



ConnectingU with Confidence

Bridging the gap
with digital media
literacy skills



Evaluation report



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Executive Summary

Project Background

Ofcom commissioned AbilityNet's 'ConnectingU with Confidence' project to enhance media literacy skills among disabled individuals in Birmingham. This collaborative effort involved multiple organisations and charities addressing the challenges faced by their beneficiaries.

Prior partnership projects and digital exclusion research had identified the lack of confidence and skills amongst the residents of ExtraCare villages with 65% noting a lack of confidence with technology and 59% of staff asked to support with tech at least once a week.

AbilityNet's intervention involved developing and running three training modules across seven different residential villages and resource centres. From a gentle and basic 'Intro to technology' through to 'scam awareness' and the final session aimed at achieving at least one new digital skill. The project aimed to upskill 200 residents across 45 group sessions, providing 30 devices to those in need, and leveraging local volunteer teams.

To validate the methodology, a pilot program was undertaken in one village, followed by an iterative review and enhancement before full-scale implementation. A key learning from the pilot identified a lower starting point in terms of media literacy competency than anticipated. This enabled the training to be adapted to suit the learners more effectively. In addition, new and existing partner relationships were leveraged to increase the number of training venues and learners, and add more volunteer support to the sessions.

Findings

Residents supported reported a wide range of impairments, with Learning and Mobility identified amongst a third of those attending. Pre-surveys highlighted the concern about scams and a lack of confidence to spot them was prevalent with 60% worried about being scammed and 61% not confident to spot scams.

Seven out of eight of the outcome targets were met or exceeded, with the only slight shortfall in the number of residents trained falling just shy of the 200 target at 183.

Evaluation showed that all attendees saw significant improvement in their ability and confidence to use their devices, alongside an increase in the frequency of use. Overall, 98% of residents reported feeling more knowledgeable about technology after the sessions.

The interactive scam awareness sessions have led to a notably positive change in media literacy skills with 97% rating their ability to stay safe online as 'average,' 'good,' or 'excellent.' However, despite these improvements, concerns about being

scammed remain. It's possible that the training has heightened awareness of the methods scammers may employ, leading residents to remain apprehensive about the possibility of falling victim, with almost two-thirds still expressing concern.

The project brought about lifestyle and mental health benefits as residents identified their increased ability to participant online, find deals, watch entertainment, and connect with family and friends. The training, sometimes coupled with a new or more suitable device and connectivity, led to half of the residents feeling less isolated and 78% feeling more independent.

Training 33 staff through three online interactive staff training sessions saw staff at the villages feel more knowledgeable around tech and motivated to support residents on an on-going basis.

Volunteers were crucial in providing the intensive one to one support identified as part of the pilot. The project utilised a blend of existing local AbilityNet Tech Volunteers, 11 newly recruited volunteers, and a contingent from a corporate partner relationship with Capgemini.

Lessons learned

Key success factors include leveraging partnerships with those who have an existing relationship with the intended learners and with whom you share a common media literacy strategy goal to strengthen the impact. Truly understanding your learner cohort through thorough data gathering and pilot phases further increases the chance of success by enabling truly bespoke training.

Conclusions and next steps

Overall, the Ofcom commissioned project has been a great success providing vital media literacy skills that enable disabled people to thrive in the evermore essential digital world. Support for residents should not end here. Continued access to assistance from AbilityNet's free services will be essential to maintain the positive momentum in acquiring new skills. This ongoing necessity is highlighted by the fact that even as the project concludes, one-third of residents still require digital skills support, and 62% remain apprehensive about scams. AbilityNet's publicly available helpline and volunteer support will serve as a dependable and sustainable resource for residents and staff, both presently and in the future.

This commissioned project's success has paved the way for wider implementation providing a blueprint that has already opened doors and approaches to introducing this support in other areas.

However, consistent funding and government support are essential to address the significant need for media literacy training nationwide. Without these resources, only a fraction of the problem can be addressed.

Background

Ofcom Initiate

Ofcom commissioned AbilityNet's 'ConnectingU with Confidence' project to enhance media literacy skills among disabled individuals in Birmingham.

Making Sense of Media is Ofcom's programme of work to help improve the online skills, knowledge and understanding of UK adults and children. This project was one of thirteen projects commissioned in December 2022 to improve media literacy skills across four cohorts:

- Older adults
- People living with disabilities, learning disabilities or cognitive impairment
- Children and young people
- Communities experiencing financial disadvantage

The partnership – a collaborative approach

The project involved a collaborative effort, with multiple organisations and charities coming together to address media literacy challenges among their respective beneficiaries in the Birmingham area.

AbilityNet – Project Lead. A charity with 25+ years experiencing supporting older people and disabled people with technology and ensuring the digital world is accessible to all.

ExtraCare - The ExtraCare Charitable Trust is a registered charity established in 1988. With a vision to create better lives for older people through providing homes older people want, lifestyles they can enjoy, and care if it's needed. They develop new retirement villages, operate villages and schemes, and support locations through fundraising, advocacy and research.

