

Know Your Neighbourhood Fund Thematic Evaluation: The Impact of Improving Digital Skills on Increasing Social Connections

Prepared for: DCMS, UKCF
and KYN-funded community
foundations and projects

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ABBREVIATIONS AND GLOSSARY OF TERMS

ESOL:	English for Speakers of Other Languages.
IT:	Information Technology.
KYN Fund:	Know Your Neighbourhood Fund.
Loneliness:	An unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship that occurs when our subjective need for social relationships is not met in terms of quantity and/or quality. Chronic loneliness is defined as those who feel lonely often or always.
Participant:	A person who receives services from a project. Some projects use other terms, such as clients, customers, services users, etc. 'Participant' is used to cover all terms in this report.
Project:	The organisation or activity that has received the KYN Fund.
Project lead(s):	The key person or people at the project who has designed and delivered the interventions.
Social isolation:	A state where an individual experiences a lack of social contact and interaction.
VCSE:	Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The Know Your Neighbourhood (KYN) Fund is a government initiative, with an ambition to understand how to improve wellbeing and pride in the local area, through volunteering and community initiatives tackling loneliness.

The KYN Fund launched in April 2023 and was scheduled to end in March 2025. This was a package of up to £30 million. Of this, up to £15 million of government and match funding was delivered by UK Community Foundations (UKCF) and a consortium of nine community foundations.

In April 2025, the KYN Fund was extended until March 2026, with up to an additional £4.5 million of funding.

This research, conducted by Forever Consulting, explored how improving digital skills can increase social connections and reduce loneliness. This topic was chosen to address an identified evidence gap about whether digital skills interventions can alleviate social isolation and loneliness. It focused on 10 KYN Fund projects in four of the nine target areas. Key research questions covered the characteristics and life events that lead to feelings of social isolation and/or loneliness, how interventions were designed and delivered, and the impact they had.

Readers should note that:

- Participants interviewed were asked about how the interventions impacted their feelings of social connections and feeling part of the local community. This was to avoid assumptions that they may be

socially isolated or lonely, as well as to create a safe space for conversations due to the stigma that may be associated with feeling lonely.

- Participants interviewed took part in a range of activities at the project, and were often unable to separate their overall experience from that of the digital skills support. Therefore, it cannot be stated that the impacts discussed were solely due to participating in the digital skills intervention.

The research involved interviews with 10 project leads, 54 participants, and three observations in IT classes. They took place between December 2024 and February 2025.

Characteristics and life events that lead to feelings of social isolation and loneliness

Project leads interviewed reported that social isolation and loneliness are prevalent in many of the people who take part in their projects, not just the KYN Fund activities which were more likely to be targeted at people experiencing loneliness.

Participants provided several reasons why they felt socially isolated or lonely, and these were corroborated by project leads. They included:

- Being new to the area.
- Lacking confidence to speak English.
- Negative experiences of other people.
- Being a surviving partner.

- ∞ Austerity, economic downturns and the increasing cost of living.
- ∞ Adapting to life after children.
- ∞ Not being in education, employment or training.
- ∞ Living with social anxiety.
- ∞ Being unable to access services online.

Interventions' design and delivery to increase social connections and reduce loneliness

Projects catered for diverse learning styles and could broadly be categorised in two ways:

- ∞ Structured classes that participants attended regularly in person. They tended to have learning outcomes and follow a curriculum.
- ∞ Ad hoc support, where participants received tailored help in person on an informal, one-to-one basis.

The interventions were targeted at people who wanted to improve their digital skills. Project staff and promotional materials purposefully didn't mention loneliness, as they felt that this may have deterred people, due to the stigma that may be associated with feeling lonely.

Most participants were referred or signposted by friends, family, religious leaders, or agencies such as Jobcentre Plus. Many projects advertised by conducting outreach in the local community, asking leading questions about IT skills during other activities, and hosting family fun days. Project leads reported that these approaches were worth the effort because they increased awareness amongst people who may not have heard of them or may not have felt confident to attend.

What works to attract participants

- ∞ Promote the digital skills that participants will learn, and their tangible benefits for taking part in modern life.
- ∞ Avoid mentioning any aims to reduce loneliness, as this may deter people due to the stigma associated with feeling lonely.
- ∞ Schedule digital sessions after a popular activity, such as lunch club.

Participants interviewed enjoyed taking part in the digital skills interventions. They reported that this was due to the welcoming environment, friendly staff and patient trainers, and tailored support to overcome the specific barriers they faced.

What works in project design and delivery to improve digital skills...

- ∞ Employ friendly staff and patient trainers.
- ∞ Overcome learners' specific barriers to taking part, e.g., provide free hardware, connectivity, adapted equipment, etc.

... in structured classes

- ∞ Follow a professional course but build in time for individual support.
- ∞ Group together people with similar skills.
- ∞ Use a range of learning techniques.

- ✖ Schedule IT sessions around other popular activities to maximise attendance.

... in ad hoc support

- ✖ Avoid anything that resembles a formal learning environment.
- ✖ Organically weave digital support into other conversations and activities.

Projects embedded increasing social connections – with the hope that would in turn reduce loneliness – into the ways they provided digital support.

What works in project design and delivery to increase social connections and reduce loneliness

- ✖ Provide a welcoming atmosphere.
- ✖ Employ staff with an awareness of how loneliness and social isolation manifests and who have the skills to help alleviate it.
- ✖ Deliver shorter, more frequent sessions over a longer period. This increases the frequency that participants attend the centre and creates sufficient time to build trust in the staff and develop meaningful relationships with other participants.
- ✖ Run smaller classes, orchestrate group work, and facilitate conversations between participants.
- ✖ Ask participants to help others and/or take on leadership roles.
- ✖ Provide a sociable space and the time to spend with others.

- ✖ Encourage contact in person and online outside the project.
- ✖ Provide a variety of activities, including socials.

Projects generally delivered as they intended, although there were some features that they would do differently in the future or would recommend other projects doing.

Projects' recommendations for future digital skills interventions

- ✖ Provide advice and support about online safety.
- ✖ Build in sufficient time to build trust and learn new skills.
- ✖ Be flexible, dynamic and react to what participants want.
- ✖ Deliver shorter, more frequent sessions over a longer period.
- ✖ Run smaller classes to maximise opportunities for learning and building social connections.
- ✖ Follow a professional course but build in time for individual support.
- ✖ Link digital skills to topics that are relevant for increasing social connections and taking part in modern life, e.g., searching on social media for local groups and activities to join, and turning a hobby into a business.

The impact on increasing social connections and reducing loneliness

Most participants interviewed reported an increase in in-person social connections while they were at the project, which they valued immensely. Several have made good friends and spend time together

outside the project. Several appreciated meeting people from different backgrounds and developing the social skills to communicate with a range of people.

Participants interviewed reported that the increased social connections occurred because they could start a conversation by asking for help, and they had a shared experience to talk about.

Fewer participants interviewed increased their social connections online. Those that did tended to say that they had the confidence to do this because they had met them in person first, or they had overcome concerns around safety and security. However, several participants had no desire to connect with others online, and some said they preferred to connect in-person (as opposed to online) since taking part in the project.

Overall, there were examples of participants who are happy with their level of social connection. However, there were others who said it had improved, but they wished they had more, and some said they experienced social isolation and loneliness when they were not at the project.

Other reported benefits for participants included:

- ∞ Increased ability to take part in the modern world, including the world of work.
- ∞ Increased confidence and self-esteem.
- ∞ Increased sense of belonging.
- ∞ Improved mental health and sense of purpose.

Reported impacts for other people

Participants mentioned those close to them also benefitted from them taking part in the project, as they:

- ∞ Have helped others improve their digital skills and increase their social connections.
- ∞ Have experienced improved wellbeing, for example, they appear happier, less stressed and anxious, so family and friends worry less about them, and are able to have a more positive relationship with them.

Reported impacts from other activities

The research was not designed to compare the impact of digital skills interventions with other types of activity. However, because all participants interviewed took part in other activities at the projects, we could explore the reasons for the impacts noted above.

Project leads and participants interviewed felt the impacts occurred due to a combination of features that included:

- ∞ The welcoming atmosphere at the centre and the friendliness of staff and other participants.
- ∞ Taking part in activities that involved interacting with others.
- ∞ Having a volunteer or helper role.

Sustainability of impacts

Participants interviewed said that they will continue to come to the project as long as it exists, and many have their own digital devices or are able to use computers at the centre. Project leads said they would continue to help participants with any digital support they need.

Therefore, it is likely that reported impacts around social connections and improved digital skills will continue for those who have taken part.

Project leads reported that they want to continue delivering digital support after the KYN Fund ends. This is because there is ongoing demand in local communities, and they believe it helps increase social connections and reduce loneliness. They reported that they would need funding and quality staff to deliver at the same scale, and there were examples of projects who will apply for new funding and use peer volunteers.

Scalability and replicability

Most project leads would like to expand their work but stressed the need for adequate funding and quality staff. However, a few felt that excessive growth could dilute close relationships with participants and consequently diminish the impact.

Project leads believed their models could be replicated in other areas, provided there is strong collaboration with public and Voluntary, community, Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations, e.g., local councils, Jobcentres, colleges, libraries, and other community groups. Trust from the local community is also essential.

Conclusion

The research suggests that interventions to improve digital skills can provide an effective way to increase social connections, particularly in person. This is because they provide participants with the opportunity and a reason to start a conversation and form a rapport with each other.

Improving digital skills also has wider reported benefits for participants, including increasing their ability to take part in modern life, boosting confidence and improving mental health.

However, the research also found that the positive impacts could be attributed to a combination of other features including the welcoming atmosphere at the centre, the friendliness of staff and other participants, taking part in activities that involved interacting with others, and having a volunteer or helper role. This suggests that the positive impacts around increasing social connections are more likely to be dependent on the environment at the centre, the nature of the staff and other participants and the opportunities to interact with others, rather than the subject of the intervention itself.



