technologies:

- Wanting to be independent and not have to ask others for help; this was particularly important to housebound older people who depended on others for their online shopping;
- Wanting to use WhatsApp and see their family and friends has been a common motive for some older people to engage with the Programme;
- External influences also played a role in prompting interest – families encouraging older people to learn how to do certain things online or on the phone, or realising that landline phones may disappear in certain areas.

The research also captured clients' feedback on challenges they experienced when using digital technologies and their concerns that acted as barriers to progressing with their learning:

- **Concerns over fraud:** this was a major worry, particularly linked to online shopping and banking, that stopped some people from doing the things they wanted to do online.

  "I tried but to be honest because I was really worried …. I wanted to order food online, I tried and then when it comes to go to your basket and all that, I thought, 'No I can't do this', so I left it. I just thought, 'No leave it, in case I mess up'. Because I've not got anybody. If my bank details or my money goes, I've still got to pay my bills. I've got nobody to call on to help me till I get out of this mess or whatever. I'm on my own." [Client]

- **Lack of confidence:** clients felt they were not in control when using the internet or their digital devices because of their lack of digital knowledge and skills. Many recalled instances where they felt frustrated or had difficulties in this respect, for example: getting roaming charges but not knowing why and how; being targeted by fraudsters over the phone who tried to get them to go to a particular website; trying to use maps functionality but struggling to get the quickest route, and so on. Because they felt they were unable to keep on top of their devices and what they do online, they lacked the confidence to learn through trial and error. For example, some worried about not knowing what to do if anything went wrong when doing a particular task online. Others

felt embarrassed about showing their lack of knowledge to other people, particularly to younger people.

"I get into a muddle and panic, touch the wrong buttons." [Client]

- **Feeling overwhelmed:** a couple of clients also appeared to struggle with the amount of information available online through Google searches. They explained how they felt unsure which of the many results to look at.

"It's not easy. If you want to go and find something and the prices, all these other shops pop up and I don't know what I'm buying. Then they frighten me because they say you've got to watch these scams, I can't tell really if a scam's not a scam; these emails come and I delete these emails, but they don't delete it, they still pop up, I don't want all that nonsense in life." [Client]

- **Eyesight problems:** two clients had eye conditions and deteriorating eyesight which made it more challenging to use digital technologies, despite wanting to learn and engage.

"It's so sad because I want to [use the internet] and they [volunteers] were so good, so helpful, got me back onto it, explained a lot of things that I didn't know, but because I am struggling with my sight, it is hard going and it's getting worse." [Client]

- **Cost**: A couple of respondents who borrowed tablets felt unsure whether they would be able to afford to buy a device themselves or pay for the internet.

"It's great, it's interesting, I'm not bored of it at all and I know that I've got it to look at; [the only thing is] it's the money side, isn't it? Apparently, most of it that's in that tablet, you've got to pay for, haven't you? I'm only a pensioner, I haven't got a lot of money. If it's a lot of money to spend on that, I'll have to think twice." [Client]

Again, these reports were echoed by staff and volunteer Digital Champions. In particular, staff stressed that fear of doing something wrong or breaking a device was one of the strongest barriers to wanting to learn how to use the internet and digital technologies. In staff and volunteer Digital Champions' view, this fear was combined with a lack of confidence in own abilities to use digital technology and concerns over scams they could be exposed to online. Staff also pointed out that for some older people health difficulties such as visual impairment, short term memory loss or arthritis, also created barriers to using digital devices. Affordability and the costs of WiFi and obtaining digital devices were other barriers cited by some staff, for example, those supporting older people on low income.

"Being scammed would be a big one. There's so much scam awareness that it puts people off going online." [Staff]

> *"Fear. They'll come up with a reason they can't do it. They fear they'll lose what they've got saved in the computer, or they'll forget what they've learnt."* [Staff]

> *"The one thing they all seem to have in common is they lack confidence, they are frightened of the machines, I had one woman who is only 50 shaking with fear. In the end, if we've been successful, they are much more confident and not afraid of the tablet, so that's been what I've found."* [Volunteer Digital Champion]

Volunteer Digital Champions, for their part, felt that a negative attitude to learning how to use the internet and digital technology was another major barrier for some older people. Volunteers explained that some older people were referred to the service by family members instead of wanting to learn themselves. In other cases, some approached the service out of frustration rather than interest, for example, because they felt companies and organisations keep asking them to do certain things online. Where the interest was not coming from individuals themselves, this presented a barrier to engaging with the service.

> *"We do actually get quite a few referred in who don't actually want the referral. It's a family member or friend who has supplied them with a device that they are not then able to teach them how to use; or they don't have any technology and somebody working with them thinks it would be really good if they could get online but they actually have no interest or there is a big barrier. So, there are lots of conversations to be had initially to establish what that one need is and if there really isn't any need, where we go from there. There's not a lot we can do if they're really adamant they don't want you to go and they don't want you to support them."* [Volunteer Digital Champion]

Finally, staff and volunteer Digital Champions highlighted the factors they felt helped some older people overcome these barriers and engage with the Programme and learning how to use digital technologies. The following aspects of the Programme were cited as key enablers of engagement:

- Being able to loan a device to clients so they could practise what they learn;
- Reassuring older people that they can learn at their own pace;
- Linking learning to specific things individuals wanted to know and highlighting the benefits of learning those things.

> *"What's really helped is advertising the fact that we are able to loan them a device. A lot of the time, older people don't want to make that investment, especially with the cost of living crisis at the moment. Giving them that reassurance that actually the device will be loaned to you, and if it's something you feel would potentially be useful, then we have other devices which we can donate as well."* [Staff]

> *"We'll teach them how to switch the device on and so on. Knowing that, it's less overwhelming. I've found a lot of times older people feel that [they] don't know what [they're' doing, so [they] don't want to break it. Giving them that reassurance that you can go at your own pace, this is a person-centred service."* [Staff]

"[They want] to gain something at the end, whether it's ordering their shopping, being able to use their bus pass. One specific thing that will help them. Maybe Facetiming a family member overseas. There's something particular they want to get as a result in the end." [Staff]

3.2. Client experiences of the Programme and support

Modes of delivery

There was a good mix across different clients of the type of support they engaged with, as some attended group sessions whereas others engaged with one-to-one support. Within this, there were a few different support formats used by local Age UKs involved in the evaluation:

- **One-to-one support:** In this sample of clients, one-to-one support mainly involved up to 6 initial sessions where volunteer Digital Champions supported clients with specific learning aims they had. Support was often delivered at the client's home, but sometimes also at Age UK premises. Clients in this sample were mostly supported face-to-face but sometimes also received guidance over the phone or online. Once the initial block of support provision ended, clients usually knew they could contact Age UK again if they had specific questions or needed further support.

- **Group support:** Based on client interviews, there were varied group support formats different local Age UKs used. These included:
  - Small group sessions (3-6 clients) which involved a structured 6-week course and covered topics of most interest to older people accessing the Programme, for

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example, email, WhatsApp and other communication apps, online shopping. These groups were sometimes combined with one-to-one support where volunteer Digital Champions would help individual clients, but not always.

- 'Advanced' courses where clients learned how to use some standard computer Programmes, for example, Word and Excel. This was not a common format and only two clients reported attending a course like that.

- **Drop-in support:** This format was fairly common and very fluid as it depended on the needs of people who attended. For example, it could involve volunteer Digital Champions fixing a problem or teaching someone how to do a certain task. Typically, older people who came to drop-in sessions engaged with one-to-one support, but sometimes felt frustrated if they had to wait too long or could not access support because too many people turned up. (Volunteers were also frustrated by this format, as they would commit their time but sometimes no one would come.)

- **Technical support and troubleshooting:** Some partners also offered help over the phone or where volunteer Digital Champions accessed older people's devices remotely to fix technical problems they had.

Given the variety of support formats, it wasn't always clear from the interviews whether they were all part of the current Digital Champion Programme or some were perhaps legacy services from previous iterations of their digital inclusion work.

Learning topics

Clients were broadly split into those who wanted to learn how to do a specific thing, for example, online shopping, and those who had a more general interest in improving their digital literacy and learning different things. At the same time, some who initially joined about one goal went on to develop interest in learning other things too. Most common learning goals included using the internet for:

- communication and social purposes (emails, texts, Facebook, WhatsApp, Zoom);
- practical day-to-day tasks (online shopping, booking holidays, maps);
- leisure activities (watching videos, listening to music, photos, browsing);
- volunteering and community activities (Excel, email, WhatsApp, Zoom).

Those who progressed from one learning goal to others sometimes wanted to learn how to use particular digital devices they owned (for example, their smartphone, laptop, tablet, internet-enabled TV, satnav, or voice-controlled personal assistants).

> *"Everything is computer generated and you've got to have an email address for most things."* [Client]

> *"Apps that are relevant to me are YouTube, YouTube music, Netflix. I've now got that on a laptop. My TV hasn't got any of these things on it, so the next thing is to buy a TV with all the modern things on it."* [Client]

"I wanted to remind me how to do a spreadsheet because here where I live we have a social club which I am the Treasurer of and I wanted to make a spreadsheet for the other people that live here to show where the money goes, what I did with it, but I just could not work it out because I'd forgotten." [Client]

Experiences of digital skills group sessions

Clients who attended group sessions highlighted what they felt worked well and less well about this format:

- **Broad introduction:** Group sessions were felt to provide a good breadth of topics and introduction to some basic skills. Clients felt they broadly increased their awareness of how to do different things online or using digital technologies and reassured them around security.

