

Future Digital  
Inclusion:  
delivering basic  
digital skills for  
those in need

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Good Things  
Foundation



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## Executive summary

Since 2014, the Online Centres Network has supported more than 1 million people to learn basic digital skills through the Future Digital Inclusion (FDI) programme funded by the Department for Education and predecessor Departments, making a significant contribution to closing the digital skills gap in the UK.

The programme helps people of all ages and backgrounds, some with limited digital skills and others with none, and many experiencing significant material and psychological barriers to successful learning outcomes. Online Centres respond to this diversity by offering support tailored to individual needs, helping learners to build their confidence in using digital technology and achieve personally relevant outcomes.

Each Online Centre operates within a unique set of boundaries and opportunities: although resources and support provided by Good Things Foundation enable the delivery of core outcomes, there is no standard model of FDI delivery. But whatever differences exist, some principles are universal: all Centres do their best to provide more intensive support to those with the highest level of need, offer learning which is friendly, informal and approachable, and focus on building learners' motivation to use and keep using digital technology as well as building their basic digital skills.

This report is based on evidence collected as part of a **realist evaluation** of the FDI programme. The aim has been to understand the mechanisms behind FDI: the resources that different types of Online Centre have at their disposal, and which are most important for different types of learner. The evaluation has highlighted strengths in the FDI model as well as areas for improvement, both of which are set out in this report, and it is hoped that the findings can be used by Government, digital inclusion practitioners and other digital skills organisations to increase further the impact of basic digital skills delivered in community settings. This is particularly important in a time during which pressures on the community sector have increased, while overall funding for community-based activity has decreased.

The evaluation process has been supported by training and consultancy from Dr Justin Jagosh, Senior Research Fellow in Health Services Research at the University of Liverpool, where he is Director of the Centre for Advancement in Realist Evaluation and Synthesis (CARES). Dr. Jagosh has provided ongoing feedback on the methodology employed for this evaluation and the key documents used, including interview schedules, the programme theory, findings and reporting outputs.

## Key findings

- **FDI works well for many learners because it provides support that is personally relevant and focuses on motivation.** Despite the diversity of the Online Centres Network and the different models used to provide FDI, all delivery is based on understanding individual learners' needs and personal circumstances, and on helping them to develop the motivation they need to become long-term, independent users of digital technology.
- **FDI is particularly important for learners with low skills and confidence.** For learners with no qualifications, an Online Centre is often their first learning experience since leaving school. These learners receive higher levels of 1-to-1 support and positive feedback, rate Learn My Way (Good Things Foundation's basic digital skills learning platform) especially highly, and place extra value on Centres' informality and friendliness; those with poor previous experience of education report more positive attitudes as a result of FDI-funded support.
- **FDI helps learners to progress to further learning and positive employment outcomes, and specifically helps learners achieve outcomes that they did not intend at point of engagement.** Survey evidence from FDI shows that 87% of those supported progress to different forms of further learning, including informal and formal education and training. Evidence suggests that this reflects the impact of community-based basic digital skills support on the motivation to learn. Furthermore, factors such as low confidence and external pressures mean that learners may only have limited, short-term goals in mind when they first attend an Online Centre. The flexible, tailored support offered by Centres leads to more significant, unintended outcomes: for example, only 27% of learners express interest in accredited qualifications at point of engagement, but 39% have started a qualification three months later.
- **Current levels of FDI funding may be too low to support those with the highest levels of need.** Helping learners who are offline to develop digital skills is resource-intensive, and becomes more so if learners have especially low skills and confidence. Greater need for 1-to-1 support and overall support time correlates with factors including age, lower educational attainment, unemployment, and not speaking good English; for example, 18% of unemployed learners over 55 expect to need more than five months support, and 42% of learners who are still learning English need 1-to-1 support all the time. When one or more of these factors are present, Online Centres have to combine FDI funding with other sources of income, and make extensive use of volunteers, in order to deliver. They may also be forced to choose between more than one important element of delivery, for example choosing guaranteed high levels of 1-to-1 support at the expense of offering open-ended learning.
- **Programme resources are not evenly distributed across the Online Centres Network.** Partly because of limited funding, and partly because they can choose the best way to deliver FDI, Online Centres deploy different combinations of the resources identified in the FDI programme theory. This means that the consistency of support provided to learners can be uneven when comparing activity in different centres. Some programme resources were identified as especially important, and are especially common: high tutor to learner ratios (made possible by the widespread use of volunteers in Online Centres); regular positive feedback that helps learners overcome low self-efficacy; the ability to begin learning without having to wait for the start of an academic term; and open-ended provision, which learners can access for as long as they need to. However, the level of FDI funding available, and the loss of other sources of funding across the Network due to cuts, means that no one resource is universally available. This can result in 'gaps' in provision, with demand for certain resources not always met.

- **Employment and employability are key drivers of demand for FDI.** Almost a third of FDI learners are motivated to learn digital skills for finding work, rising to more than half of working-age learners with no qualifications; a further 17% were motivated by work-related learning, rising to 35% among employed learners. Centres report that they continue to receive a high volume of jobseekers signposted or formally referred by local Jobcentres, and that delivering FDI for these learners is inseparable from other forms of employment support. The roll-out of Universal Credit is increasing further the level and intensity of support required by this group.
- **The diversity of the Online Centres Network is a strength.** The Network includes support services for people in crisis, adult learning providers, and specialists working with specific demographics; some Centres are open to all, while others only work with individuals referred from other agencies. Although all kinds of Centre contribute to FDI, these different operating models create the potential for diversifying the FDI programme in order to achieve a wider range of outcomes.
- **Learn My Way is an important resource for the delivery of basic digital skills.** Learn My Way, Good Things Foundation's learning platform, is positively rated by the majority of learners, and is rated especially highly by those with few or no digital skills, and working-age learners with no qualifications. Online Centres also report that it provides important capacity to deal with high volumes of learners while maintaining comprehensive, quality learning. Learner survey data also shows that Learn My Way supports, and is most effective as part of, a programme of blended learning.
- **The FDI programme does not just support people with no digital skills,** but also those who have limited digital skills. While a third of FDI learners report having no skills at point of engagement, a quarter have the skills to complete an online form, make an online purchase or change internet privacy settings.<sup>1</sup> These learners are less likely to be interested in or to benefit from Learn My Way, more likely to be employed, and more interested in work-related learning and qualifications.

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“Most of my learners did say that if I ran a drop-in session, they would come and they would carry on with the learning, but I just don't have the resource to do that.” - **Online Centre in a city centre library, NE England**

“What we do here is, we deliver functional skills in maths, English and ICT, and wherever possible, we do progress them on to qualification pathways. However, that hasn't been a focus really, of where FDI has been. I'd love to see it going more in that direction, because I think that's where progression will become really valuable. What we tend to do - completely unfunded, actually - is provide additional resources and classes. But it's not something that's funded by Good Things Foundation, and it needs to be, really. Less of the absolute beginner stuff, if you like, at the expense of that, in order to provide more support for people who have a need to go further.” - **Adult learning Online Centre, Yorkshire and Humber**

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<sup>1</sup>Based on data provided by learners during Learn My Way registration.

## Introduction and Evaluation Methodology

The Future Digital Inclusion programme has been delivered by Good Things Foundation since 2014, funded by the Department for Education, and before that the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. The programme helps people learn basic digital skills, working in community locations across the country. Since it began, FDI has reached more than 1 million people, with high rates of progression from basic digital skills to other positive outcomes, including further learning. An important characteristic of the programme has been its reach: engaging those who are disengaged from education, and facing a wide range of barriers that leave them socially and economically excluded.

Key outcomes from the FDI programme since 2014-15 are:

- More than 1 million people have been supported to learn basic digital skills
- More than 80% of those supported say they have progressed to further learning, and 39% have progressed to accredited qualifications
- 66% have progressed to employment-related activity, with 17% entering full-time or part-time employment
- More than 80% of those supported face one or more barriers related to social exclusion (poverty, unemployment, low skills, disability, homelessness).

FDI delivers a wide range of learning across basic digital skills, from foundation skills (using a computer or device) through to online transactions (online banking, online shopping), with a strong focus on internet safety and security. Learn My Way, Good Things Foundation's learning platform for basic digital skills, forms the core of this offer, used within Online Centres to deliver blended learning through a range of methods, from 1-to-1 support to group and peer learning. Learn My Way contains over 30 very short courses in basic digital skills, each of which takes around 30 minutes to complete and includes a short online assessment to check learning. The FDI learning model is flexible, frequently open-ended, and centred on interpersonal relationships with staff and volunteers in centres.

Importantly, FDI embeds basic digital skills into the wider support offer provided by many organisations across the Online Centres Network, including community centres, adult learning providers and drug and alcohol rehabilitation services. Good Things Foundation achieves this by building the capacity of centres to deliver basic digital skills, through training, handbooks and other resources, campaign materials, and - working with DfE - grant funding.

FDI's core reach is based on monitoring the number of learners that are helped and supported by Online Centres to **register** on the Learn My Way platform. Alongside this, the programme also includes a benchmark target for the achievement of two basic digital skills from the national basic digital skills framework<sup>2</sup>. This is measured as the number of learners **completing** two Learn My Way courses that are mapped to the skills in the framework. Learn My Way also includes a data capture tool (CaptureIT) allowing Online Centres to record positive learning outcomes against the basic digital skills framework enabled by resources other than Learn My Way. Finally, the programme also helps a smaller number of learners to complete a **City & Guilds Entry Level 3 Award in Online Basics**, undertaken and assessed online.

<sup>2</sup>Now the Essential Digital Skills framework (2018), but when FDI began, Learn My Way courses were mapped against the predecessor Basic Digital Skills framework. Work is underway to map Learn My Way against the new framework.