Source: Participants during a coding class at Youth Aspire Connect

1: INTRODUCTION AND METHOD

Overview of the Know Your Neighbourhood Fund

The Know Your Neighbourhood (KYN) Fund is a government initiative, with an ambition to develop an understanding of how to improve wellbeing and pride in the local area, through volunteering and community initiatives tackling loneliness.

The KYN Fund launched in April 2023 and was scheduled to end in March 2025. This was a package of up to £30 million. Of this, up to £15 million of government and match funding was delivered by UK Community Foundations (UKCF) and a consortium of nine community foundations. This funded 115 projects, and supported activities enabling volunteering and tackling loneliness in nine targeted disadvantaged areas¹.

In April 2025, the KYN Fund was extended until March 2026, with up to an additional £4.5 million of funding.

The KYN Fund's objectives are to:

- ∞ Build the evidence to identify scalable and sustainable place-based interventions that work in increasing regular volunteering and reducing chronic loneliness.
- ∞ Increase the proportion of people in targeted high deprivation local authorities who volunteer at least once a month.

- ∞ Reduce the proportion of people experiencing chronic loneliness in targeted high deprivation local authorities who lack desired levels of social connections.
- ∞ Enable targeted high deprivation local authorities to implement sustainable systems and processes that encourage volunteering and tackling loneliness.

Research aims

This research, conducted by Forever Consulting, explored how improving digital skills can increase social connections and reduce feelings of loneliness. This topic was chosen to address an identified evidence gap around whether digital skills interventions can alleviate social isolation and loneliness.

The research questions were:

- ∞ What are the characteristics and life events that lead to feelings of social isolation and/ or loneliness?
- ∞ How were the digital skills interventions designed and delivered to increase social connections and reduce loneliness?
- ∞ What impact have the digital skills interventions had on increasing social connections and reducing loneliness?

¹ Barrow-In-Furness, Blackpool, County Durham, Fenland, Great Yarmouth, Kingston-Upon-Hull, South Tyneside, Stoke-On-Trent and Wolverhampton.

Participants were asked how the interventions impacted their feelings of social connections and feeling part of the local community. This was to avoid assumptions that they may be socially isolated or lonely, as well as to create a safe space for conversations due to the stigma that may be associated with feeling lonely.

Research approach

A qualitative approach was adopted, consisting of:

- ∞ 10 interviews with lead delivery partners.
- ∞ 54 interviews with participants.
- ∞ 3 observations during IT classes.

Interview guides are provided in Appendix 1.

The fieldwork was carried out between December 2024 and February 2025.

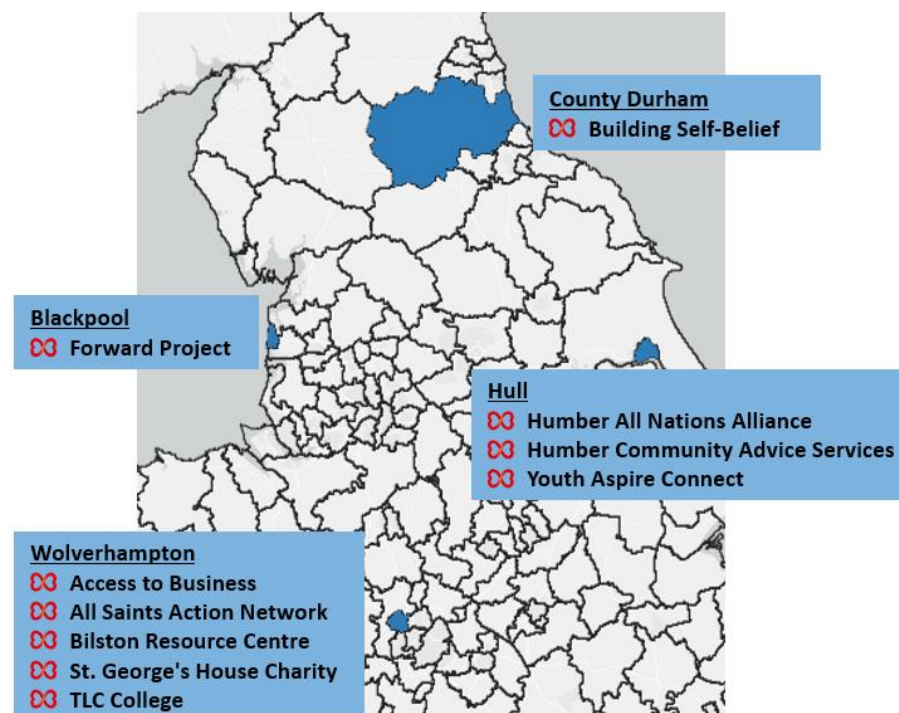
Project selection

A scoping phase explored which KYN projects aimed to increase social connections by improving digital skills. This involved a review of application forms, followed by scoping interviews with project leads.

The scoping phase revealed 10 projects were eligible. It was feasible to engage them all, and therefore a sampling strategy was not required. All 10 projects were invited to take part, and all accepted.

The 10 projects were based in four areas (see Figure 1.1).

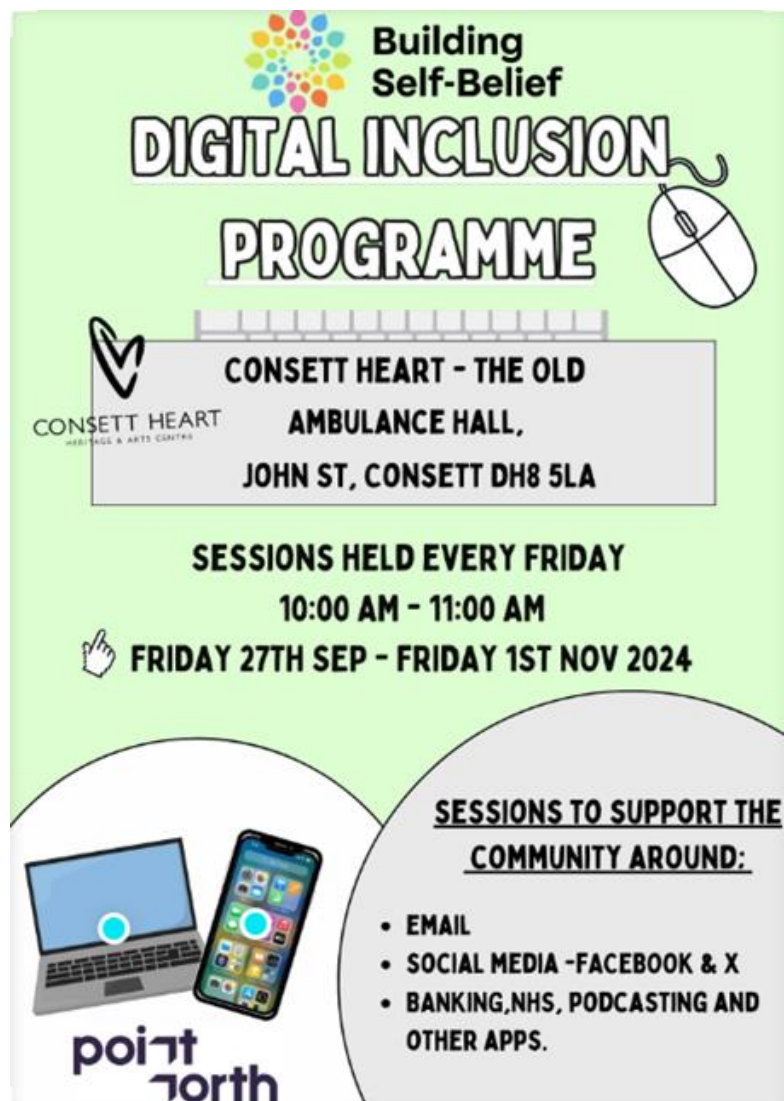
Figure 1.1: Project locations



Analysis and interpretation of findings

The information gathered through the fieldwork was collated using a specially designed framework which grouped research questions, sub-questions, and themes. The information was analysed to explore the full range of interviewees' views and experiences. This report presents in-depth insights, which are illustrated with quotes and mini case studies. All participants' names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

All projects delivered a range of services, e.g., other training courses, information, advice and guidance, and social activities. All participants interviewed had received or been involved in at least one other service or activity at the project, in addition to receiving support to improve their digital skills. Many of these activities were also designed to increase social connections and reduce loneliness. Therefore, the participants interviewed were often unable to separate their experience at the project overall, from that of the digital support. Consequently, it cannot be stated that the impacts discussed were solely due to their participation in the digital skills intervention.



Source: Poster from Building Self-Belief

2: CHARACTERISTICS AND LIFE EVENTS THAT LEAD TO FEELINGS OF SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS

This chapter addresses the first research question: What are the characteristics and life events that lead to feelings of social isolation and/ or loneliness? All the project leads that were interviewed reported that social isolation and loneliness are prevalent in many of the people who participate in their projects, not just the KYN Fund activities which were more likely to be targeted at people experiencing loneliness. They are aware of this through direct conversations with, and observations of, participants. Many participants we interviewed also reported feeling socially isolated and/or lonely. This chapter presents the common reasons why participants and project leads reported that these feelings can occur.

Being new to the area...

There were examples of participants who felt lonely when they moved to the area. They may have friends and family in other places, but do not spend time with them now. Furthermore, some have come from countries where the culture is family and community-focused, and they were rarely on their own. They found it a big change to move to a country where people are more likely to plan visits, or need an invitation, and there is less spontaneous 'popping round' to people's houses.

Lacking confidence speaking English...

There were examples of participants who said they were confident meeting people who spoke their own language, but it was hard to make connections when they had to speak English. For some, not

speaking English made them feel anxious that they would be judged or mocked, which made it even harder to make friends.

"In Spanish [meeting people is] super easy! In English I can be quite shy." *Participant*

"I was worried about speaking in case people couldn't understand my accent, or they'd be prejudiced or small minded." *Participant*

"We know one lady who wouldn't leave the house without her children or answer the phone if they weren't there. She was entitled to benefits but she didn't have the confidence to speak to the agencies. It took her over six years to come to our office on her own." *Project lead*

Negative experiences of other people...

