

Norfolk Library and Information Service

# Online, Safe and In Control

End of Project Report: February 2023 - March 2024

# Executive Summary

## Introduction

This report examines the outcomes of a year-long digital inclusion project delivered by Norfolk Library and Information Service, commissioned by Ofcom as part of their Making Sense of Media programme. The programme aims to improve media literacy skills for people most at risk of digital exclusion.

Norfolk Library and Information Service is a network of 47 libraries and 5 mobile libraries with extensive experience providing digital inclusion work through our Information and Digital offer. Our libraries provide quality information and digital support to make a positive difference in people's lives. Examples of previous projects include Digital Champion Volunteers, HMRC's Taxing Times, Census Support, and NHS Connect.

## Project Background and Overview

Our intervention - titled 'Online, Safe and In Control' - focused on adults aged 55+, who as a demographic are less likely to engage with digital technology. This puts them at risk of harm and prevents them from realising the benefits of being online. We aimed to help older adults get online, build confidence with digital devices, and broaden their internet use. Our theory is that these changes can in turn contribute to increased independence, resilience, and social connection.

We provided customers with instruction, guided practice, and access to resources to enable independent learning through drop-in and bookable 1-1 appointments with library staff across four branches. The content of each session was structured around one or more of 3 key themes:

- **Online** – computer basics and accessing the internet
- **Safe** – avoiding online harms like scams and disinformation
- **In Control** – broadening internet use by learning to use services like social media, online shopping and banking

## Evaluation

Our evaluation aimed to explore: 1) what impact the project had; and 2) what worked well and less well about our approach and delivery. Our evaluation design was guided by 6 Key Evaluation Questions and a theory of change.

The findings in this report are based on post-support surveys and follow-up interviews with staff and customers. 33 customers completed the survey. The survey looked at confidence in 6 different areas: overall internet use, judging the truthfulness of content, spotting scams, keeping in touch, finding reliable information, and completing online transactions. 4 interviews were completed with customers 1-1 and via telephone. Staff also provided feedback.

Our evaluation has two key limitations: 1) we were unable to objectively measure ability, so findings are based on self-reported levels of confidence and ability only, which are subject to bias; and 2) our

sample size is very small relative to the total number of people supported, which limits the external validity of our findings.<sup>1</sup>

## Key Findings

Demand for support was high: we delivered 392 sessions, expanded to a fourth location and there was often a wait time for sessions.

'Online' was the most dominant of the three session themes, which suggests that most older adults needed help with the very basics.

Leisure and employment also emerged as significant areas for support. Almost all staff members mentioned examples of customers at the younger end of the age range going on to get jobs or volunteering opportunities after receiving support.

The majority of respondents reported an increase in confidence in each of the 6 areas measured:

- Almost all respondents reported increased confidence in **using the internet** (24 out of 26).
- Most respondents reported an increase in confidence **judging the truthfulness of online content, spotting scams, and finding reliable information** online (11 out of 13, 11 out of 14, and 10 out of 13 respectively).
- Over half of respondents reported increased confidence in using the internet to **complete online transactions and keep in touch** (8 out of 15 and 6 out of 11 respectively).

Most respondents also reported an increase in **how often they use the internet** (11 out of 16).

## Lessons Learned

The evaluation identified that the following approaches worked well in supporting older adults with digital media literacy:

- **Bookable sessions** were preferred over drop-ins because they allow time to prepare and help both staff and customers to manage their schedules.
- **1-to-1 sessions** made people feel valued and ensured support was person-centred and tailored to each individual.
- Having the **extra time and resource** to run sessions made a huge difference to the depth of support we could provide.

In addition to what worked well, the evaluation identified several challenges and improvements to delivering digital literacy support:

- Staff and customers observed that **fear and low confidence levels** were significant barriers, resulting in poor trust in the reliability of devices and online services.
- Additional attitudinal barriers included **low levels of motivation and willingness to learn**. Low motivation on the customer's part seemed to stem from a lack of understanding of the

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, in October 2023 (8 months into the project) our survey data was lost due to a technological error. Our final sample size is therefore very small relative to the total number of people supported. This must be considered when weighing the validity and generalisability of our findings.

relevance of digital technology to their lives. Staff felt that some customers expected quick-fixes and weren't willing to engage in a learning process – this was difficult to overcome.

- Staff found it challenging to manage multiple **data collection** methods and get customers to engage in the evaluation process. This improved when we shortened and simplified our methods.
- **The scale and extent of the problem** of low digital skills is a challenge, both because of the sheer number of people who need support, and because of how much time and effort it takes to learn. Acquiring digital skills requires patience, flexibility, and the ability to problem-solve. Like learning a new language, it takes time and practice.
- While the staff on this project were confident in their digital skills, that isn't true for all staff across the service. **Staff confidence levels** across the service could be improved by offering more opportunities to refresh training, developing resources further, and clarifying the role of all staff members in supporting digital skills. The more staff are confident with their own digital skills, the better they can serve customers.
- We could increase the **quantity of support** by offering more sessions where possible, trialling small group sessions (2-3 customers) and/or integrating digital support into other activities, for example Job Clubs.

## Conclusion and Ideas for Action

The project was successful in delivering a high number of sessions, increasing the confidence of older adults, and contributing to positive outcomes for our customers in areas such as employment, social connection, personal independence, and financial autonomy. We also learned lessons about what works well in digital media literacy support, how we can improve our support and how we can improve our evaluation practice in future projects.

The following are ideas for action for our service to consider, directly informed by our findings:

- **Idea #1: Create a dedicated toolkit for delivering digital skills support sessions in Norfolk Libraries** A toolkit will facilitate the scaling-up of digital support across our service and ensure that it is efficient and consistent for customers, providing structure for teams who experience demand, but don't know where to begin or how to maximise capacity.
- **Idea #2: Prioritise the recruitment of 'Digital Champion' volunteers** Library managers working with the Digital Inclusion Coordinator and the Volunteer Coordinator should renew efforts to recruit volunteers, especially in locations where this option hasn't been explored recently. This will expand capacity and relieve pressure on staff.
- **Idea #3: Continue to seek partnerships and funding** Without increased funding we cannot sustain the level of support that we have delivered through this project. Digital inclusion is a topic with expanding currency and recognition in the public sphere. Norfolk Library and Information Service should continue to seek funding opportunities and partnerships because this is an issue that is highly relevant to our purpose and values.

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# Introduction

## Norfolk Library and Information Service

Norfolk Library and Information Service is a network of 47 libraries and 5 mobile libraries. We believe in the unlimited potential for libraries to make a positive difference to people's lives and communities, and welcome thousands of visitors to our libraries and online services every day.

It's free to join the library and members can use any library in Norfolk. We offer free access to thousands of books, eBooks, audiobooks, music, and magazines as well as our Business and Intellectual Property (IP) Centre and the Norfolk Heritage Centre, based at the Millennium Library. Many of our libraries offer extended opening hours through the Open Library service. This lets members access their local library, its books, computers, and spaces when the library is unstaffed.

Norfolk's Libraries offer far more than just books however - each of our branches run events and activities for all ages. In the last 3 years we supported an average of over 100,000 people per year at activities across the county.

Digital inclusion is a key theme in our programme. We have extensive experience providing digital inclusion work through our Information and Digital Offer, one of the six 'Universal Library Offers' set out by [Libraries Connected](#). Through this offer we "provide quality information and digital support" and "enable individuals and communities to develop skills to find answers and to inform life choices."<sup>2</sup> Our Digital Champion volunteers, Digital Health offer, and discrete projects such as Taxing Times, Census Support and NHS Connect are all relevant to this offer.

