



Digital Champion Programme (Cohort 2)

Evaluation report

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1. Executive summary

This evaluation examines the delivery, reach and impact of the Digital Champion Programme (Cohort 2), drawing on qualitative and quantitative evidence from older people, Digital Champions (staff and volunteers)¹, and 15 local Age UK/Cymru partners. The Programme aimed to address digital exclusion by supporting older people to develop digital skills and confidence through trained Digital Champions, alongside providing access to loaned technology where needed.

Between June 2024 and November 2025, 284 Digital Champions engaged 34,691 older people through awareness-raising activity and supported 4,118 with direct digital skills support. The evaluation considers how far the Programme achieved its intended outcomes, how successful it was at encouraging continued engagement over the medium term, and the barriers and enablers that influence effective delivery. The evaluation also looked at how well the model identified, engaged and supported older people who are at higher risk of digital exclusion.

Impact for older people

The Programme had a positive and, in some cases, transformative impact on older people's day-to-day lives. Service users² reported increased confidence and reduced anxiety when using digital technology, alongside practical gains such as improved access to health services, financial management, housing and council services. Improvements in wellbeing and social connection were also evident through greater contact with family and friends, participation in community activities, and renewed engagement with personal interests.

For some older people experiencing isolation, poor health or significant life disruption, relatively small digital interventions unlocked significant benefits, restoring a sense of independence, agency and connection. While impacts varied and were not always sustained without ongoing support, the programme consistently created conditions in which older people felt able to engage with technology on their own terms.

Sustained digital engagement

Overall, the Programme was successful in encouraging many older people to continue using digital technology over the medium term, though sustained engagement was often

¹ Throughout this report, 'Digital Champions' refers collectively to all staff and volunteers delivering digital support. Where a distinction is made, 'Volunteer Champions' refers to volunteers and 'Staff Champions' refers to paid staff in a delivery role.

² Throughout this report, 'service users' refers to older people receiving support through the Digital Champion Programme. Additionally, 'participant' is used to clarify when a service user took part in the evaluation research.

partial and conditional. Confidence could fluctuate over time and was vulnerable to disruption from changes in technology, health, or increasing digitisation of services.

Some service users progressed towards independent use within the existing model, while others continued to require reassurance and access to help as new challenges arose. A smaller group were unlikely to achieve independent use due to cognitive impairment, anxiety, health issues, or informed personal choice. These outcomes reflect variation in needs and circumstances, rather than shortcomings in programme delivery.

Sustained engagement in using technology in the medium term was supported by personalised, relational support; opportunities to practise skills; reassurance that mistakes were reversible; and clear communication that returning for help was expected and welcomed. Barriers included fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, health and memory-related challenges, complexity of technology (including software updates), and perceived limited access to ongoing support.

Supporting older people from high-risk groups

Risk of digital exclusion among service users was shaped less by demographic category alone and more by the interaction of health, confidence, life circumstances and structural barriers, often becoming apparent only after engagement began.

The Digital Champion model enabled participation for many older people from high-risk groups, though outcomes were more varied in the medium term. Participation nevertheless brought meaningful benefits, including increased confidence, reduced anxiety and improved access to services.

Digital Champions successfully supported service users with more complex support needs by adapting their approach. This included flexible pacing, accessible communication, appropriate device matching, and repetition and routine for those with memory challenges, alongside acceptance that sustained supported use may be an appropriate outcome where independent engagement is not achievable.

Outcomes for volunteers and local Age UK/Cymrus

The Programme achieved its intended outcomes for volunteers, with Digital Champions benefiting from increased confidence and skills gained through delivering support to older people. These gains were primarily relational and interpersonal - volunteers reported improved communication and teaching skills, greater patience, and a deeper understanding of the barriers faced by older people.

Local Age UK/Cymrus strengthened their capacity to deliver digital support through volunteer teams, community partnerships and flexible delivery models. However, challenges emerged around sustaining the volunteer-led delivery model beyond the

funding period, volunteer recruitment and delivery capacity, and balancing reach with depth of support, particularly for people with more complex needs.

Key process learning, recommendations and conclusion

The evaluation confirms that effective digital inclusion is relational, person-centred work, as embedded in the programme design. Training and support for Digital Champions were most effective when focused on building service users' confidence, teaching skills and managing digital anxiety. Volunteer recruitment and delivery capacity remained the key constraint on scale, and peer learning between local partners was underutilised, with Project Coordinators reporting limited use of the channels provided by the programme to share approaches and solutions across the programme.

The recommendations aim to protect and strengthen the impacts observed for older people while addressing limits in sustaining these outcomes. They focus on strengthening preparation and support for Digital Champions, embedding shared learning and coordination, making ongoing access to support explicit, clarifying realistic expectations around sustained and supported digital engagement, and adapting delivery for high-risk groups while accepting sustained supported use as a valid outcome.

Overall, the Programme achieved meaningful impact for many older people, helping them gain confidence, access services and feel more connected. Its core strength lay in creating trusted spaces where older people could engage with technology at their own pace and return for help when needed.

2. Background and context

2.1. The Digital Champions Programme

The Digital Champion Programme aims to tackle digital exclusion by recruiting and training Digital Champion volunteers, who will support older people to improve their digital skills, as well as providing loan technology to those without access.

Between 2022 and 2026, 40 Age UK/Cymru partners were supported to deliver the programme, which was split between two cohorts, each lasting 18 months. Cohort 1 involved 25 partners and ran between June 2022 to November 2023. Cohort 2 (the focus of this report) involved 15 partners and ran between June 2024 and November 2025.

Delivery models

The Digital Champion Programme model involved the following:

- **Recruitment and training of volunteer Digital Champions** to support the delivery of the programme for older people in the community.
- **Awareness raising about the benefits of digital skills** to reach and inform people at risk of digital exclusion about the benefits of taking part in the service. This involved the delivery of small and large-scale events, outreach work in partnership with external service providers and promotional activity.
- **Digital skills support** to assist older people to develop their skills and confidence online. Support was staff or volunteer-led, delivered in either one-to-one (at a person's home or community venue) or in a group. Remote support was also offered (over the telephone or video call).
- **Provision of technology**, through a loan and donation scheme, or through safe and inclusive community spaces, to older people who did not otherwise have access

Programme objectives

The Digital Champion Programme aimed to:

- Recruit and train 480 volunteer Digital Champions (cohort 2 = 180)
- Deliver awareness-raising activities to 96,000 older people (cohort 2 = 36,000)
- Assist 12,000 older people through digital skills sessions (cohort 2 = 4,500)
- Support older people with access to loaned or donated technology

Programme outcomes

The Digital Champion Programme aimed to achieve the following outcomes.

Older people will:

- Feel more inspired and more motivated to get online.
- Develop digital skills and confidence and gain longer-term access to technology equipment.
- Feel less isolated and more socially connected.

Volunteer Digital Champions will:

- Benefit from increased confidence and skills gained through delivering support to older people.

Local Age UK/Cymrus will:

- Be better equipped to provide a wide range of high-quality digital support to a greater number of older people.

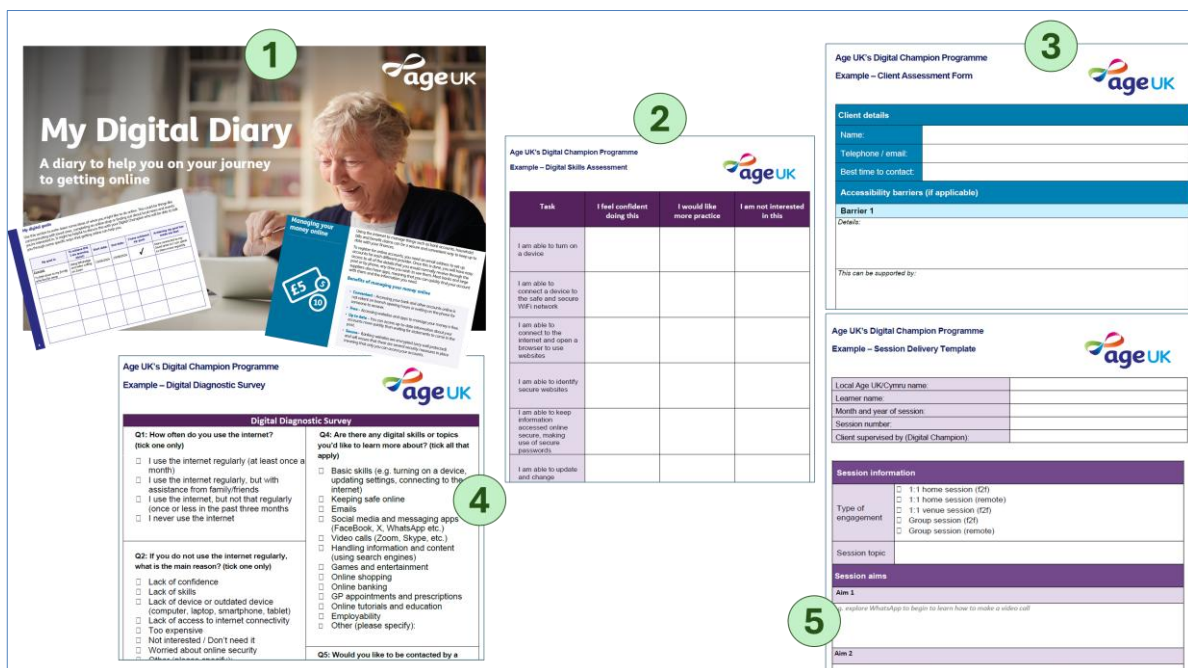
Cohort 2 partners and support from Age UK

The following Age UK/Cymru partners delivered the Digital Champion Programme in Cohort 2.

- Age Cymru Gwent
- Age Cymru West Glamorgan
- Age UK Bath & North East Somerset
- Age UK Birmingham
- Age UK Calderdale & Kirklees
- Age UK Ealing
- Age UK Leeds
- Age UK Lincolnshire
- Age UK Mid Mersey
- Age UK North Yorkshire Coast & Moors
- Age UK Salford & Trafford
- Age UK Sheffield
- Age UK Shropshire Telford & Wrekin
- Age UK Sutton
- Age UK Waltham Forest

To support their delivery Age UK/Cymru partners were provided with the following: (see appendix 1 for a fuller list)

- **Digital instruction guides**
- **Digital Champion online training** including modules on: Understanding Digital Exclusion; Reaching and Supporting Those Most at Risk; Building Digital Confidence and Technical Know-How; Promoting Online Safety and Security; Strengthening Your Soft Skills; Engaging with Popular Digital Topics and Delivering Support Effectively and Safely.
- **Programme delivery templates** including consent forms, registration records and session records.
- **Over 18 programme support resources** including: (1) My Digital Diary (a resource for service users); (2) A digital skills assessment form; (3) A client assessment form (4) A digital diagnostic survey and (5) A session delivery template.



- **Programme learning and evaluation resources - cohort 1 evaluation reports**
- **Ongoing knowledge sharing** (including a monthly partner newsletter) from the Age UK project team and internal quarterly reports.

2.2. The cohort 2 evaluation

Objectives

As well as assessing the achievement of programme outcomes and efficacy of programme delivery, the Cohort 2 evaluation aimed to generate insight to answer six key questions grouped under two themes:

Sustainable engagement

- How successful or otherwise is the Programme at encouraging older people supported to continue to engage with and use digital technology over the medium term (6-12 months)?
- What are the enablers for this success or the disablers and barriers when not successful?
- For whom the Programme is successful, how does it impact the day-to-day experiences/ life of that person?

High risk beneficiary groups

- How successful or otherwise are local Age UKs at identifying, engaging and supporting older people in high-risk groups to begin or further develop their use of digital technology in a confident and safe way?
- What capabilities and adaptations of the core model, if any, are required for local Age UK partners to support older people from high-risk groups to fully participate?
- What are the experiences of older people from high-risk groups participating in the programme, including the benefits and challenges they may experience?

Methodology and participation

Insight to answer the questions above was gathered from the following sources:

Service users (43 unique participants)

- One-to-one interviews with 21 service users early in their support journey
 - 12 of those service users provided feedback during their subsequent support (11 provided written feedback and 6 participated in a follow up interview)
- One-to-one interviews with 10 service users towards the end of their support journey
- Two observations of group support sessions followed by focus groups with the service users (a total of 12 participants)

Digital Champions (89 participants – some crossover)

- One-to-one interviews with 8 volunteer champions
- An online focus group with 3 volunteer champions
- An online insight community with 9 volunteer champions
- An online survey generating 69 responses (53 volunteers and 16 staff³)

Staff delivering the programme (25 participants)

³ Digital Champions could be volunteers or Age UK/Cymru staff members

- An online survey for Project Co-ordinators and Outreach Workers (25 responses)
- 4 online focus groups with co-ordinators and outreach workers (20 participants)

Quantitative monitoring data referenced throughout this report is drawn from monthly returns by local Age UK/Cymru partners to the Age UK programme team. This data was compiled and provided to the evaluation team as contextual framing.

2.3. About this report

This report brings together qualitative and quantitative evidence to examine how the Digital Champion Programme was delivered in practice, who it reached, and what difference it made for older people engaging with digital technology.

- Sections 3-5 focus on how service users arrived at the programme, their reasons for doing so, and their digital needs.
- Sections 6 and 7 shift the focus to Digital Champions, exploring volunteer recruitment and motivation.
- Sections 8-10 examine how the programme was delivered on the ground, including how Digital Champions adapted their approach to respond to differing needs, confidence levels, and circumstances. This includes the programme's support of high-risk groups.
- Sections 11 and 12 describe the impact the programme had on both service users and Digital Champions.
- Sections 13-15 explore process factors supporting delivery, including the effectiveness of Digital Champion training, the support provided to volunteers, and coordinators' experience of delivering the project.
- Section 16 considers how service users' digital engagement can be sustained beyond the programme.
- Section 17 provides a discussion of programme scope and the limits of what a time-limited, volunteer-led model can reasonably achieve, and the implications of this for expectations of independence and ongoing support.
- Section 18 concludes the report by setting out recommendations for how the programme might continue to evolve while retaining its core strengths.
- The report concludes with some service user case studies

3. Digital Awareness Sessions

Age UK data, gathered from monthly monitoring returns, reveals that 34,691 older people engaged with Cohort 2 partners (representing 93% of the target objective).

Digital Awareness Sessions were person-centred conversations with older people not yet digitally engaged and at risk of digital exclusion, delivered either 1:1 or in a group setting. Their purpose was to raise awareness about technology, explain how key services are moving towards digital-first, help older people understand how technology might make their lives easier, and introduce the Digital Champion Programme.

3.1. What worked

Trusted and familiar settings

Staff soon found out that embedded community engagement was the most reliable approach to reach older people. According to Age UK data, 40% of older people engaged because of an event hosted by external providers – the largest source of engagement.

Coffee mornings, church groups, sheltered housing communal areas, and community lunch clubs provided familiar, trusted environments in which conversations about digital support could happen without pressure or suspicion. In these settings, staff described older people as more open, curious, and willing to ask questions.

Healthcare settings

Healthcare settings became particularly productive once relationships with practice managers were established, reinforcing the importance of trusted and familiar environments. GP surgeries offered high footfall, a clear connection to NHS App support, and a level of credibility that reassured potential learners. As one Project Coordinator explained, *“once you've got a venue like that, you can always be raising awareness because doctors have lots and lots of footfall... that was a good anchor for our project.”*

A focus on practical benefits

Over time, staff refined how they talked about the service, shifting away from an emphasis on “digital skills” - which some older people perceived as a chore - towards reassurance and practical benefit more closely reflecting the Programme's intended approach. Framing the offer as free, flexible, and available in people's homes helped lower barriers to engagement. One Digital Champion described presenting the service instead as “a welcoming club of like-minded people.”

A further indicator of effective community engagement was the role of word of mouth. In social housing settings in particular, satisfied service users shared positive experiences with neighbours, generating organic interest in the Programme. While word of mouth was

not an awareness raising activity in itself and was not counted as a KPI, it reflects the strength of community presence that embedded engagement created and should be understood as a secondary outcome of effective outreach rather than a delivery mechanism.

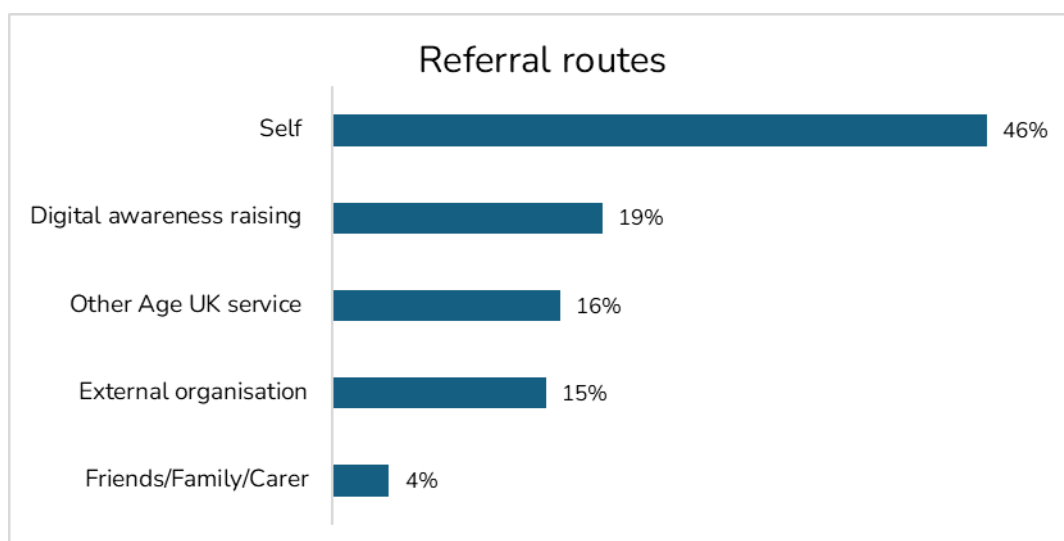
3.2. What didn't work

Public facing events

By contrast, public-facing stalls in general community settings were not as effective. Staff described people actively avoiding engagement, often associating charity stalls with fundraising rather than support. One staff member recalled passers-by *"thinking, Oh my God, I've got to get away from that because they're going to try and take my money."*

3.3. Sources of referrals

Self-referral was the most common "route" into the Programme. This does not necessarily mean that people found the service independently as outreach activity in external settings would have raised awareness and enabled self-referral.