  "Looking up a holiday, then you look up your accommodation, how many beds you want, the location, how you would get there, what the train times are, what the bus times are…It was really, really good, I got loads out of it [group sessions]." [Client]

  "We got quite a lot out of it, we spent quite a bit of time doing emails, how to open them, how to send them, it was quite informative, how to write them, open them, close them, go to other sections." [Client]

- **Social:** Groups were also appreciated for their social aspect, as clients enjoyed meeting other people and helping each other. Most felt comfortable learning and asking questions in a group of people they felt were similar to them.

  "I went there and I met a group of my age that are disabled like me as well (I walk with walking sticks) - I went there and I was very happy because I thought these are the type of my people, I was happy to sit comfortably within them." [Client]

  "Going to the group is fantastic. We get along, we greet each other, we are like family, you see that you are one of them; we have cup of tea and biscuit, which is another family." [Client]

- **Limited scope for individual learning:** However, clients had different experiences in whether they felt their individual needs were met in the group setting. Most felt that it was very difficult to get enough individual attention in their group sessions to help them learn how to do specific tasks they were interested in. A couple of respondents also explained that people in their group had very different levels, so they felt that other people slowed them down in what they could learn. On the other hand, one client had a more positive experience in this respect, as they reported that the instructors were able to work with individual clients in their group setting.

Experiences of one-to-one support

Most clients who engaged with one-to-one support were very positive about their experience, felt they learned what they wanted to, and highlighted some positive aspects of this format of support:

- **Tailored**: One-to-one sessions were felt to provide the opportunity to go at the right pace for the client and tailor the learning to their interests and learning needs.
- **Safe**: They were also seen as reassuring for those who may feel embarrassed about their lack of knowledge in a group.
- **Flexible**: Most clients appreciated that with one-to-one sessions they could flexibly develop their learning goals and move from one task to the next.
- **Accessible:** Clients who were housebound appreciated that Digital Champions visited them at their home, since they would struggle to access this support in the community.

> *"They come to my home, which is good because I don't drive so I find that hard to go anywhere, to go to a class or anything because I can't get there."* [Client, housebound]

> *"The benefit of somebody coming round to my home is worth more than anything really... I don't have to get out, drive my car, sit in a classroom or with other people. It's one-to-one which is brilliant, that's the benefit to me. I learn better because I get all embarrassed and anxious when I get other people because I might look like an idiot."* [Client]

Experiences of remote support

Most clients involved in the evaluation engaged with their support face-to-face, however, some were supported remotely, via the phone and online. Those who engaged with support remotely did not choose that, but were offered that option as it was not possible to support them face-to-face where they lived or at that time. Some were initially unsure about accessing support online, but decided to try it out because they were taught how to use online video conferencing platforms, such as Zoom.

> *"At the time, online [support] was the only thing going. I wasn't very keen, because I was a bit nervous about the Zoom thing and everything, but afterwards I was quite happy. I look forward to it."* [Client]

Those clients were, nevertheless, satisfied with the support they received and did not feel their learning or experience was affected by getting support remotely. They explained that volunteer Digital Champions were able to access their device and show them how to do certain tasks by demonstrating that on the screen and explaining the step-by-step process. As in face-to-face sessions, those clients took notes to help them remember how to do those things later.

Clients who engaged with remote support felt this was a convenient and easy way to get help with digital technology. Some, however, also felt they would have preferred face-to-face support due to the added social interaction it would allow.

"I have mixed feelings about face-to-face and online. [With online], you don't have to travel, especially in winter, so I don't mind. I'm used to it online, it's OK now. With a face-to-face class, you can interact with more people, it's a whole class, it's a different thing. But you get more attention one-to-one, which is a good thing."
[Client]

Experiences of follow-up support

Most clients who engaged with one-to-one support were aware they could contact Age UK if they had further questions after their initial support ended, whereas awareness of follow-up support varied among those who attended groups. Those who contacted Age UK about follow-up support mostly reported they were able to access further help they needed. Respondents appreciated having this 'safety network' and being able to access this support made them feel more confident, as they knew they could get help if they needed to. Those who did not need to ask for further support still felt reassured they could do so if needed.

"They [Age UK] told me I can contact them. It's given you a friend in an alien world for us who are not from a digital age. It is an enlightening little torch. We pick up the flame and carry on." [Client]

"[The Digital Champion is] back-up. You're not on your own, are you? It can be a bit hard using the internet." [Client]

However, a few clients had less positive experiences with follow-up support, due to lacking awareness of what support was available or potentially issues with oversight of whether and when clients were followed-up. For example, a couple of clients experienced long delays in hearing back from their Digital Champion or local Age UK/Cymru when they asked for additional support. Both examples cited below involve transitions from one mode of support to another, where some clients seemed to be unclear over the follow-up action:

- One client completed their group sessions but felt they needed additional help to learn how to do online shopping. The client contacted their local Age UK about this and were told someone will follow this up, but no one contacted them about this. The client decided they won't call again because they thought other people should also have a chance to get support, not being aware she could access additional support. When the same client was interviewed 6 months later, they reported their local Age UK contacted them in the meantime and arranged for one-to-one support, which they were very pleased about.
- Another client had to return the tablet they borrowed from Age UK, but felt unclear whether and when they would get any follow-up support with buying their own tablet. The respondent started thinking they won't get any help and so won't be able to keep benefitting from the things they learned.

The experiences above suggest a need to:

- Raise clients' awareness of follow-up support they can access through the Programme and how to access that, particularly with those attending group sessions to ensure they know they can also get one-to-one support;
- Be very clear over timelines for follow-up support – particularly in transitions from group to one-to-one or tablet loan to buying own device – as otherwise older people may conclude they were forgotten and disengage with the Programme;
- Consider how client needs are tracked throughout their engagement with the Programme, e.g. whether there are points when someone checks if they need further support and if this is clear to clients. This may be particularly important with high-risk groups as they sometimes may have additional barriers, so be less likely to pursue getting further help themselves.
- Consider whether anything else was needed to help volunteer Digital Champions flag instances where they were unable to provide support to someone, to ensure that those clients would receive some follow-up contact.

Additional client observations on Programme strengths

In addition to the Programme being tailored to individual needs and easy to access due to home visits, clients highlighted some additional aspects which they felt were important strengths across different types of support:

- **Volunteer Digital Champions:** Across different support formats, clients described volunteer Digital Champions, their approach and manner in extremely positive terms. Age UK Digital Champions were described as: patient with older people, friendly, helpful, entertaining, amazing, approachable, and supportive.

  "The main guy was amazing, he couldn't do enough to help you, he was very upfront and very entertaining." [Client]

  "They said 'well bring [the tablet] in and we'll go through it with you' and they spent ages sorting me out. I can't recommend them enough. Very patient." [Client]

- **Tablet loan:** Being able to borrow a tablet was seen as extremely helpful as it allowed clients to practice what they learnt. Without this, some thought they would not have progressed with their learning and using the internet. It also motivated a couple to want to get their own device once the loan finishes.

  "I borrowed a tablet – that aspect they have done very well, because it helps you to practise. They said you can drop in anytime if you call her that you are getting stuck as well." [Client]

- **Using own devices:** Getting help to learn how to use devices they owned was also seen as critical for those who already had some digital devices. This was seen as more useful than attending lessons where they'd be learning on devices they couldn't use otherwise.

- **Hand-outs and notes:** In some instances, clients were given printed hand-outs with steps they should take for a particular task online or took notes of what they should do. Having printed or written notes of step-by-step instructions was critical for being able to retain this information and aiding their learning and practice.

> *"She [the Digital Champion] wrote lots of things by hand, including how to send an email, and then the next week when she came, she brought me a printed edition of what we'd done the week before.*" [Client]

- **Visual aids:** Drawings or diagrams were also seen as helpful by some. For example, a client with dementia appreciated their Digital Champion gave them a diagram showing the key buttons and controls on their phone. They found the diagram helpful for remembering how to turn their phone on and off and use other controls.

- **Age UK brand:** The fact that the Programme was delivered by Age UK helped reassure clients that they won't feel judged and embarrassed, which they feared they could get from younger people. For some, this helped motivate them to join the Programme.

- **Remote assistance:** One client also reported that volunteer Digital Champions provided remote technical assistance, so could log in to their tablet and fix issues, which they found very helpful.

3.3. Staff and volunteer Digital Champions' experiences of service delivery

As already reported by clients, most local Age UK/Cymrus provided support on a one-to-one basis, although some mixed this with other types of support, such as group courses, drop-ins and remote technical assistance. Respondents generally believed that one-to-one support was more appropriate for older people with no or low digital skills. However, they also thought that group sessions had some specific benefits. Similarly to clients, staff and volunteer Digital Champions noted that group sessions provided opportunities for socialising to older people and allowed them to support each other in learning. In a few cases, group sessions were even chosen because clients expressed an interest in learning together. At the same time, group sessions were seen as sometimes challenging due to the difficulties of managing different levels and skills in the group.

> *"One to ones are more comfortable for people without good skills, it's a good opportunity to manage."* [Staff]

> *"In a group setting, when they see their peers are also struggling with similar things, they're more comfortable. Knowing they're not alone, that other people are working at their own pace as well. If there's anything I don't understand, I can get support from my peers or there's a volunteer or a member of staff there to help me. It's about creating that comfort. What I found was, having that group setting creates almost a buddy system. People start working together."* [Staff]

Volunteer Digital Champions who provided client support during drop-ins reported similar issues as with group sessions. Those volunteers felt they were often unable to devote enough attention to all clients attending drop-ins, which resulted in some people disengaging from the Programme. Others with drop-in experience were frustrated that sometimes people would not turn up, while volunteers gave their time to be there. On the whole, volunteers thought that the one-to-one model was superior and that drop-ins could be frustrating to both clients and volunteers.