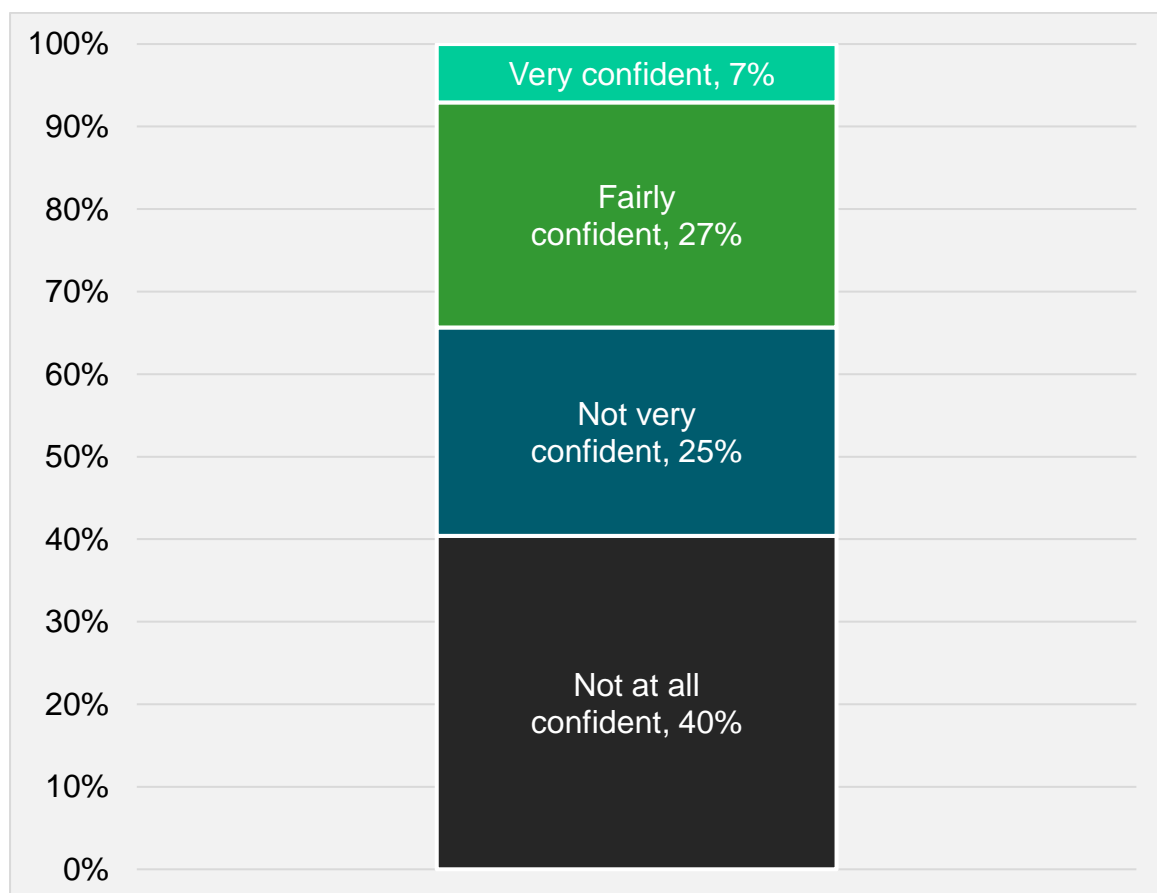
Birmingham County Council - Heartlands and Midland Mencap – All centres offer personalised support to adults who have health and mobility support needs, including dementia and learning disabilities. Day Care offers a personalised approach supporting wellbeing and independence through the development of friendships, reducing isolation and offering a wide range of activities and opportunities that promote increased quality of life.

Southern Housing – One of the largest housing providers in the UK with more than 78,000 homes across the Midlands, London, the Southeast, and the Isle of Wight, giving over 167,000 people, somewhere affordable to call their own. Ranging from traditional social housing to shared ownership, affordable rent, private market rent, student accommodation, care and support or outright sales, they offer a range of services. Their vision is to create communities where everyone has a safe home in a place where they're proud to live.

Identifying the problem

Prior partnership projects and digital exclusion research conducted by ExtraCare revealed that residents were less inclined to use online platforms, lacked confidence, and possessed low levels of media literacy skills. Village staff expressed significant concern that residents were susceptible to being deceived into sharing personal information or signing up for dubious offers. Research showed that 65% of residents are not at all or not very confident with technology (see chart below).

Chart: Confidence of residents with tech. Source - ExtraCare research in March 2020 based on 1672 residents



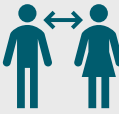
A staff survey conducted by ExtraCare in 2021 underscored the heightened demand for digital support within the residential villages.



59% of staff are asked for tech help at least once a week.



50% of staff suggested group sessions would be of benefit.



88% of staff said 1:1 support would be beneficial too.



"In my opinion residents need a lot of reassurance. They feel unsure of technology." (ExtraCare staff member)



ExtraCare's Research and Technology Lead

Kerry Stack worked closely with AbilityNet for many months to raise awareness of what support and services they could offer residents across the retirement villages, before ultimately rolling out the 'ConnectingU with Confidence' Project.

"We all know the internet is such a huge part of everyday life now, with so many day-to-day tasks being done online. Whether that be transferring money between bank accounts, or catching up with old friends on social media, the digital world has taken over! However, unfortunately not everybody

is educated on how to navigate a website and above all, online safety, which can have detrimental consequences. ExtraCare and the team at AbilityNet came together with the same goal and focus, and that was for our residents to become more comfortable with technology, leading to the Ofcom Project!"

"at ExtraCare we feel it is our duty to educate not only our residents, but our staff as well, to the risks they may face online. Recently we have been very fortunate to have the help of the amazing volunteers at AbilityNet!"

(Extract from ExtraCare blog published Feb 2024. [Read the full ExtraCare blog here.](#))

ConnectingU with Confidence

AbilityNet's 25 years' experience in the digital inclusion landscape, coupled with the insight from ExtraCare, highlighted that tailored, in-person support in an environment that the beneficiary feels most comfortable, at the pace they need, proves the most impactful. AbilityNet provided a series of three interactive group sessions starting from a basic intro to tech, through to scam awareness and finishing with a layer of digital skills.



Images of the promotional materials to invite residents to the media literacy sessions.

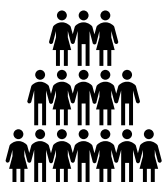
The lack of suitable devices was addressed via an AbilityNet bank of gifted tablet devices. The initial plan was for sessions to take place across five ExtraCare residential villages in the Birmingham area.

Investing in local volunteer recruitment provided added support for the most intense training needs and provided longevity to support after the initial intervention period had ended. Additionally, an online portal was devised to offer staff and residents access to supplementary resources and links on an on-going basis.

To validate the methodology, a pilot program was planned in one village, followed by an iterative review and enhancement before full-scale implementation across the remaining four villages. Progress and impact were assessed using the evaluation framework outlined in the Appendix.

The project aimed to support ...

200 residents



45 group sessions



3 modules



30 devices



Evaluation

AbilityNet conducted an evaluation to assess the effectiveness of the project, focusing on identifying successful aspects, areas for improvement, and the overall impact.

To ensure thorough testing of both the evaluation process and training program, a pilot phase was integrated into the project timeline, implemented in a residential village in March 2023, prior to the full rollout in July 2023.

The evaluation aimed to answer the following key evaluation questions.

- Were residents better able to use their tech and undertake tasks online?
- Were residents more knowledgeable and confident to identify scams and misinformation online?
- Were staff more knowledgeable and confident about digital skills, accessibility and scams?
- Were local volunteers active, engaged and confident in supporting residents?