There were examples of participants who felt that they had been treated badly by others in the past. Consequently, they could be sceptical and find it difficult to trust and open up to others.

Some projects supported asylum seekers and refugees who have been abused and exploited by people who were meant to protect them. Their project leads reported that it can take a while for them to work out who they can trust.

Being a surviving partner...

There were examples of some participants who were widowed or had experienced a relationship breakdown. They were living on their own for the first time in a long time and were not used to navigating the world alone.

“People can go downhill very quickly after a bereavement or losing a job. They don’t look after themselves. It’s like an existential sense of despair and despondency.” *Project lead*

Austerity, economic downturns and the increasing cost of living...

There were some examples of participants and project leads reporting that there are few places for people on a budget to socialise. Many places where people would have typically met have closed, such as community groups, working clubs and pubs. Some also said that they are worried about paying their heating bills, and so they choose to stay at home to save money.

“They can’t afford to go out for coffee. They can’t afford to get out of the house. They’re embarrassed to tell people, so they cut people off.” *Project lead*

Adapting to life after children...

There were examples of participants with older children who said that they found it harder to make friends now they didn’t have a shared experience, and they felt they had lost the social skills they needed to interact with other people.

“When you’ve got children, you take them to school and you meet other mums. Now you’re not taking them, you don’t have those connections. I’ve moved away from the area where I was friends with other school mums. I’m still friends with them. I just don’t see them as much cos we’re not in the same place.” *Participant*

“It used to be hard for me to be comfortable talking to people. I was looking after my children, family, cooking, cleaning, etc. When I went out, I used to feel conscious about what I was wearing. Do I need makeup? Other people will see me today! I didn’t feel like I had the right social skills, as I was used to only communicating with family. I used to think extra hard about what I said when I met someone new. Will they take things the wrong way? I used to feel so anxious.” *Participant*

Not being in employment, education or training...

There were some examples of participants reporting they felt socially isolated because they were not going to work. Similarly, some project leads reported that not going to work or school, and therefore not taking part in the associated social activities, such as 'hanging out', playing sport or socialising could lead to social isolation and loneliness. They felt this was because they could find it hard to relate to others, as they lacked common experiences to share and talk about.

Adam had a big circle of friends and found it easy to make connections with people. He had to leave his job due to health issues. He found conversations with his friends revolved around competitions over who had the best job, house or car. He felt like he couldn't take part in these conversations, and stopped enjoying socialising with these friends, and so he withdrew from the group.

"I used to be a really outgoing person. But then [following health issues] I didn't want to go out. I didn't want to meet people. I'm not sure if I avoided people, to be honest."

Living with social anxiety...

Many project leads observed social anxiety in their participants, and there were examples of participants who reported feeling that way. For some, this could have been triggered by an external factor, such as those mentioned above, including the Covid-19 lockdowns, losing a partner, or a job. For others, general anxiety and poor mental health resulted in feeling unable to interact with others.

Project leads and participants also mentioned anxiety having a 'snowball' or a 'spiral' effect, where people find it difficult to start socialising once they have been out of action for a while.

"Social anxiety is a big factor why people can't meet up or speak to anyone. All you want to do is stay indoors. People feel they will be better indoors than going out." *Participant*

"Going into lockdown put a massive strain on her mental health. Afterwards, she was scared to speak to people. She didn't want to start conversations because she worried that others wouldn't speak to her. It's taken her a while to gain confidence to speak to people again." *Project lead*

Being unable to access services online...

There were examples of project leads reporting that they believe there's a link between poor digital skills and feeling socially isolated or lonely. They felt it was difficult for those with poor digital skills to make the most of life's opportunities, as many activities and services are now online. They also felt that those who are socially isolated may not know who to ask about how or where to access these opportunities online. This was a key reason for some projects developing an intervention to increase social connections through improving digital skills.

"If you can't use IT, you can be excluded from so much, like booking GP appointments, or paying for parking. You don't feel part of society. It reinforces 'otherness' and social isolation. There's an assumption that everyone is IT literate – or they have someone who can show them how to do things – and if you don't you can feel really stupid and ashamed." *Project lead*

"Everything is digital now. It's the only way people can do things themselves. Learning how to use the computer helps you to be part of society. It opens a bigger world." *Project lead*

"If you were socially isolated, would you know how to do any of these things? Would you even know they existed?" *Project lead*



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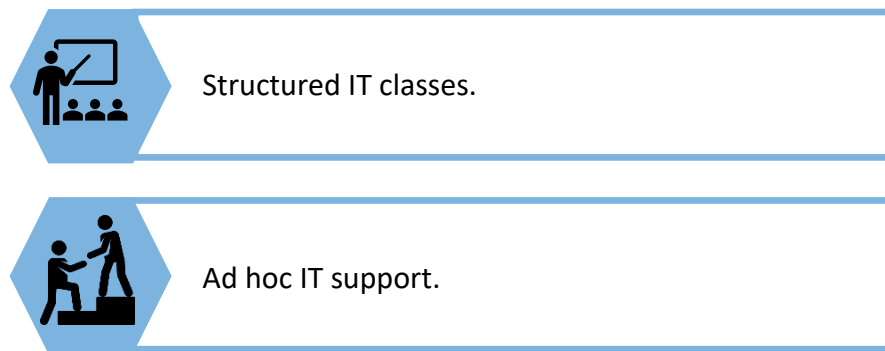
Source: Poster from All Saints Action Network

3: INTERVENTIONS' DESIGN AND DELIVERY TO INCREASE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS AND REDUCE LONELINESS

This chapter addresses the second research question: How were the digital skills interventions designed and delivered to increase social connections and reduce loneliness? It provides an overview of the approach taken by projects to deliver digital skills interventions, and focuses on how interventions were designed (including how they attracted participants) and delivered to increase social connections and reduce loneliness.

Approaches to delivering digital skills interventions

Projects broadly took two approaches to improving digital skills, both of which took place in person:



Structured IT classes

Six projects delivered structured IT classes in person. Common features included:

- ∞ Participants were either required or encouraged to attend regularly.
- ∞ Classes tended to be part of a course that had learning outcomes and followed a predetermined curriculum.
- ∞ Curriculums covered how to use smart phones and/ or computers to access the internet, social media and Microsoft Office.
- ∞ Knowledge was applied to practical tasks such as making a GP appointment, buying travel tickets, making video calls.
- ∞ There was a clear distinction between the tutor and the learners.

Ad hoc IT support

Four projects delivered ad hoc IT support in person. These projects used the KYN Fund to train staff in how to provide digital skills. They helped their beneficiaries by offering drop-in sessions or one-to-one support for any IT issues or queries. Common features included:

- ∞ Participants received tailored help on an informal, one-to-one basis. This was provided as and when participants needed it and may not have been every time they attended the project.
- ∞ On the occasions they wanted support, this was for the practical things they wanted to achieve in the moment, such as applying for a bus pass, or making a video call with family.
- ∞ Support was provided by the project staff who delivered other activities – there wasn't a dedicated 'digital support trainer'.

- ∞ Participants were able to use the project's computers on an ad hoc basis.

More information about each project is provided in Appendix 2. This includes the overall aim of the project, as well as the other activities they deliver.

Attracting participants to digital skills interventions

The digital skills interventions researched were not specifically targeted at people who were experiencing – or were at risk of – loneliness. Projects tended to target people who wanted to improve their digital skills, and so they highlighted the digital support, and the skills participants would learn. Project leads interviewed said that they purposefully didn't mention any aims to reduce loneliness, as this may have deterred people due to the stigma that may be associated with feeling lonely. Some examples of promotional materials are included throughout this report.

Most of the participants interviewed heard about the project through their existing networks, such as family, friends, neighbours, another group or religious institution. Others were recommended by an agency, such as Jobcentre Plus or the council's housing service. A few heard about it independently through advertising.

There were examples of project leads saying that they spent a lot of effort doing outreach to promote the digital skills interventions. They went into spaces where their target audience might be, such as Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) and religious organisations, community, social and leisure centres, libraries and shops. They also met with trusted community leaders who would refer participants to them. Many of those offering structured courses also attended Jobcentre Plus open days.

Other innovative activities included:

- ∞ Organising family fun days to introduce new people to the centre and raise awareness of their activities.
- ∞ Asking leading questions while they delivered other activities in the community, such as, "Do you have a mobile? Do you need any help with it? Come along to [centre], we can help you with it."

Project leads felt these activities were worth the effort because it increased awareness about their organisation and activities amongst people who may not have heard of them, or may not have felt confident to attend. Often the person doing the outreach or the fun days would be the same person delivering the digital classes, so potential participants could build a rapport with them before they joined. These staff would take a personal approach to help alleviate any worries the potential participant might have, including helping them plan their journey to the centre.

A few projects advertised online through their social media networks and email/ WhatsApp contacts. However, others purposefully avoided this approach, as they wanted to reach people who had poor digital skills and weren't online.

“We advertised the benefits of the courses and explained what they could achieve. We show them that they will get something meaningful to them out of it, and give them a vision of what they could do with these skills.” *Project lead*

“Don’t mention the ‘L’ word. If you ask someone if they’re lonely, they will say no. Labels really matter.” *Project lead*

“Don’t put a badge on it. We learnt from advertising for the Warm Homes Hub. That had “Can’t afford to heat your home? Come to this place!” plastered all over it. Who wants to be labelled as that?” *Project lead*

Designing and delivering digital skills interventions to improve digital skills

Projects intentionally designed many aspects of their digital intervention to make them appealing to, and beneficial for, participants, and participants told us they appreciated these efforts. This section details common features found in both structured courses and ad hoc support.

A welcoming environment...

Staff ensured that their centre is a welcoming, friendly place that puts participants at ease. They recognised that leaving the house and making the journey to the centre can be a big step for many people, so they wanted to ensure they felt comfortable when they got there. Some centres also included free refreshments.

Friendly staff and patient trainers...

Similarly, the staff and trainers understood the importance of their role in determining whether participants have a positive or negative experience. All staff took the time to get to know the participants, understand their interests and what’s going on in their lives. For some participants, it felt like the first time for a long time that anyone had shown an interest in them. Trainers were especially conscious that they needed to put participants at ease, build up their confidence and their skills, and not make them feel stupid.