Each learner engaged through FDI is supported on a journey to build their motivation and learn basic digital skills. Registration on Learn My Way is the marker that their learning journey has started, but from here learners take very different pathways according to their needs (which are often complex) and the type of support the Online Centre provides. A proportion of learners will complete courses or other learning resources that map against basic digital skills from the national framework, while a smaller proportion will progress to complete the Award in Online Basics. But as shown in the figures above, whatever pathway they follow a high proportion of FDI learners progress to positive learning and employment outcomes.

The following table shows the proportion of FDI learners achieving these outcomes since the programme began in 2014.

Table 1: Top-line FDI programme outcomes

	Total number (to end October 2018)	Five-year target	Level of achievement against five-year target (to end October 2018)
Registrations	1,102,569	1,000,000	110%
Completions	296,411	300,000	98%
Online Basics Awards	9,535	10,000	95%

## Purpose of this Report

This report is the final output of a **realist evaluation** of the Future Digital Inclusion programme. The evaluation was conducted during the summer of 2018.

In realist evaluation, rather than trying to find out 'does this programme work?', the methodology attempts to find out in **what ways** a programme works, for whom, **in what circumstances**, and **how**. Realist evaluation is therefore well-suited to the complexity and variety observed across the Online Centres Network.

## Realist methodology

The realist evaluation began with the development of an initial programme theory, which broke the FDI programme down into three families of resources - elements believed to be important in helping learners to achieve their goals:

- **Learning structure resources:** relating to learning being structured in an informal way that makes it appealing, relevant and convenient to people who may be struggling with busy or chaotic lives, low self-efficacy, and a feeling that digital technology is not for people like them.
- **Interpersonal resources:** helping learners to navigate their way through a learning experience which may be very different from their previous experience, and related to the critical role of interpersonal relationships between learners and tutors.
- **Environmental resources:** related to the location, 'look and feel' of Online Centres, which may be more or less deliberate, and more or less noticed by learners - but in all cases, contribute towards creating an environment in which those unsure or uncomfortable about learning feel welcome and understood.

The realist evaluation process involves testing **which resources are most important to programme beneficiaries**, especially in terms of the effect they have on confidence and motivation; this emphasis makes it especially applicable to FDI, where many learners lack self-efficacy and perceive a lack of value in digital technology.

The individual components of the three families of resources are shown in the following table:

**Table 2: Summary of individual resources in the FDI realist programme theory**

Learning Structure Resources	Interpersonal Resources	Environmental Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learners do not have to wait to begin learning</li> <li>Learners can miss sessions if they need to without prejudice</li> <li>Learners can attend for as long as they need to</li> <li>Learning is personalised to individual needs</li> <li>Learning is centred around practical application of skills</li> <li>Learn My Way allows Centres to deliver high-quality learning which is standardised in terms of skills, vocabulary and concepts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learners receive regular positive feedback</li> <li>Learners receive 1-to-1 support as required</li> <li>Volunteers provide translation and other support for non-native English speaking learners</li> <li>Learners support and learn from one another</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Online Centres are accessible to the communities that need them</li> <li>Online Centres look and feel relaxed and informal</li> <li>A sense of community within Online Centres encourages retention and achievement</li> </ul>

The availability and impact of these components was then tested through a range of qualitative and quantitative approaches, with data collected through the following interventions:

- In-depth interviews** with learners (n=15) and Online Centres managers and tutors (n=10)
- Through new questions in the **Online Centres learner survey**, administered online through Learn My Way, specially designed to test the programme theory developed for the realist evaluation (n=1452)
- Through a **Centre-level census of FDI learners**, to test the accuracy of the learner survey sample and to recruit learners for interview (n=424)
- Through a **quantitative survey of Online Centres**, both FDI grant funded and unfunded (n=252)
- Through **analysis of learner progression survey data** from the beginning of the FDI programme, to reveal outcomes at a greater level of resolution and statistical certainty.

A more detailed methodological breakdown is provided in appendix A.

Presenting the outcomes of the realist evaluation, this report begins by summarising who **the FDI programme engages**, and highlighting the **core importance of flexibility** in the FDI programme model. From here, it identifies several **key areas for improvement** in the FDI model, and discusses the **critical resources of the FDI programme**: the elements of delivery through which FDI creates impact. Finally, the report shows how FDI **changes intentions of learners and supports progression**, finishing with a **typology of key learner groups** and commentary for each showing their key characteristics and how the FDI programme helps them achieve positive outcomes.





## Who the FDI programme engages

The FDI programme model was created to be flexible, supporting anyone who needs help with digital skills, no matter what their background and personal circumstances: it supports a learner population which is diverse in terms of needs and barriers.

**Low or no qualifications.** The FDI programme disproportionately engages learners with low or no qualifications. Compared to a national figure of 22.5%, 33.8% of FDI learners have no qualifications; for Level 1 qualifications the figure is 21%, compared to 13% nationally.<sup>3</sup> Almost two thirds of FDI learners with no qualifications are aged 44–64, and they are motivated above all by the need to develop digital skills to find work; the strong partnerships between many Online Centres and Jobcentres create open referral routes, and Jobcentres recognise that Centres are skilled at helping those with the lowest skills and confidence.

**Higher qualifications.** 32% of FDI learners are educated at Level 2 or above. These learners tend to be younger; they may be unemployed and come to an Online Centre through referral from a Jobcentre, but many are motivated to improve their digital skills for existing employment, or to undertake more advanced learning, including qualifications.

**Retired people.** Just under 17% of the FDI learner population is retired: slightly lower than the national figure of 18%, and considerably lower than among non-users of the internet, 64% of whom are over 65. The relatively low level engagement of older people reflects the fact that, lacking employment-related motivation, non-users over 65 are significantly more likely to feel that the internet is ‘not for people like them’, and state that nothing would convince them to go online.<sup>4</sup> Unlike many jobseekers, older people engaged by Online Centres tend to have a personal motivation to learn digital skills, and to respond to marketing messages or word of mouth sources of information.

**Learners with limited digital skills.** Limited digital skills are defined in the Online Centres learner survey as being able at point of engagement to independently fill in an online form, make an online purchase, or change social media privacy settings. But these skills are limited to ‘personal’ online activity – they do not necessarily mean that individuals have the very different digital skills they need to be productive at work. Around 29% of learners (30,700 per year) have limited digital skills (LDS) at point of engagement.

**Unemployed learners.** Since the introduction by DWP in 2012 of the Universal Jobmatch employment portal, high volumes of jobseekers in need of digital skills support have been signposted and referred to Online Centres by Jobcentres, and those referred tend to be older and lower-skilled: overall, 45% of Online Centres learners are jobseekers – a total of 47,500 per year – of which 72% are aged over 45, and 60% are educated below Level 2. As with the general learner population, older and age and lower skills correlates with relatively poor self-efficacy, with 49% of unemployed learners with no qualifications believing that learning to use the internet is very complicated.

**People still learning English.** At least 17,000 FDI learners per year are still learning English, and the real total is likely to be considerably higher. This group comprises recent economic migrants to the UK, refugees, and long-term UK residents who have never learned to speak English. The concentration of non-native English speakers in urban areas, and their unique needs, means they are more likely to be learning in a relatively small number of Online Centres which provide a range of specialist support services to migrant populations, especially English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

<sup>3</sup>Office For National Statistics: UK Census data 2011. Available online at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/business-transparency/freedom-of-information/what-can-i-request/published-ad-hoc-data/census/qualifications/ct0429-2011-census---highest-level-of-qualification---england-and-wales.xls>

<sup>4</sup>Ofcom, Adults’ Media Use & Attitudes Report 2018. Available online at: [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0011/113222/Adults-Media-Use-and-Attitudes-Report-2018.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/___data/assets/pdf_file/0011/113222/Adults-Media-Use-and-Attitudes-Report-2018.pdf)

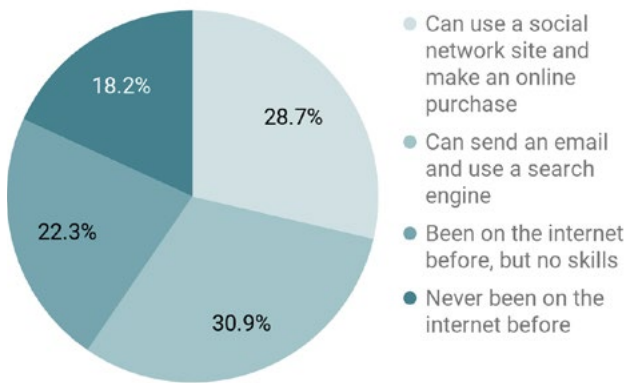
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“Usually they’re coming to us because they’re on that journey towards getting back into work, and some of them are quite a long way off from that, and others are closer. So they want to gain confidence with IT skills, because obviously that’s very important to both be able to sort of apply for jobs, and then find a job.” - **Online Centre based in a drug and alcohol rehabilitation service, East Midlands**

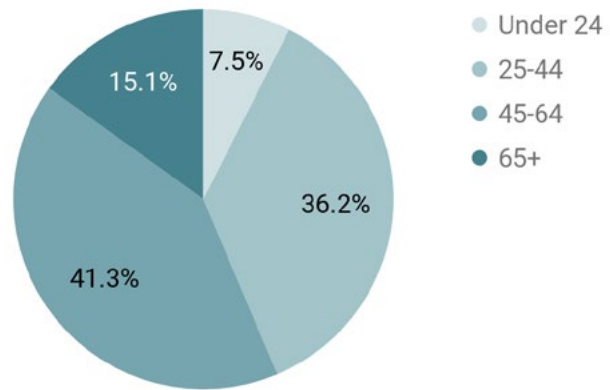
“When you’re talking about people who aren’t at retirement age that need to learn IT skills, usually they are, when they come to us, they tend to be applying for benefits or they’re looking for a job, for work. They’re already in a low-income bracket, they’re already disadvantaged.” - **Adult learning Online Centre, Yorkshire & Humber**