3.4. Aligning outreach with capacity

In higher-demand areas, awareness-raising activity sometimes outstripped delivery capacity, with prospective learners facing waits of several weeks. Where this occurred, some disengaged before support began, suggesting the importance of aligning outreach activity with available provision.

"In delivery hub areas where sessions were always fully booked, we found that if we did awareness raising in these areas people did not want to wait potentially up to seven weeks to attend the next programme." (Project Coordinator)

Key learning

- Outreach was most effective when it took place in trusted, familiar settings.
- Embedded engagement and healthcare partnerships created credible, low-pressure routes into the service, supporting more meaningful initial contact.
- Messaging that emphasised reassurance and practical benefit lowered barriers to engagement.
- Where awareness-raising outpaced delivery capacity, potential service users could disengage whilst waiting for support, highlighting the importance of aligning outreach activity with available provision.

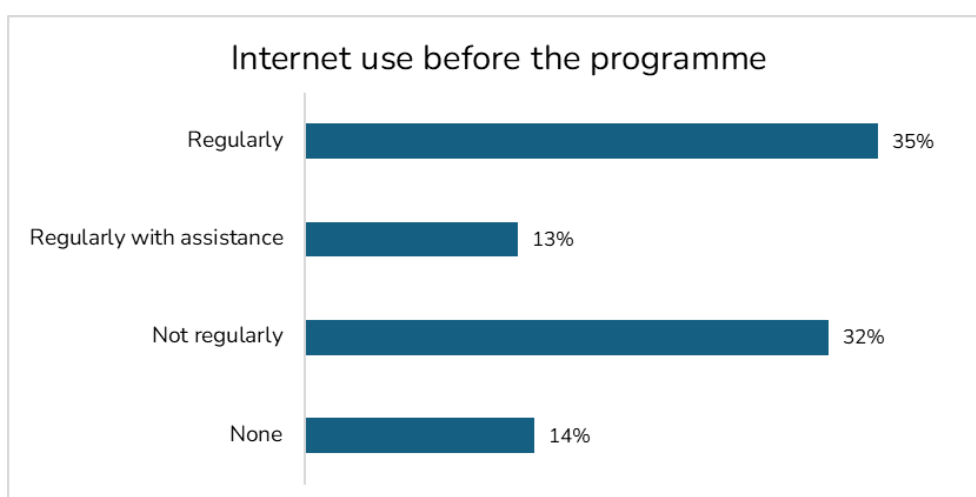
4. Service users and their motivations for accessing support

4.1. Profile of service users

According to Age UK data, 4,118 people registered to take part in the Programme.

- 63% were female, 37% male.
- Where stated, 84% were white.
- Where stated, 45% were 76 or older, 22% were under 65.
- 44% had had contact with Age UK previously.

In terms of internet usage, just over a third of people were using it regularly without assistance before the Programme, around one in seven were not using it at all.



Of those that didn't use the internet, 46% attributed that to a lack of skills and 27% to a lack of confidence⁴.

⁴ From Age UK monitoring – no other response option over 10%. “Not interested” – 8%, “Need extra support” – 6%, “Security concerns” – 5%

4.2. Practical triggers for accessing support

Many evaluation participants came to the Programme at a moment of practical necessity rather than out of general interest. A husband's death meant suddenly having to manage household finances; a new disability made the computer *"my contact with the outside world"*; a GP surgery sent a letter encouraging patients onto the NHS app. These triggers shared a common feature: circumstances had changed, and tasks that had previously been handled by others or done in person now required digital capability. One service user participating in the research summed up the practical impact of these changes: *"I can't even apply for a new wheelie bin."*

For others, motivation was less about necessity and more about curiosity and connection: wanting to share photographs with grandchildren, explore personal interests, or simply feel less left behind in a world that had moved on without them. These service users arrived with enthusiasm alongside anxiety, seeing the Programme as an opportunity rather than a last resort.

4.3. Confidence, shame and fear of judgement

What the Programme encountered, however, was not simply a skills gap but something closer to a loss of confidence. Service users described feeling "illiterate" in ways that carried real shame: *"I felt illiterate in the same ways people couldn't read and signed their names with an x... I felt on that level with the modern day."* Many worried about appearing incompetent in everyday situations: *"I didn't want to be that person that's lost or embarrassed or doesn't have a clue what to do."* This fear of judgement ran deep, with several service users acknowledging they avoided asking family members for help rather than admit how limited their skills were.

Some had already tried other routes and arrived having internalised a sense of failure. *"My daughter signed me up for another course, but I was hopeless, they were all so much better than me."*

4.4. Emotional and social drivers of engagement

For some, joining was as much about companionship as learning new skills. For one person, digital capability was essential to remaining connected to community life. *"Our church uses WhatsApp for all the communications, so I needed to learn how to use that on a smartphone."* Another participant reflected, *"My husband died 16 months ago... I was feeling a bit fed up and lonely... They thought it would be good if I went. And it was."*

These accounts show that digital engagement could be driven as much by emotional need as by practical necessity. Many service users were not seeking technical expertise for its own sake, but ways to regain confidence, independence, and a sense of belonging in a

world that increasingly assumes digital capability. As one participant put it, *“I’ve got a son that’s very difficult to get hold of... I’m trying to be more independent in this new world of technology.”*

Staff perspectives reinforced this pattern, consistently identifying independence as a central motivator for engagement. As one Project Coordinator observed, *“older people don’t like relying on people, but as they age, they find themselves relying on more and more.”*

Key learning

- For many service users who participated in the evaluation research, engagement with digital support was triggered by life changes and practical pressures, rather than an interest in technology for its own sake.
- Motivation to seek support, and the outcomes older people valued, were closely linked to confidence, dignity and independence.
- Previous negative learning experiences influenced expectations, making trust, patience, and emotional reassurance central to effective support.

5. The complexity of older peoples’ support needs

5.1. Beyond skills support: the realities of digital exclusion

The Digital Champion Programme trained staff and volunteers to support older people to develop practical digital skills. The training and resources provided to support delivery are discussed in detail below in Section 13.

In practice, staff found that digital exclusion was rarely an isolated issue. Across multiple partners, Project Coordinators and Outreach Workers described encountering service users with complex pastoral needs alongside their digital support requirements, including mental health conditions, domestic violence, addiction and homelessness. These accounts came from staff rather than being systematically captured through Programme monitoring data, and the frequency varied across local Age UKs/Cymrus. One Project Coordinator described how the role shifted in response, becoming 'almost managing pastoral care that has elements of digital skills, but there's a lot else going on.'

The Programme's response to these situations relied primarily on safeguarding training and informal escalation to Project Coordinators, with volunteers not expected to manage

complex situations independently. DBS⁵ checks were carried out on all volunteers. Several staff reflected that, given the level of complexity they encountered, it would be helpful for their organisation's policies and support arrangements to more fully reflect these realities - in order to better equip those delivering the programme.

5.2. The personal nature of digital support

The nature of digital support further intensified this complexity. Much of the work involved sitting alongside someone and looking together at a phone or tablet. Staff described seeing personal messages and emails that clients would not normally share, creating an unusually intimate form of support. For people experiencing isolation or trauma, this closeness often enabled engagement, while also blurring boundaries between technical assistance and personal support.

As one Digital Outreach worker put it, *“digital is part of life. We can’t talk about digital without talking about your whole life.”*

5.3. Beyond digital skills: trust, pace and pastoral complexity

Supporting the most excluded clients required staff and volunteers to go well beyond digital instruction, navigating challenges of trust, pace and, at times, pastoral complexity that shaped the character of delivery.

Both Project Coordinators and Outreach Workers described an in-between step in practice - the groundwork of building trust and confidence required before digital learning could meaningfully begin - which sometimes sat outside the formal structure of awareness raising and skills sessions. This step was often a prerequisite, particularly for those who were severely excluded. One Project Coordinator explained that *“the amount of confidence building just to get to the point where they’re going to say OK, I’ll take a loan device... you could be working with them for a month.”* This challenged assumptions about pace and progression, requiring staff to redefine what meaningful progress looked like.

Baseline digital skills could also be far lower than expected in some cases. In rural areas especially, staff encountered older people who had never used a keyboard, having worked on the land throughout their lives. Clients with memory difficulties required repeated, highly focused sessions, sometimes returning to the same task across multiple visits, making linear models of skills development unrealistic.

⁵ Disclosure and Barring Service is a UK government body that helps employers make safer recruitment decisions by allowing them to check whether someone has a criminal record or is barred from working with children or vulnerable adults.

Taken together, staff accounts suggest that the Programme operated at the intersection of digital inclusion and wider support needs. This complexity, and the fact that the Digital Champion role may have been far more pastoral and relational in practice than some staff and volunteers had expected at the outset, provides important context for later sections on Digital Champion recruitment and training.

Key learning

- Digital exclusion among the most vulnerable clients was closely intertwined with wider social and emotional needs, making pastoral support an important component of engagement.
- The complexity and intensity of need challenged assumptions about linear skills progression and required flexible definitions of progress.
- Supporting the most excluded clients involved a mix of skills instruction and relational, confidence-building work with a digital focus.

6. Volunteer recruitment

6.1. The profile of Digital Champions

Age UK data reveals that 284 Digital Champions were recruited (representing 158% of the volunteer recruitment target⁶).

- 52% were female, 48% male.
- 76% were White, 13% Asian and 6% Black.
- 59% were aged between 25 and 64, with 23% older and 18% younger.

6.2. Aligning messaging with what the role required

Some staff felt that the way the volunteer role was presented - including its title and, role description and recruitment materials - gave potential recruits the impression that it required a lot of digital knowledge and skill.

This perception shaped recruitment in two ways: some potentially strong candidates shied away, feeling they lacked the technical expertise they assumed the role demanded, while others with high technical confidence came forward but struggled with the relational dimensions of the role once in post.

As delivery progressed, a mismatch became apparent between how the role was perceived and what it actually demanded. What the programme consistently emphasised,

⁶ The target referred to volunteer champions, the monitoring data refers to “Digital Champions” so may include staff champions.

and what delivery confirmed, was that interpersonal qualities mattered far more than technical expertise: patience, empathy, and the ability to connect with older people experiencing anxiety, loneliness, or low confidence. In practice, the technical threshold proved remarkably low. As one Project Coordinator explained, *“if you can turn a phone on and do the volume control and set an alarm, you can be a digital volunteer”* meaning that the technical threshold need not be a barrier to volunteering, though the relational demands of the role were considerable. As another Project Coordinator reflected, *“we were having all these kind of techies coming along... but they didn’t quite understand the nature of the role.”*

6.3. Shifting to “person-first recruitment”

This learning prompted a change towards what several staff described as “person-first recruitment” mirroring a move the programme itself had made between Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 but which had not yet consistently filtered through to local recruitment practice. Rather than leading with digital skills, Project Coordinators increasingly prioritised candidates who enjoyed working with older people and showed natural teaching instincts. As one put it, *“we look at the person first and then the digital is almost secondary really... do you enjoy working with older people?”* Digital competence became a basic requirement rather than a distinguishing factor - *“as long as you’re confident using Google, then you’re one step ahead of the people we’re helping.”*

6.4. Effective volunteer profiles

Where recruitment succeeded, staff identified two particularly effective volunteer profiles: retired technology professionals who combined competence with enthusiasm, and individuals already accustomed to supporting their family members with devices.

The most innovative volunteer recruitment solution involved educational partnerships. One Project Coordinator described collaborating with a sixth-form college to create a supervised, intergenerational volunteering model - *“the engagement between the student and the older person is amazing.”* This success depended on sustained outreach and formal safeguarding arrangements between the local Age UK/Cymru and the college negotiated at senior level.

Recruitment challenges nonetheless remained. Onboarding volunteers took longer than initially anticipated, extending the period between initial expression of interest and readiness to begin delivery. Practical factors such as transport, travel time (especially in rural areas) and availability shaped who could realistically take on the role.

A further tension emerged at the point of recruitment around training expectations. Project Coordinators recognised a perception of extensive preparation risked deterring potential recruits who had been attracted by messaging that emphasised basic digital skills.

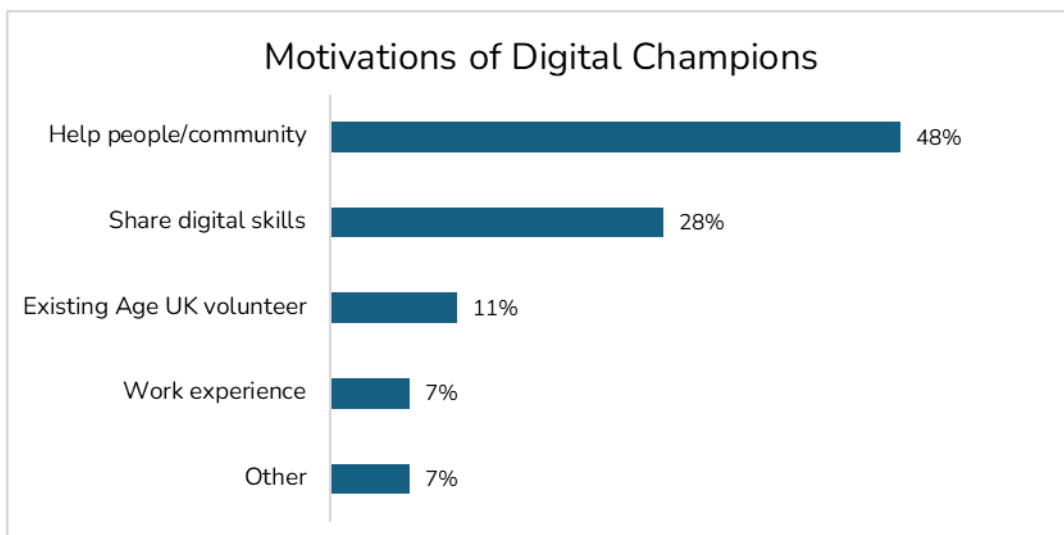
A related shift was also underway in how Project Coordinators understood the volunteer Digital Champion role itself. Staff accounts indicate a move away from a technically defined role towards one more focused on relational capacity - recognising that patience, empathy and the ability to connect with older people mattered more than digital expertise. This had important implications for how both recruitment messaging and volunteer preparation were understood in practice.

Key learning

- The framing of the Digital Champion role could overemphasise the technical demands of the role, deterring candidates who may have had the interpersonal qualities most needed in practice.
- Effective digital support relied on patience, empathy and life experience - qualities volunteers brought with them, rather than ones that could be developed through skills training alone.
- Innovative models, such as intergenerational partnerships, demonstrated potential for sustainable recruitment but required committed relationship-building and infrastructure.

7. Motivations for becoming a Digital Champion volunteer

According to Age UK data, roughly half of Digital Champions were motivated by helping others. Just over a quarter wanted to share their digital skills.



7.1. Routes into volunteering

Volunteers came into the Digital Champions Programme through various routes, including local advertising, online searches, and existing Age UK volunteer networks. These pathways attracted a diverse group, ranging from students at an early career stage to retired professionals with experience in IT and related fields. Despite these differences, volunteers described a shared set of motivations underpinning their decision to get involved.

7.2. Giving something back

For many, the decision to volunteer was rooted in a desire to give something back. Several volunteers drew on personal or family experiences of Age UK services, describing a sense of trust in Age UK and a feeling that it was right to contribute. As one volunteer explained, *“This is my first voluntary work. It was primarily because I wanted to give back. Whilst my parents were here, they used Age UK services... they would help them with things like benefits checkups.”* This familiarity with Age UK reassured volunteers that their contribution would be valued and well used.

7.3. Fairness, values and social concern

Others were motivated by a strong sense of fairness and social concern. Volunteers spoke about discomfort with the rapid shift of essential services going online and a belief that people were being left behind without adequate support. For these individuals, becoming a Digital Champion was a way to respond to what they perceived as growing unfairness in access, rather than an interest in technology for its own sake.

7.4. Volunteering at different life stages

Volunteers' motivations often reflected their life stage and circumstances. Students were drawn by opportunities to gain experience, build empathy, and strengthen their CVs, while also recognising the social value of the role. Retired volunteers described volunteering as a way to use their skills after leaving paid work, maintain a sense of purpose, and stay connected to their communities. Across both groups, the role appealed because it combined practical usefulness with meaningful human contact.