Perceived strengths of the Programme

Staff and volunteer Digital Champions highlighted a range of things they thought worked well about the Digital Champion Programme service:

- **Personalised approach**: Both staff and volunteer Digital Champions thought this was one of the most important aspects of the Programme. They explained how they adapted support to link it to clients' interests and needs, including if they had particular health conditions or disabilities that required a different approach. At other times, they focused on the devices clients owned but hadn't used, showing them the capabilities of technology.

    "We've come up with people with arthritis, so we've looked at stylus pens, keyboards, tablets. We've looked at Amazon Alexa, we've bought those for the offices for the visually impaired." [Staff]

    "We say if you want to you can share your photos, share knowledge, be social. We try to find the things they're interested in most. You can play digital piano, you can get into a competition with other people – trying to find the things they're interested in." [Staff]

    "We always say the Digital Champion journey is more like a life story. It has to be to help them do what they're interested in, to enhance what they want to do." [Staff]

- **Holistic support package:** Providing both the device, data and one-to-one support was felt to cover all key needs clients would have to engage with learning and using the internet and digital technology. Those supporting older people on low income, in particular, stressed that providing the tablet and the data was the main reason why their clients engaged with the Programme, as otherwise the barriers would be too great. Other staff respondents talked about similar digital inclusion programmes but which lacked one of those elements, which they thought hampered their effectiveness.

    In addition, staff felt the Digital Champion Programme allowed staff and volunteers to identify other needs older people had and signpost them to a range of other services and support provided by Age UK and sometimes third parties.

> *"We've come across organisations that loan tablets and don't provide practical support, or somebody will loan you data but not the tablet. With this project you have the tablet, data and the one-to-one support. Also because of the Age UK brand you've also got other services you can offer like energy efficiency check, befriending, things like that."* [Staff]

- **Diverse technologies used:** Staff and respondents often pointed out they provided support with diverse digital devices and looked for the most appropriate ones depending on individual clients' needs. For example, they supported some visually impaired older people and older people with memory loss by helping them use an Alexa smart speaker and other voice-controlled devices; or helped people with arthritis use digital technology by providing stylus pens which they found easier to handle.

- **Printed guides:** Providing clients with printed guides or notes on how to do certain tasks was felt to be incredibly helpful. Volunteer Digital Champions commented how many clients used the guides and found them very beneficial to remind them how to do things they learned.

  > *"The printed guides have worked well for us, both the ones Age UK provided and also the ones we created for specific issues people face. We found by giving them printed guides they can keep referring back to them. It's something everyone's asking us for. The majority of our members are using the guides and finding them incredibly useful."* [Staff]

- **Going at the client's pace:** The need to explain things slowly, in smaller chunks and go over them again was emphasised by many staff and volunteer Digital Champions, but particularly by those supporting high-risk groups. Respondents stressed the importance of not overwhelming clients in order to sustain their engagement with the Programme.

Perceived challenges of the Programme

Respondents also reported some challenges in delivering the service:

- **Health-related barriers to using digital technology:** As mentioned before, health problems such as failing eyesight, memory loss and arthritis presented challenges for some clients to carry on using what they've learned. In those cases, volunteer Digital Champions explored whether using other devices or software may help, or whether they could also involve carers to support clients' learning and internet usage. Other clients' learning would be interrupted when their health worsened and/or they had to go to a hospital.

  > *"Health issues. Some of my Digital Champions have gone out for a couple of weeks, and then someone goes into hospital or something happens. Also, failing eyesight. Which is where RNIB, and Buckinghamshire Vision here, they're really supportive here. Working with other organisations to find a device that is suitable for the*

person. Because you're dealing with elderly people, health issues can be a challenge." [Staff]

- **Additional needs:** Those supporting high-risk groups reported how their clients often had other needs for support. However, they were not always easy to identify and understand, as some clients did not want to disclose their situation. For example, if they accepted to engage with some digital skills support, they may not want to also discuss other areas where they may benefit from some support. Staff were also conscious of a risk of some vulnerable clients having high expectations from volunteer Digital Champions and becoming dependent on them.

- **Technical challenges:** Some volunteer Digital Champions reported that downloading apps to loaned tablets was difficult because clients did not have accounts for those tablets. However, this issue was not raised by all volunteers and some thought their clients could be flexible in downloading apps on their loaned tablets. In addition, a volunteer mentioned another scheme which loaned tablets to older people but provided no support with using them. Age UK volunteers then supported some people with those tablets, but found this technically difficult because any change on the device had to be approved by this other company.

- **Understanding client needs:** A few volunteer Digital Champions reported it can be sometimes difficult to know exactly what devices individuals had or what support they wanted and needed before meeting them. A respondent explained they completed detailed referral forms to get all the relevant information, but that older people were sometimes unable to identify what technology they had correctly or what would benefit them most.

  At other times, a couple of volunteer Digital Champions felt the information they had before meeting the client for the first time could have been clearer. For example, a volunteer Digital Champion reported an experience where they felt it was unclear what the client wanted to achieve. In this particular instance, the volunteer said they would have appreciated if staff had made it clearer to them what the learning objectives would be.

- **Balancing structure with flexibility:** While volunteer Digital Champions saw the flexibility of the Programme as its strength in that they adapted to clients' interests and needs, some also worried that the Programme could sometimes be too unstructured. For example, some respondents suggested learning goals should be agreed at the start of the 6-week-long tablet loan, to ensure that the client covered certain things during that period.

- **Ongoing learning and usage of digital technologies beyond the Programme:** A few staff and volunteer Digital Champion respondents disliked that tablets were provided on a temporary basis and questioned whether older people would continue using the

internet once they returned their tablets. Respondents thought that the main barrier was the cost of getting WiFi, which some may feel they can't afford in the current cost of living crisis. Other staff and volunteer Digital Champions explained they had different ways of supporting older people beyond their initial tablet loan, however, that support was not available everywhere. Examples of longer-term support with digital devices included:

- Allowing clients to buy their tablets at reduced prices;[4]
- Offering additional support following the end of the tablet loan, for example, referring clients to another Age UK team which supported them by providing information on different broadband options or ways to get a cheaper device;
- Securing second-hand, donated devices for clients;
- Extending the original loan as long as possible.

In thinking about longer-term support, some local Age UKs/Cymrus supporting high-risk groups also stressed the importance of balancing supporting clients to be independent whilst also making sure they knew they could come back to Age UK after their initial Digital Champion support has ended. In one case, clients were also given an 'end of support pack', with information about support and resources they can access. Other local Age UKs/Cymrus talked about keeping in touch with clients over time, for example, calling a couple of months later to check how they were doing and if they needed further support.

> *"It doesn't stop with the tablet because it assumes they haven't got broadband either, so they've got to go and buy the broadband, which one, with its costs etc. It's a subject I'm not particularly looking forward to getting into."* [Volunteer Digital Champion]

Programme adaptations for high-risk groups

While 7 out of 25 local Age UKs/Cymrus specifically supported high-risk groups, many other local Age UKs/Cymrus also supported people from these groups as part of their general Programme delivery. This is visible from the volunteer Digital Champion survey which found that a considerable proportion of volunteers have supported a range of high-risk groups, as shown in the chart below:

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[4] The option to sell or donate loaned tablets to clients at reduced prices was available to all local Age UKs/Cymrus provided they are able to replace these and maintain their pool of devices for loan so they can support new older people.

Older people who are living alone — 79%

Other groups of older people who may be at higher risk of digital exclusion — 50%

Older people with memory loss or dementia — 50%

Older people with disabilities — 50%

Older people on low income — 43%

Older people who are housebound — 26%

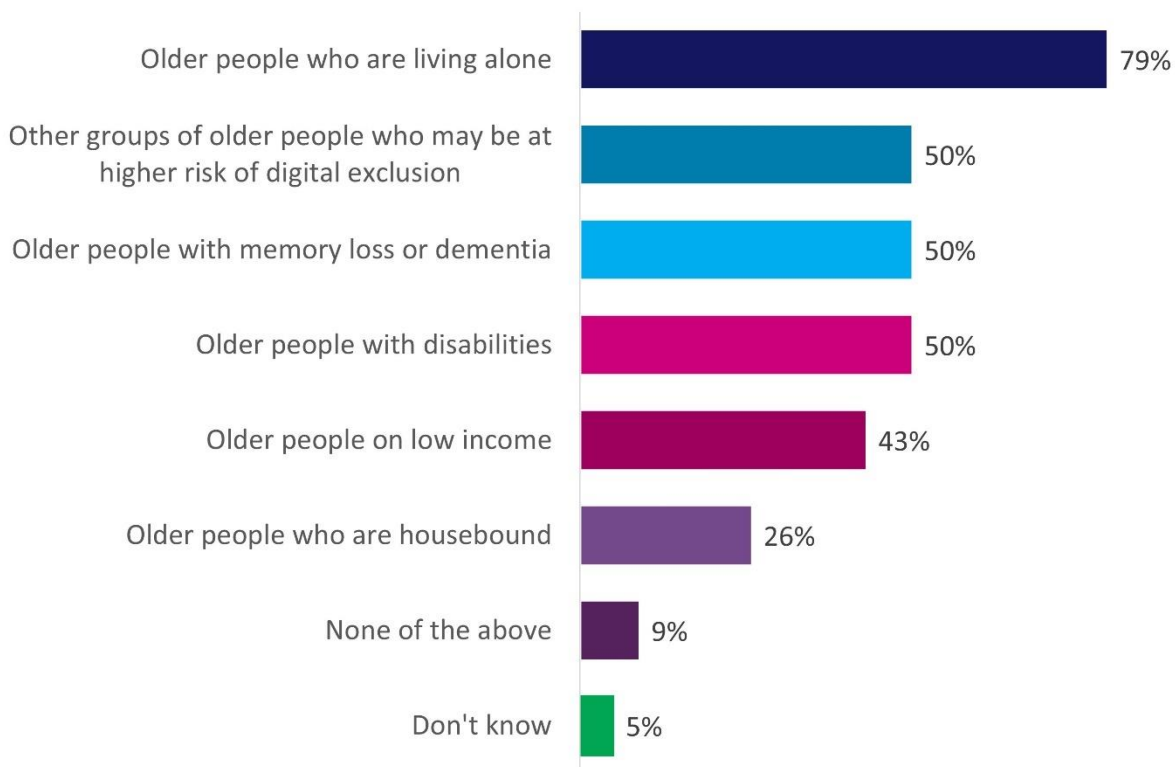None of the above — 9%

Don't know — 5%

Chart 2: Volunteer Digital Champions supporting different high-risk groups

Staff and volunteer Digital Champions (across general and high-risk delivery local Age UKs/Cymrus) shared their views on whether, and what, adaptations may be needed to meet support needs of particular high-risk groups. Overall, there was a feeling that the Digital Champion Programme model was flexible, so that support could be adapted to cater for different additional needs. Respondents felt that the ways in which Digital Champions supported older people worked well for high-risk groups too, but that certain aspects of this were even more relevant and important. For example, some stressed the importance of repetition and breaking down information into more manageable chunks; having resources to support the sessions and step by step instructions; going at an appropriate pace, and potentially allowing more time for learning and practising.