An evaluation framework was created to outline which outcomes would be measured to answer the above key evaluation questions, and how they would be measured. (See appendix)

The primary data collection methods employed a pre-training and post-training survey approach. The pre-survey was administered to each resident to establish their baseline skills, objectives, and demographic information. Subsequently, a post-survey conducted after the completion of the three training sessions gauged the extent of skill development, knowledge acquisition, confidence levels and any lifestyle changes. Complementing the surveys, observations by trainers and interviews provided additional insight and context.

Separate surveys and interviews were conducted with staff and volunteers to assess the impact of the training and support on their skills and confidence levels, particularly in their ability to assist residents going forward.

Given resource constraints, the evaluation tools needed to strike a balance between manageability and robustness. Challenges in survey completion among residents were addressed by providing support mechanisms from trainers and volunteers, as well as integrating survey completion into the training sessions to encourage participation.

Sample sizes and matching:

Results are based on analysis of 144 (79% response rate) benchmark pre-surveys and 113 (62% response rate) post surveys.

Note: From registration stats and trainer feedback it is calculated that 86% of participants completed the 3 training sessions, therefore it has been assumed the majority of pre and post respondent surveys match.

Pilot phase

Early on the idea of a pilot phase was discussed to test out the training formats, promotion and comms, survey mechanisms and also glean extra in-depth knowledge of the target audience. This pilot phase played a vital role in gaining comprehensive insights into the residents, staff, and the environment, as well as in testing training content and formats, and determining the most effective method for evaluation feedback.

Key findings from the pilot phase:

Note: these findings are based on the small pilot phase sample of 18 residents.

- Residents' initial level of digital skill was lower than anticipated, with 12 of the 18 (67%) rating their ability to use their devices as poor or very poor.
- There was more resistance to going online than initially expected. Encouraging attendance at sessions proved challenging, possibly due to residents' low digital skills, fear of appearing incompetent in front of peers, and concerns about online safety. There were 12 of the 18 (67%) who rated their ability to stay safe online as poor or very poor, while the rest rated it as average. Additionally, 9 of the 18 (50%) expressed worries about being scammed, and even more 12 of the 18 (67%) were concerned about forgetting passwords, with half i.e. 9 of the 18 concerned about sharing information with the wrong person.
- Despite many residential villages having goals and strategies to enhance digital inclusion, staff were often stretched thin balancing these efforts with their day-to-day responsibilities, resulting in lower-than-expected levels of communication and support from staff.

Several changes were made following the pilot:

- The introductory session would focus on emphasising the benefits of being online to spark interest and motivation among participants.
- Training would centre on the residents' desired goals, avoiding technical terms like 'digital' and instead focusing on activities such as 'watching their favourite TV show' or 'chatting with distant family members.'
- Based on the pre-survey results, which showed preference to learn about video calls, online shopping, email and messaging, support would be customised around these topics.
- Content for the second session, focusing on identifying scams, was refined and simplified. Complex terms like 'phishing' and 'pharming' were found to be more confusing than educational. Sessions were adapted to be more interactive, featuring real-life examples to illustrate what to watch out for. Additionally, 'scam certificates' and takeaway materials were introduced to enhance participant engagement and as an on-going reminder to think before they click.



“I’ve been to various training sessions for care related activities and find them boring, but he (AbilityNet Trainer) allows us to take part in discussion and it’s not one way traffic.” Resident who attended the sessions after the pilot.

- Volunteer and trainer support received a significant boost in response to the evident need for one-on-one assistance for residents. This was facilitated through a corporate partnership with Capgemini, whose staff contributed to the sessions as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) program.
- To ensure the achievement of learner targets, additional partners were identified in the area to fill gaps in coverage for ExtraCare villages unable to host sessions within the designated timeframe. New partnerships formed with Birmingham County Council facilitated involvement from Midland Mencap and Southern Housing. As a result, a total of 7 venues were included in the project.
- Survey formats were simplified to encourage and assist with completion, text size and response selection was made more visual. Completion also took place as part of the introductory session to ensure sample sizes were maximised.