Figure 3.1 on page 24 sets out the features that participants value from the environment at the centre and in the staff.



Source: Poster from the Forward Project

"It didn't seem like it was going to be intense. There were no mandatory bits. If you don't want to do something, you can say. But at the end of the day, if you want to do it, you can give it a shot. So it's quite a welcoming, relaxed atmosphere." *Participant*

"Be sensitive. People feel vulnerable when they learn new skills, especially when people expect you to do it. You see two-year-olds with a phone in their hands. So you must be aware of the level of humiliation – maybe more with men. How they look in front of others is so salient – especially with IT or technology. Show people 10 times, be patient. Be as understanding on the tenth time as the first." *Project lead*

"Our skills are in stark contrast to how people are treated at [executive agency]. We have the patience, we give them time. Statutory institutions have too many rules and people are thrown off and then they're back to square one. People have bigger challenges than just learning IT, so we want to be flexible around them. We don't want to add to people's pressure – we're meant to be taking pressure off them." *Project lead*

Overcome learners' specific barriers...

Staff were aware that their participants may face barriers to taking part in the digital skills intervention and they were keen to help them overcome them, where possible. They would ask participants if they needed anything to help them participate and proactively provided adaptations where they observed issues. Examples included:

- ∞ Providing free hardware (i.e., laptop, smart phone, SIM card), connectivity (i.e., free WIFI, data package) and independent use of the computer suite for those who do not have their own devices.
- ∞ Providing a special mouse for someone with a disability.
- ∞ Running shorter sessions for someone with back pain and mobility issues.
- ∞ Ensuring staff speak several languages.

"If you have no device and you don't know anyone you can borrow from, you can feel very isolated. You can't do anything without one." *Project lead*

Provide something meaningful that participants can't get elsewhere – and do it quickly...

Project leads identified a gap in the local service provision, so while they may not have competition from other organisations, they were aware that participants could simply choose not to take part. Therefore, they were keen to provide something useful from the start. Examples included:

- ∞ Teaching relevant IT knowledge and skills, so participants could do things they couldn't before, and they understood they will progress even further.
- ∞ Providing other useful information, such as managing the increasing cost of living, and how to save money.
- ∞ Inviting guest speakers, such as successful entrepreneurs with similar backgrounds to share their journey to inspire participants. This worked particularly well for youth-focused organisations.

“Young people need to see value in what you're offering. It's not enough to get them together, let them eat pizza and then go home. Beyond pizza, what value are they getting? We need to show them that they're getting something that they won't get elsewhere. We need to have empathy about what they value. And that is getting practical digital skills – and building their confidence in an environment where they're valued, feel listened to, and where people genuinely care about them. They need to know you care about them and you want them to succeed. They need to feel it's real and you're not just doing it to get some funding.” *Project lead*

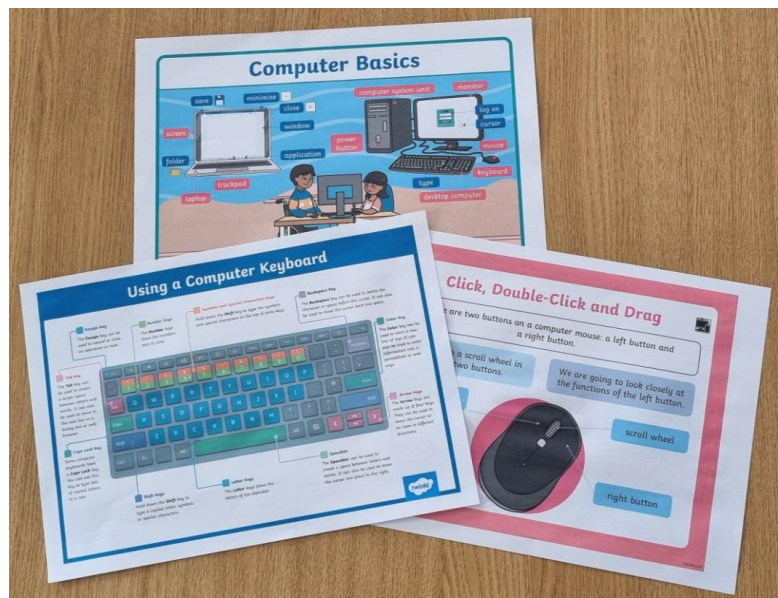
Approaches for structured courses

Projects delivering structured courses designed and delivered them in the following ways.

- ∞ **Learner-led.** Staff sought the views from participants about what they would like the classes to cover and how they should be run. Some did this informally through conversations, while one created a working group, and another surveyed their members. All reviewed the feedback, looked for commonalities and planned the sessions collaboratively.
- ∞ **Professional course.** All projects followed a recognised course – [Learn My Way](#) being the most common. Working through modules and getting a certificate gave participants a sense of achievement and boosted their confidence. Trainers ensured that the classes were delivered at an appropriate pace and were informal, and fun so participants could relax and enjoy themselves while learning. They also ensured there was time for participants to ask questions and get support about something they needed help with at that time, such as booking a GP appointment or responding to a benefits letter.

Following a recognised course was also beneficial for staff, especially those who weren't professional trainers. The structure meant they could complete the course themselves first and then plan how they would teach participants. One organisation trained volunteers through the [Digital Champions Network](#). The volunteers found the modules about how to help different types of people and identify and overcome accessibility needs particularly useful – both for their role as Digital Champions, but also for engaging with other people in general.

- ∞ **Learn with similar people.** Participants wanted to be with learners they could relate to (from similar backgrounds and experiences), and who were at a similar IT level. This was because they didn't want to feel judged for not knowing how to do something.
- ∞ **Range of techniques.** Trainers ensured there were different ways to teach the modules, including verbal and written instructions, group and individual work, and hard copies of materials that participants could take home to complete and review.
- ∞ **Schedule sessions to maximise participation.** Some projects combined the digital classes with other activities, such as consultation events, or held them after a popular activity, such as lunch club.



Source: Examples of resources used at TLC College

"They've already overcome several challenges: they've left the house, they've come to a strange place, they've admitted they need something. The last thing we want is for staff to say sit at that computer and Google it."

Project lead

"My trepidation was that it was going to be like school, and I'll have to sit there, do what you're told and all the rest of it. But truly, it wasn't like that at all. It was cosy. It was warm, a warm feeling that you got when they said, 'I'm here to help you. Ask any questions. It doesn't matter. Stop me anytime you like it.' It was just easy. Not easy to grasp! But it was easy sitting there doing it. And then you came to the end of the class and thought, 'Oh, is that the end already?'"

Participant

"I didn't want them to think I was a waste of space when I arrived. Everyone is in the same boat, skills wise, so I don't feel the pressure."

Participant

"It was a perfect format. There were lots of different styles of learning. We were learning on the laptop, we had the big screen, we took notes on paper as well. So it was that nice accessibility of different kinds of learning."

Participant

"People come for the food [at lunch club] and stay for the IT class!"

Project lead

Approaches for ad hoc, one-to-one support

Projects delivering tailored, individual support designed and delivered them in the following ways.

- ∞ **Avoid anything that looks like education.** Many participants on these projects had negative experiences of school and didn't want to enter anything that resembled a learning environment or participate in anything with a formal trainer or planned modules.
- ∞ **Organically weave in digital support with other conversations and activities.** Staff in these projects were skilled at recognising when participants may need support but may not feel comfortable asking for it. They looked for opportunities in everyday conversations to ask if they could help. For example, they might ask if they have a bus pass, and if not, ask if they want help applying for it. Participants tended to learn skills that they needed in the moment, such as applying for an e-visa. Once they accomplished that – and felt that they were well supported to do it – they tended to ask for help to do other things.

Designing and delivering digital skills interventions to increase social connections and reduce loneliness

All projects had an implicit aim to increase social connections, and through that, reduce loneliness. They designed and delivered their digital skills interventions to achieve this in the following ways.

- ∞ **Employ staff with an awareness of how loneliness and social isolation manifests and who have the skills to help alleviate it.** Many projects aimed to increase social connectivity and reduce loneliness in all their activities, not just ones relating to digital skills.

They recruited and trained skilled staff who can engage sensitively with people who may be vulnerable for a variety of reasons and can also teach digital skills/ provide digital support.

- ∞ **Engineer/ facilitate conversations between participants.** Staff and trainers helped participants connect by subtly, but purposefully encouraging interactions. As staff made it their business to get to know participants, they could easily connect people with shared experiences and interests.
 - ∞ **Ask participants to help others/ take on leadership roles.** Some trainers were supported formally or informally by others in the class who were regulars or more advanced. This worked well, as participants related well to each other. They found that showing each other how to do something provided a natural way to start conversations and get to know each other.
 - ∞ **Provide space and time to socialise.** Some projects have an onsite café or area where participants can sit with a drink. This provided participants with an easy way of being in a space where they could talk to others that they have something in common with. Some participants at projects without such a space onsite, said they wished there was one.
- Additionally, projects delivering classes, arranged the room thoughtfully, in layouts that made it easy to talk to others during the sessions. They also made the sessions interactive with open, leading questions designed to encourage people to reveal things about themselves that might spark conversations.
- ∞ **Encourage contact outside the project.** Staff encouraged participants to connect outside the project in person and online by

meeting socially, forming WhatsApp groups or befriending on social media.

∞ **Provide a variety of activities, including socials.** All the projects provided a range of activities or services. They kept participants interested and gave them something that felt natural to talk about. For many participants, the other activities were the reason they initially came to the centre – they were the hook to getting interest in the digital activities. Projects also brought participants from across their activities together for social events, such as parties, quizzes and trips.