“Learners are predominantly referred from the Jobcentre...we have had feedback from the Jobcentre that, because of the ethos we’ve got here, because of our gentle treatment, and because we can almost always give one-to-one support, they tend now to send us people that have a greater need.” - **Community learning Online Centre, West Midlands**

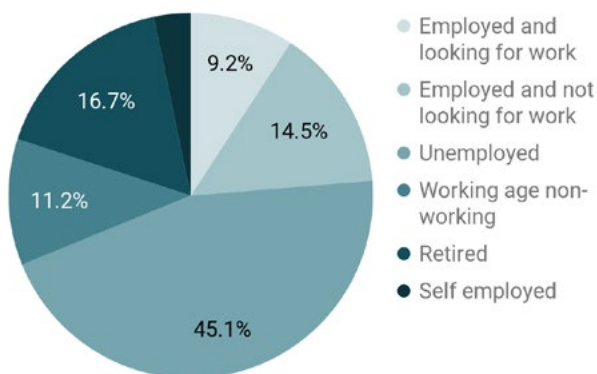
These charts show the FDI learner population broken down by the four demographic factors which are the most important predictors of motivation, barriers and support needs: digital skills, age, employment status, and educational attainment.



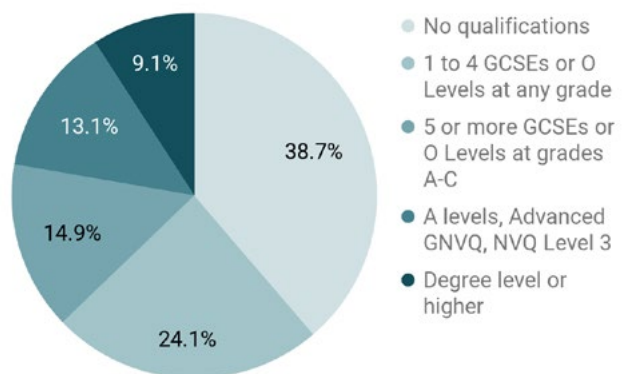
Digital skills at point of engagement



Age



Employment status



Educational attainment

## The importance of flexibility in the FDI model

Faced with a diverse learner population, Online Centres need to try and ensure that the support they offer is tailored to the needs of individuals, and that all learners are able to achieve their goals.

### Whatever these needs, most learners place a significant demand on their

**Centre's resources:** fewer than one in five of those we surveyed expected to learn all they needed in less than a month; almost a third expected to be learning for more than three months. At an average of two hours learning per week, these journeys place a considerable demand on Centres, especially for the significant proportion of learners who need high levels of 1-to-1 support and positive feedback. Although requests for help may decrease over time, new learners may require almost constant 1-to-1 support.

### Support needs are especially high among learners with poor previous experience of

**education:** those with no qualifications, no digital skills, and negative attitudes towards the internet and their ability to master it. These learners are usually working age, and are more likely to have been signposted to an Online Centre by their Jobcentre, in order to learn the digital skills to find and apply for work; in these cases, digital skills are inseparable from a broader employment support offer which differs from Centre to Centre but usually includes dedicated 'job clubs' where learners receive help with CVs and covering letters, careers advice and interview preparation, as well as being supported to find and apply for jobs online.

### Against this backdrop, it must be recognised that the job of Online Centres is becoming increasingly difficult.

Demand for their services continues to rise alongside the digitisation of society in

general and benefit services in particular. A significant rise in demand was reported by Online Centres following the introduction of the DWP's Universal Jobmatch system in 2012, which was not matched by funding on the ground. The additional requirements of Universal Credit, and the larger population it supports, has meant a further increase in demand: in October 2018 there were 1.3m Universal Credit claimants, more than double the amount a year before.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, central Government spending on core adult skills fell by 40% in England between 2010/11 and 2015/16, taking into account inflation<sup>6</sup>; and funding for local authorities - previously a major source of local funding for independent Online Centres, as well as sustaining library-based provision - is predicted to fall by 77% between 2015/16 and 2019/20.<sup>7</sup>

**However, provision remains at a high volume, and effective in supporting people to realise positive outcomes, due to two key characteristics of the Online Centres Network.** Firstly, many Centre staff, especially those in frontline community centres, are willing to work beyond their hours and role in order to meet the needs of local people. Secondly, FDI benefits enormously from the contribution of thousands of Digital Champion volunteers: the Network would simply not exist in its current form without them.

<sup>5</sup>Department for Work & Pensions, 'Universal Credit Statistics: Data to 11 October 2018'. Published 13th November 2018. Accessed online 20th November 2018: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/755723/universal-credit-statistics-to-11-october-2018.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/755723/universal-credit-statistics-to-11-october-2018.pdf).

<sup>6</sup>Full Fact, 'Spending for adult skills fell by 40% between 2010 and 2015'. Published 16th February 2018. Accessed online 20th November 2018: <https://fullfact.org/education/spending-adult-skills>.

<sup>7</sup>Financial Times, 'Local councils to see central funding fall 77% by 2020'. Published July 4th 2017. Accessed online 20th November 2018: <https://www.ft.com/content/9c6b5284-6000-11e7-91a7-502f7ee26895>.

“Learners can have an offending history, a mental health problem, homelessness, it could be other long-term health conditions. It might just be that they’ve been unemployed for a period of time and lack skills, their skills have become out of date, and they just need a bit of help to get back into the job market. They want to become economically active, come off benefits, they want to gain work experience or voluntary work, so they’re somewhere on that continuum, sometimes they’re looking to re-train. So they often need tailored support, it’s not one size fits all. We’ll be working with each person, looking at what their goals are, and trying to tailor the support to that.” - **Online Centre based in a drug and alcohol rehabilitation service, East Midlands**

“We’ve got one learner at the moment, she’s a young woman, she’s in her late 30s, she had a stroke and she’s recovering from that. It’s given her memory problems. She’s got two young children. She’s got elderly parents that she’s looking after. She’s got all sorts of issues going on, yet we’ve taken her from a beginner and she’s now just done her final unit of her ECDL Level One.” - **Adult learning Online Centre, Yorkshire & Humber**

“We also have people who have not actively participated in classroom-based learning for many years so these people understandably have anxiety and confidence worries and I think part of that is because this is like returning to school.” - **Community learning Online Centre, NW England**





## Areas for Improvement: What Hasn't Worked As Well

The evidence suggests that there are limitations in the FDI programme as currently delivered, and several ways in which these could be overcome. These areas for improvement are related to two key evaluation findings:

- **Current levels of FDI funding may be too low to support those with the highest levels of need.** This is exacerbated by external pressures faced by Online Centres resulting from both cuts in public funding, and the pressure placed on Online Centres' services by the ongoing demand for support from benefit claimants, a trend increasing in line with the rollout of Universal Credit.
- **Programme resources are not evenly distributed across the Online Centres Network.** Downward pressure on funding, and the varied delivery models deployed by Online Centres, mean that not all programme resources are available to all learners. This is not necessarily problematic - for example, some learners do not report needing long-term, open-ended support - and data suggest that Centres try and allocate specific resources towards those who need them most. Nevertheless, no resources appear to be universally available, and there is evidence that demand for certain resources is not always met.

Against these two broad findings, the evaluation has identified the following areas for improvement across FDI:

- **1-to-1 support is not as widespread as it needs to be.** The demand placed on Centres by referrals from Jobcentres creates a demand for 1-to-1 support that they cannot always meet. Although only 4% of surveyed learners said that 1-to-1 support was not available at all at their Centre, larger proportions said that it was

not available at all times (9%) or that they sometimes needed to wait before receiving support (22%). Overall, Centres make 1-to-1 support available to those who need it most; even so, only 77% of learners who feel that they need 1-to-1 all the time agree that it is available as much as they need it. If non-native English speakers are discounted (who tend to be supported at Centres where more 1-to-1 support is available, to help them understand written and spoken English), the figure falls to 74%.

- **Positive feedback on learning is not always offered.** As with 1-to-1 support, there is a gap between need for and provision of positive feedback within learning: among learners who report needing regular positive feedback, only 74% feel they receive it 'a lot'. Although the availability of 1-to-1 support itself influences the availability of positive feedback, it does not completely explain these discrepancies: the problem can also be due to pedagogy, as well as resource scarcity.
- **Open-ended, drop-in learning is not widespread.** Open-ended learning is important, especially to learners with lower skills and confidence. Some Online Centres allow learners to keep attending for as long as they want to, while trying to maintain high levels of 1-to-1 support; this often involves working long hours, and co-ordinating the activities of large numbers of volunteers, and runs the risk of a poorer learning experience at busy times. Other Centres choose to place a limit on the amount of time a learner can attend, ensuring high-quality 1-to-1 support is available at all times - but not for long enough to instil confidence and independence in those who need it most.



- **There is not a clear pathway to further learning embedded within the FDI model.**

A high volume of learners – especially Jobseekers – are interested in accredited qualifications at point of engagement, and evidence shows that Online Centres are effective in helping to progress them to accredited programmes, but this is not directly incentivised through the FDI model. Centres have reported that they might be able to improve learning progression rates beyond those currently achieved if funding levels and contract requirements encouraged and supported them to do so.