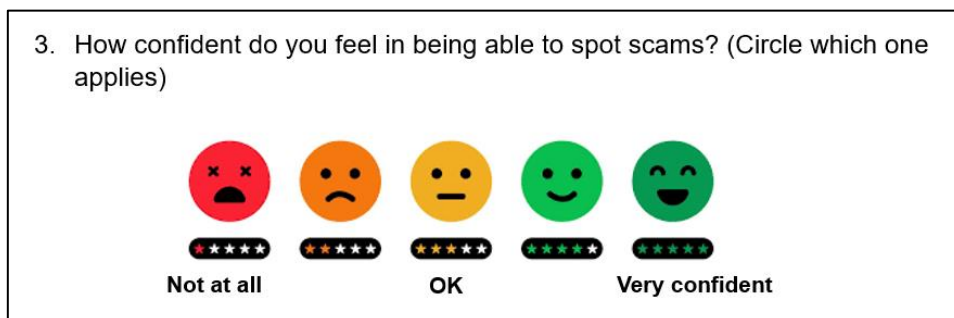


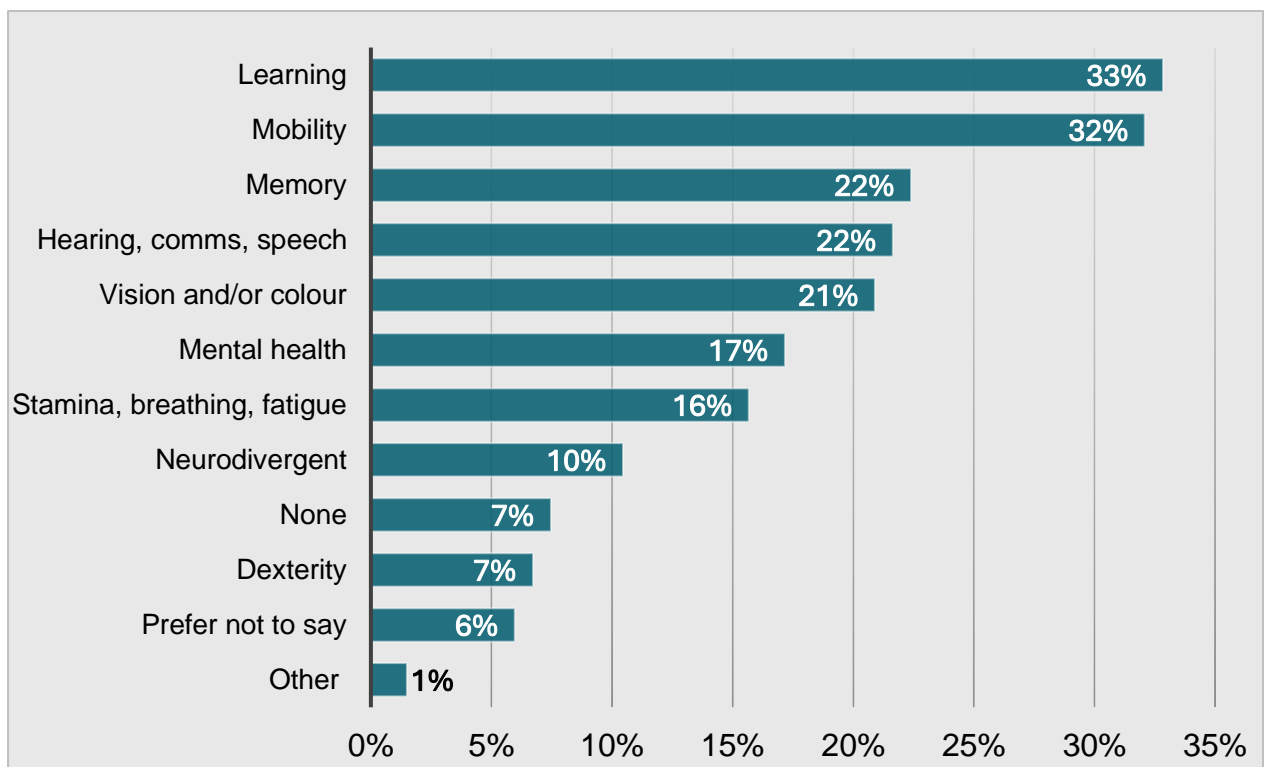
Image of pictorial Likert scale used for the survey.

Findings

Participants

Participants were disabled residents at villages plus day visitors to resource centres supporting adults with Learning Disabilities. A wide range of impairments were supported as shown below.

Chart: Breakdown of impairments (based on 134 respondents)



Significantly more females were supported, and half of all participants were aged over 65, 31% over 75.

Gender ratios are reflective of residential profiles from ExtraCare which show a higher proportion of residents are female, rather than a reflection of more females attending the sessions.

Chart: Breakdown of gender (based on 139 respondents)

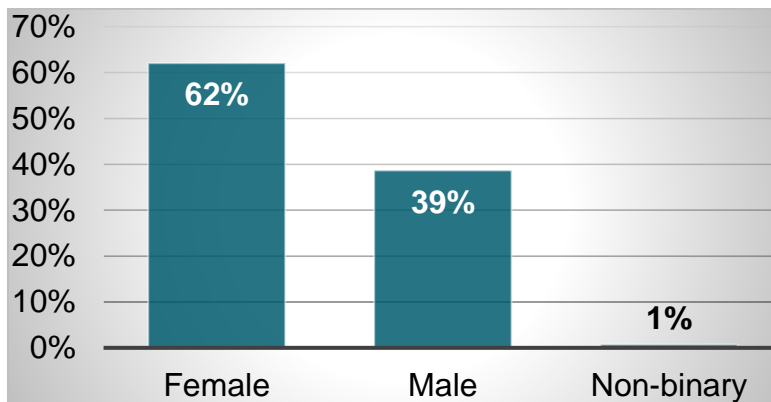
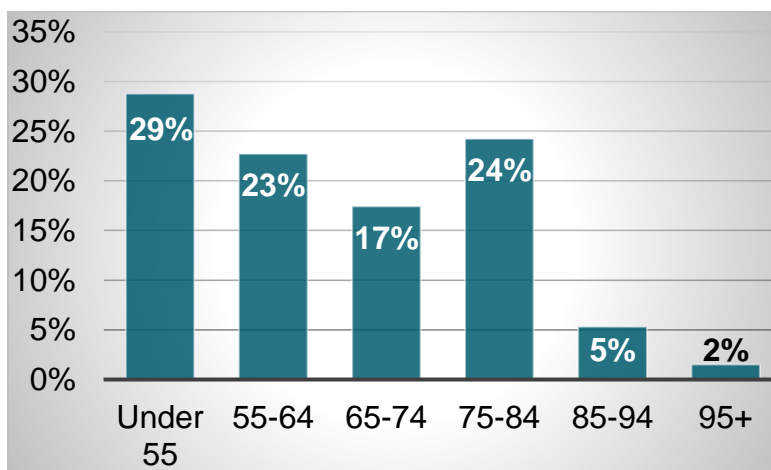


Chart: Breakdown of age (based on 132 respondents)



Disabled residents across the villages/locations benefitted from the training sessions and support. The older people were, the more worried they were about being online, and started the journey with a lower skill level.

39% of those aged 75+ rated their ability to use their device as very poor, compared to an overall figure of 21%. Similarly, 82% of them said they were worried about being scammed, compared to 61% overall. 54% noted that they wouldn't know where to go for help if they got stuck with their tech, compared to 40% overall.

“Some residents are scared of modern technology and put themselves at risk by using less secure ways to send/receive information.” **Vicki Banks Activity and Volunteer Organiser at ExtraCare Panel Croft**

Attendees of the resource centres for learning disabilities exhibited higher confidence in their digital skills, with 70% rating their ability to use their devices as average or above, compared to the overall figure of 56% for the full sample size.

Moreover, they expressed much less concern about being scammed, with only 30% noting this as a worry, compared to 61% overall.

However, through these pre-surveys, session facilitation, and communication with care workers, it became apparent that this higher confidence also posed challenges. Participants' increased trust in information and communication made them more susceptible to being duped, raising concerns about their vulnerability to exploitation.



“My name is Declan, I come to Heartlands to see my friend Harjeet. I have an Xbox, and use Facebook, but I keep forgetting my passwords, so I have 5 Facebook accounts.” **Citizen from Birmingham County Council Day Centre**

Summary of digital use and barriers before the intervention

- **Most residents were already using a device most days** (64%), although 16% were very low users at less than once a month.
- **Popular digital pastimes centred around communication and entertainment** - messaging (45%), email (38%), social media (34%) and video/TV (34%). 42% wanted to be able to video call or online shop by the end of the sessions.
- **Large percentages had a low view of their digital skills.** A third rated their tech ability as ‘average’, with another 44% saying they were poor or very poor when it came to digital ability.
- **Scam spotting confidence was low.** 61% were not very or not at all confident to spot a scam with just over half saying they ability to stay safe online was poor or very poor.
- **Fear of scams was high** with 61% saying they were worried about being scammed, and 56% scared they would share details with the wrong person.