> *"The groups we have been seeing have been mixed; some people live alone, albeit in sheltered accommodation. Some may have a degree of cognitive impairment and a few have mobility problems. Thus far we have been able to cater for all within the adaptable curriculum we use."* [Volunteer Digital Champion]

Staff and volunteer Digital Champions also suggested some ways in which support for high-risk groups could be adapted:

- **Additional training for Digital Champion volunteer Digital Champions:** Some volunteers felt there should be specific training focusing on working with particular high-risk groups, for example: training in tools and apps that could be useful to those groups; training for how to set up devices for visually impaired people; training on

dementia and working with people living with dementia; training to raise awareness of benefit applications relevant to people living on low income.

> *"Volunteers should be trained more on specific tools and apps so that they can have variety of resources to use with these groups."* [Volunteer Digital Champion]

- **Linking up with other support:** There was also a sense that signposting to other support may be more relevant when working with high-risk groups. Some volunteer Digital Champions suggested that the Programme should consider how digital support for high-risk groups could be linked to other types of support they may need and working with other services and agencies.

- **Balancing support with independence:** A few volunteer Digital Champions highlighted the importance of balancing the support they provided with encouraging client independence. They felt this was even more relevant to high-risk groups, as there was potentially a higher risk of clients becoming dependent on volunteers.

In addition to these general suggestions, some volunteers highlighted particular ways in which they have adapted support to specific high-risk groups, or how they thought digital skills support could be adapted to their needs:

- **Disabled older people:** Volunteer Digital Champions reported using particular devices that may be easier to use for older people with disabilities or particular health conditions, for example, stylus pens, accessible technology, or voice-controlled devices.

- **Older people on low income:** Respondents stressed that people on low income are likely to find buying their own device and connectivity more challenging, which could then be a barrier to sustaining their usage of digital technologies. They felt that the Programme needed to consider how to discuss future use and access to connectivity with clients, as well as look into providing used but working devices.

- **Older people living alone and those who are housebound / with mobility issues:** Some volunteers supporting these groups felt there was a befriending aspect to the digital skills support they provided to these groups. One volunteer also suggested the Programme could teach older people from these groups how to use digital technology to develop new and maintain existing social contacts.

3.4.   Suggested future developments for the Programme

Thinking about how the Programme could develop in the future, staff were keen to explore the following areas:

- **Diverse devices:** Programme staff found that different devices suited different people depending on their needs and were keen to explore how diverse digital technologies could be used in the Programme. For example, some wondered whether the tablet loan scheme could provide devices other than tablets, whereas one local Age UK/Cymru was

interested in exploring the use of Virtual Reality (VR) for travel experiences with older people in nursing homes or who were housebound.

> *"We're now looking at different types of hardware. Smart speakers, smart cameras, stuff like that. So maybe somewhere in the project plans, [have] some information about…don't stick to tablets because there are other types of IT equipment we should be thinking about."* [Staff]

- **Other sources of funding:** Some thought their organisation was likely to apply for other sources of funding to continue the Programme in the future. Respondents were considering banks and health boards as possible sources of funding, which they thought funded digital inclusion activities linked to online banking and online patient apps respectively. Others were keen to explore possible sources of funding for devices, for example, e-waste and recycling funding schemes.

> *"We are looking at other places that are providing funding. I think a lot of the banks and building societies are looking at this type of thing, where they will fund you for 6 months if you go out and help people. That's more on the online banking side of things."* [Staff]

> *"We're looking at any health board funding going forward. They're creating new apps all the time with doctor's surgeries and things like that. There was a new e-waste funding bid that came up last week to recycle electronics, so we'll be looking at that. We're looking at moving forward with virtual reality and Alexa and things like that."* [Staff]

- **Sustainability:** Other than considering different sources of funding, staff were unsure how else the Programme could be sustainable. Some were reluctant to charge for digital inclusion support in the future, as they found this created significant barriers to older people joining the Programme. For example, one local Age UK/Cymru explained they had a period before where they tried charging and as a result had very limited number of clients in the Programme.

> *"We tried to charge before the pandemic, and in a year we'd only supported 18 people. In the first year of the pandemic, we supported 178 people when it was free. When we charge, it's something not everybody's going to be able to pick up, and when you're charging £10 an hour, it's putting pressure on the volunteer and on the client to pick it up."* [Staff]

A staff member and some volunteer Digital Champions raised a couple of other points with regards to sustainability, but from the perspective of clients. Some volunteers disliked that the tablet loan was temporary and thought older people might stop using their digital skills once they returned tablets. These respondents wondered whether it was possible to either give tablets or always allow clients to buy them at reduced prices. In addition, one volunteer was keen to build better relationships with other

organisations providing digital inclusion support, such as libraries, so older people can be referred to those Programmes for longer-term support.

> *"I think from the client's perspective, in order to make it sustainable, instead of loaning the devices, there should be something where we can provide the devices. I appreciate that's an expensive suggestion, but I'm just thinking about the practicality. This would encourage them to take part. Instead of giving them something, upskilling them and then taking it away, to ensure sustainability, donating the device would be something."* [Staff]

- **More supporting resources:** Some volunteer Digital Champions called for providing more resources to support clients, including a greater range of how-to guides and those with visuals. Examples of suggested resources included guides on topical digital challenges (e.g. parking, rail ticket, health apps) and handouts specific to devices individual clients have.

- **Best practice:** There was an interest both from staff and volunteer Digital Champions in sharing best practice from other Age UK partners and similar Programmes and making sure that information and any helpful resources were easily accessible and all in one place.

- **Other:** Individual volunteers who completed the online survey also made suggestions for how specific aspects of Programme delivery could be improved:
  - Replacing older loan tablets with newer ones, as some tablets in use were found to be slow;
  - Improving session feedback forms to allow for more than one topic or learning goal to be noted;
  - Ensuring that reminders are sent to clients for their appointments, particularly to those with memory loss;
  - Where support is provided in groups, splitting those by digital skill level if possible;
  - Supporting older people with interest in learning more to access further training beyond the Programme;
  - Guiding volunteers on how to manage client appointment cancellations;
  - Providing feedback to new volunteers after their initial support sessions.

4. IMPACT OF THE PROGRAMME

4.1. Impact on clients

All clients felt they benefited from attending the Programme, as they thought their knowledge and confidence to use the internet and digital technologies has improved. As a result, most also reported they have learned how to do at least some of the things they wanted and have been using the internet and digital devices more. Many also felt that using

digital technologies has made a difference to their lives more broadly, for example, improving their social connections or by helping them with day-to-day practical tasks.

Impact of using digital technologies

All clients reported the Programme raised their awareness of what they could do online and improved their knowledge of using the internet and devices they had. Many further stressed the Programme increased their confidence to use the internet and digital technologies. Clients felt their newly found confidence was key to motivating them to learn more and use what they've learned, as it reduced their fear of doing something wrong. Consequently, many were a lot more open to doing things online through trial and error and working things out for themselves.

> *"Because they've given me the course and individual attention, it gave me more confidence so I have been able to sort myself for lots of things. My mind is more open to the answers. From my age point of view, it's easy to think I can't work this out. But they've given me more confidence to try things out."* [Client]

> *"They gave me the impetus to try… if it goes wrong, I just come out, I don't have to answer to anything."* [Client]

> *"It helps me even with the little knowledge that I have. It helps me look at it in a different way. I used to say I don't know how to do it. Now I think…if I could learn that, it would enable me to do things."* [Client]

Most also reported the Programme helped them learn how to do particular things they wanted to do online. As a result, they have been using the internet more since they joined the Programme. In some cases, clients had moved from not using the internet at all or very little to using it in a range of ways. Across the sample, clients varied in how they used the internet and digital devices but the range of activities listed included: texting, taking and sending photos, using emails, video calls, watching videos and TV, listening to music, booking holidays, texting, browsing the internet for information, getting a bus pass online, online shopping, using particular apps.