**These areas for improvement provide an opportunity to review the FDI model, at a time when changes are almost certainly required.**

The environment in which Online Centres operate has become more challenging since the beginning of the FDI programme in 2014. With higher demand for services and less overall funding to provide these services, Centres are not always able to offer the resources they know that learners need, or to know how best to provide them. Although individual learners receive support that reflects their individual needs, and achieve outcomes that are personally relevant, this is not always the case across the whole Network.

**The evidence suggests several avenues for designing and testing new approaches to funding and delivery that could help community organisations (including Online Centres) distribute resources more effectively and efficiently, and maintain the delivery of essential skills in community settings at a time when pressure on funding and resources is acute.**

This is particularly important as the new legal entitlement to full funding for essential digital skills qualifications comes into force in 2020, at which point community organisations will have an important role in providing an effective engagement and progression route in digital skills for those with poor previous experience of education and/or facing practical barriers in their lives.

“We don’t kind of necessarily know in advance who’s going to turn up to a session. So we’ll staff it, we’ll resource that as we’re able to, but it could be that some sessions are a lot busier than others, and that would impact on the tutor’s ability to give that one to one support.” - **Online Centre based in a drug and alcohol rehabilitation service, East Midlands**

“We run a very structured model because of the numbers, and because of the volunteers’ time as well. The timetable’s very structured: week one, week two, week one, week two. We do have the possibility for people to go onto a third and fourth session, but to accommodate everybody here, and to maximise the provision from the volunteers, we don’t usually.” - **Online Centre based in a city centre library, NE England**

“On five o’clock on a Tuesday where we normally have a lot of people in, last week there was absolutely torrential rain, and very few people came. Then the next time, all of a sudden, you could have at two o’clock a group of people decide to come together, so we could end up with 15. So what you have to do is you’ve got to try to break it down. You ask people to wait and try to reallocate them.” - **Community anchor Online Centre, NW England**



## Critical resources: Why the FDI programme works

Although all of the resources in the FDI programme theory were reported and had a positive effect, some stood out as more or less universal, and of critical importance in terms of engaging, retaining and progressing learners. These resources tended to have a high cost for Online Centres: they required considerable time, money and energy to provide. Nevertheless, many Centres worked hard to find ways to offer them, and presented strong evidence as to why they were essential.

- High Tutor to Learner Ratios.** Many Online Centre learners have low digital skills and confidence, making high tutor to learner ratios essential. 92% of Centres reported that they provide 1-to-1 support, and 71% say they provide it all the time or as soon as required. Only 17% of learners reported that they never needed 1-to-1 support, falling to only 10% of those with no qualifications, and 48% of those with no qualifications said that they needed 1-to-1 support all the time. Even when learners are working through Learn My Way, and in the relatively small amount of FDI provision where all learners in a group follow the same course, tutors still need to be on hand to ensure every learner is making meaningful progress and nobody is left behind. Interestingly, learners with lower qualifications are more likely to report that 1-to-1 support is available all the time, or immediately on demand, suggesting that Centres are ensuring that extra resources are directed towards those who need it most.
- Regular Positive Feedback.** For new learners already unsure of their ability to succeed, the smallest setbacks can result in disengagement; emphasising every success, and helping learners to get over their mistakes, can help to mitigate this risk. 88% of learners said that praise and encouragement were important parts of learning support, and these were especially highly valued by learners aged under 45 with lower educational attainment.
- No Time Limit For Learning.** Learners with no digital skills and low confidence at point of engagement are unlikely to achieve their goals very quickly: they want and need open-ended support, which they can access for as long as required. 70% of Centres reported that all of their learning is open-ended: any learner can continue learning for as long as they need in order to build their skills, confidence and motivation; a further 18% make open-ended learning available to learners in certain circumstances. Open-ended learning is rated the most important element of support by learners over 65 and those with no qualifications, and the second-most important by learners overall.
- Flexible Start Dates.** Different changes of circumstances, among different types of learner, can create a sudden need to develop digital skills - 56% reported that they needed to start learning urgently, and could not have waited. For older people, the trigger for learning is more likely to be bereavement, and the loss of proxy access to the internet: 35% of learners over 65 said that they started learning because they had lost a proxy. 61% of learners already in employment needed to quickly develop digital skills for the workplace; and 60% of unemployed learners needed to start their learning straight away, either to find work or for work-related learning, or to manage accounts for the DWP's Universal Credit and Find A Job online services. Centres work hard to make learning instantly accessible, with 79% saying that they had no waiting time for learning under any circumstances, and 95% saying that they offered instant access to learning in certain circumstances.

- **Learn My Way.** Offering flexible start dates with no time limit for learning works - but places a considerable strain on Online Centres. Centres need a solution that allows them to offer a standardised, high-quality learning experience, and to manage learning sessions in which each learner is following their own journey. Learn My Way provides this solution, which 85% of Centres surveyed as part of the evaluation rated as important or very important to their digital skills delivery. Learn My Way is also valued by learners, 98% of whom find it useful,

and 70% very useful; it is especially highly rated by learners with no qualifications. It is rated highly by independent users, with 59% finding it very useful, rising to 70% of those with no qualifications; however, it is universally rated as more useful by learners who have access to higher levels of 1-to-1 support - suggesting that it is most effective as part of a programme of blended learning.





## Progression: How FDI changes intentions

Comparable data on learner outcomes has been collected since the beginning of the FDI programme, through the progression survey administered by telephone by IFF Research: a total of 1,215 responses since 2014 (baseline data is collected in an online survey of those who register on the Learn My Way platform). This has shown that:

- 87% of learners supported by FDI progress to further learning (comprising accredited qualifications, informal courses and self-guided learning)
- 73% of working-age learners improved their prospects of finding work
- 39% of learners attending a Centre progressed to at least one accredited qualification
- 74% accessed online government services for the first time
- 17% entered full-time or part-time employment

As part of the FDI programme, Online Centres are also encouraged and supported by Good Things Foundation to create and validate Unique Learner Numbers (ULN) for those they support. Alongside these data, analysis of ULN data matched to data from Learn My Way shows that in 2016-17, of the 9,800 learners who registered on Learn My Way and received a validated ULN, 1,700 went on to start a course recorded on the Individualised Learner Record.

A key part of the realist evaluation has been the analysis of these outcomes data, focusing on:

- **Learner demographics:** age, employment status, education level and ethnicity
- **Initial intention:** comparing outcomes recorded in the progression survey, with intentions stated in the baseline survey (for example, learners are asked at baseline if they are interested in learning how to save money online; and in the progression survey are asked if they went on to do so).

Recent research on adult learning conducted by DfE identifies a 'pre-contemplation' stage of

learning, during which potential learners 'are not necessarily seeking to appraise or critically engage with aspects of their lives which they may not find fulfilling.' Individuals at the **pre-contemplation** stage are more likely to have had a poor experience of previous (school-age) learning, and a misconception that adult learning will be similar, leading to low self-efficacy and low perceived value in learning.<sup>8</sup> These factors affect a significant proportion of FDI learners, of whom:

- 29% did not enjoy learning at school, rising to 48% of those with no qualifications
- 62% of those with no qualifications report having no positive learning experiences since leaving school
- 34% say that learning to use the internet feels very complicated, rising to 53% of those with no qualifications
- 20% of those with no qualifications feel that the internet 'is not for people like me'.

These barriers mean that Online Centres should in theory face an uphill struggle with many learners, who may not be interested in specific valuable outcomes when they first start attending a Centre. To assess the impact of the FDI programme it is therefore important to understand, not just what proportion of learners progress to specific outcomes, but also their intentions: whether or not they were interested in these outcomes in the first place.

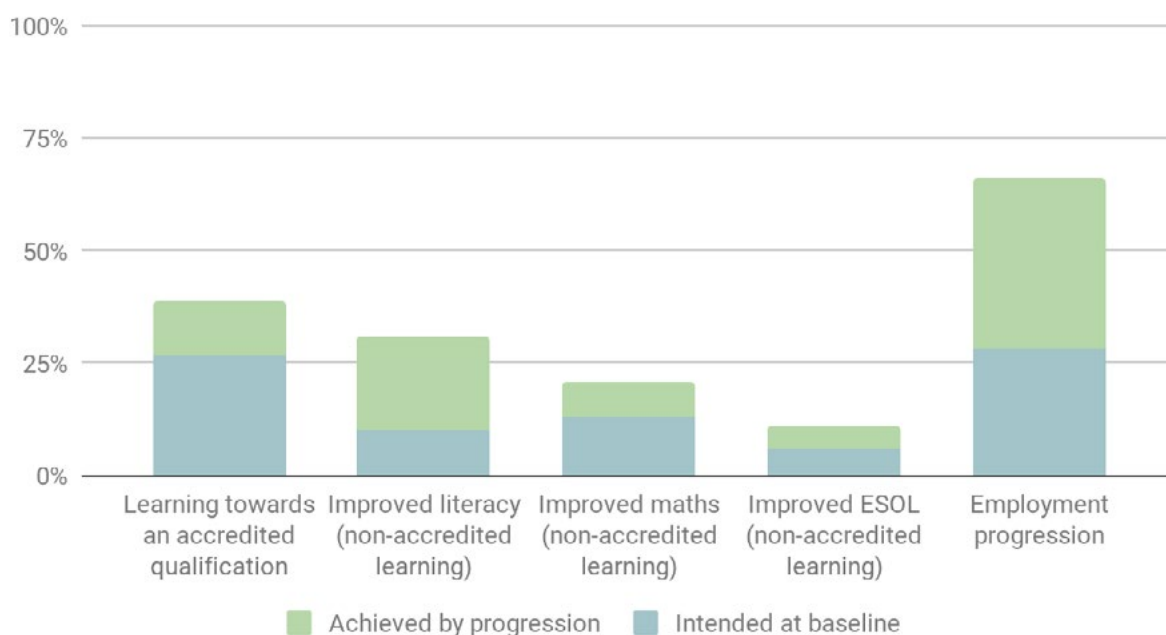
**The evidence shows that for all population groups supported by FDI, a greater number of learners progressed against given skills and employment outcomes than originally intended to.** A visual comparison of learner baseline and progression data measured from the beginning of the FDI programme is shown in the charts below. This shows the proportion of FDI learners that intended a certain outcome (in blue) and the proportion that went on to achieve that outcome (in green), and in all cases the latter exceeds the former. This same data is presented later in the report for the different audiences identified in the section on learner typology.