“Staff encourage you to introduce yourself and speak to other people. If they see someone on their own, they encourage them to get involved in something. And they ask others, like me, to introduce myself to them and see if they need help with something.” *Participant*

“The staff look at everyone who's signing on. They look at what they're good at, and what they lack and they kind of group together similar people with similar traits. If it's a group of shy people they'll always want you to get involved, but they'll never pressure you... They're very good at breaking down any walls that you might have – but also leaving it all up to you.” *Participant*

“When you help them, you get to know them. I can have a good relationship with them. They can easily come and say something to me if they're having problem in the class.” *Participant as a volunteer helper*

“This is the most impactful thing we've done to reduce social isolation because it was really flexible and informal, not a strict structure and formal like a school classroom.” *Project lead*

“We didn't want people to come in, sit on a computer for an hour and then leave – that would be a failure.” *Project lead*

“Give people a reason to stay – a brew will do – and make it social.” *Project lead*

[Outside of the centre] “We talk about everything in our personal lives. We have a WhatsApp group. We discuss all our issues and support each other.” *Participant*

“The key is to offer many activities, so they're not sat around doing nothing. Give them something to talk about.” *Project lead*

Figure 3.1: Features that participants value from the centres and staff



Source: Participants during a class at TLC College

Lessons learnt in designing and delivering digital skills interventions

Generally, projects delivered as they intended, although there were some features that they would do differently in the future, and several lessons that they would impart to others designing and delivering similar projects.

- ∞ **Include advice and support about online safety.** Staff were conscious that by teaching participants how to use the internet, they were also introducing them to opportunities where they may come to harm through scams, fraud or misinformation. Therefore, they built in sessions about how to avoid being a victim of online crime, and how to verify whether what they read online is from a reputable source and can be trusted. One project partnered with a building society to deliver a session specifically on financial scams.
- ∞ **Appreciate it takes time to build trust and learn new skills.** Many projects ran longer courses and/ or ongoing ad hoc support or drop-in sessions, coupled with other opportunities for participants to interact. This was so participants could take time to develop trust in the staff, build relationships with other participants, and learn digital skills. Whilst staff facilitate and engineer interactions, they appreciated that sustainable connections develop gradually.
- ∞ **Be flexible, dynamic and react to what participants need.** The projects shaped themselves around what participants wanted, and altered their plans as needed. For example, some moved to supporting less on computers and laptops as participants mainly wanted to learn how to use smart phones. One project that usually offered one-to-one support identified common requests and organised occasional group sessions. This gave participants the

skills they were after and an opportunity to interact with others. For projects delivering structured classes, they also realised they sometimes needed to curtail their planned content, as participants were taking longer to understand the work and gain the needed skills. Instead, they provided an overview of a topic in one session and went into greater detail in the next, for example an overview of Facebook one week and how to use it the next week. They also spent significant time at the start of each session reviewing what was covered previously to help participants consolidate their knowledge and ensure no-one was falling behind.

Other changes and lessons that specifically apply to structured courses included:

- ∞ **Deliver shorter, more frequent sessions, over a longer period.** Some project leads discovered that classes over an hour could be too intense for beginners, and it was better to run shorter sessions a few times a week. This also helped participants to build a routine and increased the times they were leaving their house and coming to the centre – and therefore reaping the associated benefits.
- ∞ **Smaller classes are better for learning and building social connections.** Some project leads, especially those who didn't have volunteer helpers, found it was difficult to teach, monitor progress and help participants at the same time. They also found that having fewer participants made it easier for everyone to build a rapport. As trainers were also focused on increasing social connections, they sometimes orchestrated group work so participants could get to know each other, even though they were more likely to develop their digital skills quicker by working individually.
- ∞ **Follow a professional course – but build in time for individual support.** Project leads felt the recognised courses were

appropriate, and some are exploring how to offer accredited training in the future. They also received feedback that participants wanted tailored support for things they needed help with in the moment, e.g. setting up online banking. All projects adapted to do this informally, and some projects will include scheduled drop-in sessions in the future. There are few other local organisations that provide this tailored IT support, and so the projects are filling an unmet need.

∞ **Link digital skills to topics that are relevant for increasing social connections and taking part in modern life.** Some projects would like to explore these activities in the future:

- ∞ Combine participants' interests with improving their digital skills. For example, learning how to search online and on social media for local groups and activities they may like to join.
- ∞ How to turn your hobby into a business. For example, online marketing and selling.
- ∞ Run a family history project through online research. One project lead did this previously and found it was successful in teaching digital skills and encouraging the group to talk to each other.

"We want to give people confidence, but we want them to be wary too. We've opened up a new world for them and we need to make sure they're safe in it." *Project lead*

"It takes time to build a relationship with other people. It takes time to develop a natural connection. It may be the first time they've interacted in a meaningful way with anyone for years." *Project lead*

"It takes time to build trust. It can take four, five, six visits before they mention the thing that is making them lonely." *Project lead*

"Don't go in with size 12 shoes and think everyone will be fixed. Have lower expectations." *Project lead*

"It's been great to run a flexible project to work around the participants and respond to what they want. We built the service around what they want, not what we thought they wanted." *Project lead*

"We learnt we were limited about how many we could meaningfully support at one time – so it was better to have fewer people. Plus it's easier to build relationship with fewer. Now we believe it's quality not quantity." *Project lead*

4: IMPACT ON INCREASING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS AND REDUCING LONELINESS

This chapter addresses the third research question: What impact have the interventions had on increasing social connections and reducing loneliness? It explores project leads and participants' perceptions about the difference the digital skills intervention has made to participants and those around them, and why these impacts occurred. It concludes with how sustainable impacts may be, and the extent digital skills interventions are scalable and replicable in other areas.

Readers are reminded to be cautious when interpreting the findings, as participants received or were involved in at least one other service or activity delivered by the project, in addition to digital skills. Many of these activities were also designed to increase social connections and reduce loneliness. The participants were often unable to separate their experience at the project overall, from that of the digital support. Consequently, it cannot be stated that these impacts are solely due to their participation in the digital skills intervention. Additionally, this qualitative research provides subjective views on impact, and not quantitative findings.

Reported impacts for participants

The wide-ranging benefits reported by participants are set out below.

Increased social connections...

Most participants interviewed said that they had increased the amount of people they speak to in person since attending the project. For some, this is solely while they are at the project, but others have increased the amount in other areas of their lives.

Participants reported that the digital skills intervention gave them a shared experience to talk about. Many began getting to know each other by talking about the support or asking each other for help. However, this approach is likely to apply to other activities where skills are being learnt, e.g., knit and knatter, gardening, cooking classes, etc.

Participants valued the connections they have made at the projects, and several have made good friends and meet outside the project.

As well as increasing the overall number of people they interacted with in person, many also appreciated meeting people from different backgrounds. Many said they wouldn't have had the opportunity or the confidence to speak to them if it wasn't for the project.

Some participants said they were more confident to connect online with fellow participants because they had already spoken to them in person. A few increased the number of people they connected with online because the digital support gave them the knowledge and skills, and helped them overcome concerns about safety and security. Many of these participants increased their contact with family or friends. There were relatively few examples of participants connecting online with people outside their existing network, but many said they were content with this, and didn't want to use social media. Some also said that they prefer interacting in person (as opposed to online) since coming to the project.

Some participants interviewed are happy with their level of social connection. Others said it had improved, but they wished they had more. Therefore, they were lacking their desired level of social connection.

Quotes about increasing connections in person

“Before, I’d see people talking in college and I’d just wish I had friends. Now I’ve met people here that also go to college, and we’re friends now. I’m quite happy and it’s quite exciting because we can share ideas and have something to talk to each other about. If there are things I don’t understand, I can ask them.” *Participant*

“It’s such a good network. We’ve gained such good friendships. We often meet outside for a tea or coffee.” *Participant*

“I’m more confident approaching other mums in the playgroups now. I’ve made new friends there and have become quite close to some of them. We push each other to be more positive in life.” *Participant*

“We know clients are like friends now. They’re going out of the house themselves and being proactive meeting up. After the Christmas quiz they went out afterwards without staff. Some hadn’t seen each other for a few months.” *Project lead*

“I’ve got a PlayStation, but I don’t tend to be on it as much as I used to be. I’m more outgoing. I prefer to get out and see people than be in my bedroom.” *Participant*

One project trained nine volunteers to teach the digital course. Staff reported that they bonded together, became a strong team, and are now friends. One became pregnant with their first child and didn’t have a strong network outside the centre, so they took her to hospital appointments and arranged a baby shower.

One of them told us, “One of the ladies recently had a baby, so we automatically feel like we’re all aunties and we’re going to spoil her baby. We’ve become like a little family.”

Quotes about meeting diverse people

“I’m happy with this little family I found. The oddball bunch. I’ll call them that because they look different shapes, sizes, religions. They’ve all got different backgrounds, nationalities and everything. And everybody’s here having a great time.” *Participant*

“I’ve met new people I wouldn’t usually. It’s stopped my world getting smaller.” *Participant*

“It’s opened my mind to getting involved in other activities and talking to people I wouldn’t have had the confidence to talk to before.” *Participant*

Quotes about increasing connections online

“Once you've met them in real life, it makes you more confident to make friends with them on Facebook and ask for their number to message them.” *Participant*

“A participant had family abroad and they wanted to video call them. We talked them through how, wrote down the steps and encouraged them to have a go at home. They came back and couldn't do it, so we showed again. They were successful the following time, and now talk to family every day.” *Project lead*

“I'm not into social media; I don't want it. I would rather see and talk to people, and this project has had me interacting with people from all different backgrounds. It's made me more tolerant.” *Participant*

“Before, I would prefer to communicate with some people online rather than meeting them in person. If some of my friends would say, “OK, let's meet”, I'd be like, “No, I'm happy. I'm talking to you online. That doesn't mean I'm going to see you.” And now I'm like, “OK, let's come on down.” *Participant*

Dilara was given a device by the project, and they showed her how to use social media to connect with family in [home country]. She's able to keep in touch with her poorly mother back home, which makes her feel less helpless, as she can't visit her. Staff observed that something changed in her, and she now sees the value of digital communication. She's now in WhatsApp groups with others at the centre and in her local neighbourhood.