Output targets achieved

While slightly falling short of the overall target for residents trained, all other resident-focused objectives were met or surpassed.

	Target	Actual	Diff	Target met?
Number of training sessions	45	45	0	😊
Number of residents trained	200	183	-17	😞
Online portal resource	Practical tips to shield yourself from scams, with Ofcom			😊
Devices gifted	30	81	+51	😊



Image: Devices ready to hand out at Christopher Court

Better able to use their tech

	Pre	Post	Change	Target met?
% able to complete 3 tasks online*	29%	52%	+23	😊
% using device at least once a week	75%	93%	+18	😊
% rate ability to use device as average, good or excellent	56%	85%	+29	😊

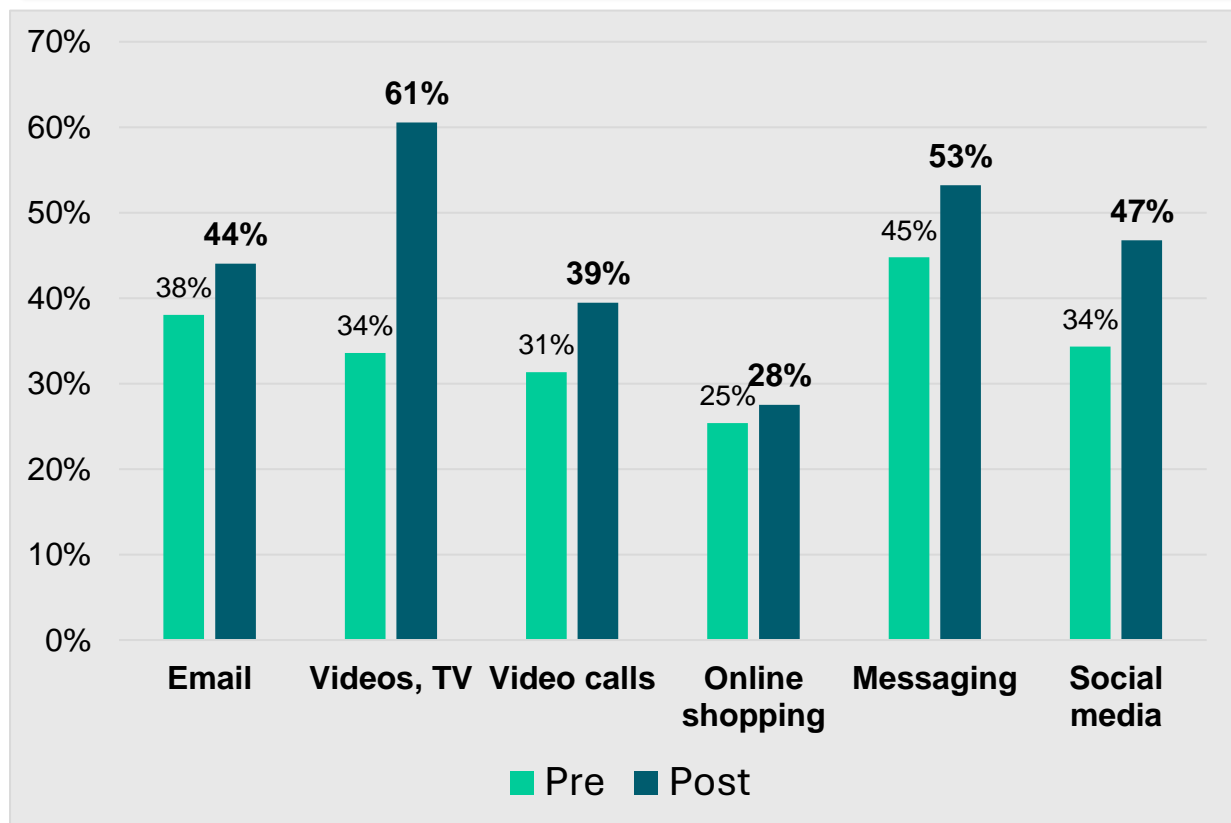
*Tasks included emailing, watching videos online, online shopping, using social media.

In practice, the support needed to enhance residents' digital skill level was intensive, often requiring personalised attention. The assistance from the team of volunteers was crucial in supplementing this additional training resource for the trainers.

Overall, 98% of residents reported feeling more knowledgeable about technology after the sessions.

Unfortunately, the improvement in the range of skills achieved fell below expectations, with only 52% of residents able to complete at least three digital activities on their devices, compared to the target of 75%. However, this marks a significant increase from the 29% recorded in the benchmark survey conducted before the sessions began. From trainer and volunteer feedback and observation this is due to the intensity required per skill to make progress to be confident to perform the new skill independently, and a lack of confidence from residents to self-rate their own ability. Also not shown on the survey is the observed increase in the ability to use Apps they were already using before the training.

All skills listed saw an upward trend in terms of the number of residents now able to complete these tasks post the training sessions. This was particularly so for online entertainment i.e. videos/TV.



The frequency of device usage has improved significantly, with 93% of residents now using their devices at least once a week, and 80% using them daily.

As an increased number of tasks and activities can be completed online residents are feeling more connected and engaged with the outside world, they are able to research and find the best deals, saving money. Calls to family and friends online reduce feelings of social isolation and improve mental health.

“As we moved through the three modules, I could witness the residents increase their skills and confidence online. The smiles and laughter were evident as they made video calls to grandchildren, enjoyed a band they use to watch when they were younger, or found a great deal on their online shopping” **Chris – AbilityNet trainer**

Residents’ self-assessment of their online abilities shows increased confidence, with 85% rating their device usage as ‘average,’ ‘good,’ or ‘excellent,’ surpassing the 80% target and up by 29 percentage points compared to the benchmark survey.




This trend is particularly pronounced among residents who attended resource centres for citizens with learning disabilities, with 95% rating their device usage as ‘average,’ ‘good,’ or ‘excellent.’

“My name is Linval, I am a resident of Pannel Croft, I was really lucky to be gifted a device from AbilityNet, before AbilityNet I was really struggling, so didn’t use it (my phone) too often. I really wanted to play games, jigsaw puzzles and listen to my music, which I am now able to do on my own. The sessions I attended were useful to learn something new and how to do things in a more efficient way.”



Linval pictured with Ionez. Since developing his newfound joy for technology he has been supporting Ionez with her new laptop gifted as part of the project.