<sup>8</sup>Department for Education (2018): Decisions of Adult Learners. Kantar Public and Learning and Work Institute. Available online at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/742108/DfE\\_Decisions\\_of\\_adult\\_learners.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/742108/DfE_Decisions_of_adult_learners.pdf)

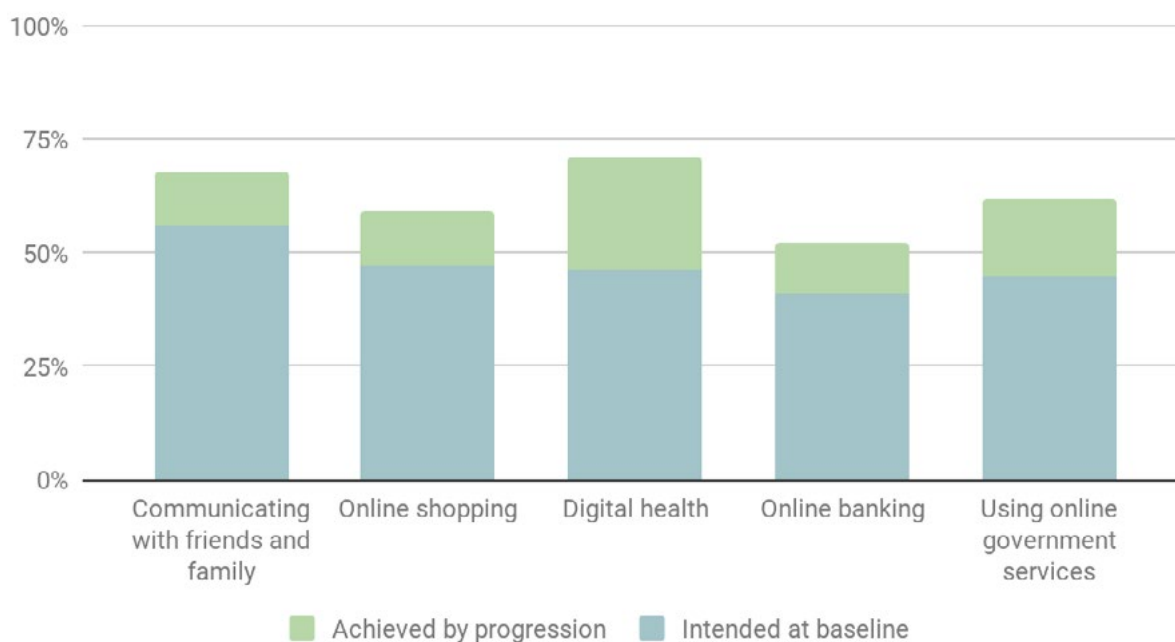
There are some clear headline trends:

- For accredited qualifications, intention to progress rises from school leaving age to peak between 35 and 44, at 47%. Overall, learners aged 25-44 have the highest levels of actual progression to qualifications: 55%, against a working-age average of 46%.
- Over three times as many learners improved their literacy than initially intended to do so (10% intention, 31% progression). Learners more likely to benefit were those aged under 45 (14% intention, 42% progression) and those with no qualifications (15% intention, 35% progression).
- The gap between qualification intention and progression is especially high among learners with no qualifications at point of engagement: only 22% expressed an initial interest in a qualification, but 36% went on to qualification-based learning.

Intention vs Progression for Learning & Employment Outcomes: All Learners



Intention vs Progression for Digital Skills Outcomes: All Learners





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## Learner Typology

The FDI programme supports anyone who needs help with digital skills, no matter what their background and personal circumstances. Within this population, some characteristics stand out as particularly important for delivery of the FDI model.

The types presented here do not constitute the entire FDI learner population, and there is some overlap between types; for example, a third of unemployed learners also have no qualifications. Rather than providing an overall segmentation, the purpose of the typology is to draw attention to characteristics which are well-represented in the population, and have significant implications for the programme

in terms of resourcing and delivery strategy. For example, the fact that learners with no qualifications need the highest levels of 1-to-1 support indicates that this need is negatively correlated with educational attainment - the lower a learner's attainment, the more likely they are to need 1-to-1 support.

Type	% of FDI learners	Significant characteristics
Unemployed learners	45%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Majority referred by Jobcentre</li> <li>Motivated to find work online, often to the detriment of other digital skills outcomes</li> <li>Ideally need in-house employment support</li> <li>Older jobseekers have low digital confidence and motivation</li> <li>May need to keep attending Centre until they find work</li> </ul>
Learners with no qualifications	29%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Poor experience of education</li> <li>Very low confidence and motivation</li> <li>Require intensive, long-term support</li> <li>Especially value learning environments which are informal, welcoming and 'not like school'</li> </ul>
Learners with limited digital skills	29%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More likely to have higher educational attainment</li> <li>More likely to be in employment</li> <li>Interested in work-related learning</li> <li>Support is less intensive and may be more limited in time</li> </ul>
Learners who are still learning English	≥6%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Require very high levels of 1-to-1 support</li> <li>Ideally need in-house support with ESOL</li> <li>More likely to be learning in community centre Online Centres</li> <li>Translation support (often from volunteers) is critical</li> </ul>
Retired learners	17%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Low digital skills and confidence, but relatively high motivation</li> <li>Need long-term support</li> <li>Value the social aspect of the internet, and approach learning as a social activity</li> </ul>

## Unemployed Learners

### Contexts: Characteristics of Unemployed Learners

- Less likely to have any personal access to the internet, and to have access to a device well-suited for online job search
- Lower digital skills, with older jobseekers more likely to have no digital skills at point of engagement
- Older jobseekers (over 45) are significantly more likely to have poor educational attainment (<Level 2), and less likely to have experience of using computers in the workplace
- Older jobseekers and lower skilled jobseekers feel that the internet is very complicated, and not for people like them
- Majority were referred or signposted by a Jobcentre

### What Works For Unemployed Learners

- Learning structure resources are critical: jobseekers need learning, support and access that can be accessed quickly so they can begin looking for work, and which is open-ended, usually until they find employment. Older jobseekers prefer open-ended learning support, which they can access for as long as they need.
- Interpersonal resources are important: older jobseekers need high levels of 1-to-1 support, with younger jobseekers more likely to value regular positive feedback on their progress.
- Environmental resources are important: younger jobseekers are more likely to want learning that does not look or feel like school.
- Almost all jobseekers need auxiliary support with finding work, such as CVs and Universal Credit claims.

## Unemployed Learners: Profile

Since the introduction by DWP in 2012 of the Universal Jobmatch employment portal, high volumes of jobseekers in need of digital skills support have been signposted and referred to Online Centres by Jobcentres, and those referred tend to be older and lower-skilled: overall, 45% of Online Centres learners are jobseekers - a total of 47,500 per year - of which 72% are aged over 45, and 60% are educated below Level 2. As with the general learner population, older and age and lower skills correlates with relatively poor self-efficacy, with 49% of unemployed learners with no qualifications believing that learning to use the internet is very complicated.

For jobseekers, learning digital skills is almost always part of a broader support journey back into employment, which might also involve help with writing CVs and covering letters, mock

interviews, careers advice, and work-related learning. Jobseekers are more likely to be learning towards a qualification (27% vs 22% all learners), with older jobseekers more likely to be receiving other forms of support in finding work compared to younger jobseekers (62% vs 51%); it is unsurprising that jobseekers are more likely to be learning in a community centre where employment support services are more common, rather than in a library (51% vs 16%).

Older jobseekers form a distinctive group within the unemployed Online Centres learner population, due to their lower digital skills and experience, lower educational attainment, and correspondingly high support needs: they are much more likely than younger jobseekers to perceive the internet as difficult to learn (40% vs 17%), and to have no digital skills at point of engagement (41% vs 9%).



## Unemployed Learners: Support Needs

Jobseekers are often in a hurry to learn digital skills, and at a national level, the rollout of Universal Credit is increasing further the level and intensity of support required by this group. With requirements to use Government service portals to make benefit claims and to record personal details and job search activity, the need for access and support is often urgent; in some cases, unemployed learners are under threat of benefit sanction if they fail to register for and use the Find A Job website (the successor to Universal Jobmatch), and navigating the new and unfamiliar Universal Credit website creates the risk of delayed benefit payments. Unemployed learners were more likely to report that there was an important reason that they needed to start their learning straight away (70% vs 56%), and to say that a lack of waiting time was the thing they valued most about their Online Centre.

Once they are engaged, older jobseekers may need help with the most basic digital skills, while younger jobseekers may need to develop the specific skills required to complete complex online forms, or make the most of the functionality of online job search sites. Unemployed learners may not have access to the right kind of device for online job search, or any internet-connected device at all: free, convenient access to the internet is one of the most important things that Online Centres can offer, and the ability to access a Centre for as long as required is especially highly-valued by unemployed learners with no qualifications.