## Ofcom – Making Sense of Media

The project in this report was commissioned by Ofcom as part of their [Making Sense of Media](#) programme (MSOM). The aim of the MSOM programme is to improve media literacy skills across four cohorts:

- Older adults
- People living with disabilities
- Children and young people
- Communities experiencing financial disadvantage

These cohorts have been identified through Ofcom's research as being more at risk of digital exclusion, which is defined as having "limited or no access to the online world".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Libraries Connected. (n.d.). *Universal Library Offers: Information and Digital*. Libraries Connected. Retrieved March 11 2024, from <https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/universal-offers/information-digital>

<sup>3</sup> Ofcom. (2022). *Digital exclusion: A review of Ofcom's research on digital exclusion among adults in the UK*. [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0022/234364/digital-exclusion-review-2022.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0022/234364/digital-exclusion-review-2022.pdf)

## Project Background

Our intervention focused on older adults, who are less likely to engage with digital technology<sup>4</sup> which puts them at a higher risk of harm and prevents them from realising the benefits of being online.

There are many reasons why someone might not use the internet, from a lack of skills to issues with access and affordability. Attitude and motivation are also key. Despite society being increasingly 'digital by default', some people don't want to be online. Others might want to but lack confidence and are wary of safety risks.<sup>5</sup> For these reasons we aimed to provide education while addressing low confidence and motivation.

The libraries we chose to deliver in were selected based on information from the Digital Exclusion Risk Index (DERI), which combines financial deprivation data with demographics and broadband coverage to "visualise the risk, or likelihood, of digital exclusion for every LSOA in England and Wales, and every data zone in Scotland".<sup>6</sup> We also considered staff's experience of each local area and relative demand for support from older people in our existing customer base.

## Project Overview

The issue this project aimed to address is low engagement with digital technology and online information/services from older people. By providing support, we sought to help older adults get online, build confidence with digital devices, and broaden their internet use. We built on our existing knowledge to develop a theory of change (Appendix A) which sets out a rationale for how achieving these aims could lead to positive life outcomes for our customers, such as increased independence, resilience, and social connection.

Support took the form of 1-1 appointments with library staff which were available across 4 branches: Kings Lynn, Dersingham, Great Yarmouth and Thetford libraries.

During appointments customers were offered instruction, guided practice, and access to resources to enable independent learning. The content of each session was structured around one or more of three key themes while also considering the individual needs and interests of the customer. These themes were:

- **Online** – computer basics and accessing the internet
- **Safe** – avoiding online harms like scams and disinformation
- **In Control** – broadening internet use by learning to use services like social media, online shopping and banking

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<sup>4</sup> Ofcom. (2023). *Adults' Media Use and Attitudes report 2023*.

[https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0028/255844/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2023.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0028/255844/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2023.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Greater Manchester Office of Data Analytics. (n.d.). *Digital Exclusion Risk Index*.

[https://www.gmtableau.nhs.uk/t/GMCA/views/DigitalExclusionRiskIndexv1\\_6/DERIhomepage?%3Adisplay\\_count=n%3Aembed=y%3AisGuestRedirectFromVizportal=y%3Aorigin=viz\\_share\\_link%3AshowAppBanner=false%3AshowVizHome=n](https://www.gmtableau.nhs.uk/t/GMCA/views/DigitalExclusionRiskIndexv1_6/DERIhomepage?%3Adisplay_count=n%3Aembed=y%3AisGuestRedirectFromVizportal=y%3Aorigin=viz_share_link%3AshowAppBanner=false%3AshowVizHome=n)

## Evaluation Overview

### Evaluation aims

Our evaluation aimed to explore 1) what impact the project had and 2) what worked well and less well about our delivery. We have been using the 1-1 appointment model of delivery across our service for several years, so wanted to measure how effective it is and find out if and how we could improve it.

### Key evaluation questions

We set out the following key evaluation questions (KEQs) to guide our evaluation:

- To what extent was their demand for digital skills support?
- To what extent did the project improve the confidence of older adults in going online and using online services?
- Did ability improve alongside confidence?
- To what extent did using the internet to keep in touch reduce loneliness?
- What worked well?
- What barriers and challenges did we encounter?

### Evaluation activities

We used multiple methods of quantitative and qualitative data collection, pre- and post-support surveys and staff observation forms.

#### Pre-and post-support surveys

The surveys included 5-point Likert scale measurements of confidence in different areas of internet use, basic demographic information, and space for open-response feedback.

The surveys looked at confidence in 6 different areas: overall internet use, judging the truthfulness of content, spotting scams, keeping in touch, finding reliable information, and completing online transactions.

Respondents were asked to rate their confidence levels in each area on a scale from 'not at all confident' to 'very confident' with 3 options in between. They were first asked to report their confidence after having received support, then to report what their confidence levels were initially, before receiving support. Not all respondents answered every question in the survey, so the sample sizes for each area differ.

A total of 33 customers completed the survey. The majority (20 people) identified as women. 12 identified as men, and 1 person chose not to disclose their gender.

There was an even mix of age ranges amongst the survey respondents. 13 were between the ages of 55 to 64, 9 were 75 or older, and 8 were between the ages of 65 to 74.

The 4 customers who completed follow-up interviews were also survey respondents therefore are included in the counts above.

## Observation forms and quiz

The observation forms were designed so that staff could monitor a customer's progress in specific areas across multiple appointments. A quiz was created to directly measure ability in recognising scams.

## Follow-up interviews

Follow-up interviews were conducted with seven members of staff who had delivered sessions, and four customers who had received support. These interviews provided qualitative feedback through open-ended questions about their experience. We were not selective about which customers were interviewed. All customers who gave permission for follow-up were contacted for an interview and four agreed to participate.

## Evaluation limitations and challenges

We encountered many challenges with data collection which are detailed later in this report (see: '**Lessons Learned**'). Neither the staff observation forms, nor the quiz were successfully implemented, and we switched from pre- and post-support surveys to a single post-support survey. This decision was made to lessen the burden of data collection on staff and customers and increase engagement with the evaluation process.

As a result, we were unable to measure ability directly. Our findings are therefore based on self-reported levels of confidence and ability, which is a limitation because confidence and ability levels don't necessarily correlate. The survey also introduced recall bias by asking respondents to remember their feelings and behaviours before receiving support.

The surveys and interviews only represent a short to medium term impact. Long-term impact is not measured, which limits the extent to which we can test our theory of change.

Unfortunately, in October 2023 (8 months into the project) our survey data was lost due to a technological error. Our final sample size is therefore very small relative to the total number of people supported. We estimate over 125 individuals were supported across 392 sessions. This must be considered when weighing the external validity of our findings (i.e. to what extent our findings can be applied to other groups of older adults or settings).