More confident to spot a scam

	Pre	Post	Change	Target met?
% rating confidence to spot an online scam as ok, good or excellent	39%	90%	+51	
% rating ability to stay safe online as average, good or excellent	46%	97%	+51	
% worried about scams	61%	62%	+1	

The interactive scam awareness sessions have led to a notably positive change in media literacy skills, with 90% of residents now rating their confidence in identifying online scams as ‘ok,’ ‘good,’ or ‘excellent,’ and 97% rating their ability to stay safe online as ‘average,’ ‘good,’ or ‘excellent.’ However, despite these improvements, there hasn’t been a corresponding decrease in concern over being scammed. It’s possible that the training has heightened awareness of the methods scammers may employ, leading residents to remain apprehensive about the possibility of falling victim, with almost two-thirds still expressing concern.

*“My name is Myrtle and I am a resident in Pannel Croft, I took part in the sessions to learn some basic skills to use a computer. Seeing what these little gadgets can do was what I enjoyed the most, remembering what all they symbols meant was the hardest for me. The most imported thing about the sessions, was helping me **not to be so afraid of Technology.**”*

Better able to participate more online, find deals, info, entertainment, connect with people

	Pre	Post	Post	Target met?
% using device at least once a week	75%	93%	+18	
Average number of tasks can be completed online*	1.9	2.5	+0.6	

*Tasks included emailing, watching videos online, online shopping, using social media.

As previously mentioned, there has been a significant increase in online participation, with the majority of residents now using their devices at least once a week.



Although the shift in digital skills was slightly below expectations, the target was to be able to do 3 tasks online, it's progressing in the right direction.

Residents can now complete an average of 2.5 tasks or activities online, compared to 1.9 before the intervention, with a target of 3. The ongoing support from volunteers is expected to sustain this transition to new skills, and with their tailored one-on-one assistance in residents' homes, the project is anticipated to be even more successful.

At the conclusion of the sessions, twice as many respondents noted 'other' as a category for something they use their device for now, indicating an improved range of digital skills. These additional tasks included music, gaming, banking, photo management, accessing bus timetables, and reading books.

“Some residents have reported that they have started shopping online which is more convenient for them, especially in winter months.” **Vicki Banks Activity and Volunteer Organiser at ExtraCare Pannel Croft**

Less isolated

	Pre	Post	Change	Target met?
% less isolated	n/a	50%	n/a	
% using social media or social connectivity services	38%	46%	+8	

The absence of devices, connectivity, and skills can result in social isolation in an increasingly online world. Fortunately, following the intervention, half of the residents now feel less isolated.

A greater number of residents are now utilising social media platforms, messaging apps, and video calling to maintain connections with both family members and the broader community. The acquisition of new skills is empowering residents to engage more effectively with their families.

“Thank you for helping me, I am now able to use my phone to receive video calls from granddaughters, and they send me pictures of what they are up to.” **Pannel Croft resident**

More independent

	Target	Post	Target met?
% more independent	80%	78%	☹️

As residents expanded their usage, diversified their skills, and grew more confident in online safety, it also fostered a sense of increased self-sufficiency, with 78% of residents reporting feeling more independent, just shy of the 80% target.

“Our residents are now less scared of their devices and more confident to complete simple tasks by themselves. One resident told me they were now able to accept video calls from their family who live abroad. Other residents have reported using their devices with their Grandchildren and showing them what they have learnt.”
Vicki - Activity and Volunteer Organiser at ExtraCare Pannel Croft



Ashleigh Jones, Network Connector at Midland Mencap explains that *“The difference having these devices and support from AbilityNet has made to the citizens is night and day, they are more independent and more engaged with learning.*

The citizens can now complete their disability action plans and do their own research.





A couple of the citizens prefer to work independently, so having their own device has made such a difference.

Huge thanks again for those 10 Chromebooks... You have no idea of how many barriers you guys will have helped us eliminate”.

Staff and volunteers

Staff and volunteers were essential to the success of the project. All staff and volunteer objectives were met or surpassed.

Staff and volunteer outputs achieved

	Target	Actual	Diff	Target met?
Online staff training sessions	1	3	+2	
Staff trained	25	33	+8	
New volunteers	10	11	+1	
Volunteers supporting at group training sessions	15	26	+11	

Staff more confident with tech and better able to support

Through a series of online training sessions staff across the villages were upskilled and motivated to support residents on an on-going basis.

Stats below are from an interactive staff training session with 14 staff members (9 of the 14 trainees gave feedback).

Chart: Staff's knowledge of tech (based on 9 staff)



Following the session, there was a notable positive shift towards increased knowledge for the majority of participants with 5 more staff rating themselves as fairly knowledgeable. However, it's important to acknowledge that one staff member found the additional request to support with digital tasks too complex and burdensome, resulting in them feeling 'not at all knowledgeable' after the session. Ad-hoc feedback indicated that they struggled with the pace and technical complexity of the session. As a result, a follow-up one-on-one session with a volunteer or trainer will be arranged to provide additional support and address their concerns.

Volunteer engagement

Using local volunteers, existing and new, to support the training sessions has been crucial in providing extra tailored support to residents and staff.

Capgemini an existing corporate partner of AbilityNet, supported by providing corporate volunteers as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) scheme. Adam was one such volunteer from Capgemini who used his corporate volunteering hours to support at the residential villages during and after the group sessions.

"Adam was so good at helping move all my pictures to my new device, I can now look at them all again" **Wyn, a resident supported by a Capgemini volunteer**



Capgemini is a global leader in partnering with companies to transform and manage their business by harnessing the power of technology. Its digital inclusion programme looks to help make the digital revolution an opportunity for all and provide a bridge between technology and society. This connection has led to a deep sense of responsibility in terms of both the impacts of technology and the risks of being excluded from its opportunities in an increasingly connected world.

Image: Adam (Capgemini) supporting a Christopher Court resident.

From Adam's perspective the experience was really rewarding.

"I work as a Software Engineer for Capgemini within the HMRC Market Unit, a business sector solely focused on providing transformative digital solutions to improve the digital tax landscape in the UK. In the support sessions I completed at Christopher Court, I was able to transfer my technical knowledge to the residents to help them 'get online' and be safe when doing so. We covered topics in laptop setup (Chromebooks), using the internet, and protecting your information while online. I thoroughly enjoyed the sessions, and they have made an impact in my everyday work ensuring I keep accessibility and security as a primary consideration in the work I complete." **Adam - Capgemini corporate volunteer**



AbilityNet's Tech Volunteers also supported the project.