There is a clear distinction between younger and older jobseekers in terms of anticipated support time: 35% of those aged under 45 expect to need no more than one month's support, compared to 15% of those over 45; and 18% of those over 55 expect to need more than five months support.

## Outcomes For Unemployed Learners

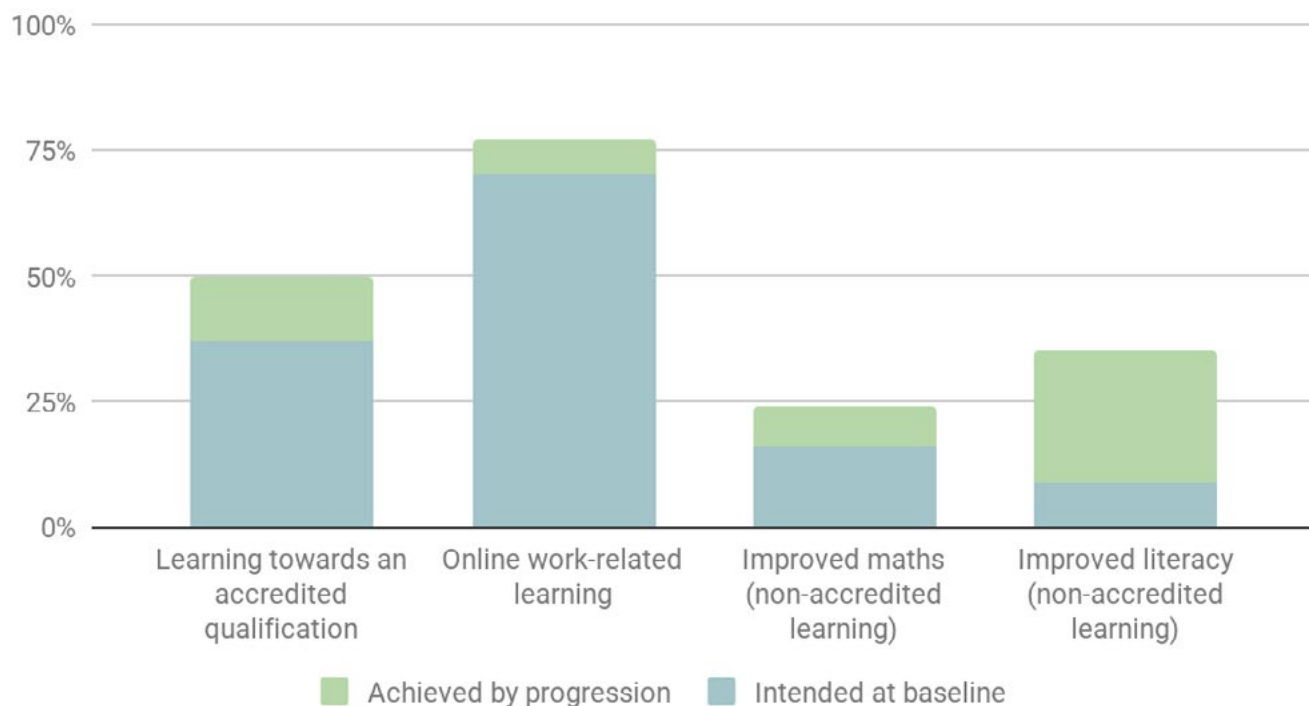
At point of engagement, unemployed learners are interested in finding work first and foremost, and often to the exclusion of other goals. Progression data suggest that Online Centres are effective in helping them to identify and achieve other outcomes: despite not saying they wanted to, jobseekers are more likely to say they are more able to manage their money; have improved job prospects; learn for a qualification; claim benefits online; and do work-related learning. In particular, among learners who had no intention to learn for a qualification, jobseekers with no existing qualifications are 31% more likely than non-jobseekers to then go on to learn for one; and jobseekers aged 55-64 are 17% more likely to do so.

However, informal learning progression is more dependent on initial intentions: for 45-54 year old jobseekers who do not give informal learning as an intention, they go on to do courses for personal interest or try to improve their knowledge about anything less often than non-jobseekers (18% and 22% respectively). In contrast, 54-65 year old jobseekers who state an intention to learn for personal interest are 12% more likely than non-jobseekers to do so.

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“ Newcastle went live with Universal Credit two years ago. So we do get a lot of people who are sent here from the Jobcentre...they've done their online application form with a support worker, but then they've got to manage their online Universal Credit claim and they need to be able to have support to do that. We trained my volunteers to support people on opening and closing their Universal Credit journal and checking to see if they've got any to do in their 'to do' list, but also, to register that they've actually been on our class because our class counts as part of their job searching...because people were getting their money suspended all the time because they don't know how to go in and out and of their journal.” - **Library Online Centre, NE England**

### Intention vs Progression for Unemployed Learner Outcomes



“The Jobcentre are sending us people that they know will benefit most the kind of support we give. It’s those kind of people who’ve got no confidence, who shy away from the idea of learning because they think they can’t. So they’re sent here because the Job Centre recognises that it’s informal but it’s not unprofessional. We get things done. We’ve got an overarching structure of where we want to take people, and they’re aware that we want them to achieve, we want them to get to a point, but it’s done in an informal way so as not to scare people.” - **Community Online Centre, West Midlands**

## Learners With No Qualifications

### Characteristics of Learners With No Qualifications

- More likely to be aged 55+, and unemployed if of working age
- More likely to think the internet is complicated to learn, and less likely to agree it's 'for people like me'
- Less than half report enjoying learning at school, and fewer have had any good learning experiences since leaving school
- More than twice as likely that learning at an Online Centre is their first learning experience since leaving school
- Much less likely to have any digital skills at point of engagement, or any personal access to the internet

### What Works For Learners With No Qualifications

- Among learning structure resources, more likely to value the ability to keep learning for as long as they need, and having opportunities to practice what they've learned
- Younger learners are more likely to need high levels of 1-to-1 support and positive feedback
- Negative previous experience of education means they are more likely to prefer learning environments that do not look or feel like school; older age cohorts are also more likely to value interpersonal relationships with Centre personnel, and belonging to a learning community of peers

### Learners With No Qualifications: Profile

29% of learners report having no qualifications (NQ) at point of engagement: approximately 30,000 per year.<sup>9</sup> Although learners of any age may not have any qualifications, the large majority (84%) are over 45, and 39% are between 55 and 64. Among working-age learners, lack of qualifications overlaps considerably with unemployment: 34% of unemployed learners are NQ, rising to 50% for those aged 55-64. Finding work is the main motivation to learn for 52% of working-age NQ learners, and they are significantly less likely to be interested in learning for personal interest. But as age increases above retirement, the situation is reversed: significantly higher numbers are interested in online learning, as well as accessing services and online banking.

NQ learners are characterised by especially low self-efficacy, especially in relation to ICTs, driven by negative experiences of school-age education and a lack of exposure to learning opportunities and digital technology throughout their lives. Only 42% enjoyed learning at school, and only 32% have had opportunities to learn in the workplace; overall, just 62% report any positive learning experiences between school and engagement with their Online Centre. Workplace experience of ICTs is low for all NQ age cohorts, and any experience is more likely to be limited to simple applications such as email. The effect of these limitations is apparent in lower trust in the internet, with 64% of NQ learners saying at point of engagement that they would never enter personal or financial details online, with little variance by age cohort; and a greater sense that the internet is complicated, which rises steadily with age.

<sup>9</sup>Based on Q1 and 2 2018-19 figure for KPI1 x 2 x 0.29.

## Learners With No Qualifications: Support Needs

NQ learners are often unsure of their ability to learn, or even if learning is for them; they need intensive, long-term support to help them achieve their goals. All NQ age groups are more likely to anticipate attending their Centre for five months or more, and to need higher levels of 1-to-1 support and positive feedback. Interestingly, younger NQ learners (under 55) report the highest levels of all: 26% feel they need constant 1-to-1 support and 63% find positive feedback very important, compared to only 12% and 40% among older NQ learners (slightly lower than the general learner population). NQ learners also value the ability to put learning into practice, building their confidence through tangible evidence of success.

Overall, NQ learners are more likely to value environmental resources which help them to overcome negative attitudes towards and poor previous experience of learning: the look and 'feel' of Online Centres as 'not like school', the friendly and informal relationship between learner and tutor, and the sense of community within the learner population; they are more likely to be learning in a community Online Centre rather than a library, with a support model which may be better able to bring these resources to bear.