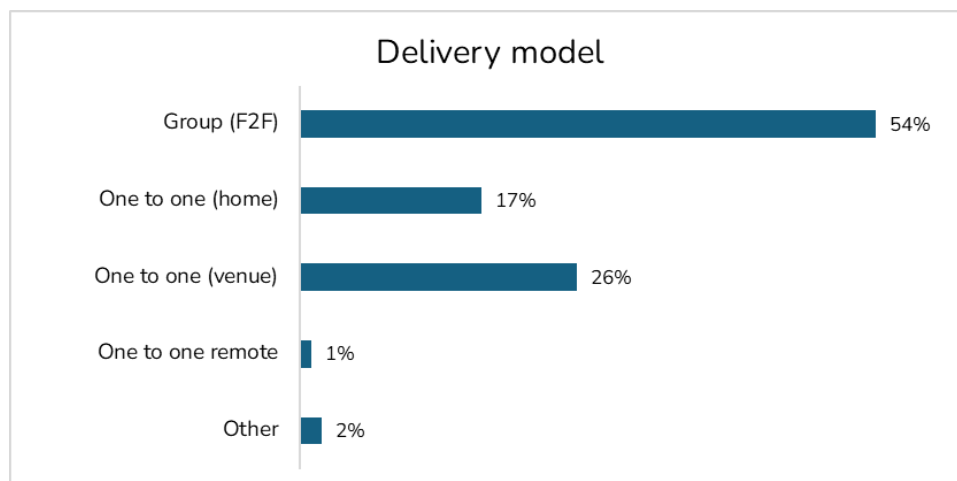
Few volunteers were motivated by a desire to teach technology itself. Instead, they were attracted by the opportunity to help people overcome everyday challenges and rebuild confidence in a digital world. Many described the role in relational terms, seeing it as an extension of the informal support they already offered to family or friends.

Key learning

- Volunteers were motivated to join the programme largely by altruism, social concern, and connection to Age UK’s mission.
- Decisions to become a Digital Champion were shaped more by values and life experience than by interest in technology itself.
- Digital skills were viewed as a practical tool for helping others, not as the central attraction of the role.

8. Delivering digital support in practice

According to Age UK data, 4,118 older people received digital skills sessions (representing 92% of target). 54% attended a group session, 43% received one-to-one support either at home or at another venue. Remote support was rarely provided.

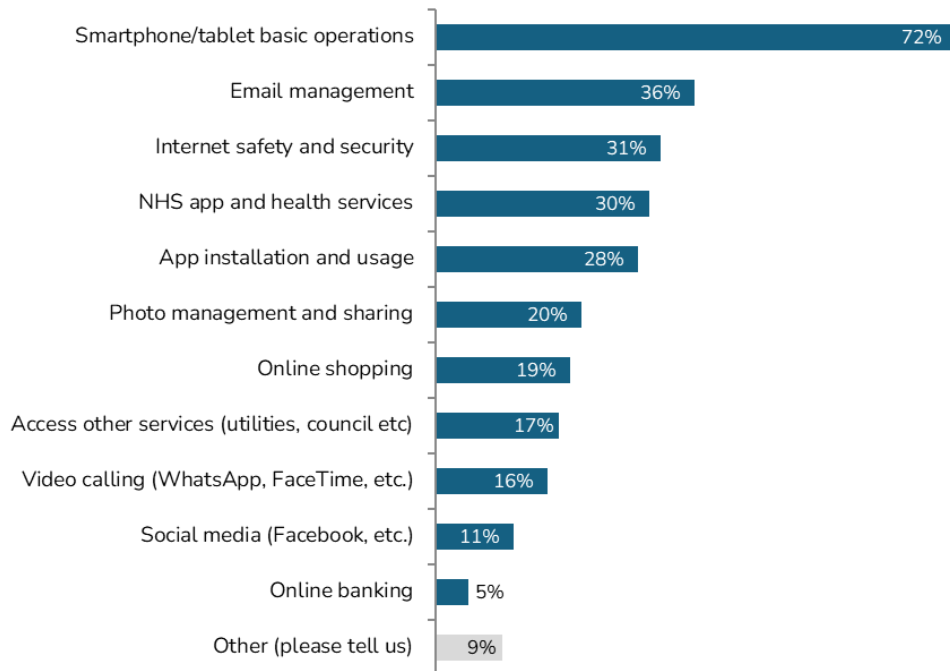


8.1. Service delivery models, enablers and barriers to digital learning

From the outset, the Digital Champions Programme adopted a flexible mix of delivery approaches, recognising that older people’s needs varied widely. In practice, service users did not come to the programme seeking to “learn digital skills.” Instead, they arrived with concrete problems to solve accessing the NHS App, sending photographs to family, managing emails, booking services online, or understanding how to use a device they already owned. As one Digital Champion explained, support was usually about “*someone trying to get into a specific account or resolve a very specific problem.*”

Digital Champions were asked to identify the most common digital needs they encountered in practice. Responses show that these related to basic device use and access to essential services, rather than advanced digital activity.

**What are the three most common digital needs among your clients?
(please choose up to three options) (64)**



This shaped the delivery models that emerged in practice, including one-to-one support (both in venues and at home) and group-based learning. Each model brought distinct strengths and limitations. Effectiveness depended less on the format itself than on how well it aligned with individual confidence levels, health, mobility, and learning needs.

8.2. Understanding need in practice: assessment as an ongoing process

Effective digital support was underpinned by a person-centred approach. Rather than assuming levels of digital ability, Digital Champions used conversation, observation, and practical exploration to understand each learner’s confidence, circumstances, and goals.

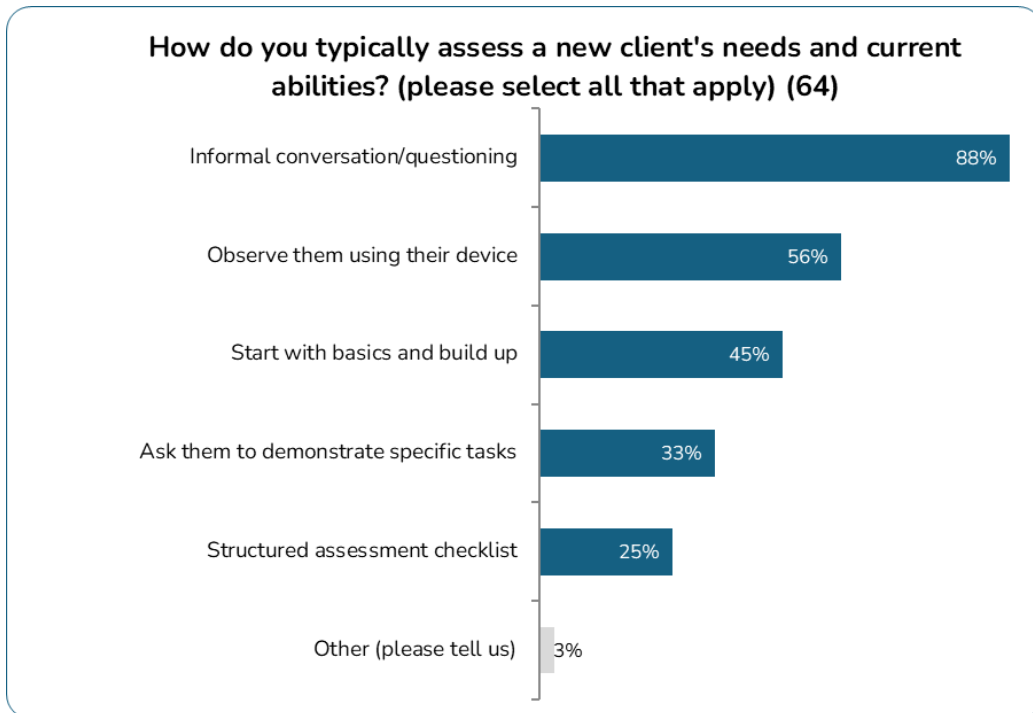
“Each person was unique and what they wanted to get out of their device, or the internet was unique to them.” (Digital Champion)

This reflected a shared recognition that digital exclusion rarely exists in isolation. Health conditions, anxiety, memory difficulties, language barriers, and wider social circumstances often shaped what learning was possible and how quickly progress could be made. Listening was therefore central, with Digital Champions acting as facilitators rather than instructors and responding to how learners engaged in practice.

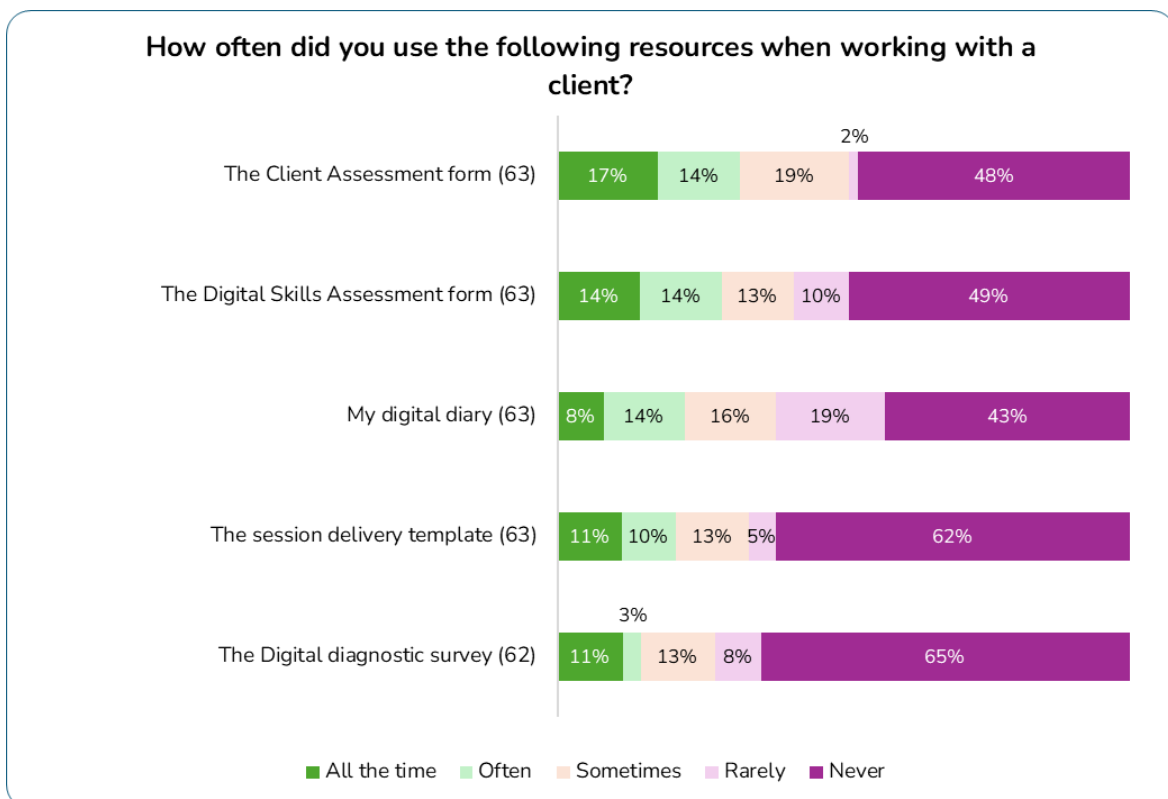
“The IT part of the job is not the most important, the client is.” (Digital Champion)

Digital Champions’ survey responses indicate that assessment was typically informal and embedded within delivery, relying on discussion and simple tasks rather than structured

tools. This reinforced the need to adapt support as understanding developed, rather than treating assessment as a one-off activity.



Responses also indicated that formal assessment and delivery tools were used infrequently in practice. Around half or more of Digital Champion respondents (64) reported never using most of them, highlighting a potential mismatch between formal tools and the realities of delivery.



This does not indicate a lack of assessment, but rather that assessment was typically carried out through conversation, observation, and ongoing support.

“I found it worked better to talk things through and watch how they used their device, rather than asking lots of questions or filling in forms.” (Digital Champion)

Many Digital Champions described working with service users who arrived with specific, immediate problems rather than seeking structured learning pathways, making formal assessments and templates feel artificial or unhelpful.

“People usually came with a specific problem they wanted help with there and then, rather than wanting to go through an assessment or plan.” (Digital Champion)

Lack of awareness also played a role. Some Digital Champions reported they were not aware of the resources, not being offered them, or not receiving training in their use, while others felt they already had suitable local resources or professional expertise. Some Digital Champions expressed concern that formal documentation could disrupt the relational quality of sessions, particularly for people experiencing anxiety or cognitive difficulties.

“Starting with forms could make people more anxious. Building trust first was more important than ticking boxes.” (Digital Champion)

8.3. Starting where people are: personalisation and pace

Personalisation consistently emerged as a critical enabler of effective digital learning. Digital Champions routinely described taking users “back two or three steps” to rebuild foundations that had never fully formed. These moments were framed not as setbacks but as considered judgements that allowed learning to progress at a manageable pace.

“It’s all so unrushed, and they are so supportive” (Service user)

Digital Champions emphasised that addressing basic gaps early helped users avoid repeated frustration and build confidence.

“She’s even shown me the basics... she showed me how to slide the screen up from the bottom, because I wouldn’t have had any idea.” (Service user)

Home visits were particularly beneficial for people with mobility limitations, health conditions, or complex domestic environments and, for some, they were the only viable way learning could take place.

“I expected it to be going to classes... to find out that someone actually came to my home and that it was free, I was like, wow.”

Language was also critical. Many Digital Champions deliberately mirrored the words learners used to describe what they saw on screen rather than correcting technical terminology. This approach made things easier to follow and helped keep attention focused on completing tasks rather than mastering unfamiliar vocabulary.

“If they go, ‘it was that square thing,’ I say OK, that square thing.” (Digital Champion)

8.4. Learning with others: reassurance, structure and progression

Group sessions offered a different learning experience. For some learners, group settings provided reassurance that they were not alone in struggling with technology. Hearing others ask questions made difficulties feel normal and reduced embarrassment.

“You feel you’re not the only one. The rest of my family are all really good with this kind of thing and they’re not good at showing me how to do things so learning with the other ladies is good.” (Service user)

Group environments also enabled peer learning, particularly where service users could see others “their own age” making progress. Structured groups organised by confidence or skill level helped some learners feel a sense of progression.

However, staff and Digital Champions consistently noted the limits of group delivery. Differences in devices, starting points, and pace often diluted the level of individual support available. Groups worked best when their purpose was clearly defined and when volunteer support enabled near one-to-one assistance within a social setting.

8.5. The role of Digital Champions in enabling learning

Reassurance played an important role in enabling learning. Digital Champions frequently emphasised that mistakes were easily reversible, helping to reduce fear and shame. Normalising error - sometimes by sharing their own uncertainty - helped create a more relaxed learning environment. Informal conversation, humour and social connection were often as important as the task itself, particularly for service users experiencing isolation.

“She spoke with you, not at you... if she’d been my teacher 70 years ago I might have gone further in the education system.” (Service user)

Digital Champions described their role as one of guided discovery rather than instruction. Early, achievable “wins” were used deliberately to build confidence, allowing service users to see that they could manage tasks themselves.

“Once they see they can manage it, you can almost feel them relax, and the rest of the session becomes much easier.” (Digital Champion)

For many service users, the confidence built during sessions depended on what happened next: whether they felt able to practise, remember, and revisit what they had learned between sessions.

8.6. Tools and resources that support learning between sessions

Supporting learning beyond individual sessions depended on practical tools that enabled service users to practise independently and retain what they had learned. Personalised materials created during sessions were valued more highly than generic resources. Service users described notebooks, handwritten step-by-step instructions, diagrams, and prompts in their own words as essential “user manuals” that reduced anxiety and supported safe practice between visits, particularly for people managing memory difficulties, anxiety, or limited confidence.

*“Once I’ve learned something, I have to write it down and then practise it.”
(Service User)*

Creating these materials during sessions also provided a shared reference point, helping Digital Champions reinforce learning over time and identify where individuals were getting stuck.

Views were more mixed on the usefulness of centrally produced resources. Project Coordinators spoke positively about the Age UK ‘Digital Diary’ where it aligned with more structured delivery, particularly in group settings where a shared framework supported progression and consistency. In these contexts, the diary helped provide continuity between sessions and a tangible record of learning.

Many Digital Champions preferred to create bespoke materials tailored to immediate needs. As noted earlier, some were unaware of existing resources, while others felt that more formal tools risked disrupting the natural flow of sessions or overwhelming learners experiencing anxiety or cognitive difficulties. For these Digital Champions, flexibility and responsiveness were prioritised over standardised approaches.

Overall, tools were most effective when they supported confidence, recall, and independent practice in ways that felt personal and manageable, rather than when they imposed additional structure.

8.7. Device loan as an enabler of digital learning

Access to appropriate devices was a necessary condition for participation for some service users, making the technology loan scheme an integral part of the Digital Champions Programme. For some, loaned or donated tablets or smartphones removed an immediate barrier to engagement and acted as a gateway into learning that would not otherwise have been possible.

Where learning led to clear personal benefits, such as improved communication with family or access to healthcare, loaned devices often served to demonstrate what was possible digitally rather than becoming permanent personal devices with family members sometimes purchasing devices once their value was established. For others, affordability rather than motivation became the limiting factor, reinforcing the view that the loan scheme worked best as a bridge rather than an endpoint. A donation scheme was introduced in Cohort 2 which made available a range of technology including tablets, laptops, smartphones, smart speakers, ergonomic mice, stylus pens and keyboards.

However, staff and Digital Champions consistently observed that access alone did not guarantee confidence or sustained use. Many service users already owned devices but struggled to use them effectively, reinforcing staff and Digital Champions' view that digital exclusion is primarily about access.