"Hi my name is Linda, I have been an AbilityNet volunteer for just over 2 years, I have recently taken on the role of West Midlands Coordinator. I became a volunteer as I wanted to show people that they don't need to become experts or have a degree and they don't need to know everything at once, but with a little help, patience and practice they can vastly

improve their world and become full participants in the 21st century.

I have thoroughly enjoyed supporting AbilityNet, throughout this project, and enjoyed meeting so many different clients, from all walks of lives. Every session was different, with each cohort having very different needs, this project has

shown me how prevalent the need is, and I am looking forward to continuing to support the local ExtraCare and Southern housing villages on their journey of Digital Literacy."

Linda has and continues to be an amazing support to the West Midlands, she gave up more than 38 volunteering hours to support this project, and ran some of the training sessions.



Lessons learned

Throughout the project lessons were learnt that were incorporated in to following phases or taken onboard for future project work.

Collaboration is key

Leveraging partnerships with those who have an existing relationship with the intended beneficiaries and with whom you share a common media literacy goal, strengthens the impact. It also presents its own complexities due to differing priorities among the involved parties. It's important to plan early, engage in discussions with partner organisation(s), establish mutual goals and responsibilities, and formalise these agreements in writing. The ExtraCare and AbilityNet relationship already had a good grounding to work from.



As Kerry Stack, the research and technology lead at for ExtraCare explains.

“We have been working with AbilityNet to bring digital inclusion to our residents for a couple of years through various projects, but this project was an opportunity to do it on a much larger scale. Offering everyone in our Birmingham villages the chance to learn how to use the internet safely, whether that is to reduce

loneliness through social networking or to learn practical skills to help them remain independent for as long as possible for example learning to shop online or advanced topics such as online banking.

One of our villages that AbilityNet worked with who would be classed as being in a lower socioeconomic group grabbed the opportunity with both hands and gained the most from the project. They were gifted devices that they would not otherwise have had access to be even able to start to learn how to use the internet. Most of these residents originate from the Caribbean, by learning to use the internet they are now able to connect face to face with relatives back at home. The project has made a huge difference to the residents of Pannel Croft and there's no going back, I've had feedback from residents saying that they really enjoyed learning with AbilityNet volunteers and are looking forward to continuing learning new skills.

ExtraCare recognises the importance of digital awareness and is promoting this to residents by looking for opportunities to work with organisations like AbilityNet. We have invested thousands of pounds in our award-winning Smart Market project which entails loaning smart devices that are Alexa compatible to residents for free to help them remain independent for longer using technology. With AbilityNet's help we

are getting to more and more residents who otherwise would not have had the confidence or potentially the resources to be digitally included. Thank you!!!”

Corporate partners with the same passion also played a huge part in the success.

“With the right skills, technology is an enabler, helping people navigate an increasingly interconnected and digital world. That’s why building digital skills is so important – and to ensure no one is left behind, anyone with technology skills can help support those around them to learn and gain confidence,” **Bethan Richmond, Digital Inclusion Programme Manager at Capgemini UK, an organisation that supplied volunteer support**

Allow sufficient time and maintain flexibility

Allocating 14 months for the project timeline, plus including time for a pilot phase, enabled ample time to test and refine the concept before full-scale implementation. Through previous projects and the pilot, it was acknowledged that the process to inform and upskill is intensive, particularly when addressing learning disabilities. There is a need to invest the necessary time and effort and recognise that support services will be ongoing beyond the initial intervention, it’s not a one-off hit.

Truly understand your target audience

Through the pilot sessions it was recognised how confused the residents were by even simple tech phrases and the reluctance to engage with technology was evident. By conducting sessions in venues where beneficiaries felt comfortable, preferably among peers, success is more likely. Even down the detail e.g. the timing of sessions and being mindful that many of the residents were up later in the mornings and became tired in the afternoons. Additionally, having identified the low confidence levels through benchmark surveys the introduction of tailored one-on-one sessions with volunteers proved crucial. Technology topics were introduced gradually, emphasising the positive benefits. Where individuals were more confident, these success stories were used to showcase residents similar to the participants who have embraced technology, and leverage positive peer influence within the group to encourage others. It was important to avoid using technical jargon and focus on outcomes that residents identified in pre-surveys as wanting to achieve. By highlighting the practical outcomes of technology, such as easier appointment booking, video calls with distant family members, and online shopping convenience buy in from residents was more likely.

Other lessons learned

- **Customise sessions** and pace them according to the needs of the end users. Keep sessions relatively short and include breaks. Follow a methodology of tell, show, practice, and continuous reinforcement.
- **Integrate evaluation surveys and case studies** into the sessions to enhance engagement and ensure accurate and full responses.
- **A comfortable environment is key**, for example, room size and shape make a difference. With 'hearing' identified as an impairment for 22% of residents, if the room is too big it is challenging for residents to hear and engage effectively.
- **Encouraging participation in sessions requires a joint effort** from the training organisation, such as AbilityNet, and village/centre staff, employing a multi-channel approach including newsletters, leaflets, posters, recommendations, reminders, and crucial conversations to reassure and motivate residents to attend. Promotional materials should steer clear of technical jargon and digital terminology, instead emphasising that 'everyone is welcome,' sessions are 'relaxed,' and, of course, there will be tea and cake!

Conclusions

In summary, the intervention has proven to be overwhelmingly successful, achieving seven out of eight of its outcome targets. The only slight shortfall was in the number of residents trained, which fell just short of the 200 mark at 183. This highlights the importance of a cohesive and collaborative approach to ensure participant awareness and motivation to attend sessions across multiple venues.

Evaluation results demonstrated significant improvements in learners' abilities and confidence to use their devices, with a notable increase in device usage frequency. An impressive 98% of residents reported feeling more knowledgeable about technology after completing the sessions.

The interactive scam awareness sessions yielded positive results, with 97% of participants rating their ability to stay safe online as 'average,' 'good,' or 'excellent.' However, concerns about being scammed persist, possibly due to heightened awareness of potential scamming methods introduced during the training, with nearly two-thirds of residents still expressing apprehension.

The project also delivered tangible lifestyle and mental health benefits, as residents reported increased participation in online activities, finding deals, accessing entertainment, and connecting with family and friends. Furthermore, half of the residents felt less isolated, and 78% reported feeling more independent, particularly when training was coupled with the provision of new or improved devices and connectivity.

Training 33 staff through three online interactive sessions resulted in increased staff knowledge about technology and heightened motivation to support residents on an ongoing basis within the villages.