# Findings

## Demand for Digital Support

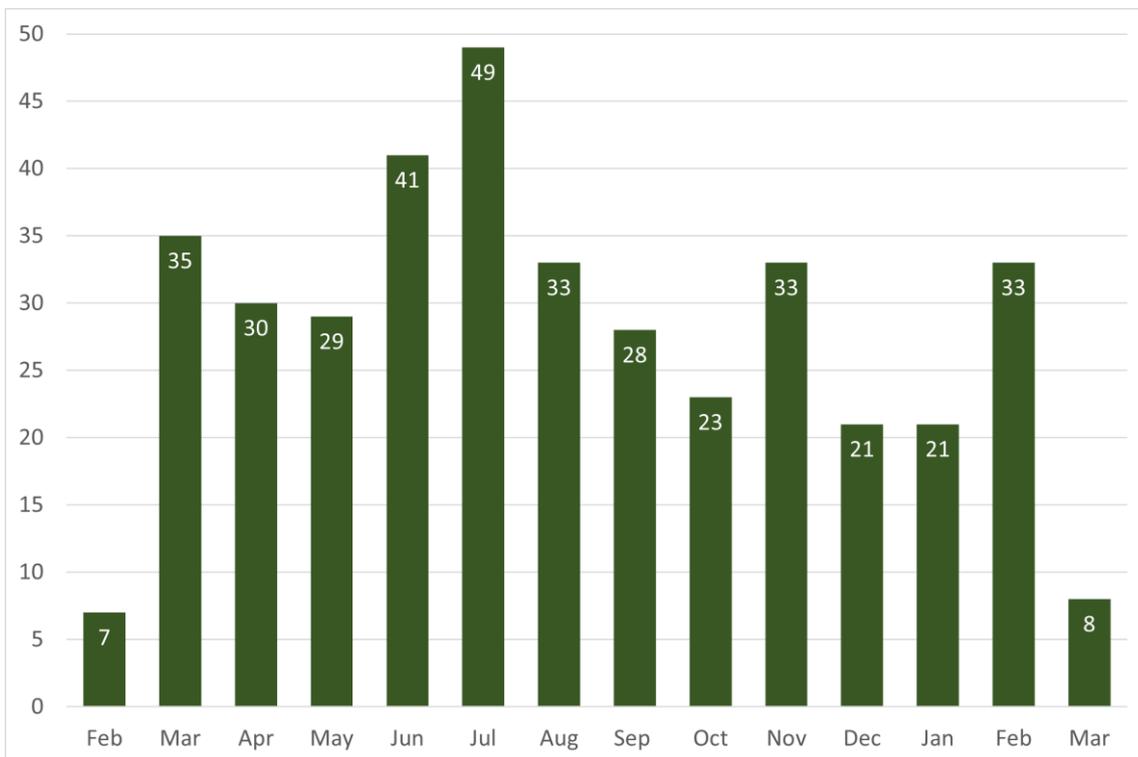
One of our Key Evaluation Questions was “to what extent was there demand for digital skills support?” Before this project we experienced what felt like a high demand for digital skills support from our customers. We wanted to confirm this and to better understand the extent of demand to improve our support. Getting a sense of how many people attend sessions when they are offered can help us decide how much staff/volunteer time to dedicate. Knowing what topics and themes are important can help us to develop our resources and training.

### Number of sessions delivered

392 sessions were held in total. Most sessions (83%) were 1 hour long. The busiest month was July with 49 sessions. A large majority (73%) of the sessions were booked as opposed to drop-in.

When asked what demand was like, all staff members thought that overall demand for the sessions was high and mentioned indicators for this including a wait time of multiple weeks when booking sessions, the need to expand the offer to a fourth location (Dersingham Library), and in a small number of cases offering support to 2 people at a time to meet demand.

Figure 1: Number of Sessions (n=392)



### Reasons for support

Staff were asked to classify each session by which of the three themes (Online, Safe or In Control) was most dominant. ‘Online’ was the dominant theme in a majority of sessions (61%). ‘In Control’

was the dominant theme in a small minority of sessions (29%). 'Safe' was the dominant theme in very few sessions (9%).

The fact that 'Online' (computer basics and accessing the internet) was the most dominant theme suggests that many people are starting from the beginning and need to learn the very basics. One customer said that what she found most helpful about the sessions was that they were suitable for a complete beginner. She mentioned that she had been referred to a computer skills course previously that was hosted online, so not accessible to her.

That 'Safe' was so rarely the dominant theme does not mean that online safety wasn't a common topic, but instead that it was easier to cover by integrating into other areas. This was confirmed by staff members.

Additional themes emerged that had not originally been considered distinct. Emphasising fun and enjoyment was mentioned as a method to motivate people. Leisure was also considered important for its own sake.

*"People don't realise they can use tech for fun, not just functionality." – Staff member*

Most staff members cited demand from customers to use apps and websites related to their hobbies and leisure interests. BBC Sounds was mentioned, as was Pinterest, YouTube, and our Library eBook and audiobook apps.

*"I'm now using my laptop for my leisure not just filling out forms. Because of the sessions, I'm even now confident enough to trace my family history at home." - Customer*

Employment was also mentioned as an unanticipated reason people sought help. For example, staff in Yarmouth mentioned that the closure of Wilko stores in October increased demand for support with online job seeking, to the point where they started seeing people in 2s and 3s.

One of the customers who completed a follow-up interview listed 'uploading their CV' and 'sending emails' as primary goals. They were signposted to us by an organisation that helps people with long-term health conditions stay in work. When asked why they came to the library for support, they said "I need someone to help me 1-1, which you can't get at the DWP".

In follow-up interviews almost all staff members mentioned examples of customers going on to get jobs or volunteering opportunities after receiving support.

Employment was not expected to be a significant outcome for this project. The fact that we set our lower age limit to 55 instead of 65 is a likely factor. That libraries are places where people already go to seek employment support could also be relevant.

## **Confidence Going Online and Using Online Services**

The project aimed to support older adults to feel more confident using the internet and different online services. We anticipated that this, alongside skills development, would lead to increased use and an overall improvement in attitudes toward digital skills and the digital world.

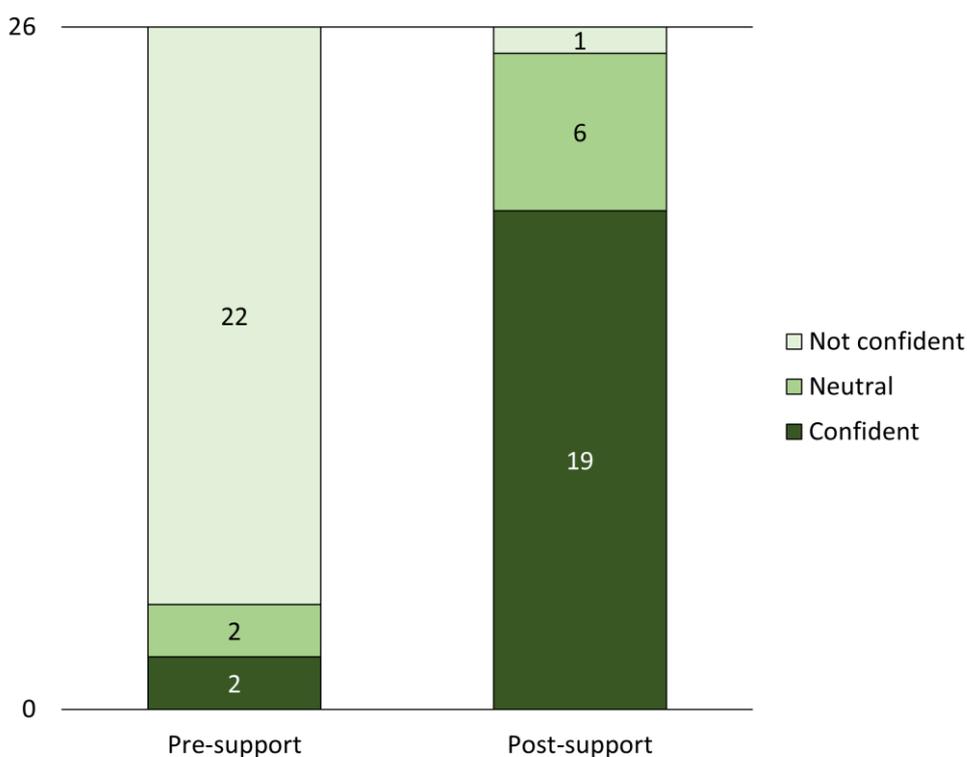
## Overall confidence in using the internet

Overall confidence before receiving support was low, with 22 out of 26 respondents saying they were 'not at all' or 'not very' confident in using the internet.

After receiving support:

- 24 out of 26 respondents reported increased confidence in using the internet.
- 9 reported a high increase (3 or more steps on 5-point Likert scale).
- 2 respondents reported no change in confidence.

Figure 2: Confidence in using the internet (n=26)<sup>7</sup>



In follow-up interviews, almost all participants and nearly half of staff members directly mentioned increased confidence resulting from the support.