Where loaned devices were introduced, Digital Champions noted a sense of distance that shaped how people engaged with the technology. Some service users were reluctant to treat the device as their own, hesitating to store personal information or rely fully on something they knew was temporary. This limited the regularity of use needed to consolidate learning.

To address this, Digital Champions highlighted the importance of reassurance practices around device loans, including emphasising that mistakes could be undone and demonstrating factory resets on return. Despite these efforts, this lack of a sense of “ownership” sometimes undermined engagement. In one example, a service user who believed they had damaged a borrowed phone stopped attending sessions entirely rather than raise the issue. Staff also described it as *“always sad to take away the device”* at the end of a loan period, recognising that this could mark the end of digital participation rather than a transition to independence.

8.8. Barriers, confidence, and continuation

Despite the enablers discussed above, service users continued to face multiple barriers. Emotional challenges such as fear of failure, anxiety about forgetting, and resistance to being pushed online often outweighed technical difficulties. Practical issues, including outdated devices, forgotten passwords, unreliable Wi-Fi, and memory difficulties, also disrupted progress.

Confidence was more likely to develop when digital skills became part of everyday routines rather than remaining isolated tasks. Ongoing reassurance and continuity of support relationships were also central to sustaining engagement.

Key learning

- Delivery was most effective where support was shaped around individual goals, confidence, and circumstances rather than standardised pathways.
- Assessment, personalisation, and pacing were continuous, relational practices rather than discrete stages or tool-led processes.
- Trusting relationships and emotional reassurance were as central to learning as technical instruction.
- Digital confidence did not always develop in a straight line and relied on reassurance, regular use and access to ongoing support.
- Access to devices could be an entry point to learning, but their impact was shaped by confidence, ownership, and financial context.

9. Cohort 2's high risk focus

9.1. Identifying high risk groups

As part of delivery planning, partners were asked to consider groups thought to be at higher risk of digital exclusion for targeted outreach and support. Groups identified included minoritised ethnic communities, people living in rural or isolated areas, those with visual impairments, and people identifying as LGBTQ+.

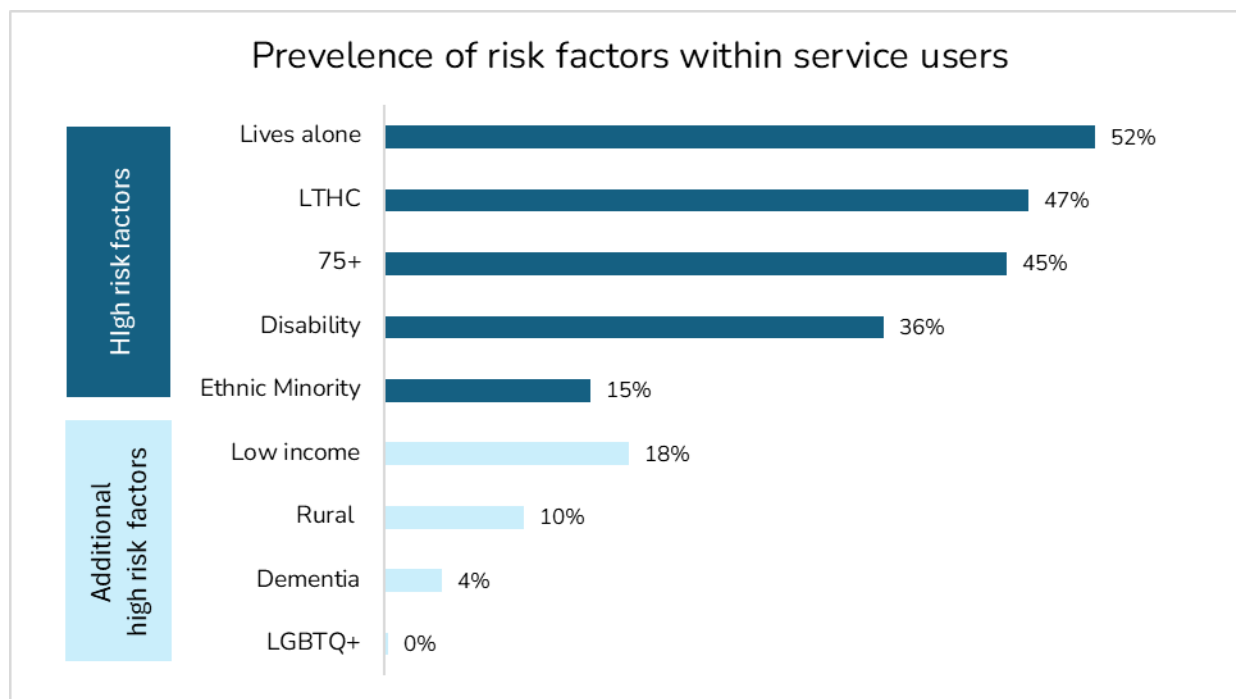
It is important to note that this section addresses two related but distinct findings. First, that the high-risk categories provided a useful framework for outreach and targeting, and that some additional factors not currently captured in that framework also appear to predict digital exclusion risk.

Second, that people engaging with the programme frequently presented with complex support needs alongside their digital exclusion risk - needs that shaped the intensity of support required, but which are not themselves the same as digital exclusion risk. Both findings have implications for future delivery, but they point to different areas for development: the first to outreach and targeting, the second to volunteer preparation, support and signposting. While these categories provided an initial framework, staff accounts and Age UK data suggest that risk of digital exclusion, as it emerged in practice, was shaped less by identity and more by the interaction of health, in practice, few service users from these groups joined the programme during Cohort 2. Monitoring data showed that 72% of registered older people recorded no additional high-risk factor, with particularly low uptake among LGBTQ+ communities.⁷ This in itself represents a significant finding about reach, and suggests that the challenge for these groups lies less in the support offer once engaged, and more in the pathways and targeted outreach needed to bring them in. They may be less likely to engage with services in the first place. At the level of individual delivery, staff found that a person's demographic category was not always a reliable guide to the intensity or complexity of support they would need - which was shaped more by health, life circumstances and structural barriers than by identity or group membership. This is distinct from the value of demographic categories for targeting outreach, where they remained a useful planning tool.

Age UK partners captured data on the risk factors identified within service users at registration. This showed that living alone, having a long-term health condition (LTHC)

⁷ The Age UK data from monthly monitoring tracked four additional high-risk factors at registration: rural location, low income, dementia/memory loss, and LGBTQ+. This differs slightly from the groups identified in the evaluation brief, which included minoritised ethnic communities and visual impairments. Monitoring data showed very low uptake across all additional high-risk categories, with 72% of registered older people recording no additional high-risk factor, and 0% identifying as LGBTQ+.

and being over 75 were the most common risk factors. The additional factors identified by local Age UKs/Cymrus were present to a lesser extent.



9.2. How risks became apparent in practice

Across different settings, Project Coordinators repeatedly found that the categories used to identify people at risk of digital exclusion did not always predict who would require the most intensive support. Staff accounts across multiple partners described people experiencing mental health conditions, neurodiversity, addiction, poverty, homelessness, or cumulative disadvantage - and these factors shaped the intensity of support required. One Project Coordinator reflected that some of the most intensely supported people were *“white middle class people who actually were much higher risk”* because of what was going on in their lives rather than their group label.

This perspective was echoed indirectly by service users themselves. Older people rarely described themselves in terms of identity or group labels. Instead, they spoke about shared practical barriers that made them feel excluded or vulnerable as services moved online. Among those with long term health conditions - themselves an identified high-risk category - practical barriers were significant: Arthritis made using keyboards or touchscreens difficult; visual impairment reduced confidence. Shared or insecure housing limited privacy; and fear of scams made people wary of engaging. Digital Champions also supported older people with suspected, but yet to be diagnosed learning needs, such as dyslexia or autism.

9.3. An inclusive approach

Consistent with the Programme's person-centred design, most partners adopted an inclusive rather than targeted approach, supporting anyone who came forward while responding to needs as they emerged. Outreach Workers did engage specific communities - for example through coffee mornings in minoritised ethnic communities - but staff consistently noted that fear of technology, low confidence and anxiety about getting things wrong cut across all groups. As one Outreach Worker reflected, *“different groups have different family values but overall, the fear of tech transcends all.”*

Key learning

- Digital Champions often felt that risk of digital exclusion was driven more by health, confidence and life circumstances than by predefined group labels.
- Many people whose support needs were most intensive did not fit neatly within the identified risk categories, with the full picture only becoming clear through engagement.
- The identified high-risk categories did not always align with the realities staff encountered on the ground.
- The high-risk of digital exclusion categories provided a useful starting framework for outreach and targeting, but staff found that digital exclusion risk and complex support needs frequently co-occurred and interacted - each compounding the other.

10. Service adaptation in response to need

This section explores how far the Digital Champion model responds to differing support needs in practice, and where additional flexibility or tailoring may be required to support full participation.

10.1. How support needs vary by group

To better understand how support needs varied, the Digital Champions survey asked Digital Champions to reflect on the additional challenges they most often encountered when supporting different groups of service users. The analysis shows that each group faced a different mix of challenges, with support needs varying in type and intensity.

Profile of additional challenges reported by staff and volunteers for different high-risk groups. Percentages reflect the proportion of responses identifying each challenge within a group. Response totals vary across groups and findings for smaller groups should therefore be interpreted with appropriate caution.

	Need more time and patience	Require specialised equipment/ accessibility features	Communication difficulties	Greater anxiety about technology	Financial barriers to accessing devices/internet	Family/cultural barriers to learning	Complex health/ medication management needs	Transportation difficulties attending sessions
People living alone (supported by 82 respondents)	26%	0%	6%	35%	11%	7%	4%	11%
People experiencing social isolation (53)	26%	0%	19%	30%	9%	6%	2%	8%
People living in rural or isolated areas (12)	17%	8%	8%	33%	8%	0%	0%	25%
People with very limited income (32)	9%	0%	0%	13%	53%	3%	6%	16%
People with visual or hearing impairments (59)	27%	19%	24%	12%	3%	0%	8%	7%
People with physical disabilities/mobility issues (45)	33%	16%	9%	9%	9%	0%	11%	13%
People living with memory loss/dementia (29)	41%	0%	17%	31%	3%	3%	0%	3%
People with mental health challenges (22)	36%	0%	18%	32%	9%	0%	5%	0%
People from minoritised ethnic groups (13)	38%	0%	31%	15%	8%	8%	0%	0%

Across several groups, anxiety about technology emerged as a prominent barrier, particularly for people living alone, those experiencing social isolation, and people living in rural or isolated areas. For these groups, challenges appeared to relate less to technical access and more to confidence, reassurance, and the availability of informal or ongoing support. People living in rural or isolated areas additionally faced practical barriers related to transportation and attendance at sessions, suggesting that delivery models requiring travel may be less suitable for this group.

In contrast, people with very limited income cited financial barriers to accessing devices more frequently than other challenges. This suggests that affordability was the most commonly identified constraint on engagement for this group, as reported by Digital Champions working with them directly, alongside confidence and capability challenges.

Several groups were reported to require increased time, patience, and tailored support, most notably people living with memory loss or dementia, people with mental health challenges, people with physical disabilities or mobility issues, and people from minoritised ethnic groups. For some of these groups, elevated anxiety about technology was also reported, indicating that support may need to be delivered more gradually and flexibly to be effective.

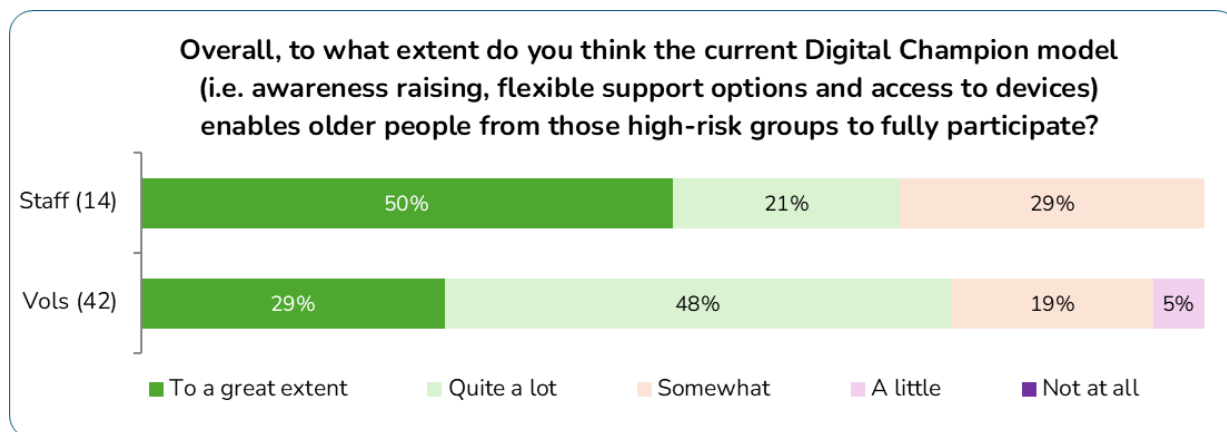
Distinct accessibility and communication-related challenges were most evident for people with visual or hearing impairments, reinforcing the importance of adaptive communication methods and assistive technologies.

10.2. Adapting delivery in real time

As delivery progressed, it became clear that effective digital support relied on ongoing adaptation rather than sticking to a fixed model. Staff and Digital Champions described responding in real time to the physical, cognitive and emotional barriers service users

brought with them. This meant adapting not only how support was delivered, but what counted as progress.

Survey responses suggest that the current model is perceived to enable participation for many older people from high-risk groups including those with more complex support needs.



Adaptation for access

One of the most visible forms of adaptation involved matching devices to individual accessibility needs. Digital Champions described routinely using physical aids, such as styluses to support dexterity, alongside adjustments to device settings including larger text, simplified layouts, and voice activation. Tablets were introduced for people who already owned smartphones but struggled with small screens, while smart speakers opened up digital participation for those with limited mobility or visual impairment. In several accounts, small interventions had a big impact. One Outreach Worker described how a brief demonstration transformed access for a wheelchair user:

“All I did was say, did you know that you can make calls, phone calls through Alexa... I spent, like, literally five minutes... that absolutely changed her life.”

Staff consistently framed these moments as the removal of a key barrier rather than the development of general technical skills. As one Project Coordinator reflected, smart speakers were effective not only because they improved accessibility, but also because they felt less intimidating and more engaging:

“Their voice-activated features made technology more accessible, especially for people with limited mobility or vision challenges. They were also exciting simply because they were new.”

Adaptation for cognitive needs

For service users with cognitive impairment, adaptation required deeper changes in approach. Outreach Workers described moving away from explanation-heavy teaching and instead focusing on repetition, routine and play when working with people living with dementia. One reflected:

“Turning teaching into games and repetitive sequences helped the clients... We also ensured that we utilised whatever accessibility settings we could depending on the conditions of the client.”

At the same time, staff were clear about limits. Some individuals ultimately found digital technology too confusing despite extensive adaptation and recognising when to step back was part of responsive practice rather than a failure.

Relational adaptation

Adaptation also operated at a relational level. Project Coordinators highlighted the value of shared lived experience, particularly where volunteers had similar life circumstances to the people they were supporting. One described how this helped build trust and confidence more quickly:

“One of our volunteers who lives with dementia was able to raise awareness and show other people with dementia how technology could improve their daily lives.”

Person-centred responsiveness in practice

Consistent with the Programme's person-centred approach, Digital Champions emphasised in-session improvisation - adjusting language, pacing and focus as needed. This often meant shifting attention away from technical tasks altogether:

“A large part of the sessions is about interpreting interactions online rather than how to perform a practical task.”

Digital Champions described creating tailored solutions where no suitable resources existed - writing personalised guides, producing visual prompts, or finding safe ways to demonstrate apps that could not safely be shown in full. This adaptability relied on creativity, patience, and a willingness to learn alongside service users rather than instructing them.

Key learning

- Groups identified as being at higher risk of disengagement experience different combinations of barriers, highlighting the need for tailored approaches to digital support rather than a one-size-fits-all model.
- Person-centred responsiveness was central to delivery, shaping both how support was provided and what progress looked like.
- Well-matched adjustments, particularly around devices and accessibility, often enabled people to engage quickly.
- Supporting people with cognitive or complex needs required changes in approach, not just more time.
- The level of responsiveness required increased the judgement, emotional effort and skills required by Digital Champions in practice.

11. Impact on service users

11.1. Growing confidence and reduced anxiety

The most consistent change reported by service users was how they felt about using technology. People who had previously avoided their devices or approached them with dread, described feeling able to experiment, make mistakes, and try again. *"I would say I've gone from being a zero out of 10 confidence to 6 or 7 out of 10,"* one participant reported. Another captured the psychological shift: *"I feel now that I'm more confident to use the phone on my own... You become less wary about messing it all up... it becomes the norm."*

For many, this meant that anxiety gave way to curiosity - a willingness to explore what their devices could do rather than fearing what might go wrong. As one participant reflected: *"90% of the problems that I was having weren't problems but being old and not keeping up with modern technology... she really put my mind at rest."*

11.2. Increased independence in everyday tasks

This growing confidence led to practical independence. Service users began managing tasks they had previously delegated to family members or avoided altogether. *"I do bank transfers myself now. When I pay my hairdresser... I do that,"* one woman explained. Others described ordering prescriptions through the NHS app, handling insurance matters, and accessing council services without needing to wait for help. The ability to apply learning to unfamiliar situations was a recurring theme. One participant, having received support with her phone, successfully returned an Amazon parcel using a QR code:

"If I hadn't had the tuition from her, I wouldn't have had a clue... much easier... all without the fuss and bother."