> *"I'd like to go to the German market and I look up the train times now … I'm more likely to go looking and feel that I'm not on my own, I can look on my phone.*" [Client]

> *"What I would say to other people is that if I can do it, anybody can do it! In fact, I am doing it! I teach my friends now, they come to me now and I explain to them how I've learnt through Age UK, I preach it to every one of them.*" [Client]

> *"I can now receive and send emails. I can put pictures on it and include them in texts and emails. If you are writing to family, it's nice to include pictures.*" [Client]

> *"I'm glad [Age UK] are teaching me to use the tablet, which is a very interesting thing. It's keeping me awake, it's entertaining, everything you want to know you press a button on that thing and you can get a lot of information, so I am enjoying that.*" [Client]

> *"I've been borrowing a tablet. Obviously, it was strange at the start, I didn't have a clue to be honest with you, but it's going pretty good now. I've got my own email address. Now I know how to go into the apps. I can send an email, how to check the emails, how to search for information. It's easy and straightforward but if you've not done it, it's not easy."* [Client]

Impact in other areas of life

Clients reported that using the internet and digital technologies brought significant benefits in different areas of their life:

- **Social connections**: Many respondents felt that using digital technologies improved their social contact, as they were able to video call their family or join other groups, for example, a Zoom church group. A deaf respondent who learned how to text on his smartphone was now texting daily with his friends and family, which made him feel less isolated. Another respondent, living on their own, was interested in getting an Alexa smart speaker, as they thought it might make them feel they had company.

> *"I use it for my church a lot; before I didn't know how to do that. If there is any place that invited me, I know that if I don't use the ID number, I can use the link. I know how to put my face out and I know how to hide my face; if I don't want to be*

seen or heard, I know how to click! [..] With friends too – we have social interaction. Before, you are inside the house, you can only talk by phone, now you can see people's face. Even my mum in Africa, I have been [able] to see my mum. When I want to see her, I go on the Zoom and I ask my sister to put it on my mum. […] Joy! I don't know how I can put it, but the joy is there, that you can see her without travelling to Nigeria!" [Client]

"My family, children and grandchildren live in Devon nearly 200 miles away, I've now been able to set up a video link with them and can book my own train tickets to go to see them, I do all that on the tablet." [Client]

"I even sent a cheeky birthday card to my grandson. You put happy birthday pictures, you choose a format and send that off to a company, then they send a card and it showers them in confetti. That was the fun thing I did. I wouldn't have been able to do that without them." [Client]

"A daughter of my friend asked me for something for her mother's 60th birthday. She asked if I had any memories or photos. I found this tiny little brownie photo of me and my friend as children. I took a picture of that with my phone put it on the computer, narrowed it down and altered it so my friend's picture came clear and combined that with a text and sent it. All of that I was able to do. It took me a week to do but I was very pleased. So, I was able to take part in a group activity like that." [Client]

"It's contact, really. Otherwise, I probably wouldn't know what's going on with the family. I would know the big things, but now I know all the little ones. I saw that my grandson started college today and I saw it on the family chat." [Client]

"It enables me to keep in touch with old friends. I've not lost them at all. We'll sit and chat usually on Sunday. We talk about things and have a laugh and cheers us both up." [Client]

- **Independence:** Some also felt being able to use the internet and digital technologies meant they were less dependent on their family and others on a daily basis. Some people living alone explained that being able to use the internet themselves gave them a sense of safety. They felt reassured that should they have a problem they would be able to solve it, for example, by accessing products, services or help they needed online.

  "It also reassures my family that I can find out about things myself. I shouldn't be depending on them all the time. It's given me an independence. It means I don't want my daughter to run back and forth to help me. Basically, I've got the tools I need." [Client]

  "I haven't done a grocery shop online but I know it's there and I know I can do it, if I need to, if I'm ill. I feel a bit better I know I can do it." [Client]

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"It saves me worrying about things. It's there at my fingertips, I can do it. I think it helps… You are not alone, you can reach out if you need some help." [Client]

- **Leisure, community and work activities:** Being more able to use the internet helped some pursue their interests, for example, read articles or watch videos in particular areas, listen to music, book holidays online, find equipment for their hobbies online, or just generally feel they were more in touch with what was going on in the world. In other cases, it enabled some clients to join in community activities, for example, take on a volunteering role in a local group which required communicating with others via email and WhatsApp. In one case, getting support through the Programme was instrumental in allowing one client to carry on with their academic work in retirement.

    "A current example; I've always been a great fan of rugby, played it quite successfully, and at the moment there are many rugby internationals taking place and the BBC does not have the rights to any of them …. 15 minutes after a game, I can watch either the edited highlights or the complete match, which is marvellous!" [Client]

    "One day I felt a bit down and I just sat there and I thought, 'Oh I could find this music.' It's wonderful and I felt really good'. That was fantastic. I know if I'm feeling down, I can listen to something that makes me feel really good. I used to go to Tai Chi classes and I can actually do that on this computer without having to go out to a class I can find it on YouTube." [Client]

"I was asked by my group whether I'd turn the minutes I took at the meeting into a document. That's not something I can do. I am lacking in that and I will be lacking in that more with this other group I joined. A half of me thinks I'll just let someone else do it. The other half of me would like to be fully enjoying life and because that [the internet] is such a part of life…Life is making me pull myself up and learn those things. Better do it now, the longer you leave it, the harder to learn." [Client]

"I like writing so writing on a computer would be invaluable to me." [Client]

- **Mental wellbeing:** Learning how to do certain things on their digital devices allowed clients to engage in activities which improved their mood and made them feel better. For example, clients talked about feeling better as they were able to listen to music they liked, had new things to do and could keep in touch with people close to them.

   "When I was feeling extremely low one day, I found some songs on YouTube that I used to play when I was young and it lifted my spirit. I felt so much better, it's been so helpful. It has been a god send for me." [Client]

   "It gives you something to do, sense of purpose in a way. You realise you're part of everything. It's a learning platform, it's so vast, it's so big, there are no limits. Anything you want to know you just google it". [Client]

In addition, some clients thought that learning how to use the internet improved their self-esteem and confidence more generally. Respondents talked about feeling confident about overcoming challenges, trying out things they wouldn't dare to do before, and feeling they belonged more to the world. For example, a client shared a story during a follow-up interview to illustrate their improved overall confidence. They said how they were asked to help a friend to inflate their car tires. While they would have doubted themselves before and felt they couldn't do this, this time they went to help their friend and were happy to try and work out how to do this.

In other instances, this improved general confidence was important in managing the challenges posed by poor health or being housebound, for example, through improving mood and empowering older people to connect with others, pursue their interests and be more independent and in control of their life.

   "My confidence improved. I feel better now when family talk about the internet because I know what they are talking about. Otherwise, I feel a bit stupid." [Client]

   "I've always been an active person with interests. And all of a sudden, without being to walk, to go out, this loss of mobility has crippled me in my mind. Then doing this course made me realise that wasn't me, it brought back my confidence. [...] It made me feel almost like I had control over my life rather than being a blob sitting down. Just thinking I need to get other ways of doing things." [Client]

"I feel more alive knowing how to do these things. […] Because that's life now, you have to know or you're lost. I see everyone walking around with their nose in their telephone; what are they doing? I need to be in the same zone. Children are born into this computer age that we're in now, they know what it's all about. I'm 66 and I don't have a clue." [Client]

"I say I'm sick with COPD, so I can't walk very far, so for all those people out there who are housebound it's a lifeline." [Client]

"I've had that lightbulb moment with the course, where it's made me think I can learn these things, I think there are other things I'm going to want to do." [Client]

"I feel I can cope with things and look back at things I've done. I'm just more decisive. Because I'm able to cope with things, I can order things and plan things." [Client]

- **Health-related benefits:** Some respondents reported being able to access healthcare more easily due to using digital technologies, or even using digital devices to monitor their health and collect health-related data they can share with their GP. Others used the internet to search for health information which they found helpful.

  "I've learnt to get onto my doctor's website and I can reorder prescriptions. I couldn't do that a little while ago but I can do that now. Before, I didn't have a clue what to do." [Client]

  "My son bought me a Fitbit watch and then because of the course, I was able to connect it to my phone and my phone gives me detailed information about what my heartbeat's doing so I've been able to relay that to my doctor. […] GP set up another 24 hour ECG as a result." [Client]

  "They also showed me the app for blood pressure and I use it often. I don't know how accurate it is but it gives me some idea. I need to keep control of it so it's a little thing that helps me with that." [Client]

  "I have been looking at what food not to eat to cope with high blood pressure. I can check things like that." [Client]

  "Everything is recorded, all my history is on my telephone. If I need anything from the chemist, I phone them or email that to the surgery, that gets sent to the pharmacy and it's delivered. Rather than go to the chemist I'm able to do it myself. It's easier". [Client]

- **Practical help:** Many felt that being able to use email and the internet more generally helped them deal with a range of day-to-day practical tasks, for example, moving house, shopping, booking travel or paying for parking.

"I've been looking at moving to be closer to my children who are in Shropshire. I put my flat on the market and went online to get an estate agent. I then asked her if she can send me the details by email. So, she did and I was able to look at it. So, I'm back to the world of the living!" [Client]

"I bought a new bed online. You choose a bed you want, you customise it, they deliver it and they take away the rubbish. And it's cheaper than in a shop. Isn't that fantastic!" [Client]

"I went into Argos a few months' back and I didn't have a clue. They used to have brochures and things, now it's all screens and I didn't have a clue what to do! Now I went on a week or so ago – perfect! I went on the screen, got whatever I wanted … so, I did manage to learn something." [Client]

"When I want to research things, I go on the internet. Moving to a bungalow, my furniture didn't fit so I had to get new. I've been researching furniture." [Client]

"I applied for my driving license, which I have to do as I'm over 70. So, I went online, said, 'C'mon, have a go'. I did that very quickly and was well pleased." [Client]

- **Financial benefits:** A couple of respondents found that being able to do things online was financially beneficial to them, either as they made savings by finding online discounts or by seeing people online and therefore not having to pay for travel to join social activities. While some still worried about using online banking, a few ventured out and started banking online. They felt they benefitted from being able to monitor their finances online.