*“These sessions have been enormously helpful and have given me more confidence using devices.” – Customer*

## Confidence in using the internet to keep in touch

Reducing social isolation is an important part of our strategy as a library service, and as such was considered a side aim of this project. According to Age UK, while loneliness affects people of all ages, older people are particularly vulnerable because of life circumstances like losing a partner, or

<sup>7</sup> Respondents were asked to describe their confidence using a 5-point Likert scale. For this and other charts in this report, these categories have been condensed for illustrative purposes.

the onset of illness and/or disability.<sup>8</sup> Digital exclusion can be a compounding factor in these circumstances.

The importance of online social connection was confirmed by how often it came up as topic in support sessions and interviews.

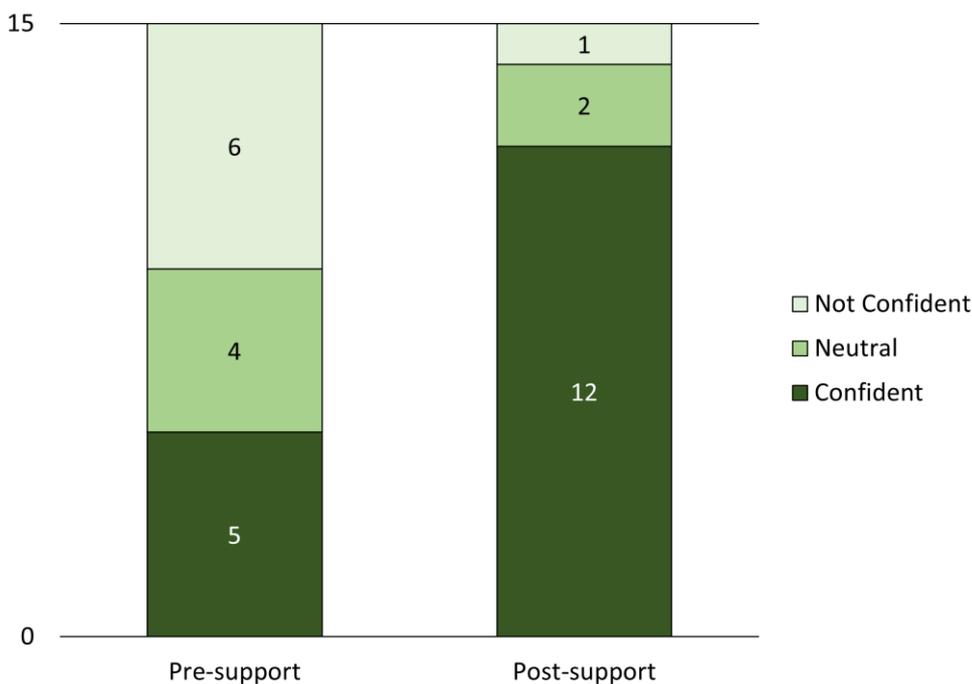
*“You can’t phone up anyone anymore half the time, which is a real pain... in learning I am not being isolated.” – Customer*

Before receiving support, confidence in using the internet to keep in touch with friends and family was mixed. 6 out of 15 people reported low confidence, 5 out of 15 reported some confidence and 4 felt neutral.

After receiving support:

- 8 out of 15 respondents reported increased confidence using the internet to keep in touch.
- 3 people reported a high increase (3 or more steps on the 5-point Likert scale), which is a lower proportion than in the other areas. The reason for this could be that the baseline confidence levels for keeping in touch were higher than in other areas, which suggests this is an area of internet use that older people are more likely to be familiar with.

Figure 3: Confidence in using the internet to keep in touch (n=15)



Reduced loneliness was mentioned as a positive outcome in most staff interviews, and in one of the customer interviews. This mostly involved teaching people to use emails and instant messaging to contact their family.

<sup>8</sup> Age UK. (2018). *All the Lonely People: Loneliness in Later Life*. [https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/loneliness/loneliness-report\\_final\\_2409.pdf](https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/loneliness/loneliness-report_final_2409.pdf)

*“One lady spoke Latvian, but her keyboard was set up in English. We were able to set up the keyboard on her tablet so that it could switch between Latvian and English. She is now emailing her family 3-4 times a week, more than previously.” – Staff member*

Staff spoke of getting to know customers and often speaking about things beyond the scope of the session. In this way the sessions themselves may have alleviated some loneliness.

*“I think sometimes they want to come in to talk to someone. Yes, it’s helping them with technology, but I think it’s so valuable for people who are isolated.” – Staff member*

Three staff members mentioned different examples where someone’s partner had passed away which had contributed to loneliness. In one case the partner had been the one who was handling all the digital life-admin, which then left the customer “stranded”. In sessions with this person staff went through how to manage his bills, his mobile contract and more.

One customer who was interviewed was not interested in learning to socialise online.

*“If I want to say something, I will say it. I don’t believe in text or social media. I think texting is quite rude.” – Customer*

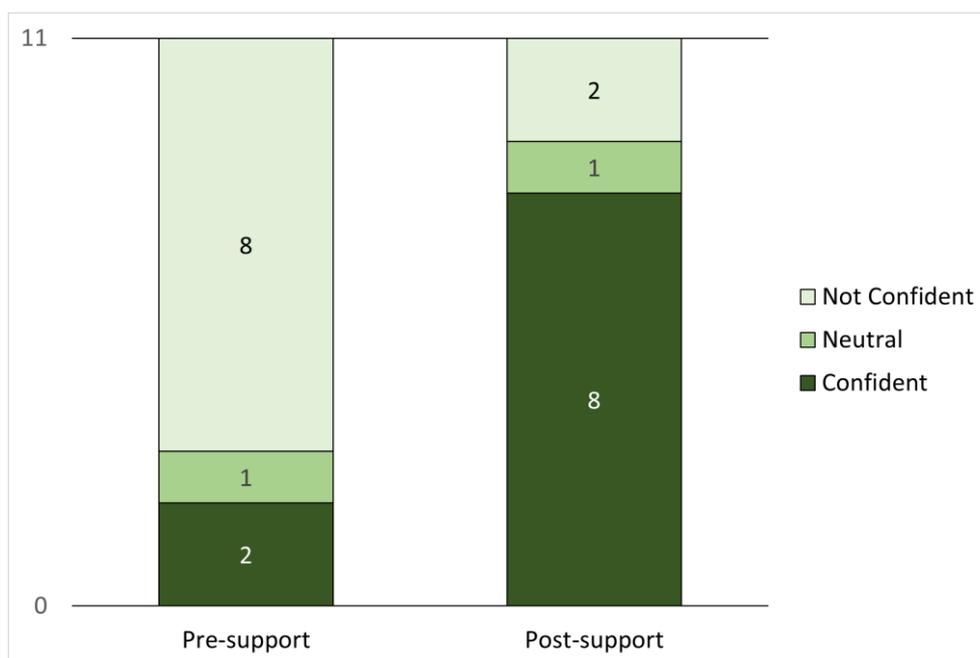
## **Confidence in online transactions**

Before receiving support, confidence in completing transactions like shopping and banking online was low, with only 2 out of 11 respondents reporting confidence in this area.

After receiving support:

- 6 out of 11 customers reported increased confidence in completing online transactions.
- 4 reported a high increase (3 or more steps on the 5-point Likert scale).
- 5 reported no change in confidence, which could indicate an area for improvement in our sessions but could also be because this is a more complex area with higher stakes. Making a mistake could be costly.

Figure 4: Confidence in using the internet to complete online transactions (n=11)



Our session guide for this area focused on tax and pensions, online shopping, and interacting with banks and utility companies. These were the areas that we thought were most important to living independently and where the need would be highest. We saw a range of positive outcomes, such as people with limited mobility being able to order their groceries, and people switching to paying their bills online.

*“A few weeks ago, I ordered something that didn’t arrive, so I managed to email and find out why the order hadn’t been delivered. I couldn’t have done this before.” - Customer*

Another topic that came up frequently in this area was travel, including buying travel tickets, using bus and train apps, and paying for parking.

*“I helped one customer learn to use the carparking app, where before she would call up her son to pay for her parking remotely on his phone each time she parked.” – Staff member*

### Improving ability – confidence in action

As explained above, we were unable to measure increased ability in a quantifiable way, however the interviews and open response questions did include specific mentions of increased ability.