Staff observed this pattern of growing autonomy across service users, noting that even minimal interventions could generate significant change. One Digital Champion witnessed a service user discovering that her hearing aids could sync with her mobile phone - *"a detail not explained to her when they were fitted at the hospital. Her world opened back up before my eyes."*

For service users facing acute circumstances, practical digital skills addressed fundamental needs: patient, step-by-step support enabled a homeless client to independently bid on housing with the Digital Champion reporting. *"He couldn't thank me enough for the help I had given and the patience I had shown."*

11.3. Increased wellbeing

Beyond practical tasks, service users described changes in how they spent their time and what they felt capable of doing. Some explored personal interests - ancestry, history, photography, crafting - while others structured their days around newly accessible entertainment. One woman used YouTube for classical music concerts and comedy, helping her protect "me time" and manage her daily routine. Another described the cumulative effect: *"So much information was given to us. It's so interesting. I just don't think I will ever stop going there. It is stimulating, I have to say... It keeps me physically active, mentally active."*

The impact on mental wellbeing was significant for some service users. A woman with insomnia following her husband's death, living with chronic pain, was shown how to search for and play music on her tablet; by doing this at night she slept better and dramatically improved her quality of life. Another described a simple but effective coping strategy: *"I used to get stressed about the bills. And now if I am getting stressed, I'll just go and open the YouTube and watch a funny video for myself. And it just takes the tension away."* Staff observed that service users became *"noticeably less anxious when discussing their devices"* and that digital confidence appeared to transfer into broader life engagement - joining activities and becoming more socially connected.

11.4. Improved social connection

Social connection improved through multiple routes. Service users who attended the group sessions made friends and met *"like-minded people at a similar stage of life."* Those receiving one-to-one support found communication easier: *"I do text more than I call from my phone... to be able to send a message, you know, like when people are at work or they're out and can't answer the phone. Yes, that has definitely made it easier to keep in*

contact." For one participant, gaining email access meant inclusion in a community he had been excluded from: *"There's a men's club where we meet... the secretary contacts everybody by email. Except me."* The relationship with the Digital Champion was itself a source of connection for isolated service users: *"I have a cup of coffee when I get there... we have a little chat and then once I've had the lesson, I have another little chat and then I'm off."*

For some service users facing severe isolation, the changes were transformative. One woman described what the support meant for her future:

"Without your organisation, I would not be making this next step... I was getting that I could no longer cope living like I was living. It will give me my life back... I'll no longer be in here stuck in these four walls."

Taken together, these accounts show that effective digital inclusion can lead to.

Key learning

- For many service users, increased digital confidence led to change across several areas of life - with benefits such as practical capability, psychological confidence, daily structure, emotional wellbeing, and social connection reinforcing one another.
- Practical independence in essential tasks reduced reliance on family members and restored service users' sense of agency.
- In many cases, relatively modest technical interventions unlocked much broader change in how service users engaged with the world around them, suggesting that removing barriers and building confidence may matter more than comprehensive skills training.

12. Impact on Digital Champions

12.1. Motivation and meaning

Volunteers consistently described deriving satisfaction not from technical accomplishment alone, but from witnessing tangible changes in service users' confidence, inclusion, and sense of agency. Moments of visible progress - such as learning to share photos with family members or using digital tools independently - were experienced as deeply rewarding and helped sustain engagement, even when other aspects of delivery were challenging.

"Seeing the smile on their faces when they learn how to send a picture through WhatsApp to their family member was priceless." (Digital Champion)

This motivation helped balance the demands of the role. Volunteers described their contribution less in terms of passing on skills and more in terms of human connection and personal impact. Feelings of pride, fulfilment, and purpose were closely tied to seeing service users overcome fear, frustration, or isolation associated with digital exclusion.

12.2. Being able to use personal experience

A distinctive feature of the Digital Champion role, from volunteers' perspectives, was the opportunity to draw on their own life experiences to support others' learning. Volunteers described how sharing their own learning journeys helped them feel more confident and authentic in the role. It also allowed them to connect with service users as peers rather than experts. This approach helped build trust and reduce anxiety, and reinforced volunteers' sense that their personal experience had real value.

"I feel most proud of using my own life story to be able to inspire other people that they CAN learn."

This peer-learning dynamic reinforced the relational nature of support. Volunteers emphasised that success was rarely defined by the completion of a task or the mastery of a device, but by shifts in confidence, willingness to engage, and emotional response. The language used to describe impact consistently focused more on human experience - smiles, pride, reassurance and inclusion - than on technical outcomes.

"Making a difference in people's lives (our clients), seeing them becoming more confident and knowledgeable, being included and more independent was the biggest success."

Key learning

- Volunteer motivation was driven mainly by the relational and emotional impact of the role, particularly supporting others through change and seeing growth in confidence and connection.
- Sharing personal experiences and using peer-learning approaches helped build trust and reduce anxiety among digitally excluded service users.
- Volunteers tended to define success in human terms, such as confidence, inclusion, and connection, rather than technical achievement.
- This strong alignment between volunteer values and the programme's person-centred ethos supported sustained engagement and commitment over time, even in the face of practical delivery challenges.

13. Digital Champion training

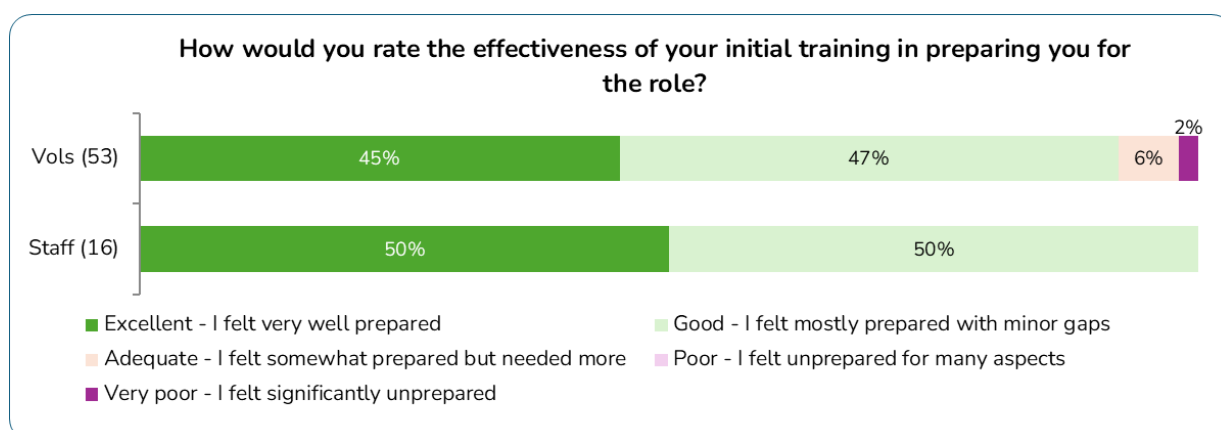
13.1. Training provision and preparedness

The Digital Champions Programme invested significantly in volunteer onboarding and training, developing a suite of online training modules delivered through a Moodle-based platform alongside topic-specific guides and PDFs. These included a two-day programme set-up and delivery session (recorded and made available to partners for use when staff changed), programme guidance documentation, reporting and monitoring support videos, e-learning for volunteers covering key considerations for the role, and e-learning for staff covering the programme model and delivery approach.

Local partners also had a responsibility for supporting volunteer preparation, including through shadowing and peer learning, which had been identified as effective approaches in Cohort 1 and recommended for Cohort 2.

The evaluation focused on volunteers' overall experience of preparation and readiness; detailed feedback on individual resources was beyond the scope of the fieldwork. The training covered digital skills, managing technical complexity across different devices and platforms, safeguarding requirements and person-centred approaches. Volunteers generally welcomed the flexibility of self-directed learning, and many described the content as *“well written, professional and helpful.”*

Survey findings suggest that initial training provided a strong foundation. All staff and most volunteers felt prepared for their role, although many reported minor gaps in their readiness.



13.2. A difference in emphasis between training and practice

Qualitative accounts nonetheless pointed to a gap between what the training emphasised and what delivery actually required. In practice, volunteers found the technical content of sessions simpler than training provisions had led some to expect, with much of the work focused on helping people grasp very basic digital actions for example, supporting people

who had never used a tablet to understand what an icon represented, or why tapping produced a different result from pressing and holding. One Project Coordinator challenged the framing of the e-learning directly:

“I think the training presented the role as more of a teaching role, and for me it isn’t that. I see it as a very person-centred, one-to-one role. Often what we do comes before that, and sometimes it’s very simple. I think it was this simple element that was missing from the training, rather than the complicated stuff.”

This is distinct from a separate but related concern: while the Digital Champion role proved less formally instructional than training suggested, volunteers still needed practical techniques for supporting older people to learn - skills some felt that the training did not adequately develop.

While it served them well technically, some felt the training offered little preparation for the teaching demands of the role: breaking tasks into manageable steps, adjusting pace for people struggling with memory or concentration, and recording instructions in ways service users could later follow independently. As staff consistently observed, *“the training needed to concentrate more on soft learning skills to be used for older people with little if any digital knowledge or experience.”* Volunteers themselves recognised this gap, with one noting that colleagues *“felt it would be helpful to have templates or learning which helped them understand how to break down tasks into suitable step-by-step instructions for these service users and their specific challenges.”* The Programme's training did include a soft skills module; the finding here is that some volunteers felt its emphasis and depth were insufficient for the demands they encountered in practice.

Most volunteers arrived feeling digitally competent and trusted their ability to find answers quickly when faced with unfamiliar problems. This confidence may have led some to skim rather than fully engage with the training materials.

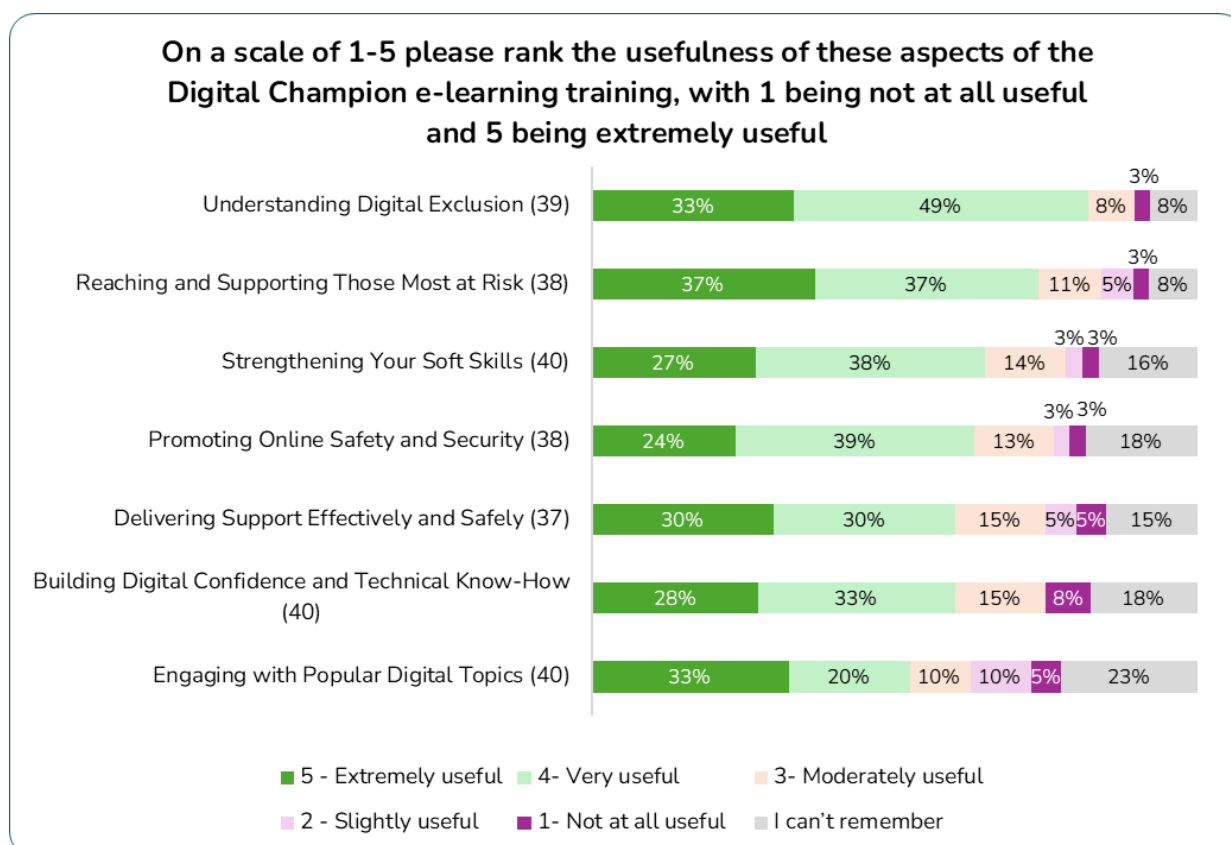
13.3. Barriers to effective training

Alongside questions about training content, the format and structure of the e-learning itself created barriers for some volunteers. Several reported unclear progress tracking and confusing interactive elements, leaving them uncertain whether they had completed the training correctly or in the right order. Some described *“a nigging feeling that they might not have done it all correctly.”* For a small number, these frustrations were enough to deter continued involvement:

“Only one of my volunteers tried to complete the training and their feedback was poor. The training was hard going and actually put the volunteer off, so they did not continue to work with us.”

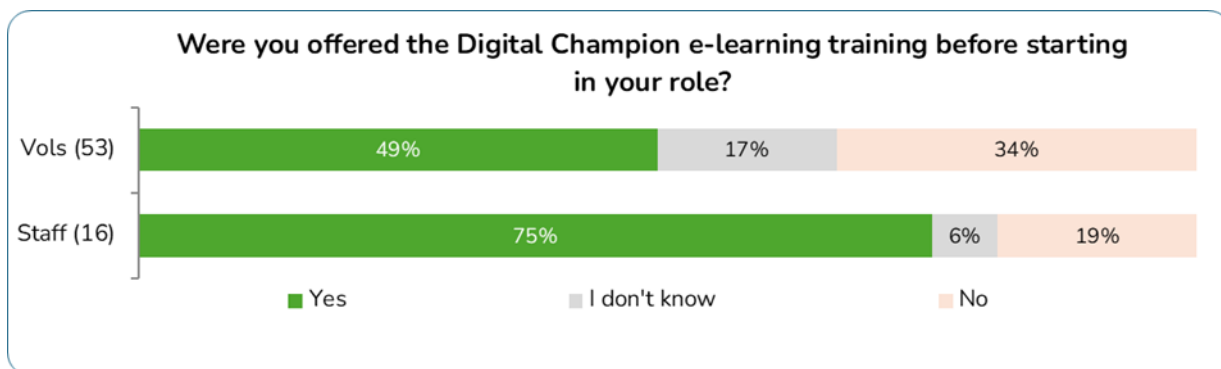
The online format also limited opportunities for discussion and reflection - precisely the elements staff identified as most valuable, particularly for working through emotionally complex situations and learning from peers.

Volunteers were asked to rate the usefulness of different elements of the Digital Champions e-learning. Ratings were highest for elements focused on understanding digital exclusion and supporting people most at risk. In contrast, topics focused on technical skills and popular digital content attracted more mixed responses. This supports the finding that effective delivery relied as much on relational understanding and confidence-building as on technical knowledge.



Survey findings also highlighted inconsistency in when training was offered. Staff and Volunteer Champions completed different e-learning packages. The staff package was mandatory, and the volunteer package was strongly encouraged but harder to enforce with local Age UK/Cymrus responsible for incorporating it into induction. While most Staff Champions reported being offered e-learning before starting in role, only around half of Volunteer Champions did so, with a substantial minority reporting that training was offered later or not at all.

Among longer-standing volunteers in particular, there was some reported resistance to completing it. This helps explain the variation in when and whether training was completed across the volunteer cohort and reinforces the need for clearer and more consistent onboarding.



Digital Champions also highlighted the cumulative training burden. They were often required to complete several general Age UK modules alongside programme-specific training, with safeguarding requirements featuring prominently. While safeguarding was recognised as important, some volunteers felt it crowded out preparation for real delivery situations. As one reflected:

“Training, I’d try and get it a bit more off the safeguarding side... and focus more on the sort of things that they could ask you, technology wise and within the session itself.”

These issues meant that some Digital Champions entered delivery having completed required training but still feeling uncertain, under-prepared, or unclear about expectations.

13.4. What Digital Champions need to feel prepared

Against this backdrop, Digital Champions wanted more guidance on teaching approaches suited to the Age UK audience, particularly in relation to age-related memory and retention issues, as well as physical challenges affecting mobility, concentration, and dexterity. The Programme's training included a module on reaching and supporting those most at risk; the finding is that volunteers felt it did not sufficiently prepare them for the range and intensity of need they encountered in practice.

Some volunteers also described encountering situations - including mental health difficulties, addiction and neurodivergence - that fall outside the scope of the Digital Champion role and would be expected to be escalated to Project Coordinators or appropriate paid staff. As one volunteer reflected:

“A large part of this job has been dealing with people with mental health difficulties, addiction problems, or who are neurodivergent. There have been times when I’d like to have had more training in these three areas.”