“ We've got older learners who've had bad experiences at school, so they need confidence boosting and they need to see results before they'll actually trust in the system. So they need to go through very small bite sized steps first to start to believe in their ability before they'll move forward with more confidence. And that can take quite a long time to build.” - **Community Centre Online Centre, London**

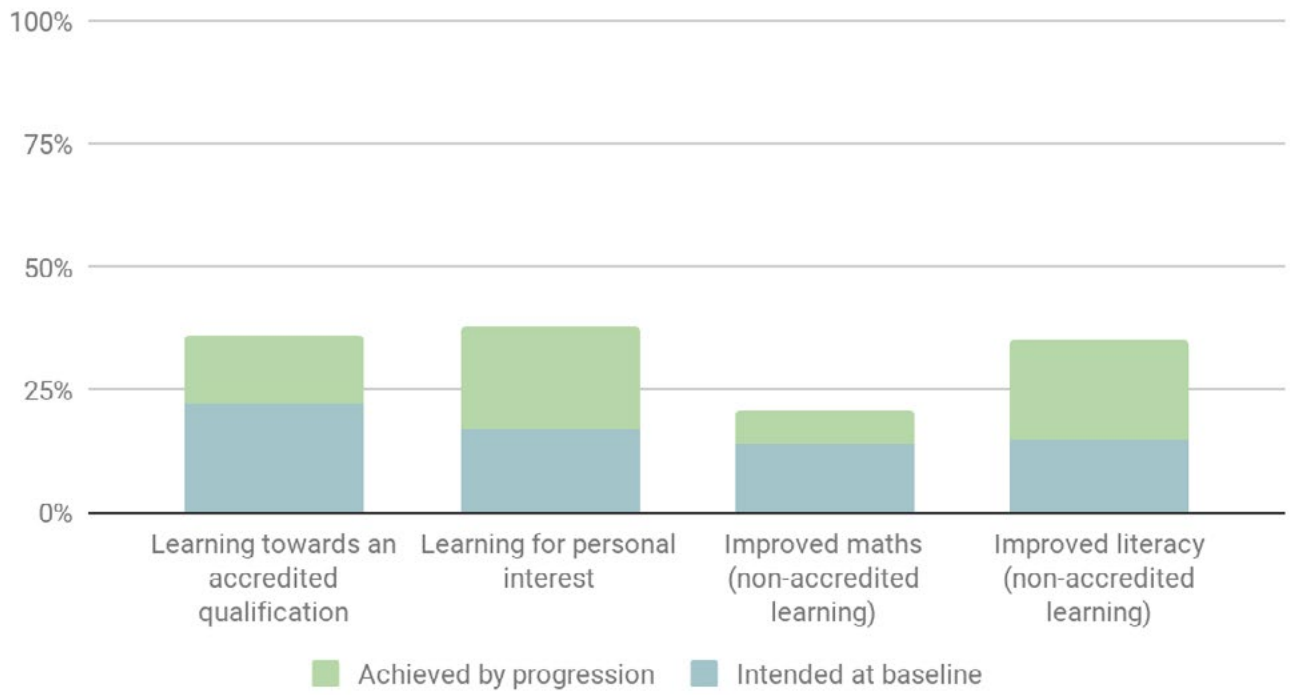
## Outcomes For Learners With No Qualifications

Online Centres support learners with no qualifications to progress to digital outcomes, even those for which they had no original intention: 63% of the two thirds of NQ learners who learned how to manage money online, did not intend to learn this at point of engagement; 56% learned how to find health information online, of which 62% had not intended to. The proportion of NQ learners progressing to other digital and personal outcomes is broadly similar to the general learner population; this shows that the FDI support model effectively overcomes the differences in skills and attitudes that exist when learners first engage.

Employment and learning outcomes for unemployed NQ learners with no qualifications depend very much on intention. Among learners who did not state an intention to find a job, unemployed learners are 30% more likely than non-jobseekers to then say their job prospects were improved. For those who did not state an intention to learn for a qualification, unemployed NQ learners are 31% more likely than non-jobseekers to then go on to learn for one. And among learners with an initial intention to do work-related learning, those with no qualifications have a significantly higher proportion who achieved this outcome: learners with qualifications at Levels 2 and 4 were 60% less likely to do so.

“ When people do the Online Basics award, more often than not it's the very first qualification they've had since leaving or even at school. I can remember a girl, once she knew she'd passed, she jumped up and I literally hugged her for quite a long time. She was in tears because it was the very first thing she'd actually achieved. Then, the next sentence out of her mouth was, "right, what can I do next?" - **Library Online Centre, E England**

### Intention vs Progression for No Qualification Learner Outcomes



## Learners With Limited Digital Skills

### Characteristics of Learners With Limited Digital Skills

- Some digital skills at point of engagement, but may have areas where they need some support
- More likely to be highly educated (to Level 3 or above) and aged under 55
- More likely to have workplace experience of using IT
- More likely to be employed, and interested in work-related learning
- Attend more sessions over more hours - but have much less need for positive feedback and 1-to-1 support
- Less likely to use Learn My Way, and those who do are less likely to find it useful

### What Works For Learners With Limited Digital Skills?

- Learning structure resources are key: these learners value the ability to start attending an Online Centre without having to wait, and being able to attend for as long as they need to.
- Although interpersonal resources are less important, these learners still need tailored, 1-to-1 support to achieve their goals
- Among environmental resources, value their Centres' ease of access
- Some may need access to internet-connected devices (laptop and desktop computers), which allow them to carry out employment-related or relatively complex tasks

### Limited Digital Skills Learners: Profile

Limited digital skills are defined in the Online Centres learner survey as being able at point of engagement to independently fill in an online form, make an online purchase, or change social media privacy settings. But these skills are limited to 'personal' online activity - they do not necessarily mean that individuals have the very different digital skills they need to be productive at work. Around 29% of learners (30,700 per year) have limited digital skills (LDS) at point of engagement.

LDS learners are more than three times more likely than learners with no digital skills to already be in employment or self-employed, and more than twice as likely to be educated to Level 3 or above. Unemployed LDS learners are primarily motivated by finding work (56%), while the biggest motivation for employed LDS learners

is work-related learning (40%). They are more likely to have enjoyed learning at school and to have had positive learning experiences in adulthood, and 74% have gained digital skills in the workplace.

There is limited data on how LDS learners hear about FDI support. 28% heard about support from 'another organisation' (i.e. not one specified in the learner survey), and 25% cited an unspecified source of information - both much higher proportions than for learners without digital skills. These figures may be connected to the much higher proportion of employed learners who are learning on Learn My Way independently, which could include learning at work. Ongoing refinements to the learner survey, informed by this evaluation, will help to better understand LDS learners' source of awareness, and their learning context.

## Limited Digital Skills Learners: Support Needs

Confidence and motivation are not significant barriers for LDS learners. They are half as likely as learners with no digital skills to believe that the internet is not personally relevant, with less than 10% thinking that the internet is 'not for people like me'; and they are five times less likely to perceive the internet as 'very complicated' to learn. Their skills and confidence translate into a significantly lower need for 1-to-1 support - 35% don't feel they need it, compared to only 9% of those with no digital skills - although they need (and receive) positive feedback almost as much as other learners.

For LDS learners, the relative importance of learning structure resources depends on economic activity. Like other unemployed learners, LDS jobseekers value the ability to start learning straight away, while those in full-time employment are more than three times as likely to value personalised learning that does not follow a fixed curriculum. Together with the much higher interest in work-related learning among employed LDS learners, the importance of personalised learning suggests the need for support to develop specific digital skills tailored to circumstances of employment.

Further evidence for the importance of FDI for employed LDS learners comes from Online Centres, who report demand for help with non-browser digital skills, especially Microsoft Office and similar productivity applications - although there is not a clear way for Online Centres to specify such support on CaptureIT, the data tool used by Centres to record non-Learn My Way basic digital skills learning.

“ I have been looking for work at the same time caring for my mum and I decided well, you know, if I stayed at home, next time I want to go to work there will no one who will employ me because I won't have any credibility in the market. So I might as well keep myself and my mind busy even if I'm not at work... I met [the Centre Manager] at a job fair...I asked her, "I have this qualification, would you take me in just to refresh my computer skills and get me back into employment?" - **LDS learner, London**

## Outcomes For Learners With Limited Digital Skills

Given their higher level of baseline digital skills, it is not surprising that LDS learners report higher rates of progression than those with fewer or no skills - although it should be recognised that all progression is recorded at the same point (three months after completion of the baseline survey), and other learners may go on to achieve similar levels of progression in the future (evidenced by their need for long-term support).

LDS learners are slightly more likely than those with fewer or no skills to progress to further learning (89% vs 83%) - which is not surprising, given the higher proportion interested in work-related learning at engagement - and twice as likely to report an improvement at work as a result of the support they have received. LDS learners are less likely to progress to qualifications, but this may be due to the fact that they are more likely to have them already; they are more likely to report progression to non-accredited courses related to employment, which corresponds with baseline intentions. The results of the realist evaluation will help Good Things Foundation to amend the FDI progression survey in order to collect better data on the limited and specific outcomes some LDS learners may want to achieve, such as learning how to use software that improves productivity in the workplace.

## Learners Who Are Still Learning English

### Characteristics of Learners Who Are Still Learning English

- More likely to have very low or no digital skills at point of engagement
- More likely to be engaged through ESOL provision, from which they progress to digital skills
- Poor English skills mean that SLE learners cannot engage fully with Learn My Way until their English language skills improve
- May have arrived in the UK in difficult circumstances and in need of a range of support services from their Online Centre

### What Works For Learners Who Are Still Learning English?

- Interpersonal resources are critical: SLE learners are more likely to value and to receive 1-to-1 support, translation support from volunteers, peer support, and positive feedback.
- Environmental resources are also important: SLE learners are more likely to describe their Centres as local, trusted, and somewhere that feels like home; and to be engaged for a reason other than learning digital skills
- Flexible learning structure is vital since SLE learners are more likely to need to miss learning sessions from time to time

### Learners Who Are Still Learning English: Profile

At least 17,000 FDI learners per year are still learning English (SLE), and the real total is likely to be considerably higher.<sup>10</sup> This group comprises recent economic migrants to the UK, refugees, and long-term UK residents who have never learned to speak English.

The concentration of SLE populations in urban areas, and their unique needs, means they are more likely to be learning in a relatively small number of Online Centres which provide a range of specialist support services to migrant populations, especially English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

SLE learners are much less likely to be learning in a library or in their own time, and much more likely to be learning in a community centre. They're also much more likely to be aware that

the venue they're in is an Online Centre. This suggests that Centres supporting SLE learners are more likely to be highly engaged members of the Network.