*“In four sessions I went from not being able to navigate a PC at all to using the internet at my leisure.” - Customer*

Staff witnessed the people they were helping learning new skills, and we believe it is reasonable to assume that the increased confidence levels reflect this.

*“When she first started, she didn’t know how to turn the computer on. She didn’t know where to find the internet. She didn’t have an email. Now she’s logging into Learn My Way at home.” – Staff member*

## Confidence in Spotting Scams and Judging Online Content

The project aimed to, as a result of increased confidence and skills, improve online safety levels among older adults. We anticipated that this, in the longer-term, would lead to reduced stress levels, because knowledge of how to avoid scams and navigate the internet safely will reduce fear. This in turn will allow older adults to engage more with the online world.

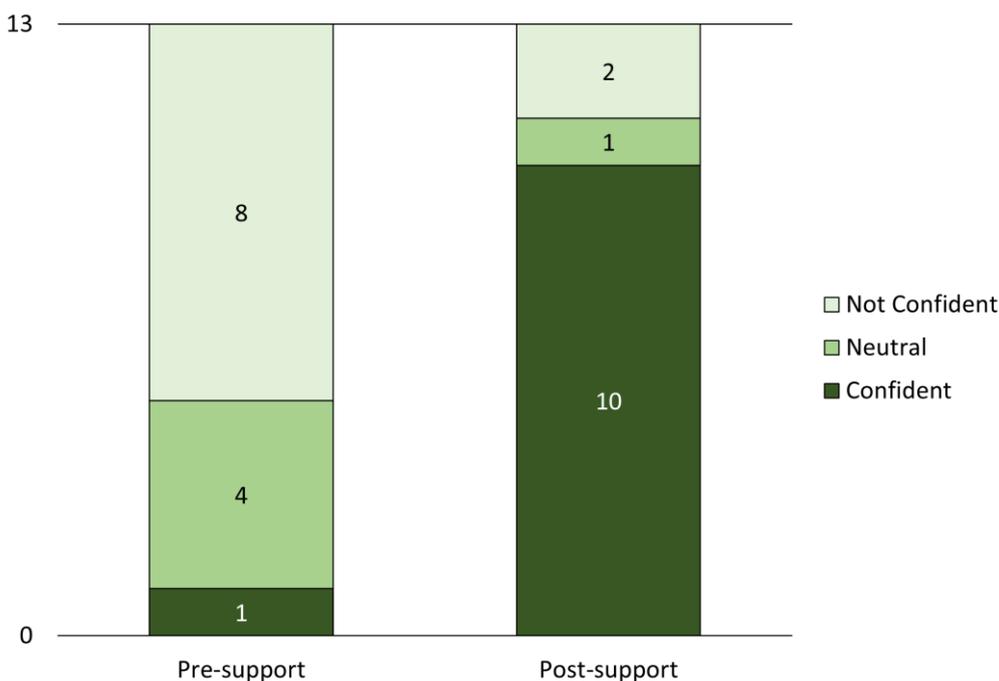
### Confidence in judging the truthfulness of online content

Before receiving support, confidence in judging the truthfulness of online content was very low, with only 1 out of 13 respondents reporting confidence in this area.

After receiving support:

- 11 out of 13 respondents reported increased confidence in judging whether what they see online is true or false.
- 7 reported a high increase (3 or more steps on the 5-point Likert scale).
- 2 people reported no change in confidence.
- Interestingly, 1 person reported a decrease in confidence from ‘Neutral’ to ‘Not at all confident’. This could be because increased awareness of mis- and disinformation has made them more wary, however it could also be that they mixed up the ‘before’ and ‘after’ question on the survey.

Figure 5: Confidence in judging the truthfulness of online content (n=13)



## Confidence in spotting online scams

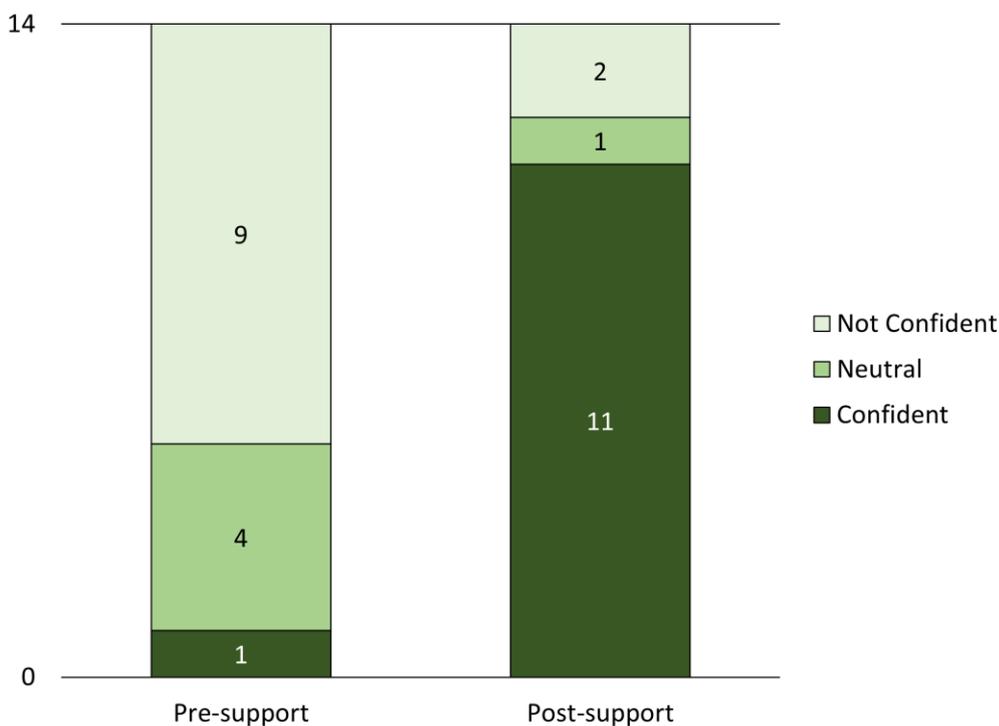
Anyone regardless of age can fall victim to online scams, however there is a perception that older people are more often targeted by scammers, both on and offline.

Before receiving support, confidence in spotting online scams was very low, with only 1 out of 14 respondents reporting confidence in this area.

After receiving support:

- 11 out of 14 reported an increase in confidence in spotting online scams.
- 7 reported a high increase (3 or more steps on the 5-point Likert scale).
- 2 reported no change.
- As in the previous outcome, the same person reported a decrease in confidence.

Figure 6: Confidence in spotting online scams (n=14)



Many customers were open about their fear of scams from the outset, but it was clear from their testimony that our support helped them to feel safer.

*"I've always been a bit worried about security, but I was reassured when I went to the library." - Customer*

Staff spoke of the fine line between raising awareness of scams and putting people off altogether. There is a balance to be struck to effectively empower people.

*"I don't want people to stop being cautious, just not to avoid it [the internet] like the plague." – Staff member*

## Confidence in finding reliable information

Information has never been easier to access, but not all information is accurate or reliable. Additionally, the sheer amount of information available online can make it difficult to find exactly what you are looking for. Being digitally excluded only makes this harder.

Our customers often express frustration in being unable to seek information from organisations in the traditional ways they are used to, for example in person or via telephone.

*“You can’t rely on the paper to find out what you need to know. You can’t go to the council office and ask anything because it’s always a performance.” – Customer*

Public libraries might be one of the few remaining places where you can phone up or walk-in and get help finding information straight away, which is why we are well-placed to help bridge this particular skills gap with our customers.