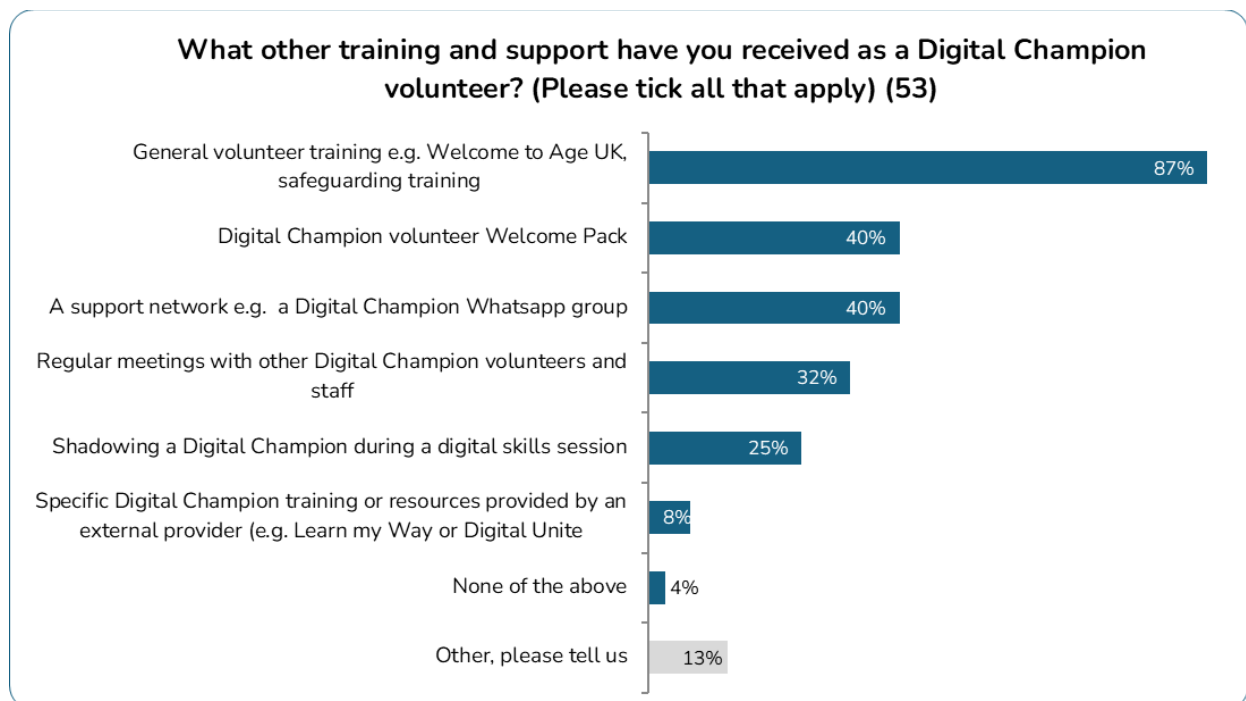
The finding here is that volunteers encountered these situations in practice, not that they should have been equipped to manage them independently. Together, these perspectives pointed to a shared gap: while the training addressed digital support in principle, it did not fully reflect the vulnerabilities and lived realities that volunteers encountered in practice.

At the same time, there was strong agreement about what actually helped build confidence and capability. It was not additional formal training content, but opportunities to observe and learn alongside experienced practitioners that helped volunteers understand how to judge pace, explain tasks simply, and respond to emotional or relational needs - skills that online modules could not easily convey. As one Digital Champion reflected:

“What really gave me confidence was shadowing and getting peer support. That was the part that made the difference - that’s when I knew I could do it.”

The most confident volunteers combined baseline training with supervised practice and ongoing peer support through buddy systems, team meetings and informal advice. Early concerns - such as pitching explanations appropriately, feeling unsure about the scope of the role, or worrying whether their skills were up to date - were largely resolved through experience rather than additional training materials.

In the survey, volunteer Digital Champions were also asked about other training and support they received alongside the Digital Champion e-learning. Responses show that while most volunteers received general Age UK training, access to Digital Champion, specific support such as shadowing, peer networks, and regular meetings was more variable.



Overall, these accounts suggest that volunteer readiness developed primarily through guided experience rather than content delivery. While training provided an important foundation, confidence and judgement were built through doing the work alongside

others. The challenge is therefore not to add more training, but to reshape preparation so that it reflects what actually builds readiness, while remaining accessible to volunteers with limited time.

Key learning

- The e-learning framed the role in more instructional terms than delivery required, with technical demands proving simpler and relational demands greater than volunteers anticipated.
- Digital Champions' readiness was built mainly through guided, experience-based support, particularly shadowing and peer learning, which were more effective than formal e-learning in developing confidence and judgement.
- Access to Digital Champion-specific experiential support, including shadowing, peer networks, and regular meetings, was inconsistent, reinforcing the need to make these forms of support more structured and reliable.
- Engagement with Digital Champion-specific training was uneven, and volunteers were resistant to additional content due to cumulative training demands, suggesting that improvement requires restructuring preparation by prioritising hands-on, experiential approaches such as shadowing and peer support rather than adding more content
- Gaps in preparing volunteers for service user complexity, particularly mental health, neurodivergence, and addiction, highlighted a broader disconnect between standardised training and the varied realities of delivery. This is not to suggest that Digital Champions should provide specialist support for complex needs - rather, that preparation should include practical guidance on recognising when needs go beyond the digital support role, and on how to escalate or signpost to appropriate services.

14. Supporting and sustaining volunteer confidence and engagement

14.1. Supported delivery

Following initial training, volunteer confidence and effectiveness were shaped mainly through support embedded in delivery rather than through formal preparation alone. While training established a baseline, staff consistently reported that sustaining volunteer confidence and motivation depended on what happened once volunteers began working with service users.

“I think the best training for the volunteers was when I began offering to go on their first visit with them. This built their confidence with home visits, confidence with how to have initial conversations with customers.” (Project Coordinator)

Supported exposure to practice, including observing real interactions, receiving immediate feedback, and knowing support was available was key to maintaining confidence. Volunteers commonly described early anxieties around explaining digital concepts clearly, working at an appropriate pace, and understanding the boundaries of their role. These concerns tended to ease through reassurance, repetition, and experience in real settings rather than through additional formal instruction.

Support arrangements

Staff put in place support arrangements to prevent volunteers from becoming overwhelmed or discouraged. For home visits, Project Coordinators routinely carried out initial assessments before volunteers became involved. This helped identify potential challenges and ensured volunteers were prepared for the context they would encounter:

“I always visit if it’s a home visit... I always go first and assess the situation before the volunteer starts going in alone. So it’s not been a surprise for the volunteer at any point.”

Group-based activities such as click cafés and library drop-ins allowed Project Coordinators to maintain oversight while volunteers delivered support and enabled less experienced volunteers to observe and learn informally from others. Across settings, staff described adapting their level of involvement based on volunteer confidence, offering closer support where needed and stepping back as reassurance grew.

Emotional safety

Clear escalation pathways were an important aspect of volunteer engagement. Volunteers consistently reported confidence in knowing they could pass challenging situations back to staff without judgement. As one staff member explained:

“The volunteers knew they could escalate any challenging customers they were having to me and that was really important to keep them happy in what they were doing.”

This safety net appeared to support, rather than undermine, volunteer confidence. It allowed volunteers to engage with complex situations without fear of being left to manage them alone.

14.2. Peer support and informal learning

Peer support complemented these formal structures. Project Coordinators described actively fostering peer spaces (e.g. shared messaging groups) to enable volunteers to share tips, troubleshoot issues, and offer encouragement. They also helped normalise

uncertainty and reduce isolation. The culture that developed was described as collaborative and supportive, reinforcing motivation outside formal supervision.

14.3. Resource implications

This combination of support was effective in retaining volunteers and sustaining their engagement. However, it also carried resource implications. Administrative requirements, particularly form-filling and data entry, were frequently described as demotivating - undermining the confidence volunteers gained through direct work with service users:

“Volunteers get... put off because they have to fill so many forms.” (Project Coordinator)

Some Project Coordinators deliberately kept volunteer caseloads low to protect wellbeing and prevent burnout. While this supported volunteer retention and satisfaction, it limited the extent to which delivery could be increased without recruiting additional volunteers.

Key learning

- Volunteer confidence and effectiveness in digital inclusion work were closely tied to relational support, including staff reassurance, oversight, and peer connection, rather than training alone.
- Supportive environments helped volunteers respond to needs that often extended beyond technology, reinforcing the importance of a person-centred approach
- Protective structures such as pre-assessments and clear escalation routes helped prevent volunteers from becoming overwhelmed and supported retention.
- Administrative demands risked undermining motivation and need to be carefully balanced against the relational nature of the role.
- Maintaining low caseloads supported volunteer wellbeing but constrained delivery capacity, raising implications for resourcing and scale.

15. Experience of Project Coordination and delivery realities

15.1. The Project Coordination role

The Digital Champions Programme was delivered through a coordination and outreach model designed to support the delivery of local services by teams of volunteer Digital Champions and standardised reporting systems. Project Coordinators were responsible for recruiting volunteers, embedding delivery locally, and meeting and tracking KPIs while overseeing quality and consistency. In practice, coordination often began in challenging conditions.

Project Coordinators' experience of set-up support was variable. Some described limited guidance from the programme team on role boundaries, while others felt insufficiently supported by their local organisation. Clarity about what the role required and where responsibilities sat was not consistently provided at either level.

While set-up activities such as designing outreach approaches, recruiting volunteers, and building referral routes are an expected part of establishing a new local service, several Project Coordinators described carrying them out in isolation. One reflected:

“I didn’t have any network at all... I started the projects. I found the volunteers, set the processes up.”

For Project Coordinators joining the project after it had already started (for example due to staff turnover), these pressures were intensified by the need to meet KPIs immediately, leaving little space for reflection or shared learning. Project Coordinators working largely on their own described *“trying to keep many different plates spinning,”* particularly when volunteer recruitment was slow or availability changed.

15.2. Responding to need

As delivery progressed, staff highlighted a growing gap between planned models of delivery and the realities of supporting older people. Service user needs were highly variable and often unpredictable: some individuals required only brief support, while others needed sustained input over many months.

This complexity had clear implications for coordination workload, volunteer deployment, and time allocation. Where volunteer capacity was limited, Project Coordinators often took on frontline delivery themselves, alongside ongoing responsibilities for administration, reporting, and community engagement.

Where volunteer teams were in place, they were central to viable delivery. Local Age UKs/Cymrus with stable groups of volunteers were better able to absorb fluctuations in demand, while those without such teams described greater fragility in delivery and increasingly blurred role boundaries.

15.3. Limited space for peer learning

Peer learning emerged as a valued but underutilised resource, with capacity pressures during delivery limiting the space for proactive knowledge-sharing. Project Coordinators found reassurance in discovering that others faced similar challenges. However, the pace of delivery meant proactive knowledge-sharing rarely took place. As one Project Coordinator noted:

“You’re so focused on getting things done, you don’t necessarily think about ringing another Age UK up.”

As a result, partners developed outreach approaches and resources to support delivery in parallel rather than building on shared learning across the programme.

15.4. Challenges with KPIs and reporting

Alongside delivery pressures, Project Coordinators experienced significant tension with what they described as programme “KPIs” and reporting requirements. For example, a tension between KPI expectations - which emphasised new service user numbers - and the relational continuity that effective support often required. While follow-up activity was captured in reporting, the pressure to bring in new referrals sometimes constrained coordinators' ability to prioritise ongoing support for existing clients:

“My outreach worker is willing to go to [an existing client] next Tuesday... but she can’t go because I’m saying no, you can’t. Because we’ve got to get new people in.”

Reporting systems added further strain. Data collection took up significant time during sessions and could raise concerns among older people about privacy risks⁸. For some partners, Salesforce reporting required troubleshooting that fell outside Project Coordinators’ formal roles, increasing stress and diverting attention from delivery - though this was not a universal experience as Salesforce was not used by all partners

Despite these challenges, staff described drawing motivation from the visible impact of their work with service users. Expressions of gratitude and signs of progress helped sustain commitment during periods of high pressure.

15.5. Sustainability beyond the funding

The most significant tension concerned sustainability. Project Coordinators spoke about the emotional impact of building trusted relationships with service users and organisational partners over an 18-month period while facing the prospect of service withdrawal without transition support. Referrals continued even after KPIs were met, highlighting ongoing need but limited capacity to respond. One Project Coordinator described the prospect of withdrawing the service as *“heart-breaking,”* noting that communities had *“nothing to fall back on.”*

⁸ Consent for data collection was obtained from all service users in line with Age UK's data protection policies and procedures.

Towards the end of the evaluation, twelve partners had secured additional funding for a further four months of delivery, and around half of local partners in Cohort 2 had confirmed plans to continue digital inclusion activity in some form, suggesting that the programme had established a foundation from which local delivery could continue.

Key learning

- Project Coordination work involved wide-ranging responsibilities and real-time adaptation of delivery models, often carried out with limited peer support.
- KPIs and reporting systems did not fully capture the nature, intensity, or relational effort involved in effective digital inclusion work.
- Volunteer availability was a decisive factor in shaping local delivery capacity and consistency.
- Strong emotional commitment helped sustain staff, but uncertainty around funding and service continuity were sources of strain.

16. Sustaining users' digital engagement over time

16.1. Digital engagement as an ongoing process

The Digital Champions Programme was designed to build confidence and capability over a defined period, enabling older people to continue using some digital technology independently once structured support ended. While flexibility was built into delivery, the underlying model was that service users would progress towards greater autonomy, with support reducing as confidence increased.

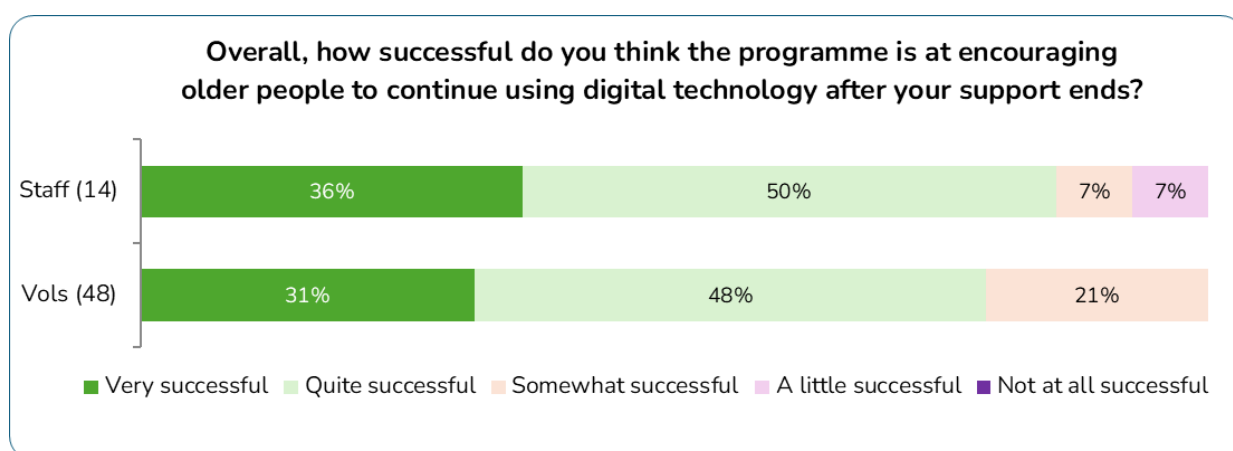
In practice, staff and Digital Champions consistently questioned whether digital engagement for older adults could ever be understood as a time-limited intervention. Technology itself continues to change (for example software updates) creating recurring moments of uncertainty even for confident users. Staff described service users returning long after formal support had ended, not because learning had failed, but because circumstances had changed. Group support sessions were specifically designed to accommodate this, enabling service users to drop in as and when they needed, without requiring formal re-referral. As one Project Coordinator explained, people might leave *“perfectly happy... then they have an update and they're there the next week.”*

16.2. An open-door approach

Project Coordinators and Outreach Workers consistently emphasised that returning for help was expected and welcomed, rather than a sign of failure. By clearly positioning Age UK as an ongoing point of support, staff helped service users feel reassured that a “safety net” remained in place after formal sessions ended. One staff member reflected that

“knowing they can return to Age UK after their 1:1 or lessons” was crucial, adding that without “the feeling of a safety net in case something went wrong... many older people would not continue IT usage.” Staff reinforced this message by actively encouraging people to return informally, particularly to drop-in sessions, making it clear that programme completion did not signal the end of the relationship. This open-door approach appeared to give people the confidence to keep using and experimenting with digital technology independently. One Digital Champion noted that people were more willing to try things independently because “they know that if they struggle, they can turn to us again another time.”

In the survey, Digital Champions were confident that the Programme successfully encouraged continued digital use.