  "I didn't realise it at the time because I wasn't using it but I now realise that it did impact considerably; purchasing things, for example I purchased a pair of hiking boots for £60 [online] that were in the local [retailer] store for £102, so saved £42 quid there." [Client]

  "I use online banking to check my finances and offers for savings accounts. I can keep track of what's going on with my finances. It's reassuring to know I've got things in pots here and there." [Client]

Longer-term impact of the Programme

11 clients were contacted for follow-up interviews approximately 6 months after their initial interview. The aim of this follow-up contact was to understand the extent to which the support they received led to longer-term usage of digital technologies and any benefits arising from that.

9 out of 11 clients who were followed-up with 6 months later were still using the internet and digital devices on a regular basis and believed they would continue to do so. Clients varied in the range of things they were still doing online and were interested in 6 months later. They broadly split into two camps:

- **Usage limited to certain key tasks:** Some were content they learned what they needed and were less interested in expanding what they knew and did. They felt their needs were met by what they learned already and lacked interest to learn new things. For example, they were satisfied they now knew how to use email, look up information, keep in touch with others, or do certain practical tasks, such as book travel or repeat prescriptions. Beyond these immediate needs, they had little interest to keep learning and sometimes explained this by saying they were not technologically minded people.

    "I'm not a tech person but I now know the things I know and I'm happy with that". [Client]

    "Not everybody is techy, not everybody wants to be. I don't want to be, I just want to know what I want to know. If someone is in the same position as me, I'd say have some sessions." [Client]

- **Open to ongoing learning:** Others, however, felt the Programme opened a whole new world to them and were learning new things and finding out new ways in which they could benefit from digital technology. They felt hugely empowered by what they were now able to do and cited examples of how this benefitted their lives. For example, a client who lived in assisted accommodation and was in poor health explained they were able to take part in an online campaign to stop the housing company from closing their homes.

All who were still using the internet and digital technologies 6 months later reported the same positive impact in other areas of their life, as discussed before. These included improved social connections, mental wellbeing and independence, as well as help with practical tasks, various activities they wanted to do, finances, and managing their health.

Clients' reports of improved social connections were to some extent reflected in changes to their answers to the UCLA loneliness scale and the ONS loneliness question. 7 clients answered these questions in their initial and follow-up interviews 6 months later. In all cases, their answers at follow-up suggested some improvements and a reduction in their feelings of loneliness. Only in one case, data suggested mixed developments over time, as the follow-up answers indicated improvements in some respects and worsening in others.

Clients varied in the extent to which their situation improved. Most had modest improvements, for example, moving from 'Often' to 'Some of the time' for questions about lacking companionship or feeling isolated. One client's answers suggested a more considerable improvement, as they moved from feeling they lacked companionship and were isolated often to feeling that hardly ever or never. The table below shows the changes in the number of clients feeling they lacked companionship or were left out, isolated or lonely often, some of the time or hardly ever. It shows that, overall, there was a modest movement towards feeling lonely less often in this group.

UCL loneliness scale & ONS loneliness question	Often		Some of the time		Hardly ever or never	
	Baseline	Final	Baseline	Final	Baseline	Final

Number of clients who felt they lacked companionship…	3	2	3	2	1	3
Number of clients who felt they were left out…	2	1	3	3	2	3
Number of clients who felt they were isolated from others…	2	2	4	3	1	2
Number of clients who felt lonely…	4	1	3	4	0	2

Table 5: UCL loneliness scale and ONS loneliness question (baseline and final data for 7 clients)

In addition, there were two clients who reported they either stopped using the internet and digital technology or used it less than while they were getting support. Both had particular reasons why their usage declined:

- In one case, a client cited visual impairment and their brother's death as reasons why they stopped using the internet and digital technology. The respondent found many websites inaccessible for people with visual impairment, which put them off from trying to use them. Following their brother's death, their life also changed as they had no caring responsibilities anymore, which prompted them to take up new activities and travelling.
- The second client, who lived alone, reported that their use of the internet and digital technology reduced after they returned the loan tablet to Age UK. They inquired with Age UK about getting support to buy their own tablet, however, no one got in touch with them about this. After 6 months, the client asked their GP to refer them to Age UK, so was due a visit at the time of the follow-up interview. The client felt their mental health worsened in the meantime as they felt more cut off from the world without the tablet.

Follow-up interviews highlighted both enablers and barriers to older people carrying on with using the internet and digital technologies on a long-term basis, after the initial support they engaged with through the Digital Champion Programme ended. Clients felt that the following factors were key enablers supporting sustainable and longer-term use of digital technologies:

- Increased confidence to learn new things through trial and error;
- Ability to get in touch with Age UK if they had further questions or problems;
- Seeing the benefits of digital technology to their lives;
- Managing to identify and learn the things that were relevant and helpful to them;
- Effective teaching and support from Digital Champions (and the way they approached teaching, for example, taking time to explain things, being patient, coming to their house, learning on their own device, tailoring support to individual interests and needs);
- Recognising the internet and digital technology were part of life, for example, needed to access services.

"I found it excellent. He asked me what I wanted to do and he did exactly that. I knew more or less what I wanted to do." [Client]

"If I can't get the doctor's app to work, I'll call Age UK to ask if they can help." [Client]

"It's fantastic that they were prepared to come to your home, where you feel comfortable. Whereas if I went to a class with other people, I would not feel comfortable." [Client]

The evaluation also identified some factors that acted as barriers to clients carrying on with using the internet and digital technologies, disrupted the usage they had established during the Programme, or stopped them from wanting to learn about new things:

- Major events and changes in their life or lifestyle, for example, moving house so needing to set up WiFi, or family bereavement and losing caring responsibilities;
- Disability, for example, failing eyesight being a barrier to using the internet;
- Encountering technical problems they cannot resolve or find help with;
- Delays in, or lack of, response from Digital Champions or Age UK after asking for further help;
- Infrequent use of certain apps so forgetting what they learned;
- Feeling frustration when not being able to complete a task or solve a problem with a device;
- Fears over security of certain activities, e.g. online banking, shopping;
- Not wanting to be absorbed by technology, so preferring to limit themselves to a limited range of activities and tasks.

> *"Sometimes I get frustrated when you can't find things. That's when I turn it off, not very patient."* [Client]

> *"I've moved. It made me less able to use IT, as it took 6 weeks to sort WiFi. But now all is set up, but I haven't had much time to be on the computer as I've been busy with the new house."* [Client]

> *"I want to know enough so it meets my needs but not that it absorbs me."* [Client]

Staff and volunteer Digital Champions' observations about the impact of the Programme

Staff and volunteer Digital Champions reported they received lots of positive feedback from clients and also observed positive impacts the service had on older people. This was observed both in terms of achieving learning goals and being able to do what they wanted to do online, as well as in terms of the wider benefits to their lives. In many ways, their observations echoed those of clients.

- **Learning successes:** Staff and volunteer Digital Champion respondents reported the Programme helped increase older people's confidence to engage with digital technologies. Volunteers cited examples of older people learning to do independently what they wanted to do, for example, seeing their grandchildren online, doing online

shopping, or listening to their favourite music on Spotify. Other successes also included examples of people who carried on with their learning, progressing from one thing to another.

> *"We found that once clients are up to speed with one thing, they're more open about asking for support in other areas online. It gives them that confidence, if I can tackle this, then I would be able to tackle something else as well. It opens up their array of accessing information."* [Staff]

> *"When somebody uses WhatsApp for the first time, or sees their grandchild for the first time, you just see the smile on their face. I supported somebody in the summer who was 92 years old, her husband died in the pandemic, and her CD player broke, but she loved Nat King Cole. We loaned her a tablet and she got really upset when she saw Nat King Cole, because she couldn't believe she could actually see him. She then got herself a tablet and created herself a Spotify playlist for herself. She said without us, she'd never used technology before, but she just wanted to be able to play music. She was over the moon that after 3 weeks it was something she was really interested in, and she's now got broadband and a tablet".* [Staff]

- **Wider benefits:** A range of other benefits and positive impact on older people's lives from using digital technologies were highlighted too, similarly to what clients reported:
  - Improved social connections for those using the internet or smartphones to keep in touch with family and friends, as well as those attending group sessions. This was also highlighted as a critical benefit by staff and volunteer Digital Champions supporting people living alone and those who were housebound.
  - Improved mood and wellbeing through having access to activities they enjoyed, for example, listening to music, doing quizzes, connecting online with like-minded people around their interests;
  - More convenience in day-to-day life, for example, around organising transport or booking appointments;
  - Greater independence as they didn't have to rely on others for certain practical tasks, which was highlighted as a benefit both by local Age UK/Cymrus support older people generally and those supporting housebound older people.
  - Better access to other services and support as clients were being signposted where needed;
  - Financial benefits, for example, saving money through online shopping, improving job-hunting skills, or selling things online;
  - Practical improvements impacting their quality of life or meeting their existential needs, for example, being able to apply for Personal Independence Payment (PIP)[5] online and secure better housing and social care, or being able to buy food while their carer was away.

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[5] PIP is designed to help with extra living costs if people have a disability or a long-term physical or mental health condition and difficulties doing everyday tasks or getting around due to their condition.