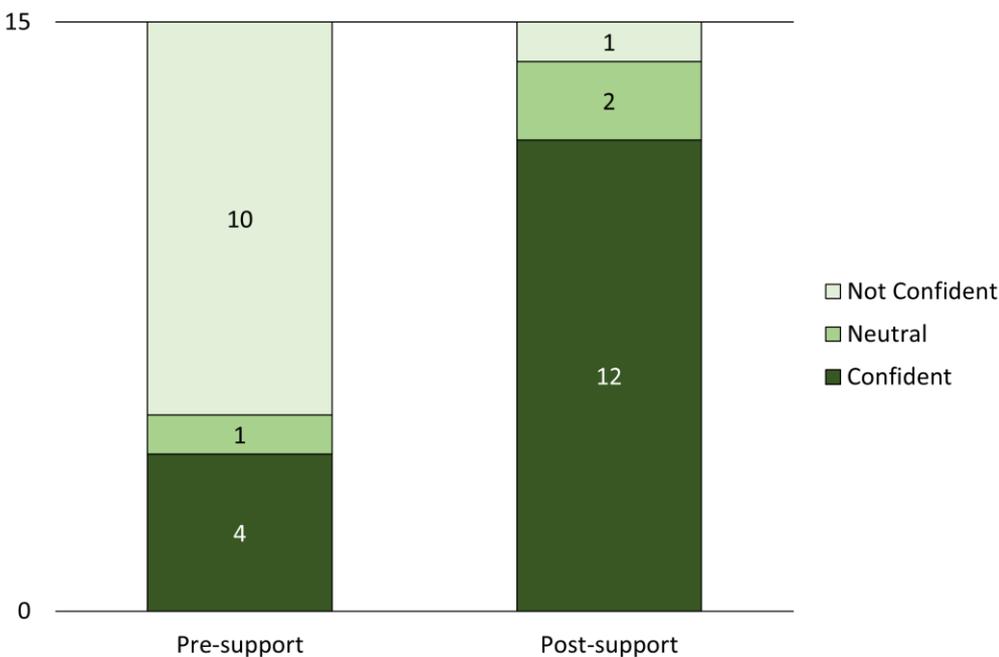
*“This is the only place I can go to... because I’ve got no family nearby.” - Customer*

Before receiving support, confidence in using the internet to find reliable information was low, with only 4 out of 15 respondents reporting confidence in this area.

After receiving support:

- 10 out of 13 respondents reported increased confidence in using the internet to find reliable information.
- 5 reported a high increase (3 or more steps on the 5-point Likert scale).
- 3 reported no change in confidence.

Figure 7: Confidence in using the internet to find reliable information (n=15)



While this seems like a positive result, this is an area, like spotting scams and judging the truthfulness of online content, where confidence does not always equate to ability. Our data would be stronger if we had been able to administer the quiz to test people’s decision-making process and ability to recognise both mis- and disinformation and harmful content.

## Increasing Use and Resilience

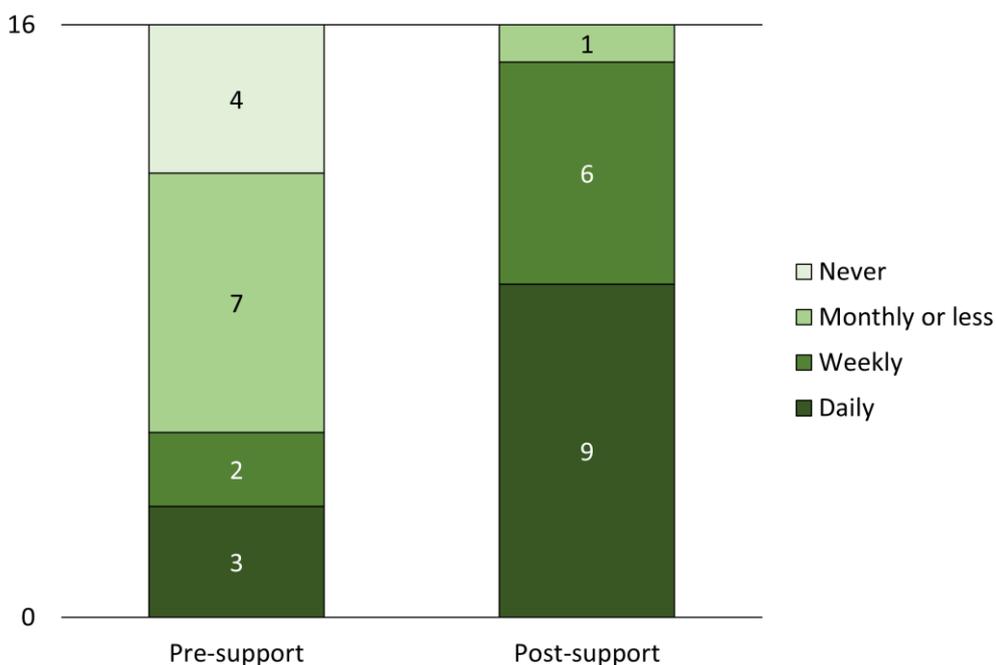
In addition to increasing confidence, increasing the frequency of internet use was a key part of our theory of change. Repetition is essential for learning new skills and building confidence – the more people use the internet the more their skills and confidence will improve. Using the internet more often also suggests increased resilience: the ability to persevere and recover from problems. We anticipated that these changes, in the longer-term, would lead to reduced loneliness, stress levels and increased independence, because older adults would use online services to manage essential life tasks and communicate more with friends and family.

Before receiving support, the frequency of internet use amongst respondents varied. Most (11 out of 16) used the internet less than once per month.

After receiving support:

- 11 out of 16 respondents reported increased frequency of internet use.
- 5 reported a high increase (3 or more steps on the 5-point Likert scale).
- 5 reported no change in how often they use the internet.

Figure 8: Frequency of internet use (n=16)



One indicator of resilience we observed in customers after receiving support was the ability to persevere when they encounter an obstacle.

*“If I’ve put the wrong password in, or not done it right, I’m confident in deleting it and trying again, where before I would panic. I don’t do that now.” – Customer*

Another indicator of resilience is whether someone knows where to ask for help or get further support and is motivated to do so. Staff established themselves as an ongoing source of support and worked to normalise help-seeking.

*“Actually, I look forward to having my learning session and when I come up against something I will make a note to ask at my next session.” – Customer*

## Lessons Learned

### What worked well for digital support?

The evaluation aimed to identify what approaches worked well in supporting older adults with digital media literacy. This section outlines three approaches: bookable sessions, 1-1 support, and dedicated resource.

Data is drawn from 4 participant interviews and 7 staff interviews.

#### Bookable sessions

Pre-booked sessions (73%) were more popular and easier to run than drop-in sessions (27%).

*“Generally, the people we were helping liked knowing they had an appointment.”  
– Staff member*

Bookable was identified as the preferred method by almost all staff members. The most common reason given for this was that it gives staff time to prepare.

*“Everyone’s device is slightly different so it’s nice to get a heads up about what kind of device they’re using.” – Staff member*

Another reason bookable was preferred is because it reduces the chance of no-shows. Some staff members mentioned holding drop-ins that no one showed up to, which is not a good use of our time and resource.

Several staff members also felt that drop-in sessions were not effective at reducing long-term support needs among customers, as their ‘single issue/fix’ focus could leave people reliant on staff for help with the same problems in the future.

#### 1 to 1 sessions

A couple of people mentioned the importance of having sessions be 1-1. 1-1 sessions made people feel valued and ensured support was person-centred and tailored to each individual.

*“The thing I liked about it most was that I didn’t have a whole classroom full of people also needing help because it’s very hard to get someone to show you something when they have a whole room of people that they have to take into consideration as well.” – Customer*

*“To go up the library and have someone pay attention to you for an hour I think is very good.” - Customer*

In addition to allowing customers to work at their own pace and tailoring the sessions to their specific needs, 1-1 sessions were important for protecting privacy. Sometimes people needed help finding reliable information about health conditions, or were applying for Universal Credit, or dealing with a legal matter. These contexts were not suitable for a group setting.