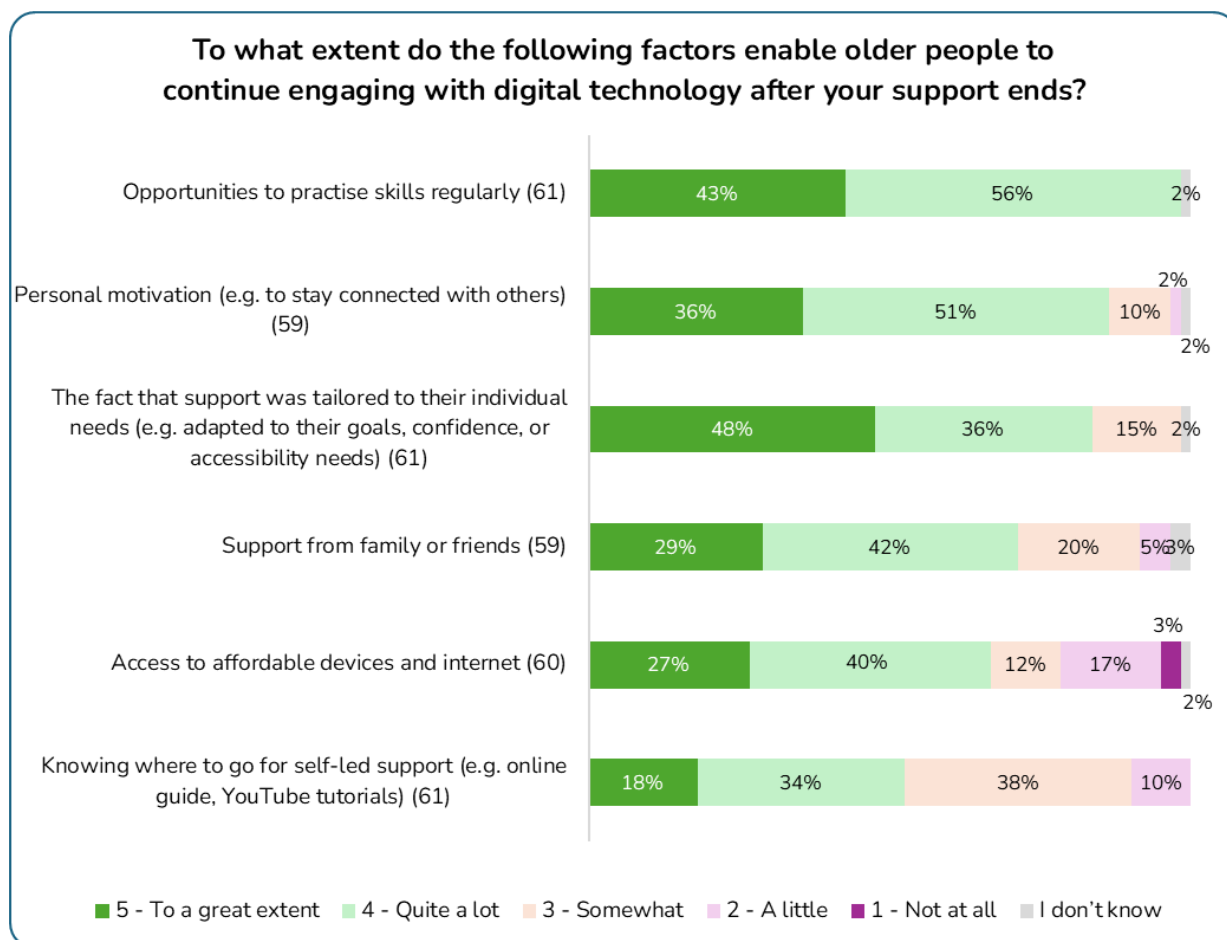
16.3. Practical strategies between sessions

Between sessions, Digital Champions used practical strategies to sustain engagement. Written notes, step-by-step prompts, and personalised reminders helped bridge the gap between supported and unsupported practice. One Digital Champion described writing instructions with the service user and then revisiting them at the next session, believing that “giving them the chance to practise continuously and independently helps their memory and confidence.” Others also encouraged self-directed learning, introducing tools such as YouTube tutorials so that service users could explore questions on their own. As one Outreach Worker put it, “YouTube is my first go-to tool” reflecting a practical approach that balanced independence with limited support capacity.

16.4. Factors enabling sustained engagement

Survey responses highlight that sustained digital engagement required more than access to devices. Confidence-building, relational support and ongoing encouragement were consistently identified as the critical enabling conditions. Opportunities to practise regularly and support tailored to individual needs were most strongly associated with continued engagement, alongside personal motivation. By contrast, knowing where to find

self-led support and relying on family or friends were rated as less influential, reinforcing qualitative findings that reassurance, repetition and relational support play a central role in sustaining use over time.



16.5. Continued engagement is fragile

Despite these efforts, sustaining digital use remained fragile. Outreach Workers described how quickly confidence could be undermined by fear of making mistakes, of scams, or of unexpected change. Software updates were a recurring trigger. Digital Champions described service users waking up to devices that “*look completely different to the previous day,*” prompting anxiety and self-blame. One noted that people were “*predisposed to believe they’ve done something wrong,*” even when changes were external.

16.6. Practical barriers to sustained engagement

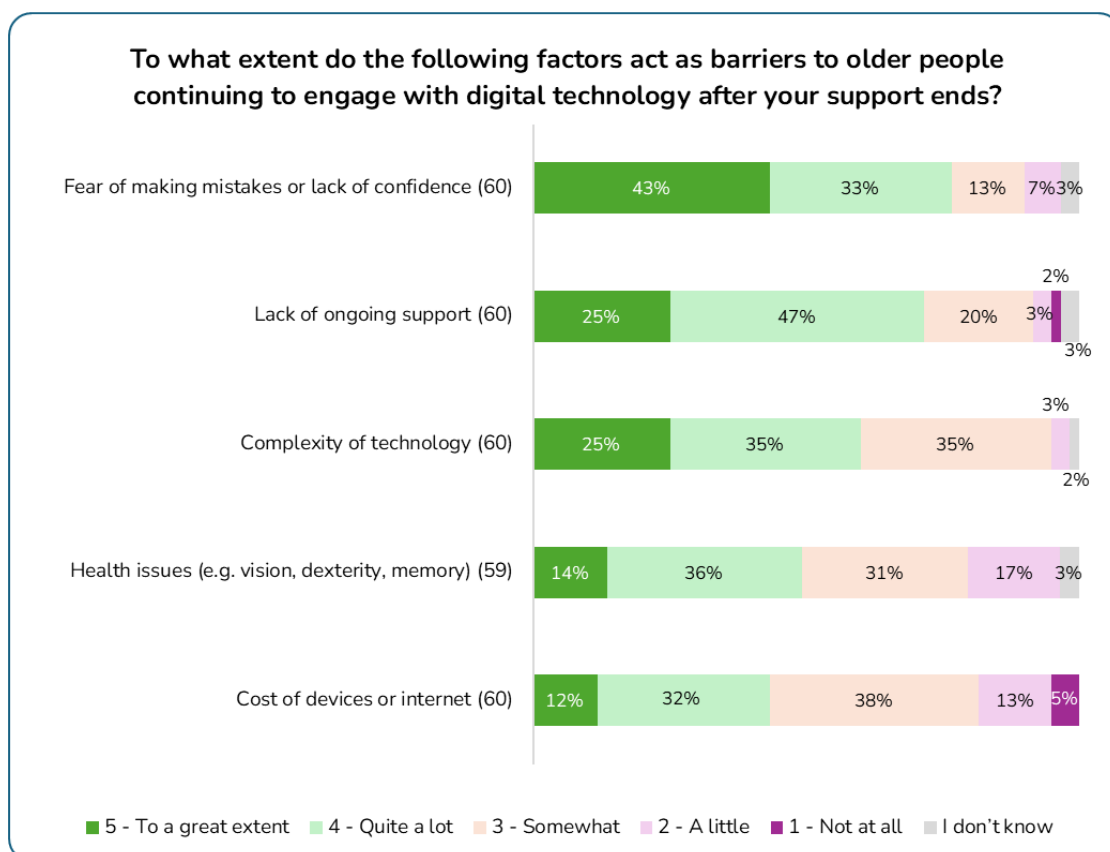
Practical barriers often compounded these emotional challenges. Limited internet access, incompatible devices, forgotten passwords, and accessibility issues frequently disrupted engagement, while some service users had few opportunities to practise, particularly where digital tasks were only needed occasionally. Family involvement could also be

double-edged: encouragement supported some learners, but others lost confidence when relatives stepped in to “do it” for them rather than enabling independent use.

Staff were clear that disengagement did not always indicate failure. Some older people made deliberate decisions to limit their digital use, weighing perceived benefits against frustration or intrusion. As one Digital Champion reflected, some service users “*truly understand and choose to opt out where they can,*” valuing freedom from constant digital demand over convenience.

Overall, the evidence suggests that sustained digital engagement depended less on acquiring discrete technical skills and more on the presence of an enabling environment. Confidence was more likely to develop where service users experienced early success, saw clear personal value, and felt reassured that support would remain available. Where that reassurance was uncertain or absent, even motivated learners were more likely to withdraw. As one Project Coordinator put it plainly, “*the problems for people are ongoing.*”

This was particularly true for service users with more complex support needs for whom continued engagement was less about achieving full independence and more about knowing that reassurance, repetition, and support would be available when confidence wavered. Survey responses reinforced this picture: fear of making mistakes and lack of ongoing support were the most significant barriers to continued use, while regular opportunities to practise and support tailored to individual needs were the strongest enablers.



Key learning

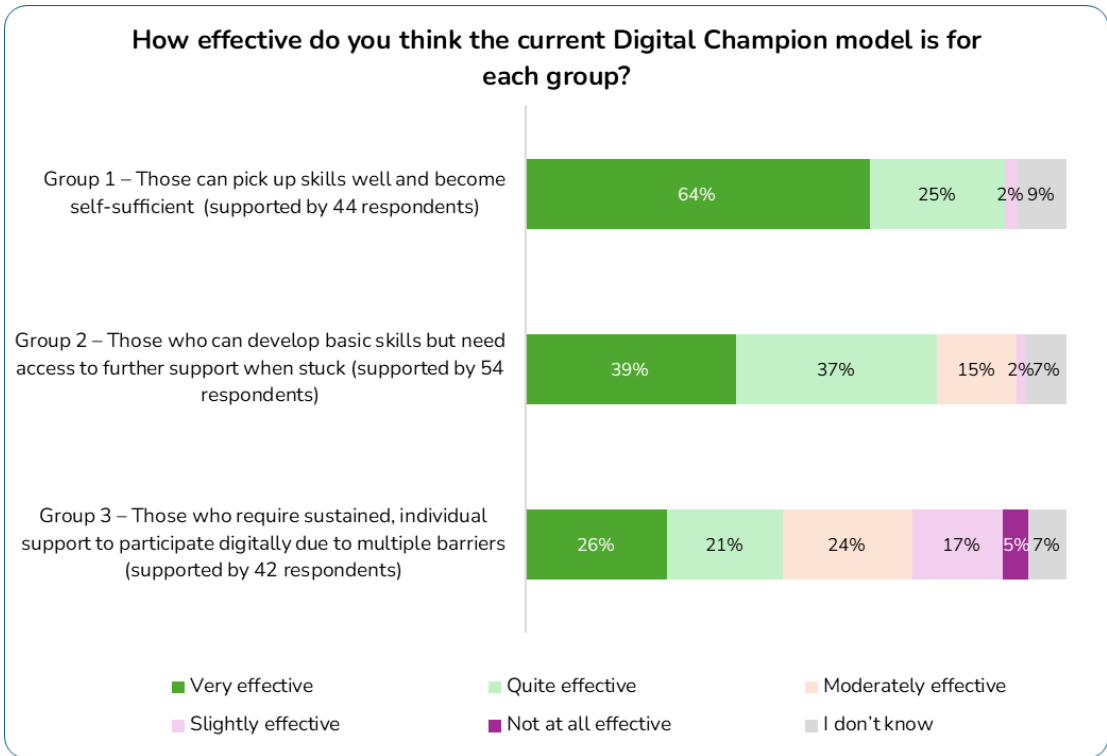
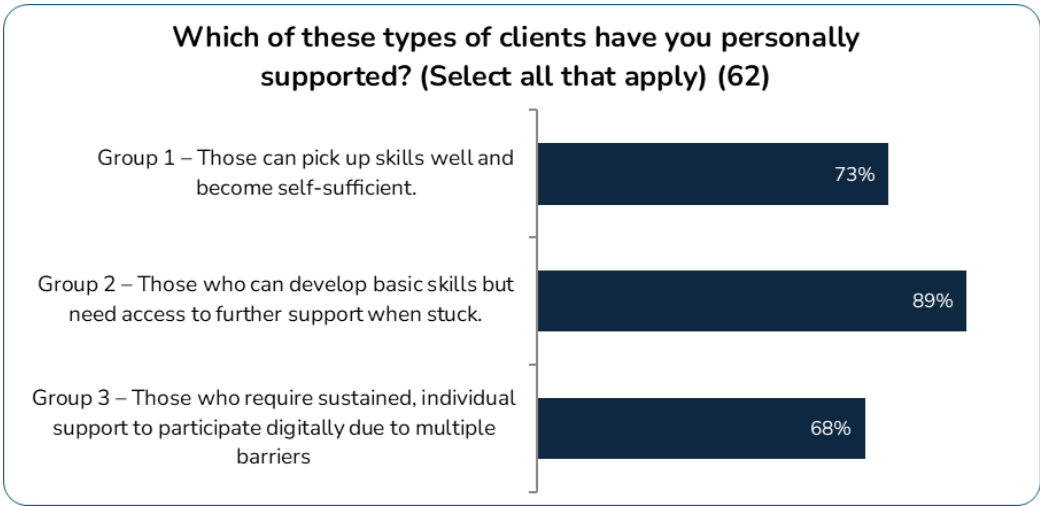
- Sustained digital engagement for older people did not follow a simple path with setbacks often triggered by technological change.
- Reassurance and access to a “safety net” of support were central to building and maintaining confidence and continued use.
- Practical strategies, such as personalised notes and self-directed learning tools, helped bridge gaps between sessions and after the programme ended.
- Withdrawal from digital use could reflect fear, practical barriers, or informed personal choice rather than a lack of motivation.

17. Discussion: Programme scope and expectations of independence

Staff reflections confirmed that digital exclusion among older people is shaped by a wide range of factors - including health, mobility, anxiety, access to services, and personal choice. Encountering this complexity in practice deepened staff understanding of what effective digital inclusion support involves and reinforced the importance of the programme's person-centred approach.

Delivery experience highlighted different patterns of engagement. Some service users developed confidence and independence within the existing model. Others gained basic skills but continued to need reassurance and access to support as new challenges arose. A smaller group were unlikely to achieve independent use due to cognitive impairment, anxiety, health issues, or informed decisions to limit their digital engagement. These outcomes were not viewed as failure, but as reflecting the varied ways people engage with technology.

Survey responses reinforced this variation. Digital Champions reported supporting people across all three groups, with perceived effectiveness highest for those able to become more self-sufficient, generally positive for those needing occasional ongoing support, and more mixed for those requiring sustained, individual input. This pattern reflects the limits of a time-limited, volunteer-led model rather than shortcomings in delivery, with independence often partial and conditional rather than permanent.



Staff also reflected on the implications for resourcing and expectations. There was concern about whether extended one-to-one support for a small number of people was always the best use of volunteer time, alongside caution about framing ongoing support needs as failure, particularly when confidence could be undermined by factors outside individuals' control.

These findings suggest that digital inclusion is better understood as an ongoing process rather than an outcome that can be achieved within a fixed period. The Programme's value lay in providing skilled, relational support that helped people engage with technology at their own pace, offering reassurance and trusted return points. While it could not resolve digital exclusion for everyone, it played a meaningful role within a wider system of support by creating spaces where older people could build confidence, make informed choices, and return for help when needed.

18. Recommendations for improving project delivery

The recommendations below are grounded in delivery experience across partners, staff roles, volunteers, and service users. They reflect learning about what enabled effective support in practice, where delivery was constrained, and how the Programme's core model could be strengthened.

18.1. Supporting people to deliver well

Strengthen practical preparation for the teaching and relational demands of the role

Volunteers generally arrived feeling technically confident, but accounts from practice consistently highlighted that the demands of the role centred less on technical knowledge and more on teaching and relational skills - confidence-building, simplification, pacing, and responding to the emotional and cognitive needs of learners. Survey findings reinforced this, with elements of the training focused on understanding digital exclusion and supporting people most at risk receiving more mixed feedback than other content, with some finding these elements useful and others feeling they did not fully reflect the realities encountered in practice. Strengthening practical preparation for these aspects of the role - rather than expanding technical content - would better reflect what effective delivery requires.

Formalise experiential learning and supervision as core elements of volunteer development

Findings indicate that confidence and capability developed most effectively through accompanied visits, shadowing, and peer support alongside formal training. Recognising supervised practice as a core feature of volunteer development would better reflect how volunteers learn in practice and support retention and wellbeing. This recommendation was identified in the Cohort 1 evaluation, so the cohort 2 findings suggest it wasn't consistently embedded in delivery across all partners.

Strengthen preparation for supporting learners with more complex support needs

Staff and volunteers reported feeling less prepared for working with people experiencing memory loss, anxiety, neurodivergence, or complex mental health needs. Training that includes practical strategies for adapting pace, communication, and expectations when supporting people with more complex needs would address this. The Programme's e-learning includes a module on supporting people most at risk of digital exclusion. The recommendation is that this content is strengthened and supplemented with practical strategies and guided experience, to better prepare volunteers for the range and intensity of need they encounter in practice.

18.2. Strengthening coordination and shared learning

Build structured peer learning and shared resources from the outset

Project Coordinators consistently described working in isolation and developing solutions independently, with peer connection between partners rarely happening in practice. A shared platform and regular programme reports, detailing practical, real examples of achievements and areas of learning, were available throughout delivery, but these were not referenced by Project Coordinators in the fieldwork, suggesting they were not widely perceived as peer learning mechanisms. Actively structuring and promoting opportunities for partners to share problems, resources and practice examples - and supporting Project Coordinators to engage with available channels - would strengthen delivery.