Quotes about desired level of social connection

“I feel a lot better. I don't feel like I'm so isolated and alone because I've got a connecting network here. This has been absolutely brilliant.” *Participant*

“I think I've improved my ability to mix with people. Before I didn't really like relating to people, but I've made a lot of friends since coming here. It's made me break out of my shell of being quiet and just staying on my own. Now I feel like relating is the best thing. It benefits me in mixing things up with people.” *Participant*

“It's improved, but could be better. [The project] has helped 100%. Without it I'd be at home moping around.” *Participant*

Increased ability to take part in the modern world, including the world of work...

Many participants said that their new or improved digital skills had helped them to take part in life in general, which in turn had made them feel more positive. Participants provided the following examples:

- ∞ Transacting with public services, e.g., booking a health appointment, applying for benefits.
- ∞ Getting out and about, e.g., applying for a bus pass, using an App to pay for parking.
- ∞ Socialising, e.g., ordering and paying at restaurants and bars using a QR code).
- ∞ Banking and shopping online.
- ∞ Updating their CV, and searching and applying for jobs.

Grace's husband did everything for her when he was alive, including sorting all the household bills. Through the project, she learnt how to pay bills online, stay safe and avoid being scammed. She now frequently uses social media to keep in touch with friends and have her say in local issues.

"[The main benefit is] "Learning new digital skills because obviously technology's always changing. So it's showing us how things are done today and you can do different things with your tablet and your phone." *Participant*

"[Staff] showed me how to apply for a bus pass. I feel like I've got a golden ticket! It's saved me £5 every time I come here." *Participant*

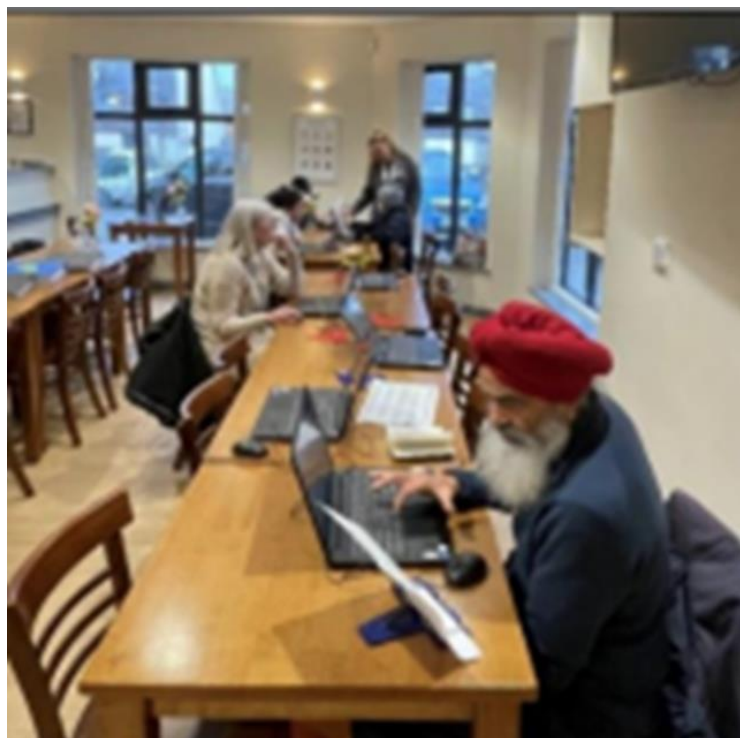
"I know how to find things, and if I don't know where something is or how to do it, I feel confident figuring it out." *Participant*

Increased confidence and self-esteem...

Most participants said their confidence had increased since improving their digital skills at the project. Many said they felt more confident speaking to other people; some also said they were more confident using their digital skills, and this has sparked a desire to improve other skills or take new courses. Others referenced a general confidence boost.

Several participants taught digital skills, were formal 'classroom helpers' or had casually shown others how to do something at some point. They said helping others made them feel valued, increased their self-esteem, and "felt good."

Before Cynthia came to the project, she was worried about speaking in case people couldn't understand her accent or they'd be prejudiced towards her. Her confidence has grown so much that she applied and was accepted onto her housing association's tenants' voice panel, and she now speaks confidently in meetings to represent her fellow tenants.



Source: New learners become familiar with their surroundings and the digital course materials in the café at Bilston Resource Centre

"I have a lot more confidence. I went through a stage where I didn't want to talk or leave the house. People would talk to me, and I'd just give one-word answers. Coming here has changed that. I'm having all sorts of conversations with all sorts of people. Now I'll speak to people in the queue at the shop. I'll have a conversation about anything." *Participant*

"I feel wonderful now because I can use a computer. At first I wasn't very confident to start anything like this. The confidence that has grown inside is absolutely amazing... I can be the advocate to say, honestly, I was in your position. But look at me now!" *Participant*

"I was confident before. And then I went down because of my health and it's difficult to scramble back up. But I've got there with the help of this place." *Participant*

"One of our older folks did their blue badge application online, then showed others how to do it and avoid going wrong. You could tell they were so chuffed to have done it – and then helped others!" *Project lead*

"I felt special [being asked to be an IT mentor] because I felt I was getting somewhere – and I knew that I could do it... To be asked to do it just felt wonderful and I feel blessed." *Participant*

Increased sense of belonging...

Many participants reported they felt a sense of belonging at the project. Some described participants and staff as family. A few also said they felt more part of the local community because they recognise people to say hello to when they're out and about.

"At Christmas we had an event, I felt nervous going but they made me feel welcome and accepted, and like I'm supposed to be there." *Participant*

"If you don't come in, everybody texts you or messages you and says 'Are you OK? Why didn't you come today?'" So it's really a good network. I don't have a big network of people that I know in [area], so this is kind of like a second family." *Participant*

"The [centre] is like a second home. And the family here is everything really." *Participant*

"It's made me think that there's more to life. Getting up to come here, it makes my day because it makes me happy and joyful. Seeing people that I know and that I trust makes my day. It's just lovely place to come." *Participant*

"I've enjoyed learning more about the community. I've felt quite isolated the last few years, so it's been lovely to meet new people." *Participant*

Improved mental health and sense of purpose...

Some participants reported they often felt anxious, which was a key reason why they struggled to connect with people. Many of them said that taking part in the project helped reduce their social anxiety, and others said that their mental health has improved. There were examples of participants, particularly those who were unemployed, who said that a main benefit of regularly attending the project was having a structure and purpose for their day, which also improved their well-being.

"I used to be anxious and self-conscious, but now I don't care if I make a fool of myself!" *Participant*

"At home I never go out, which is bad for my mental health – depression can set in. It's so good coming here. The people here know me. They're good at reading me. They can tell if I'm happy or not." *Participant*

"We have a good laugh, lift each other up. I feel a lot better leaving here than when I arrive." *Participant*

"I'm a socially anxious and lonely person, so this has really improved my confidence. I've pushed myself to do something I wouldn't have before." *Participant*

[The main benefit was] "Getting out the house and having structure to the day. I used to sleep till two or three in the afternoon. Now I'm up early to come here." *Participant*

Reported impacts for other people

Some participants and project leads felt that others had positively benefited from them taking part in the project. Examples included:

- ∞ Participants have helped others **improve their digital skills** – or have done things for them. Some said their family are relieved they have learnt digital skills because they have stopped asking them for help!
- ∞ Family and friends have **increased social connections**. This may be because they have been introduced to people on the project, or parents may talk to each other when they drop their children off.
- ∞ Other KYN ambitions around **improving wellbeing**: family and friends worry less about the participant, as they seem happier. Additionally, family members benefit from participants having better mental health and feeling less anxious or stressed, and benefit from a more positive relationship.

“I can help my family with my new digital skills, especially my nan. She had five Facebook accounts, so I've sorted that for her and taught her how to use it.” *Participant*

“I help out my mum with everything on the computer because she doesn't really know much about computing and stuff.” *Participant*

“My family are happy as they don't have to try and teach me now.” ... “I bother my children less, as I can do [digital] things myself.” *Participant*

“I think my son and granddaughter were worried cos I didn't leave the flat. They're happier now that I'm not sitting at home alone all day.” *Participant*

“I'm not as miserable, so it's benefitted my friends and family. I've been stressed with jobs and a relationship breakdown. This project's made me feel better.” *Participant*

“My family have benefited. I'm in a better mood when I come home. It lifts you up coming here.” *Participant*

“I think my children see me as a role model now. They see I've gone back to work, and I'm working hard. They see that a woman's life doesn't have to end when she has children.” *Participant*

“I think my kids also feel so proud and happy for me, when they see me using the laptop, doing assignments, reading, etc.” *Participant*

“I'm less stressed now. I used to obsess over my son all the time and worry about how he's doing. But now [coming to the centre] it takes my mind off it. I think my son is happier now as I let him be!” *Participant*

“This has made me a better mum. Otherwise, I would be super frustrated with my children being locked indoors all day.” *Participant*

Reported impacts from other activities

This research was not designed to compare the impact of digital projects against other types of activity. However, because all projects delivered a variety of activities, and all participants interviewed took part in something other than the digital support, we could explore the reasons for the impacts noted above.

When asked about why they joined, what they liked best, and the main benefits of the project, many participants initially spoke about other activities they had taken part in, and some were repeatedly prompted to focus on the impacts from the digital projects. Several also spoke about stronger social connections they had forged through other activities at the project.

All project leads and participants felt that the impacts were a result of a combination of features, the most important included:

- ∞ The **welcoming atmosphere** at the centre and the **friendliness of staff and other participants**.
- ∞ Taking part in **activities that involved interacting with others**. One project lead believes their lunch club leads to more personal social interactions than the digital classes. However, they feel the digital classes develop confidence and self-esteem in participants that they don't get from the lunch club. Several participants from another project had also taken part in a gardening project. They all spoke enthusiastically about the gardening, and several said it was the best thing they had done at that centre. Similar examples were noted at other projects relating to other activities, such as cooking classes, and group outings.

- ∞ **Having a volunteer or helper role**. One project lead felt their volunteer-led activities had the biggest impact on reducing loneliness, developing social networks, and a sense of belonging.