"One of the ladies uses a local free service, you book it as a taxi on an app and she does that now. She doesn't have to ring them. She used to be in a phone queue, [now] she can look on the app for where it is, what time it's coming because they're all GPS tracked in the city." [Volunteer Digital Champion]

"NHS App enables people to take control of the process, they don't have to ring a doctor and wait in a queue. One lady reorders her prescription by the app, so she's taken control of that process which is empowering to her." [Volunteer Digital Champion]

These qualitative research findings were consistent with volunteer Digital Champion survey results, which also suggested that volunteers observed positive impacts of the Programme in the areas mentioned above. Most commonly, volunteer Digital Champions observed positive impact in terms of practical benefits, improved social connections; and improved mood and wellbeing. In addition, over a half of volunteers in this sample observed improvements in terms of access to health services due to the greater use of digital technologies and support with this through the Programme:
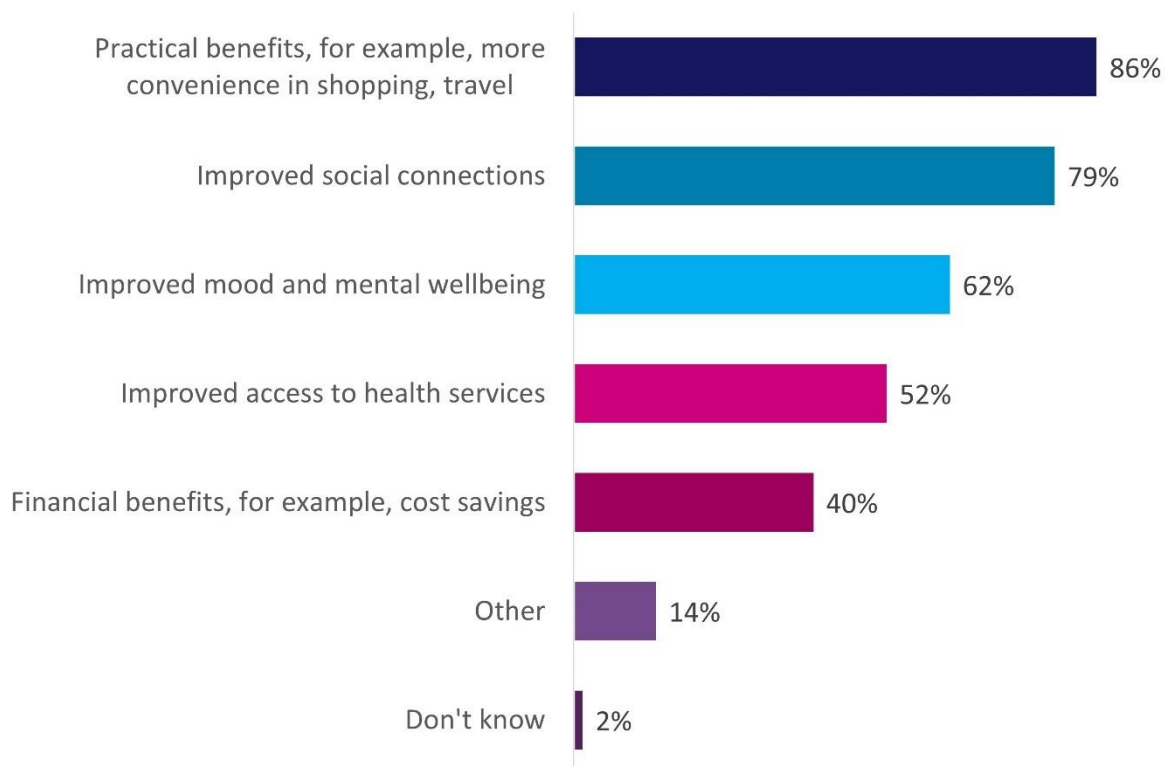
Category	Percentage
Practical benefits, for example, more convenience in shopping, travel	86%
Improved social connections	79%
Improved mood and mental wellbeing	62%
Improved access to health services	52%
Financial benefits, for example, cost savings	40%
Other	14%
Don't know	2%

Chart 3: Volunteer Digital Champion observations about the impact of the Programme on clients

4.2. Impact on volunteer Digital Champions

Volunteer Digital Champions highlighted a range of benefits they experienced through supporting older people as Digital Champions:

- They found it rewarding to see the difference their support made to older people's lives;
- They enjoyed meeting some fascinating people;

- Some said that being part of the Programme made them feel they were contributing to the wider economy and society;
- Some enjoyed that volunteering helped to get them out and about;
- Others also liked that this volunteering role required ongoing learning and felt this helped to keep their mind active.

> *"It's the reward of someone doing something digitally that fulfils a part of their life".* [Volunteer Digital Champion]

> *"It is very rewarding; I've got to meet some really fascinating people and the stories that they tell. My volunteering hours contribute to the [country's] economy, it gets me out and about, it's a win-win all over for me, I can't see a negative."* [Volunteer Digital Champion]

> *"It is a great Programme and I am very grateful that I had the opportunity to help older people learn about the digital world and keep in touch with their loved ones."* [Volunteer Digital Champion]

> *"I really enjoy helping people with their IT issues, seeing their faces light up when they have learnt something new and will be of benefit to them. I think this project that Age UK is providing is very necessary to elderly people and also very rewarding to myself."* [Volunteer Digital Champion]
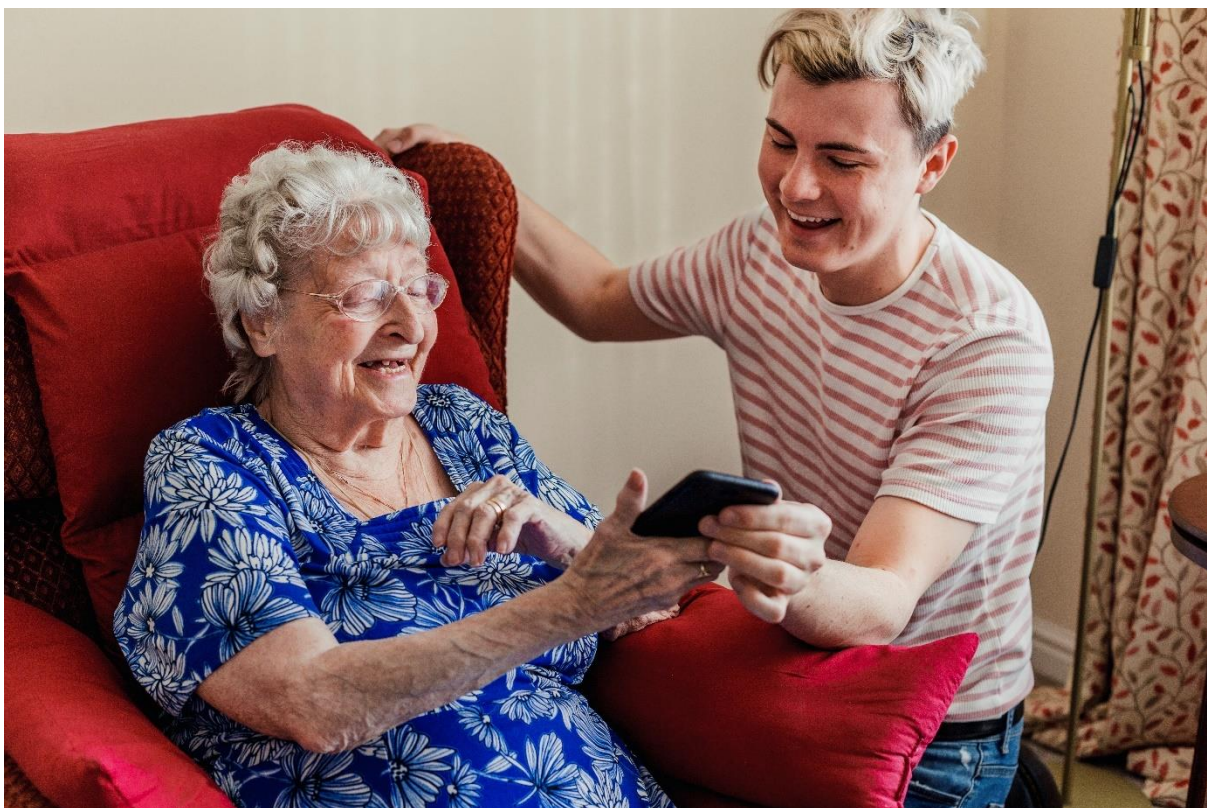
5. CONCLUSIONS AND LEARNINGS

5.1. Sustainable engagement and benefits

5.1.1. How successful or otherwise is the Programme at encouraging older people supported to continue to engage with and use digital technology over the medium term (6-12 months)?

The evaluation found that the Digital Champion Programme was very successful in supporting older people to achieve their learning goals with regards to using digital technologies. The Programme increased older people's awareness of the range of things they could do online and using digital technology that was relevant to them. It helped them learn how to do those things and improved their confidence in engaging with digital technologies.

As a result, older people involved in the Programme started or expanded their usage of the internet and digital technologies. The evaluation captured varied usage across different clients, including: texting, taking and sending photos, using emails, video calls, watching videos and TV, listening to music, booking holidays, browsing the internet for information, getting a bus pass online, online shopping, and using particular apps.

The evaluation suggested that for most older people this was a long-term behaviour change and that their greater usage of the internet and digital technologies was sustainable. Most clients who were followed up at 6 months after their initial interview were still using the internet and digital technologies on a regular basis. They were broadly split into two groups: those who were satisfied having learned what they needed and had little interest in expanding this further, and those who were open to ongoing learning and finding new ways in which they could benefit from digital technologies.

In a small number of cases where initial behaviour changes were not lasting, there were specific reasons that disrupted clients' usage of the internet and digital technologies. These are highlighted as barriers to longer-term and sustainable change below.

5.1.2. What are the enablers for this success or the disablers and barriers when not successful?

The evaluation identified factors that enabled long-term behaviour change and sustained internet and digital technology usage for older people participating in the Programme. Key enablers included:

- **The effectiveness of the Digital Champion Programme model:** The evaluation highlighted the following features of the model as enablers that helped clients overcome various barriers to learning: tablet loan; home visits; learning on clients'

devices; one-to-one support tailored to individuals; adjusting to clients' pace; volunteer Digital Champions' patience and reassurance; supporting resources.