Review KPIs and reporting to better reflect depth, continuity, and confidence-building

Current performance measures prioritised new client numbers, despite strong evidence that effective digital inclusion often required repeated engagement and ongoing reassurance. While repeat support and follow-up activity were recordable, the emphasis of performance measures on new client numbers created pressure that worked against sustained relational support. Reviewing the relative weighting of KPIs to better reflect depth and continuity of engagement would better align monitoring with the Programme's person-centred model.

18.3. Creating the conditions for sustained engagement

Provide clearer structure and reassurance for service users in one-to-one support

Service users valued having a clear sense of the overview of the support they would receive how sessions would be structured, what to expect in terms of pace and number of sessions, reassurance that revisiting basic learning was normal, and clarity about how long support would be available. This is best achieved through an early conversation between Digital Champions and service user to agree a shared plan, setting expectations for the journey while remaining flexible to individual need as it emerges.

Make ongoing access to support explicit within programme design

Sustained engagement depended on service users knowing they could return for help if needed. Clear communication that the Programme offers an ongoing “safety net”, rather than a fixed endpoint, would help build confidence beyond structured one-to-one sessions and reduce anxiety about making mistakes or being left without support.

18.4. Extending reach, accessibility and sustainability

Leverage peer and community-based support to extend learning beyond sessions

To support ongoing access in a sustainable way, confidence and continued use were strongest where learners could practise skills in trusted, low-pressure environments and see others at a similar stage making progress. Group sessions, peer interaction, and informal return points often provided reassurance and reinforcement that individual sessions alone could not sustain. Age UK should explore ways to strengthen peer and community-based support, including:

- structured group opportunities that allow learners to practise alongside peers at a similar stage
- informal return points (such as drop-ins or library-based provision) where learners can seek reassurance when confidence wavers

Reconsider device strategy to better reflect accessibility and confidence needs

Findings showed that dexterity, visual impairment, and anxiety strongly shaped how older people engaged with technology, and that small touch-screen devices were not always the most accessible option. While tablets and smartphones worked well for some, others benefited from alternative setups.

Cohort 2 made available a range of loan and donated technology including tablets, laptops, smartphones, smart speakers, ergonomic mice, stylus pens and keyboards. The evaluation found that matching devices to individual accessibility needs was often transformative. Ensuring that all staff and volunteers are aware of the full range of available options, and that loan and donation schemes are consistently promoted and accessible, would strengthen this aspect of delivery.

Develop clearer pathways reflecting varied patterns of engagement

Making these adjustments would better reflect the varied trajectories that staff, volunteers and service users described in practice.

The evaluation found that service users followed different trajectories. Some progressed quickly to independent use, others benefited from ongoing reassurance and repetition, and a smaller group were unlikely to achieve full independence due to health, cognitive, or emotional factors.

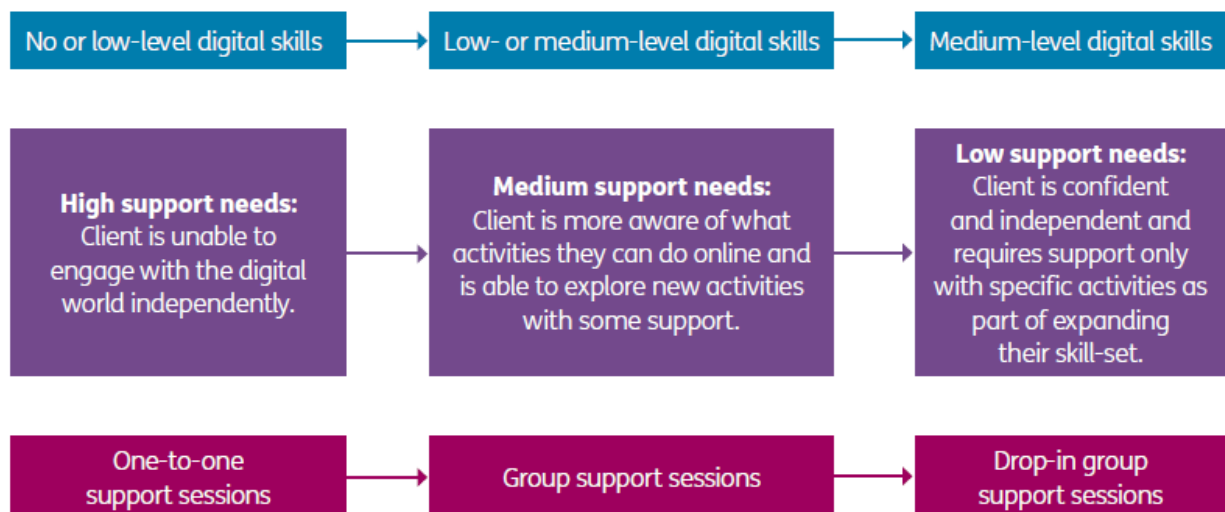
Age UK has developed a progression framework mapping support needs from high to low alongside delivery types. The evaluation endorses the skills and support needs elements of this framework and suggests two refinements: first, explicitly adding an ongoing supported-use pathway for people unlikely to progress to independence, recognising sustained supported use and continued confidence-building as a positive outcome rather than a gap in provision; and second, presenting delivery types as flexible options available

at any stage rather than a fixed sequence tied to skills level, in line with the programme's person-centred approach.

This could be expressed as three clear pathways, aligned to different patterns of engagement rather than a single model of progression:

- Independent-use pathway for people who progress quickly and want to build confidence beyond basic tasks
- Supported progression pathway for people who benefit from reassurance, repetition, and peer or group-based learning
- Ongoing supported-use pathway for people unlikely to achieve full independence due to health, cognitive, or emotional factors, where continued access to help is a positive outcome

Making these pathways explicit would help align expectations for service users, volunteers, and staff, while recognising that sustained supported use - rather than more independent use - may be an appropriate and positive outcome for some service users.



Service user case studies

Clare (group support)

Before participating in the programme, Clare described herself as “terrified” of the internet after being scammed twice.

“I had no confidence whatsoever. It’s ... scams, and ... invading your privacy and I always get the feeling that Big Brother’s watching you.”

Clare had experienced pushback from many services she’d contacted by phone - the council, banks, shops - “*they all said ‘it’s all on the website’*”. She wanted to be able to access information, complete transactions (such as garden waste removal and council tax changes), bank safely, and browse online, in line with what she saw as organisations’ expectations.

She had tried to get support from family but felt frustrated and embarrassed asking her children for help. Having benefitted from Age UK services in the past, when Clare heard about the Digital Champions Programme she was keen to sign up.

“My boys helped set me up on WhatsApp on my phone, and they’d been trying to help me, but every time I phoned them they said ‘what’s up now mum, what do you want now?’ So when I told them I was enrolling in the Age UK group they said to me ‘it’s about time mum’.”

Feeling “clueless”, Clare chose to join the beginners’ group to cover all the basics. However, after two sessions she realised she knew more than she’d thought and transferred to an intermediate group.

“I didn’t want to be wasting that space for somebody else who might need it, and I just felt, oh I’m not such a silly billy after all.”

Clare attended two beginners’ sessions and four intermediate group sessions. She found the group format particularly helpful in building her confidence and making learning less stressful.

“Being in a group was wonderful, because I suddenly realised I’m not the only one ... we realised we were all in the same boat and we weren’t afraid to ask questions or look silly.”

She appreciated the structured course format, with handouts and homework. She was able to ask for recaps and additional support when she struggled with homework and benefitted from others doing the same. Sarah has kept all her notes and still has them beside her laptop for reference.

Clare now uses all the skills and processes she learned in the sessions. She feels confident enough to experiment with new tasks and has bought a new device.

“Even with internet banking... I’m learning how to bank a cheque without going into the bank now. I’m very, very happy and I’m a lot more confident.”

“The next thing I’m hoping to do is the NHS app. I’m going to log on to the NHS website and see if I can register myself. If I can make appointments online instead of doing it the old fashioned way - waking up early to start calling them at 8am ... I know it won’t happen overnight but I know I’m getting there. It’s given me so much confidence, and my boys are so pleased.”

Parminder (group support for minoritised ethnic groups)

When Parminder’s local bank branch closed, she experienced major difficulties at the new branch.

“I’ve got no choice. I’m not fond of digital, but I did it straight away ... you have to learn.”

Parminder was also interested in learning to manage email, access YouTube (for news, cooking and dramas in her own language), search on Google, and shop online. She wanted to learn without having to ask family members, who had been impatient with her.

“Every time I go to the doctors, email is important. I’ve been lazy – I’ve been giving them my husband’s. Everything with this digital thing I always leave up to my husband to do.”

“Top of my list was learning to Google, because you can find out something yourself without them saying ‘how come you don’t know that, you don’t know anything!’”

The Digital Champions attended a regular series of sessions set up specifically for the community, with lessons designed around participants’ needs. The order of topics was chosen to support learners with English as a second language, and the space was arranged with cultural sensitivities in mind. As Parminder was helping to organise the sessions herself, she was particularly appreciative of the customisation and flexibility shown by the Digital Champions. Participants received the Diary and a pen to write notes, which they found helpful.

“You forget at our age, you need to do it over and over again for it to go in.”

Parminder observed that the Digital Champion provided needed reassurance, particularly to the women in the group, actively encouraging them to try tasks during sessions to prove

they could manage them digitally – *“looking over their shoulder, just keeping an eye on what people are doing”*. She had gone through setting up, sending and receiving email, which had been very helpful.

She and the other participants appreciate the pace of learning.

“He’s very friendly. He teaches us very slowly, very gently, so you feel you can do it.”

Being able to access information and services independently has been a huge relief to Parminder.

“I think it’s that it makes you independent, because in these days we go into danger because these young people won’t have time for us. They’re all busy, and if you ask them once or twice they get annoyed. So it’s best to learn.”

“We get really excited ... you can have communication with your granddaughters at university.”

She is enjoying practising what she’s learned – finding dramas and news on YouTube, searching on Google – and is feeling much more confident, even with basic banking and email.

“I’ve been learning about email with the Digital Champion. He showed us how to change the language, so it makes it much easier. Quite a few of the ladies can’t read English, so it really helps them.”

Susan (one to one support, device loan)

Susan had been using Age UK services for several years for a range of support needs. While she was just about managing email on her ageing iPad, she found searching online, particularly using Google, confusing and frustrating. Although she eventually solved the issue with help, the experience made her realise she needed to build her digital skills more broadly.

“I realised that banking and shopping are, in time, going to become a necessity – there isn’t going to be another option.”

Susan was loaned a Samsung Galaxy tablet and signed up for one-to-one sessions with student Digital Champions. Her assigned student responded to her immediate queries but also took the time to identify and fill gaps in her basic digital understanding. In particular, Susan needed support to adjust to the Android operating system, which she found confusing after years of using an iPad.

“What I mainly struggle with on the Galaxy is that all these other things come up when you go to search for something... you get all these 101 other

things that you don't want and you don't know how to get rid of them. It's complicated in comparison with the iPad."

Susan appreciated the enthusiasm, patience and care the students brought to the sessions and valued the intergenerational element of the programme.

"They're such a lovely crew of youngsters and it forms a bridge with the younger generation, which is very valuable."

However, she also identified some challenges. At times, the students' high level of digital confidence made it difficult for them to understand why she struggled with certain steps. In addition, exam periods and holidays led to interruptions in her sessions, making it harder for her to retain what she had learned. She also noted that on some occasions, students did not explain tasks they felt were unnecessary themselves. For example, Susan wanted to learn how to save emails and documents into folders so she could find them later, but this was not fully covered.

"For some reason she didn't really want to show me how to do it, so that's something that I've got to go back to."

One positive consequence of working with different Digital Champions was that it allowed Susan to ask for explanations again without feeling self-conscious.

"Yesterday... I got another chap, and what he did was Google it with me – making a timetable template. He was very patient. He Googled it a second and third time with me until we found something that matched what I was looking for."

Over time, however, Susan felt that too much variation in support left her feeling unsettled - particularly as she did not have a clear list of goals she wanted to achieve.

"It was a little bit like having to start again. For me it might have been better if there had been a list of things that you can do and you could choose from the list what you wanted to do."

A particularly valued aspect of the programme was the setting. Sessions took place at the students' college, in a dedicated room where participants could meet informally and chat over tea and biscuits.

"It's like a little community group. It's a very sociable occasion."

Susan did not attend the final two sessions because she decided to focus on buying a new iPad and transferring what she had learned on the Galaxy to her own device. The Digital Champions advised her on what to look for and where to find support, and she felt confident enough to make the purchase independently - something she attributed directly to the programme.

Once she felt comfortable navigating apps again, Susan began exploring more ‘fun’ and educational uses of technology with support, including stargazing apps, flight trackers, YouTube and general online searches.

Although Susan felt it was difficult to measure the programme’s impact in terms of specific tasks, as she had started with very open-ended goals, she was clear about its wider benefits. The support significantly increased her confidence and independence in using digital devices, and sparked a genuine interest in how technology could support both everyday tasks and personal interests. While she felt she would need further support to begin online banking, she now felt it was something she could consider.

“It’s a wonderful introduction. I feel more confident in the system when it comes to finance and security, and also in my ability to do things accurately.”

Stan and Gill (support as a pair)

Gill was diagnosed with a terminal illness and referred to Age UK’s programme by the hospice supporting her. She has no family, and her closest friend, Stan, who also cares for her, is digitally inexperienced. Both were increasingly concerned about being asked to do more and more things online, but neither felt they had the confidence or knowledge to manage.

“Since COVID it’s done a lot. My bank closed twice – first the Yorkshire Bank, then Halifax – so I knew I needed to do something.” (Stan)

For Gill, learning to use the internet felt particularly important given her circumstances and reliance on Stan for support.

“It was just to learn as much as possible about the internet. I live alone and I’ve no family, and the only person in my life who helps me is Stan, my carer, but he’s retired and is in the same boat with the internet – he hasn’t a clue. So fortunately, they’re teaching us at the same time. It’s really handy because we can practise together.” (Gill)

Stan took Gill to her first session, and she asked if he could attend too. She was delighted when he was invited to join. Both praised the Digital Champion highly for her calm, well-paced and reassuring approach, and both valued the Digital Diary she gave them to record what they had learned and practise together at home.

“She’s really good. She explains everything fully and she doesn’t rush you. Stan’s sometimes a bit anxious about going, but she’s so good and encouraging.” (Gill)

Together, Stan and Gill focused on building confidence with the basics: accessing the internet, launching apps, and understanding how their devices worked. As their confidence grew, they began using technology for more personal and enjoyable purposes - watching films and classical music concerts on YouTube, taking and sharing photographs, and managing appointments.

They were encouraged to practise with one another between sessions: taking pictures together and sending them to each other, setting calendar reminders, and sharing names and addresses. They both found this paired approach especially helpful.

“We’re learning to make the phone calls but with the screen – that’s been a bit tricky, knowing what to press and how to get it. But we’ve had a go. It’ll be the future; it’s probably how you’re going to see a doctor now.” (Stan)

Stan also enjoyed discovering recordings of old comedians and classic films. He felt that learning as part of a small, supportive group meant he could progress at his own pace without worrying about holding others back.

“If it had been in a big classroom I wouldn’t have been doing so well.” (Stan)

Having one another present during the sessions was central to both of their experiences.

“My memory is not as good as it was, but it’s a massive help that Stan’s with me. We can do it together to help each other. He’s learning, and he takes things in a bit better than me. So he brings the tablet around every day and we have a go together.” (Gill)

For Gill in particular, access to the internet and a digital device had a profound impact on her quality of life. She spoke repeatedly about how the programme had brought her enjoyment, distraction and enrichment during a very difficult period, especially through watching concerts and performances online.

“Honestly, like I said, I’ve been in tears – I’ve been enjoying it so much. It’s beautiful, wonderful, and I would never have known all this if it wasn’t for Age UK. I’m so grateful. I’m just in pain all the time, so this is marvellous, the way it’s enriching my life.” (Gill)

Appendices

1. List of resources available to partners

Digital instruction guides

- Digital Instruction Guides: <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice/work-learning/technology-internet/digital-instruction-guides/>
- Making the most of the internet guides: <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice/work-learning/technology-internet/>

Digital Champion Training

- Digital Champion training e-learning (volunteers)

Programme delivery forms (editable templates)

- Programme consent forms
- Learner Registration Record
- Digital Champion Record
- Digital Skill Session Record
- Technology Loan Scheme Record
- End of Technology Loan Record
- Technology Donation Scheme Guidance

Programme support resources

- Digital Champion Programme Guidance
- Digital Champion Programme e-learning (staff)
- Digital Champion Volunteer Welcome Pack
- Digital Diary template
- Client Assessment Form
- Community Needs Table Resource
- Digital Diagnostic Survey
- Digital Skills Assessment
- External Professional Referral Card
- Horizon Scanning Table Resource
- Self Referral Card

- Session Delivery Template
- Staff and Volunteer Skill and Confidence Survey
- Technology Audit Resource
- Digital Inclusion Handbook
- Technology Loan Handbook
- Tablet Instruction Pack
- Example JD and person specification

Programme learning and evaluation resources

- Digital Champion Programme - Cohort 1 evaluation:
<https://www.ageuk.org.uk/siteassets/documents/programmes/digital-champion-programme-2022-26/age-uk-digital-champion-programme-interim-evaluation---cohort-1.pdf>
- Digital Champion Programme - Cohort 1 memory loss evaluation:
<https://www.ageuk.org.uk/siteassets/documents/programmes/digital-champion-programme-2022-26/age-uk-digital-champion-evaluation---memory-loss-report.pdf>
- Internal quarterly reports