The involvement of volunteers proved crucial, particularly in providing intensive one-on-one support as was noted to be needed from the pilot phase. A combination of existing local AbilityNet volunteers, 11 newly recruited volunteers, and support from a corporate partner relationship with Capgemini ensured the success and sustainability of the project.

The project has played a pivotal role in nurturing and strengthening AbilityNet's working relationships within the Birmingham area and further afield, fostering a sense of collaboration and synergy among stakeholders. Through collaborative efforts, AbilityNet have been able to expand their reach and amplify impact, reaching more individuals and communities in need. These strengthened relationships have facilitated knowledge-sharing, resource pooling, and the identification of new opportunities for collaboration, ultimately enhancing the collective ability to address media literacy challenges and deliver meaningful outcomes. As a result, AbilityNet's presence and influence have grown, allowing them to make a more significant and lasting difference in the Birmingham area and beyond.

Next steps

The support for residents must not conclude at this point. Ongoing assistance provided by AbilityNet's free services will be vital to sustain the upward trajectory in acquiring new skills. This ongoing need is evidenced by the fact that as the project ends a third of residents still express a need for digital skill support and 62% remain concerned about being scammed, AbilityNet's on-going helpline and volunteer support will serve as a sustainable and reliable source of resources and support for residents and staff, both now and in the future.

“After being scammed recently, these sessions have really helped me to be more safe online, but I am still quite nervous.” Resident

The successful impact and considerable learnings from this project will enable the AbilityNet charity to take this project as a blueprint to funders and partners in other areas of the UK to repeat its success with new cohorts of disabled and older people. Leveraging these collaborative relationships has already led to expansion to other UK regions with a Digital Skills project link up in London with Southern Housing well under way.

The scale of need for media literacy training is recognised and significant. Despite proven results from pilot projects such as this there is a lack of consistent funding to take pilots into full-scale UK-wide interventions. How do we provide scalability to do more than scratch the surface? Without significant focus and resources from government, combined with further funding, activity and expertise from corporates and interested parties like Ofcom we can only tackle a small fraction of the problem.

Appendix

Evaluation plan: outcomes

Outcome (a single, measurable change)	Indicator (what will we measure?)	Baseline	Target	How will we collect it?	When will we collect it?	Who will collect it?
Residents better able to use tech	Proportion of residents who can complete at least three digital tasks/activities on their device	29%	75%	Start and end survey	Start / end 3 sessions During sessions	Project Manager / Admin support
	Proportion of residents who are using their device at least once a week	75%	85%	Start and end survey	Start / end 3 sessions	Project Manager / Admin support
	Proportion of residents rating their ability to use their device as 'average', 'good' or 'excellent'	56%	80%	Start and end survey	Start / end 3 sessions	Project Manager / Admin support
Residents more confident with media and scams	Proportion of residents rating their confidence to spot an online scam as 'ok', 'good' or 'excellent'	39%	90%	Start and end survey	Start / end 3 sessions	Project Manager / Admin support

	Proportion of residents rating their ability to stay safe online as 'average', 'good' or 'excellent'	46%	90%	Start and end survey	Start / end 3 sessions	Project Manager / Admin support
	Proportion of residents worried about being scammed	61%	See a reduction	Start and end survey Observation	Start / end 3 sessions At end of 3 sessions	Project Manager / Admin support
Residents able to participate more online, find deals, info, entertainment, connect with people	Proportion of residents who use their device at least once a week	38%	75%	Start and end survey	Start / end 3 sessions	Project Manager / Admin support
	Average number of tasks/activities residents can do on their device	1.9	3	Start and end survey	Start / end 3 sessions	Project Manager / Admin support
Residents less isolated	Proportion of residents who feel less isolated	n/a	50%	End survey Interview	End of 3 sessions	Project Manager / Admin support
	Proportion of residents using social media/social connectivity services	38%	50%	Survey	At end of 3 sessions	Project Manager / Admin support
	Positive language used to describe their feelings			Interviews	At end of 3 sessions	

Residents more independent	Proportion of residents feeling more independent		80%	Survey Interviews	End 3 sessions At end of 3 sessions	Project Manager / Admin support
Staff more knowledgeable.	Proportion of staff rating their tech knowledge as 'good' or 'excellent'		75%	Staff survey	End 3 sessions	Project Manager / Admin support
Staff more confident on tech	Proportion of staff rating their confidence levels as 'good' or 'excellent'		75%	Staff survey	End of 3 sessions	Project Manager / Admin support
Staff better able to support residents.	Proportion of staff rating their ability to support as 'good' or 'excellent'		75%	Staff survey	End of 3 sessions	Project Manager / Admin support
	Proportion of staff that would recommend AbilityNet to residents		80%	Staff survey	End of 3 sessions	Project Manager / Admin support

Evaluation plan: activities

Activity (the area of work we plan to provide)	Output (the good, service or product being delivered)	Indicator (what will we measure?)	How will we collect it?	When will we collect it?	Who will collect it?
45 sessions across 5 villages	Training sessions x3	Number of sessions Number of attendees Attendee age, gender, impairment. Level of knowledge, confidence, skill Disability Gender Training session rating	Surveys Register Case studies	Before the session. After each session. At the end of the 3 sessions.	Administrator
Staff training	Training session	As above	As above	As above	Administrator
Volunteer recruitment	Volunteer scheme activations 1:1 support sessions with residents	Number of volunteers onboarded. Number of volunteers at training sessions. Number of volunteer sessions and hours.	Website analytics (number of online apps & source) VMS (Volunteer Management System) Freshdesk system – tickets and hours	After campaign. On-going through project.	Administrator & Project Manager.
Online portal set up and maintenance	Active online portal for residents and staff	Number of docs/links uploaded. Views. Downloads.	Website analytics	Monthly after launch.	Administrator & Project Manager.

Graph results in table format - residents:

Age	Responses	%
Under 55	38	29%
55-64	30	23%
65-74	23	17%
75-84	32	24%
85-94	7	5%
95+	2	2%
Total	132	

Gender	Responses	%
Female	85	62%
Male	53	39%
Non-binary	1	1%
Total	139	

Disability / Impairment	Responses	%
Learning	44	33%
Mobility	43	32%
Memory	30	22%
Hearing, comms, speech	29	22%
Vision and/or colour	28	21%
Mental health	23	17%
Stamina, breathing, fatigue	21	16%
Neurodivergent	14	10%
None	10	7%
Dexterity	9	7%
Prefer not to say	8	6%
Other	2	1%
Total	134	