- **Identifying relevant learning goals:** Where older people and/or volunteer Digital Champions could identify relevant learning goals, this helped their engagement with learning and later using what they learned.

- **Highlighting / experiencing benefits:** Seeing concrete benefits to their lives from using digital technology further strengthened the motivation to sustain newly formed habits in terms of digital usage.

- **Increased confidence**: Older people often saw this as critical to increasing their usage of the internet and digital technology, as it made them more open to trying new things out and learning through trial and error.

- **Managing Programme transitions well:** Helping older people transition from Programme support to independent usage was critical for some to sustain their new digital skills and behaviours. In particular, support with getting their own devices and connectivity was important at the end of the tablet loan period.

- **Opportunity to get further help if needed:** Being able to get in touch with Age UK if further help was needed was also instrumental in maintaining digital technology usage, as it reassured clients they could get help if they could not resolve a technical problem themselves.

- **Recognising digital technology was part of everyday life:** This made some more accepting of the need to learn how to use digital technology to be able to manage various everyday tasks (although, it also made others resentful and negative about learning).

The evaluation also identified barriers to learning and challenges to sustained adoption of digital technologies. Initial barriers included fear of breaking a device / doing something wrong, lack of confidence, worries about scams, cost of devices and connectivity, and for some, a negative attitude to learning (where older people were referred by others, rather than wanting to learn themselves). The Programme helped many overcome these barriers and become more confident. However, for some older people, certain challenges persisted and other factors also played part to disrupt some older people's learning and engagement with digital technologies:

- **Disability and health problems:** Visual impairment, arthritis and memory loss were highlighted as health-related barriers that discouraged some older people from using the internet and digital technologies. Volunteer Digital Champions attempted to identify digital devices that may be more suitable to older people with disabilities. They also stressed the importance of providing additional volunteer Digital Champion training and resources to help them find solutions to make digital technology accessible to people with these barriers.

- **Major life changes:** Events such as moving house, bereavement, or ceasing to have caring responsibilities were cited by a few clients as factors that disrupted

their newly formed digital habits, so they stopped or reduced their usage of digital technologies.

- **Cost:** Some staff and volunteer Digital Champions stressed that the cost of buying a device and connectivity can be a barrier to sustained engagement with digital technology following the end of the tablet loan. This barrier was particularly relevant to people on low income, so there were suggestions that the Programme should provide more consistent help in those instances with obtaining a free or affordable device and connectivity.

- **Concerns over fraud:** Some people, who successfully learned how to do certain tasks and were content to keep using digital technology in these ways, were still worried about online scams and fraud so remained closed to activities such as online shopping or banking.

- **Disruption to Programme support:** In a couple of cases, delays and lack of clarity over the timelines for follow-up support disrupted clients' usage of digital technology. In these instances, clients were either seeking one-to-one support following a group course, or looking for help with getting their own devices after they returned the loan tablet to Age UK. These experiences highlighted the importance of clarity over what support was available and timelines of any follow-up support.

5.1.3. For whom the Programme is successful, how does it impact the day-to-day experiences/life of that person? E.g. wellbeing, money, access to services.

The evaluation found that improved digital skills impacted positively older people's lives more generally. Greater usage of the internet and digital technologies benefitted older people in a number of ways, through:

- **Improved social connections,** for example, through learning how to use digital devices to keep in touch with family and friends, which for some reduced feelings of loneliness;

- **Help with day-to-day practical tasks,** for example, through online shopping or booking travel, parking or holidays;

- **Improved mood and wellbeing** through better social connections and access to activities they enjoy, as well as increased general confidence in some cases;

- **Help with managing health** through easier access to health services, information and apps to monitor their health;

- **Cost savings and managing money**, for example, through finding online discounts or using online banking to monitor their finances;

- **Greater independence** in being able to complete a range of day-to-day practical tasks using digital technology and raising their self-esteem through not depending on others;

- **Enabling participation in leisure, community and work activities**, for example, through enabling them to take part in activities that require the use of digital technology.

Most wider benefits above were consistently cited by all clients involved in the evaluation. Clients only varied in whether they used online shopping and banking, so not all felt they benefitted financially by using these features online. Some also used the internet and digital devices to a greater extent for certain purposes than others, for example, to monitor their health or as part of their hobby, volunteering or work activities.

Where older people reduced or stopped using digital technology when their initial support and tablet loan ended, they felt frustrated about this development. In one case, a client felt their mental health worsened as they felt more cut off from the world since they returned the loan tablet to Age UK. These clients were keen to get back to using their devices but needed further help to do so, either to make devices accessible or to obtain their own devices and connectivity.

5.2. High-risk beneficiary groups

5.2.1. How successful or otherwise are local Age UKs at identifying, engaging and supporting older people in high-risk groups to begin or further develop their use of digital technology in a confident and safe way?

The evaluation found that local Age UKs/Cymrus supporting older people living alone, on low income, housebound or with mobility problems were successful in identifying and engaging those groups. Staff supporting those groups highlighted some additional referral pathways and marketing considerations important to recruiting those groups. They stressed the importance of promoting the service to families, friends and neighbours of people who were housebound or living alone. In addition, staff felt that social prescribers, hospitals and adult social care were relevant referral routes for these groups. In addition, staff supporting people on low income used Citizens Advice as an additional referral route for this group.

Staff also noted some considerations in terms of the language used when promoting the service to these groups. While their internal communications (for example, to other Age UK services) were explicit in terms of eligibility criteria and targeting their groups, their public-facing communications sometimes took a different approach. For example, staff felt that explicitly referring to older people on low income may stop some older people from joining the Programme. In addition, those supporting housebound older people did not use that term in their promotional materials, but rather focused on access to community services and need for in-home support.

Clients from the high-risk groups mentioned above reported similar experiences with the Programme and benefits of improved digital skills as those from general delivery groups. The Programme was, therefore, successful in supporting these particular high-risk groups to engage with digital technologies. However, some volunteer Digital Champions felt that support for high-risk groups could be improved further through additional training and resources for volunteer Digital Champions. For example, some suggested providing training in tools and apps that could be useful to those groups; training to set up devices for visually impaired people; training on dementia and working with people living with dementia; and training on how to link up digital support with other support high-risk groups may need.

5.2.2. What capabilities and adaptations of the general model, if any, are required for local Age UK brand partners to support older people from high-risk groups to fully participate?

The evaluation suggested that the Digital Champion Programme model was flexible enough that it could be adapted to cater for different groups and their needs. It further highlighted that some key features of the model may be even more important to some high-risk groups, as well as some additional ways in which support for these groups could be adapted to meet their needs better.

The following features of the model were felt to be potentially even more important for high-risk groups:

- **Doing what Digital Champions already do but perhaps even more so**, specifically, repeating and breaking down information into more manageable chunks; having resources to support the sessions and step-by-step instructions; going at an appropriate pace, and potentially allowing more time for learning and practising.
- **Home visits** were felt to be particularly important for some high-risk groups, including housebound people and those with mobility problems.
- **Tablet loan and connectivity** were seen as critical for engaging those living on low income.
- **A holistic approach to support**, where the service involved an element of befriending and also signposting to other support services, was also seen as more important to high-risk groups.
- **Balancing support with independence** was mentioned as potentially more relevant to high-risk group, due to a greater risk of becoming dependent on volunteers.

The evaluation also suggested that support for some high-risk groups could be further improved in the following ways:

- **More emphasis on diverse devices and accessible technology to suit different needs of people in high-risk groups:** While volunteer Digital Champions already provided support with different devices, some staff and volunteers thought that the Programme should be able to loan different devices to suit individual needs, for example, voice-controlled devices. As mentioned, a need was also recognised

for additional training in apps and tools that would make digital devices accessible.

- **Supporting high-risk groups to use digital technology in ways that address challenges they are facing:** For example, there were suggestions that people living alone could be supported to learn how to use digital technology to improve or maintain their social connections. There was further a suggestion that, where relevant and appropriate, people on low income could be shown how to use online forms for benefit applications.
- **Ensuring consistent support with getting own device and connectivity following the tablet loan:** While many partners tried to provide free or affordable devices after the tablet loan ended, there was a sense that this is not consistently available. Providing this support was seen as critical to ensuring sustainable digital technology usage for those older people living on low income.
- **Potentially involving carers:** Where older people had barriers to using digital technologies through disabilities or when their health deteriorated, some volunteers felt it may be worth exploring whether carers could be involved to support them to benefitting from digital technologies.

5.2.3. What are the experiences of older people from high-risk groups participating in the Programme, including the benefits and challenges they may experience?

The evaluation suggested that experiences of the Programme for older people living alone, or on low income, or who were housebound and had mobility problems were broadly similar to those of clients from general delivery partners. As explained above, many of the general features of the Programme worked well for these groups and perhaps were even more important in some ways than to the general older population. In addition, many local Age UK/Cymrus supporting older people more generally still supported people from these groups within their general model, which also showed the model worked well for these specific high-risk groups.

The benefits clients from high-risk groups reported were also broadly similar, with some additions. For example, those living alone and who were housebound benefitted additionally from greater independence. It made them feel safer because they knew they could use the internet to meet their existential or practical needs or ask for help if needed. People in these groups also felt that learning how to use the internet and digital technology was a lifeline for them in terms of enabling them to have social connections.

The evaluation did find there were some challenges specific to certain high-risk groups, for example, in terms of disability and barriers related to websites or devices that were not accessible. Those living alone sometimes struggled with low mood, which in some cases may make them less likely to persevere if there were delays to their support. Ensuring that staff and/or volunteer Digital Champions checked on their progress and were clear over available support and timelines for that is

therefore incredibly important for reassuring and keeping them engaged. Finally, support with getting own device and connectivity is likely to be critical to sustaining benefits from greater digital usage for people on low income, as explained before.