Source: A Digital Champion helping a member of the public at a digital inclusion drop-in delivered by Building Self-Belief

"It's more about the culture than the activity – the friendly faces, the community within a community within a community. We call it 'radical hospitality.' We'll do anything and everything within reason to make people comfortable. We're open, cheery, positive. We let them know they can be who they are here." *Project lead*

"Being at [centre] makes me happy. I'd rather be here than at home on my own." *Participant*

[Due to ill health] "My world had just gotten increasingly smaller and smaller and smaller. I was probably becoming quite socially isolated until I became more involved with [project]. It gets me out, among people and mixing." *Participant*

"Any activity that involves interactions could reduce loneliness. The IT is part of it, but not a giant part of it. It's a hook to get people to engage with each other." *Project lead*

"Coming to [project] has been an absolute lifesaver for me, in terms of meeting people. My social group is larger than it's ever been... I think it's because of the whole thing. It's everything [not just the digital classes]." *Participant*

"Eating food is the best way humans enjoy ourselves and feel comfortable. During lunch club people talk about everything. From holidays and favourite ice-cream to deep conversations around loneliness, companionship and bullying... But learning IT skills gives you confidence that you don't get from lunch. You don't get a certificate from going to lunch club." *Project lead*

[Through volunteering] "It's opened me up more. I can talk with people a lot more easily than before I came here. Before volunteering I was quite enclosed and kept myself to myself. Not sharing any information with anybody... But now I've become more open with people. I share thoughts and feelings and opinions with people. And it's because of volunteering here that I was able to open myself up to talk... I've noticed that the other volunteers become more open, and more willing to talk to people they haven't met before, especially the ones that work in the classes or in the office or cafe. The ones who see people face-to-face. The interaction helps open people up, and having the team around us really encourages us to talk to the other clients that attend." *Participant*

Sustainability of impacts

All participants said they plan to continue coming to the project as long as it exists. Therefore, it is likely that the reported impacts around improved social connections will continue.

Project leads believe that the people who have taken part in the digital skills interventions will maintain the digital skills they've learnt – as long as they keep using them, and they have access to devices and data to do this. Project leads said they would continue to help participants with any support they needed in the moment, even if they are not able to run structured classes. Most of the participants we interviewed have their own smartphone, laptop or computer, but some projects also support people who rely on using their computers, and so may need to continue accessing the project to maintain their digital skills.

All project leads said they want to continue delivering digital support after KYN funding ends. This is because there is ongoing demand from people in their communities, and project leads believe they help increase social connections and reduce loneliness.

Project leads said they will need funding and staff to continue delivering the digital skills interventions at the same scale that they were delivered during the KYN-funded project. They aim to continue the interventions by seeking new funding and using peer volunteers. Not receiving additional funding may mean that unaccredited courses are reduced or removed, ad hoc access to projects' computers is reduced, and ad hoc support is reduced.

“My goal is to stay on here because there's such a positive support network. I don't want to lose that relationship with them [staff and participants] and that connection with the community. Once you become a part of something like this, you don't want to lose it!” *Participant*

“It's like riding a bike. Once they have the confidence, they will continue to use their digital skills because we're living in a digital world.” *Project lead*

Scaling up and replicating interventions

Most project leads would like to scale up their activity to either provide more support at their current location, or in new locations in their local area. They said that this would require adequate funding and quality staff. However, a few said that there's a limit on how much they would like to grow. They feel that there is a tipping point when becoming too big can dilute the close connections with participants, and therefore several benefits could be weakened or lost.

All project leads said that their activity could be replicated elsewhere. “If it works here, it can work anywhere” was mentioned a few times. Many said this would require meaningful, ongoing relationships and a good reputation with public sector and VCSE organisations, e.g., local authority, Jobcentre Plus, colleges, libraries and other community groups. This is important for funding, participant referrals, and partnership working. A good reputation and trust amongst the local community and target participants are also essential, and they can take time to develop.

5: CONCLUSION AND WHAT WORKS

The findings presented in this report go some way to address the evidence gap about whether in person digital skills interventions can alleviate social isolation and loneliness. This section summarises key findings from the research, as well as what works. These lessons provide useful recommendations for other projects that are considering developing similar interventions.

Characteristics and life events that lead to feelings of social isolation and loneliness

The project leads and participants we interviewed reported several reasons why feelings of social isolation and/ or loneliness occur:

- ∞ Being new to the area.
- ∞ Lacking confidence speaking English.
- ∞ Negative experiences of other people.
- ∞ Being a surviving partner.
- ∞ Austerity, economic downturns and the increasing cost of living.
- ∞ Adapting to life after children.
- ∞ Not being in education, employment or training.
- ∞ Living with social anxiety.
- ∞ Being unable to access services online.

Interventions' design and delivery to increase social connections and reduce loneliness

Project leads identified many people in their local area lacked adequate digital skills to take part in modern society.

They drew on their expertise and participant feedback to thoughtfully design and deliver projects to improve digital skills whilst increasing social connections. Examples of how they did this effectively, as well as the lessons that they learnt and would recommend to other projects who are thinking about developing digital skills interventions are set out below.

What works to attract participants

- ∞ Promote the digital skills that participants will learn, and their tangible benefits for taking part in modern life.
- ∞ Avoid mentioning any aims to reduce loneliness, as this may deter people due to the stigma associated with feeling lonely.

What works in project design and delivery to improve digital skills...

- ∞ Employ friendly staff and patient trainers.
- ∞ Overcome learners' specific barriers to taking part, for example provide free hardware, connectivity, adapted equipment, etc.

...in structured classes

- ∞ Follow a professional course but build in time for individual support.
- ∞ Group together people with similar skills.

- ∞ Use a range of learning techniques.
- ∞ Schedule IT sessions around other popular activities to maximise attendance.

... in ad hoc support

- ∞ Avoid anything that resembles a formal learning environment.
- ∞ Organically weave digital support into other conversations and activities.

What works in project design and delivery to increase social connections and reduce loneliness

- ∞ Provide a welcoming atmosphere.
- ∞ Employ staff with an awareness of how loneliness and social isolation manifests and who have the skills to help alleviate it.
- ∞ Deliver shorter, more frequent sessions over a longer period. This increases the frequency that participants attend the centre and creates sufficient time to build trust in the staff and develop meaningful relationships with other participants.
- ∞ Run smaller classes, orchestrate group work, and facilitate conversations between participants.
- ∞ Ask participants to help others and/or take on leadership roles.
- ∞ Provide a sociable space and the time to spend with others.
- ∞ Encourage contact in person and online outside the project.
- ∞ Provide a variety of activities, including socials.

The impact of digital skills interventions on increasing social connections and reducing loneliness

The digital skills interventions created opportunities for participants to meet regularly. Most participants interviewed have increased their levels of social connections since attending the project, and many have made good friends with other participants and socialise with them outside the project.

However, taking part in the project has not removed feelings of social isolation and loneliness amongst them all. Some reported that they have made connections with people at the project, but they only saw them while they were at the project, and they were socially isolated and lonely when they were not at the project.

In addition to increased social connections, participants reported other positive impacts including:

- ∞ Increased ability to take part in the modern world, including the world of work.
- ∞ Increased confidence and self-esteem.
- ∞ Increased sense of belonging.
- ∞ Improved mental health and sense of purpose.

However, participants took part in a range of activities at the project and often found it hard to pinpoint how and why they achieved the positive impacts. Both project leads and participants felt a welcoming atmosphere was as important as the activity, and there was widespread agreement that any activity that involved interacting

would lead to increased social connections. Volunteering or helping others, also played a large part in forging social connections.

What's needed to make impacts sustainable

It's likely that the reported impacts will continue because:

- ∞ All participants said they intend to continue attending the project.
- ∞ Most participants have their own devices or can access hardware and connectivity at the project.
- ∞ Projects intend to continue running digital skills interventions, albeit they may not be in the same capacity without future funding and staff.

What's needed to scale up or replicate projects

Most projects said they would like to provide more support either in their current location or in another part of their local area. However, a few reported there would be a limit to how much they would want to grow before they felt it would be difficult to maintain meaningful relationships with participants and therefore the impacts could be diluted. Commonly reported requirements for scaling up or replicating included:

- ∞ Adequate funding and quality staff.
- ∞ Strong relationships with public sector and VCSE organisations to secure funding and participant referrals.
- ∞ A good reputation and trust amongst target participants, which can take time to develop.

In conclusion...

The research suggests that interventions to improve digital skills can be an effective way to increase social connections, particularly in person. This is because they provide participants with the opportunity and a reason to start a conversation and form a rapport with each other.

Improving digital skills also has wider benefits for participants, including increasing their ability to take part in modern life, boosting confidence and improving mental health.

However, the research also found that the positive impacts could be attributed to a combination of other features including the welcoming atmosphere at the centre, the friendliness of staff and other participants, taking part in activities that involved interacting with others, and having a volunteer or helper role. This suggests that the positive impacts around increasing social connections are more likely to be dependent on the environment at the centre, the nature of the staff and other participants and the opportunities to interact with others, rather than the subject of the intervention itself.

APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW GUIDES

Project lead interview guide

Getting to know you

- ∞ Let's start with you telling me a bit about you and the organisation. What is the main aim of the organisation? What is your role here?

Experiences of loneliness

- ∞ These next questions are about if and how participants experience loneliness. We'd appreciate your views based on your observations, conversations and experiences of working with the people on the project.
- ∞ The Know Your Neighbourhood Fund aims to reduce chronic loneliness. The funders – the Government's Department for Culture Media and Sport – define chronic loneliness as when someone feels lonely always or often. In your experience, is chronic loneliness a big issue for the people who come here? What makes you say that?
 - If not ask: What about loneliness in general?
- ∞ In your opinion, how do you think the people who come here experience loneliness? What impact do you think it has on their lives?
- ∞ What barriers do you think that the people who attend your project face in making social connections?

About the KYN-Funded digital project

As you know we're carrying out an evaluation specifically on the impact that projects that are helping participants improve their digital

and online skills have on improving connectivity and reducing loneliness. This is an area that has not already been well researched.