Another factor that made 1-1s more successful is that they were less formal and more relaxed. Being relaxed and comfortable is more conducive to learning, especially where there might be feelings of shame or fear to contend with.

There were a few occasions when customers were served in 2s or 3s, but only when they had agreed to this because they had very similar needs and the alternative was waiting longer for a session.

## **Dedicated staffing and resource**

We experience high demand for help with digital skills in our libraries from people of all ages. While supporting customers to use computers is a core responsibility for front-facing library staff, we struggle to provide the depth and duration of assistance that customers need. This is down to competing priorities (the wide range of services the library provides) combined with pressures on staffing. Many libraries are only single or double-staffed for much of the day.

Having the extra time and resource to run these sessions through this project made a huge difference on the depth of support we could provide. Almost all staff members mentioned the need for more resourcing to meet demand and the importance of having dedicated time to plan and deliver high quality support.

The ability to put in extra time also made the work more fulfilling for staff. Most staff members described taking part in this project as a positive experience.

*“I found it really rewarding. It’s satisfying to know you’ve helped someone to manage their daily life.” – Staff member*

*“When people ask what I do at my job, I’m really proud to mention that I get to help people improve their lives through digital skills.” – Staff member*

## **What were the challenges?**

In addition to what worked well, the evaluation aimed to identify challenges to delivering digital literacy support. The biggest challenges that emerged from the interviews were customer fear and motivation levels, the vast scale of the problem we were trying to address, and the implementation of data collection methods.

### **Fear and poor resilience**

Increased confidence and resilience were key outcomes of our support. The importance of these outcomes was reinforced by staff observations of how often fear and low confidence were significant barriers to using devices and the internet.

Low confidence was mentioned explicitly as a barrier by one participant that was interviewed, and most staff members.

*“Fear is a significant barrier. Being relaxed enough to play around and engage in trial and error is rare. People often give up at the first hurdle out of fear.” – Staff member*

*“Staff made the technology seem understandable. The internet is not scary anymore!” - Customer*

Fear of scams significantly impacts older people’s trust in digital technology<sup>9</sup> which is why support in this area is so important. If people continue to fear the internet, then they will not use it enough to achieve necessary positive outcomes in their lives.

## **Motivation and willingness to learn**

In addition to fear and low confidence, other attitudinal characteristics were described as barriers to learning. A lack of motivation was common, which often seemed to stem from a poor understanding of the relevance of digital technology to someone’s life. Staff came up with effective ways to address this, for example by asking customers to set goals or focus for their sessions in advance:

*“When I was booking them in, I would encourage them to write a list of anything that had happened previously or things they wanted explaining. When they didn’t have that focus it was hard to know where to begin... When they have come up with their own question, I feel they have found it more beneficial.” – Staff member*

It was also useful to find out about the person first, discover their likes and dislikes, and use these to get them interested. One staff member mentioned discovering that a customer was an avid cook and gardener, so began by showing them how to find recipes online and use Pinterest to find gardening inspiration.

The other attitudinal factor staff found challenging was whether someone was willing to engage in a learning process.

*“Staff enthusiasm is important, but the customer must be willing to learn.” – Staff member*

Customers increasingly seem to expect support on demand. This could be because people are more familiar with transactional relationships where they pay for a service to be done for them. It could also be that the tasks people need to complete, like applying for jobs or accessing healthcare, are so urgent that they don’t have the time or mindset to learn.

*“There’s always a high demand for digital support of any kind in our branch, however people are looking for instant gratification.” – Staff member*

## **The scale of the problem**

Perhaps the most substantial challenge described was the overall scale of the problem of digital exclusion and low engagement with digital technology. There are over a million digitally excluded older people in the UK and even more who are narrow or limited proxy users of the internet<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Re-engage. (2023). *The Unseen Price of a Scam: The impact of scams and fraud on isolated older people.* [https://www.reengage.org.uk/site/assets/files/80549/20231109\\_lr2\\_re\\_scam\\_report\\_20pp\\_final.pdf](https://www.reengage.org.uk/site/assets/files/80549/20231109_lr2_re_scam_report_20pp_final.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Lloyds Bank. (2023). *2023 Consumer Digital Index: The UK’s largest study of digital and financial lives.* [https://www.lloydsbank.com/assets/media/pdfs/banking\\_with\\_us/whats-happening/231122-lloyds-consumer-digital-index-2023-report.pdf](https://www.lloydsbank.com/assets/media/pdfs/banking_with_us/whats-happening/231122-lloyds-consumer-digital-index-2023-report.pdf)

If you've never used a computer before, the amount of information and practice you need to gain confidence is immense. It's a high cognitive load, requiring skills like problem solving, patience and flexibility. Like learning a new language, it takes time – quick fixes and short answers are not possible.

*“We've had some people who have been coming in to do Learn My Way for a year and they still haven't completed it.” – Staff member*

It's common knowledge that people need repetition to learn new things, and this is no different for digital literacy. Customers mentioned needing to go over topics multiple times and struggling to get on the computer often enough to practice.

*“The main thing I learnt was not to overload people with too much learning at once. Let them take their time and practice each thing multiple times.” – Staff member*

As mentioned above, there don't seem to be other organisations offering in-person 1-1 digital skills support in our area. This means that our service is bearing the brunt of the pressure to address this issue. We have a long way to go to make sure everyone in our community is digitally included.

## **Data collection**

As a service we had never collected data to this degree with customers. There was much trial- and-error involved. Staff mentioned difficulty engaging customers and felt that many were frustrated with the length of the surveys and the level of input required.

Almost half of staff members mentioned data collection methods not being in place from the beginning as a challenge. The same number also mentioned the overall burden of data collection, for example having multiple forms to juggle per customer, as being difficult. This was improved when we reduced the methods down to one survey for customers and one spreadsheet for recording session times and types.

## **What could be improved?**

Identifying what worked well and the challenges we encountered allowed us to consider what we can improve about the way we deliver digital literacy support in the future. This section outlines areas for improvement which were mentioned in interviews: developing staff confidence, increasing the quantity of support we offer, and reducing the burden of data collection.

### **Developing staff confidence**

We must ensure that staff are well supported in delivering digital skills support. Some staff members thought they could have used a bit more support, especially at the beginning. Others said they felt well-supported throughout.

While the staff members involved in this project had the necessary digital skills, this is not true for all staff in the library service. Some branches only had one or two staff members who were willing and able to deliver sessions.

Library staff are expected to be diversely skilled, for example they are expected to read stories, sing songs, help people to use computers and be accountable for signposting people to other services. We can't expect all staff members to have such diverse skill sets, however libraries are often staffed by only one or two people at a time.

Some staff members brought up discomfort or nervousness they felt when helping customers with 'higher stakes' tasks around banking or healthcare. In these instances, it helped to clarify the expectation that staff are not offering advice on what services to use, rather they are helping people to access information from known reliable sources, as well as providing tools to think critically about services and information people encounter online.

We can further support staff and develop their skills and confidence by:

- offering more training and opportunities to refresh training more often.
- expanding and developing resources (like the one-page guides we used for this project).
- clarifying boundaries and expectations for our digital support that are consistent across the service.

## Increasing the quantity of support

High demand for digital skills coupled with the scale of the problem of low engagement with digital technology means that we could and should offer more digital literacy support to our customers. More support is necessary to achieve the long-term positive outcomes we identified in our theory of change, and to contribute to wider societal change.

*“Digital inclusion needs to be a daily thing, available on request to make it easier for people to engage who have busy lives and/or unpredictable schedules. This isn't possible with current resourcing and staff capacity.” – Staff member*

Increased support could take the form of:

- More regular 1-1 sessions
- Integrating digital support into other activities, for example Job Clubs
- Trialling small group sessions with 2-3 customers

## Reducing the burden of data collection

As detailed in the previous section, we were inexperienced in this level of data collection, and it took us a while to finalise our methods. Not only did we end up making changes in the middle of the project, but we also experienced a loss of data due to technical issues.