- ∞ Please would you describe what your project is about. What is it aiming to do?
- ∞ Why did you decide to run a project about digital and online skills? Probe: Is digital exclusion a big issue here?
- ∞ Who is the project aimed at? Probe whether specifically for lonely people or different demographics.
- ∞ And who is actually taking part? Do you think any particular groups of people are missing? If so, why?
- ∞ How did you design and deliver the project to make sure it's attractive and accessible to people? What barriers did you have to overcome, and how did you do this?
- ∞ How did you design and deliver the project to reduce loneliness amongst participants? Was this a core aim?
- ∞ Has it been delivered as you intended? Why were any changes made?

Impact of the project on improving connectivity and reducing feelings of loneliness

- ∞ What differences do you think the project is making to the people taking part? How do you know this? Probe whether they are tracking outcomes/ impact outside the main evaluation.

- IF RELEVANT: In the scoping interview you mentioned that you were also carrying out [xxx] research. What findings or feedback are you learning from that?
- ∞ Do you think that the fact that this project focuses on improving digital and online skills has had a direct impact on reducing loneliness through the skills gained? If so, how? Are there any particular examples you can think of?
- ∞ Do you think participants are more confident connecting online with others outside the sessions? And what about in real life? If so, how? Are there any particular examples you can think of?
- ∞ In your opinion, how sustainable are these changes? Do you think they will continue after participants stop attending the project?
- ∞ Have you noticed, or have any participants told you, about any changes in their behaviour or attitude since they have taken part in the project? For example, was anyone initially very withdrawn or shy, has anyone told you – or have you noticed – that they have a more positive outlook on life, etc. Are there any particular examples you can think of?
- ∞ Who do you think the project has worked best for? Are there any groups that haven't benefited as much? Why do you think this is?
- ∞ Have you delivered other types of project that aim to reduce loneliness?
- ∞ IF YES: What sort of activities have these projects involved? [Refer back to response provided at Q14.] Have you seen similar results in terms of changed levels of loneliness compared to this project? Are there any particular examples you can think of?

- ∞ Is there anything you would do differently next time to increase its impact?
- ∞ Would this project work on a larger scale, or in a different area? If so, what's required?

Final thoughts

- ∞ What are the main things you have learnt about how to reduce loneliness through digital/ online projects? What recommendations would you make to others looking to set up a similar project?
- ∞ That's all the questions I have. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about reducing loneliness through digital/ online projects?

Participant interview guide

- ∞ Let's start with you telling me a bit about yourself. Have you always lived around here?
- ∞ How did you find out about [name of project]?
- ∞ What made you decide to join it?
- ∞ How easy or difficult did you find it to join the project?
- ∞ When did you join the project? And how often do you come?
- ∞ What do you like best about the project?
- ∞ Is there anything you don't like, or you'd change?
- ∞ What are the main benefits of coming to the project for you?
 - IF NEEDED, probe for more connections online and in real life, more confident using digital/ online skills, change of habits, feeling different etc. Seek specific examples.

These next set of questions are about meeting people and making social connections.

- ∞ For you personally, how easy or difficult do you find it to make social connections? Why is that? Has that always been the case for you?
 - IF THEY FIND IT EASY: We know some people find it hard to make social connections – has anyone told you that they find it hard to make social connections, and if so, did they tell you why?
- ∞ How are you getting on with the other people on the project? Is it a good place to make connections?

- ∞ Do you meet up with any of them outside the project? Do you think you will continue to see them once you finish the project?
- ∞ Since you've been on the project, have you made more connections with people online? And in real life?
- ∞ And how do you feel about the amount of social connection you have now? How is this different to when you started? Why do you think this is?
- ∞ Do you feel more part of the local community since joining the project? Why is that?
- ∞ Do you think you'll join a similar project in the future? Why is that?
- ∞ Do you think anyone else benefits from you coming here? For example, your family, friends, neighbours, employer? If so, how?
- ∞ That's all the questions I have for you. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about the project?

APPENDIX 2: ABOUT THE PROJECTS

Forward Project, Blackpool (awarded by the Community Foundation for Lancashire and Merseyside)

The Forward Project is based at Layton Methodist Church in Blackpool. It aims to combat loneliness and social isolation and help participants 'move forward through life skills'.

Their IT classes were open to everyone in the community, and to date, they've delivered nearly 100 sessions to nearly 500 people. The classes covered how to use a smart phone and computer to access the internet, social media, and Microsoft Office. Participants learned how to apply these skills to practical tasks, such as making a GP appointment, ordering prescriptions, buying travel tickets, online shopping, and making video calls with family and friends.

The Forward Project also offers a range of social activities, such as a breakfast hub, coffee mornings, lunch club, knit and knatter, toddler group, cookery classes and film nights.

Building Self-Belief, Co Durham (awarded by Point North)

Building Self-Belief is based in Consett, in County Durham. It focuses on improving the wellbeing of young people in need, and supporting them to build their confidence so they can realise their potential.

KYN-funding was used to train seven young people to be Digital Champions, so they could teach others how to use smart phones and computers. These skills included using social media, Apps and online banking, as well as how to edit photos and create podcasts.

Building Self-Belief also delivers other activities to increase social connections, including youth clubs, and a local heritage project.

Youth Aspire Connect, Hull (partnered with Humber All Nations Alliance, awarded by Two Ridings Community Foundation)

Youth Aspire Connect aims to empower young people and raise their aspirations through providing employment, life skills and mentoring. Their services are open to any young person, but they target those from ethnically diverse communities, and disadvantaged backgrounds.

KYN-funding was used to deliver IT courses to 50+ young people to prepare them for the future. The training covered basic skills (using Microsoft Office, email and social media) to advanced skills (animation, coding/programming, data analysis packages, graphic design, and video editing). Each course took 6-8 weeks, and learners had to achieve 50% in the assessment to progress to next course.

Youth Aspire Connect also provides music and dance classes, personal finance management and career mentorship.

All Saints Action Network (ASAN), Wolverhampton (awarded by Heart of England Community Foundation)

ASAN aims to improve the quality of life for everyone living and working in the All Saints area. They predominantly do this through facilitating community enterprises and encouraging volunteering.

They used KYN-funding to deliver weekly smart phone and computer classes. Sessions covered making connections on social media, using Apps for banking and health, and being safe online.

ASAN also delivers initiatives to improve employability, the environment, and parenting skills, and to tackle loneliness and social

isolation. Other activities include community gardening, woodwork, sewing and mending workshops, a lunch club and social events.

Bilston Resource Centre (BRC), Wolverhampton (awarded by Heart of England Community Foundation)

BRC aims to support disadvantaged members of the Bilston community to increase their employment prospects.

Their KYN-funded digital training programs were aimed at young people (16-18 years old) and older people. The weekly training covered essential IT skills, such as using a computer, and banking and health apps. Learners could use a computer, smart phone or tablet – depending on what they would use ‘in the real world’. They could progress to accredited courses, such as Skills for Life. Over time, some participants became classroom assistants and digital mentors, and helped other learners.

BRC also run courses in functional skills (English, Maths, ESOL), and they support with job searches and applications. They also offer volunteering opportunities and run a sociable on-site café.

TLC College, Wolverhampton (awarded by Heart of England Community Foundation)

TLC College offers skills and training to economically deprived communities in a comfortable and relaxed setting. Their learners are predominantly women, asylum seekers, refugees and migrants, unemployed or low skilled people.

Their digital classes covered smart phone and computer basics, and using Apps for shopping, banking, health, and communicating with friends. Learners could progress to accredited courses.

Other courses include functional skills (literacy, numeracy, ESOL), and vocational courses (first aid, food safety, security, volunteering). They offer holistic support to learners, which can include counselling, financial management, and youth activities, as well as initiatives to support wellbeing, community cohesion and integration.

Ad hoc IT support

Four projects delivered ad hoc IT support.

Humber All Nations Alliance (HANA), Hull (awarded by Two Ridings Community Foundation)

HANA is an umbrella organisation for VCSE groups representing ethnically diverse communities. It aims to amplify groups’ collective voice, ensure their interests are represented in decision-making, and enable them to play a meaningful role in Hull’s economic, social and cultural development.

HANA has a computer suite and free WIFI for visitors. Part of their KYN-funding was used to run drop-in sessions where participants could use the computers on their own or with support. Staff also helped participants use their own devices. Participants frequently wanted support with how to search and apply for work, and access public services, such as housing, employment, and benefits.

HANA also offers financial literacy courses, language support and youth mentorship programs.

Humber Community Advice Service (H-CAS), Hull (partnered with HANA, awarded by Two Ridings Community Foundation)

H-CAS provides advice and advocacy services predominantly to ethnically diverse people. They cover money/debt, housing, employment, benefits, immigration, health and general well-being.

Like HANA, part of their KYN-funding was used to run drop-in sessions where participants could access tailored support about how to do things on their smart phone or an office computer. Typically, this included how to search and apply for work, and access public services, such as health, employment, benefits and immigration.

Access to Business, Wolverhampton (awarded by Heart of England Community Foundation)

Access to Business delivers training courses and employment support. They tend to work with people who are furthest from the job market, including those who have multiple and complex needs.

KYN-funding has been used to develop 'IT Buddies' (volunteers with strong IT skills) who provided one-to-one support to others to help them use Microsoft Office and social media.

They also deliver other activities to provide participants with new skills and reduce social isolation, including a popular gardening club.

St George's House, Wolverhampton (awarded by Heart of England Community Foundation)

St George's House provides holistic support to vulnerable and marginalised men, including those who have experienced rough sleeping, substance misuse, offending behaviour, self-harm and domestic abuse.

Part of their KYN-funding was used to deliver individual support to help clients use smart phones, tablets and computers. Participants received support in the skills they wanted to learn, and the conversation often started with, "How do I do this on my phone?" This ranged from accessing public services, to searching for information

from reputable sources, to editing photos, to contacting people in their network.

St George's also used KYN-funding to deliver the 'Connect' programme, which was a user-led, peer mentoring and volunteering scheme. Activities included peer-led learning circles, chess clubs and mentoring programs to encourage social interaction.

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