Staff and customer buy-in is essential for collecting data. Staff reported that both they and customers were struggling with the length of the surveys.

We can improve data collection by:

- having methods in place before delivery begins.
- reducing the number of questions we are trying to answer.
- keeping surveys as short and simple as possible.

## Conclusion and Ideas for Action

Between February 2023 and March 2024, Norfolk Library and Information Service held 392 digital literacy support sessions for older people. Our primary aim was to increase engagement with digital technology by improving skills and confidence levels.

We were successful on multiple counts:

- We delivered a high volume of support sessions, especially relative to the support we were offering previously.
- Across each area of confidence measured, at least half of respondents reported an increase in their confidence levels.
- We observed positive outcomes in areas including employment, social connection, personal independence, and financial autonomy.
- We learned what works well and what we can improve about our delivery.

## Summary of Findings

### To what extent was their demand for digital skills support?

392 sessions were held in total. Most sessions (83%) were 1 hour long. The busiest month was July with 49 sessions. A large majority (73%) of the sessions were booked as opposed to drop-in.

When asked what demand was like, all staff members thought that overall demand for the sessions was high and mentioned indicators for this including a wait time of multiple weeks when booking sessions, the need to expand the offer to a fourth location (Dersingham Library), and in a small number of cases offering support to 2 people at a time to meet demand.

This level of demand more than justifies the need to continue offering digital literacy support in our libraries and to expand our provision to as many branches as possible.

### To what extent did the project improve the confidence of older adults in going online and using online services?

Overall, 24 out of 26 respondents reported increased confidence in using the internet. In each area of confidence measured, at least half of respondents reported an increase in confidence:

- **Increased confidence using the internet to keep in touch:** 8 out of 15 respondents
- **Increased confidence in completing online transactions:** 6 out of 11 respondents
- **Increased confidence in judging whether what they see online is true or false:** 11 out of 13 respondents
- **Increased confidence in spotting online scams:** 11 out of 14 respondents
- **Increased confidence in using the internet to find reliable information:** 10 out of 13 respondents
- **Increased frequency of internet use:** 11 out of 16 respondents

## **Did ability improve alongside confidence?**

Improved ability emerged as a theme in the qualitative interviews with staff and customers, however we were unable to measure this in a quantifiable way. Staff directly observed customers abilities improving and some customers self-reported improved knowledge and abilities. Examples of what customer's started to do included but were not limited to:

- navigating the internet
- performing a search for information
- accessing, sending and organising emails
- completing transactions online
- using the internet for new purposes, like travel and leisure

We believe that in most areas it is reasonable to assume that increased confidence will correlate to increased ability, however there are some areas, for example recognising scams and misinformation, where it would be better to have a quantifiable measure of ability, like a quiz.

## **To what extent did using the internet to keep in touch reduce loneliness?**

8 out of 15 respondents reported increased confidence in using the internet to keep in touch with friends and family, and the importance of online social connection came up frequently in interviews. Reduced loneliness was mentioned as a positive outcome in most staff interviews, and in one of the customer interviews.

The data suggests that reduced loneliness is achieved as an outcome of our support both via the digital tools customers learn to use and directly via social contact with staff who are friendly and open to getting to know the people they are supporting. This highlights an additional benefit to holding sessions in person and dedicating more time and resources to this kind of support.

## **What worked well in supporting older adults with digital media literacy?**

Approaches that worked well in supporting older adults with digital media literacy during this project included offering bookable sessions, having sessions be 1-1, and generally having the dedicated time and resources to offer more in-depth support.

Bookable sessions were more popular than drop-ins with both staff and customers because they offer more control, ability to plan and a guarantee that support will be available. 1-1 sessions were successful because they can be adapted for the individual needs of each customer, and they are more relaxed than group settings, which are associated with a more stressful classroom environment. The dedicated funding for this project allowed staff to offer much deeper support, where before they would struggle to offer more than a couple minutes at a time while balancing other tasks and demands.

## **What barriers and challenges did we encounter?**

The main barriers and challenges we encountered were customer fear and motivation levels, the vast scale of the problem we were trying to address, and the implementation of data collection methods.

Attitudes to technology including fear and low motivation were challenges because they made customers less receptive to learning and deterred them from practicing independently, which is key to developing skills and confidence.

The scale of the problem encompasses both the number of people who need support and the level of time and support that is needed to learn. Learning to use devices and the internet is a heavy cognitive load, akin to learning a new language. It takes time and there are no shortcuts.

The level of data collection required for this project was new territory for our service and a new experience for staff members. This challenge was worthwhile because it taught us new skills and improved our understanding of evaluation methods which we can apply to future projects and activities.

## **Ideas for Action**

Without increased funding we cannot sustain the level of support that we have delivered through this project, however there are measures we can take to improve our digital literacy offer. The following are concrete ideas for action for our service to consider. These are directly informed by our findings and the conclusions outlined in 'Lessons Learned' above.

### **Idea #1: Create a dedicated toolkit for delivering digital skills support sessions in Norfolk Libraries**

A toolkit will facilitate the scaling-up of digital support across our service and ensure that support is efficient and consistent for customers. It will provide structure for teams who experience demand for digital literacy support, but don't know where to begin or how to maximise their capacity.

The toolkit should include information that helps branches make decisions about who should deliver support (volunteers, staff members or both) and the different forms support can take (1-1 sessions, integration with existing events, small group sessions etc). It should include signposting to both essential and optional/extra training opportunities for staff. It should also include standard promotional assets for social media and other forms of publicity.

### **Idea #2: Prioritise the recruitment of 'Digital Champion' volunteers**

Library branches struggle to deliver digital literacy support because of pressures on staffing. Staff have a wide range of duties and tasks to keep on top of, and many branches are only staffed by one or two people at a time, which limits the attention that can be paid to any one individual.

Several branches have successfully recruited Digital Champion volunteers who provide support in a very similar way to this project. Library managers working with the Digital Inclusion Coordinator and the Volunteer Coordinator should renew efforts to recruit volunteers, especially in locations where this option hasn't been explored recently.

### **Idea #3: Continue to seek partnerships and funding**

Digital inclusion is a topic with expanding currency and recognition in the public sphere. Increasing numbers of organisations nationally are working to address digital exclusion, as services transition to 'digital by default' and digital access is correctly understood as being essential, not a luxury. Norfolk Library and Information Service should continue to seek funding opportunities and partnerships because this is an issue that is highly relevant to our purpose and values.

## Appendix A

### Theory of Change for Improving Older Adults' Online Media Literacy

#### Defining the problem

*The problem is low engagement with digital and online information/services from older people.*

*The factors that contribute to this are systemic (including cost, inadequate infrastructure, availability of education) and personal (including fear of online harms, lack of interest, low confidence).*

*The consequences of low engagement with the digital world include decreased confidence and lack of essential life skills, increased vulnerability to scams/fraud due to lack of awareness of online dangers, and increased loneliness and isolation due to lack of connectivity.*

#### What will we do?

*We will host regular digital skills support sessions focused on three themes: getting online, staying safe and taking control. Sessions will include drop-ins and bookable 1-1s to offer both one-off and in-depth support. We will create guides with relevant information and signposting resources to support our facilitators.*

#### What difference will we make?

*If customers improve their digital skills and knowledge, they will be more confident using their devices and accessing the internet, therefore they will do it more.*

*Increased use will lead to more regular use which will further improve confidence. This confidence will empower people to ask for help when they identify problems and improve their attitudes towards the digital world.*

*If customers regularly and safely use devices and the internet, this will lead to positive life outcomes. For example, loneliness will be reduced because customers will be more socially connected online. Stress levels will be reduced because they will be more resilient to potential online harm and experience it less.*

#### How could these differences contribute to wider societal change?

*Customers will be part of an older generation that engages better in the digital world, is more digitally connected, and is more resilient to online harm.*