SLE learners are far more prevalent in the Online Centres learner population than in the general population.<sup>11</sup> This may be partly due to higher levels of internet non-usage among non-White British ethnic groups (ONS 2015<sup>12</sup>), but is primarily the result of many highly engaged Centres operating as broad-spectrum community centres in urban areas of high deprivation, where there are larger BAME and SLE populations. 54% of SLE learners originally attended their Online Centre to learn English, before progressing to digital skills later on, compared to only 24% of native English speakers who started attending an Online Centre for a reason other than learning digital skills.

<sup>10</sup>It is difficult to assess the total number of SLE learners across the FDI programme, since their limited language and digital skills make it difficult for them to complete the learner survey. Even extrapolating from the very low learner survey figure for SLE learners (6%) suggests a total of 17k SLE learners supported per year. 17k based on Q1 and 2 2018-19 figure for KPI1 x 2.

<sup>11</sup>2% of the population in England and Wales cannot not speak English well or at all (ONS 2011).

<sup>12</sup>Unpublished data, commissioned by Good Things Foundation; available on request.



## Learners Who Are Still Learning English: Support Needs

As well as constituting a significant proportion of FDI learners, SLE learners also require a disproportionate amount of Centres' resources. They are much more likely to say they need 1-to-1 support all the time (42% for those still learning English vs 11% for native English speakers), high levels of positive feedback (82% vs 36%), and - obviously - need to improve their English. Feedback from Centres supporting high proportions of SLE learners suggest that these needs are met, which is confirmed by learner survey data: 77% of SLE learners say 1-to-1 support is always available (vs 52% of native English speakers), and 77% say they receive positive feedback 'a lot' (50% native English speakers).

In addition, there are some important resources which appear to be uniquely prevalent - and important - in SLE-specialist Centres. Only 25% of native English speakers report that peer support is widespread at their Centre, compared to 65% of SLE learners; SLE learners are also much more likely to value peer support (84% vs 47% native English speakers). The high incidence of peer support corresponds to SLE learners' valuing their Centres above all as a 'well-known and trusted local place' (38% vs 14% native English speakers) where 'other people like me come here - I feel at home' (21% vs 10%).

75% of SLE learners also report that translation support is available at their Centre. Evidence suggests that, in most if not all cases, translation support is provided by volunteers with the same native language, who may be looking for work or not yet eligible to work in the UK. Such support is generally only available in SLE specialist Centres, where learners, volunteers and (to a lesser extent) paid staff are likely to share a language. Centres with a smaller proportion of SLE learners may have volunteers who speak languages other than English, but may not be able to deploy them at the same time as learners who need the support, or find learners who speak the same language.

Although SLE learners rate Learn My Way highly, qualitative feedback suggests that the language level is often too complicated for them, and

they may not realise the importance of learning digital skills as part of life in the UK. A co-creation workshop with SLE specialist Centres was held in August 2018, to start to develop better digital skills resources for SLE learners. Recommendations being carried forward include:

- Simplified English or integrated translation on Learn My Way
- A dedicated Learn My Way module for SLE learners
- Embedding Learn My Way into the ESOL learning resources created for the English My Way programme funded by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
- A video library of common tasks and actions for SLE learners.

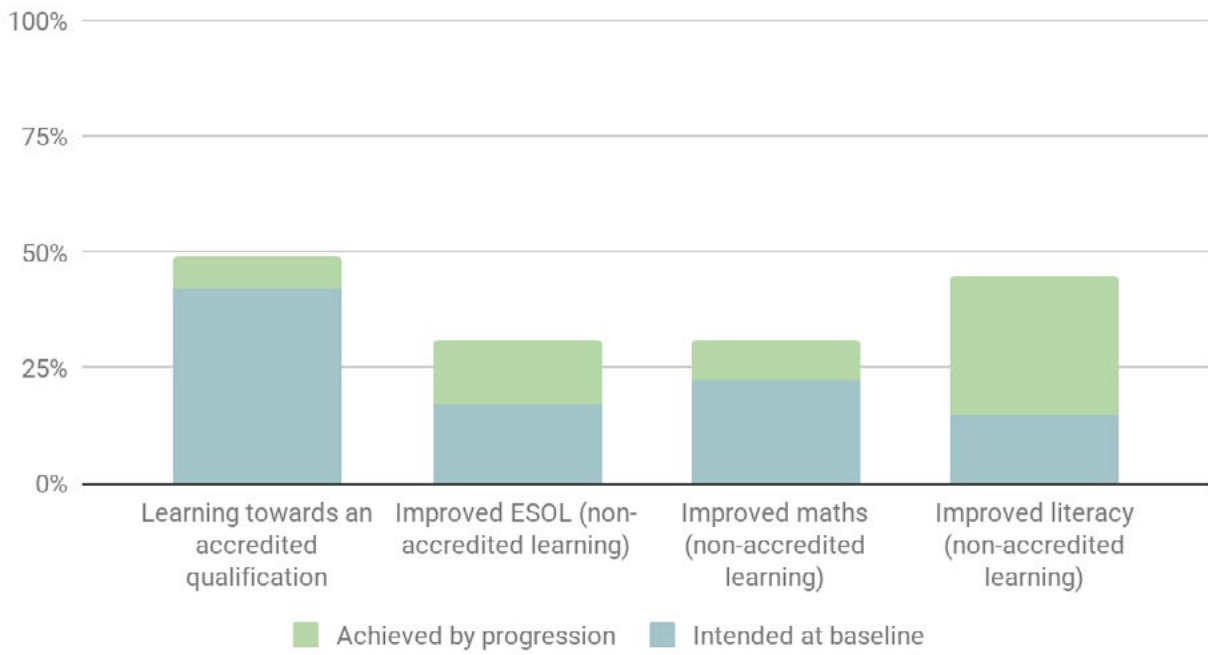
## Outcomes For SLE Learners<sup>13</sup>

Analysis of learner and progression survey data shows that SLE learners were significantly more likely to go on to positive outcomes that were not their original goals, including how to use the internet to manage their money better, claim benefits, bank and find health information; to have started full-time or part-time work; to have started a qualification; and to be happier as a result of more social contact.

The breadth of these unplanned outcomes, and the fact that SLE learners are more likely to be engaged by Online Centres for reasons other than learning digital skills, provides strong evidence of the importance of the blended delivery model for Centres providing specialist support to SLE learners: a model that focused only on digital skills would not engage digitally reluctant SLE learners through ESOL, and would be less likely to nurture a self-supporting learning community which provided flexible, informal translation support.

<sup>13</sup>Learners have only recently been asked if they are SLE, so outcomes data is taken from BAME learner progression survey respondents.

### Intention vs Progression for BAME Learner Outcomes



## Retired Learners

### Contexts: Characteristics of Retired Learners

- Much more likely to be learning in library Online Centres, and less likely to be learning at home by themselves
- More likely to be motivated to learn due to loss of an internet proxy
- Low digital skills and self-efficacy, especially among those with low educational attainment
- Less confident to learn by themselves through trial and error
- Primarily interested at point of engagement in learning for personal interest and keeping in touch with friends and family

### What Works For Retired Learners?

- Retired learners most value the ability to keep learning for as long as they need to, to choose their own learning journey, and to attend learning when they want to
- They prize the social aspect of learning, and the sense of belonging to a learning community
- They like Learn My Way for the opportunities it gives to put learning into practice, and its comprehensiveness

## Retired Learners Profile

Approximately 13% of FDI learners - nearly 18,000 - are retired at point of engagement. With no need to use the internet to find work or undertake work-related learning, every other digital motivation is higher for this cohort, but above all the desire to learn for personal interest (primary motivation for 35%), and to communicate with friends and family online (14%); online shopping, banking and budgeting are also significant motivations. And without the Jobcentre as a source of referral, they are more likely than working-age learners to have heard about their Online Centre through marketing materials (30% vs 14%), or via word of mouth (36% vs 15%).

Although retired learners are more likely to consider the internet complicated to learn (43% vs 33% average), they are slightly more likely than average to perceive it as personally relevant. These differences reflect the fact that retired learners are learning for personal reasons, rather than being compelled to do so, and have correspondingly higher levels of motivation.

## Retired Learners Support Needs

Retired learners higher motivation may be the reason behind their otherwise surprising rejection of 1-to-1 support and positive feedback. They are less likely than any other economic group, including employed learners, to feel that they need

1-to-1 support all the time, and this holds true when controlling for education attainment and existing digital skills. (However, it is not clear to what extent this rejection in survey data conforms to reality, and it may reflect retired learners not wanting to be conform to stereotypes associated with older people and digital technology.) Whatever the reality, need for some level of 1-to-1 support is high, with only 6% of retired learners saying they do not need it at all.

Retired learners' lower digital skills and experience at point of engagement leads them to place greater value on the ability to attend their Centre for as long as they need to; they are less likely to anticipate needing less than two months support, and more likely to expect to be learning for five months or more. They also value flexible learning where they do not always have to attend sessions.

It is in relation to environmental resources that retired learners' support needs stand out, and indicate a dislike of formal learning, and a preference for learning in a social environment. They are more likely to place value on their learning venue being a well-known and trusted local place, the friendliness of tutors and volunteers, and the fact that the venue does not look or feel like school.

## Outcomes for Retired Learners

Outcomes for retired learners reflect their economic inactivity. With no motive for any kind of employment progression, they are also less likely to be interested in gaining qualifications in preference for non-accredited and self-led learning: only 17% progressed to a qualification, compared to 55% of learners aged 24-44. However, a significantly smaller proportion of 9% expressed an interest in learning for a qualification at point of engagement, again demonstrating how Online Centres are able to support learners from pre-contemplation to engagement with qualifications.

“When I first came, I said, I don't want to know about going online, I don't want to know about emails...all I want to do is to do the [residents' association] accounts [using Microsoft Excel]. When I know exactly what I'm doing I might go into emails.” - **Retired learner, E England**

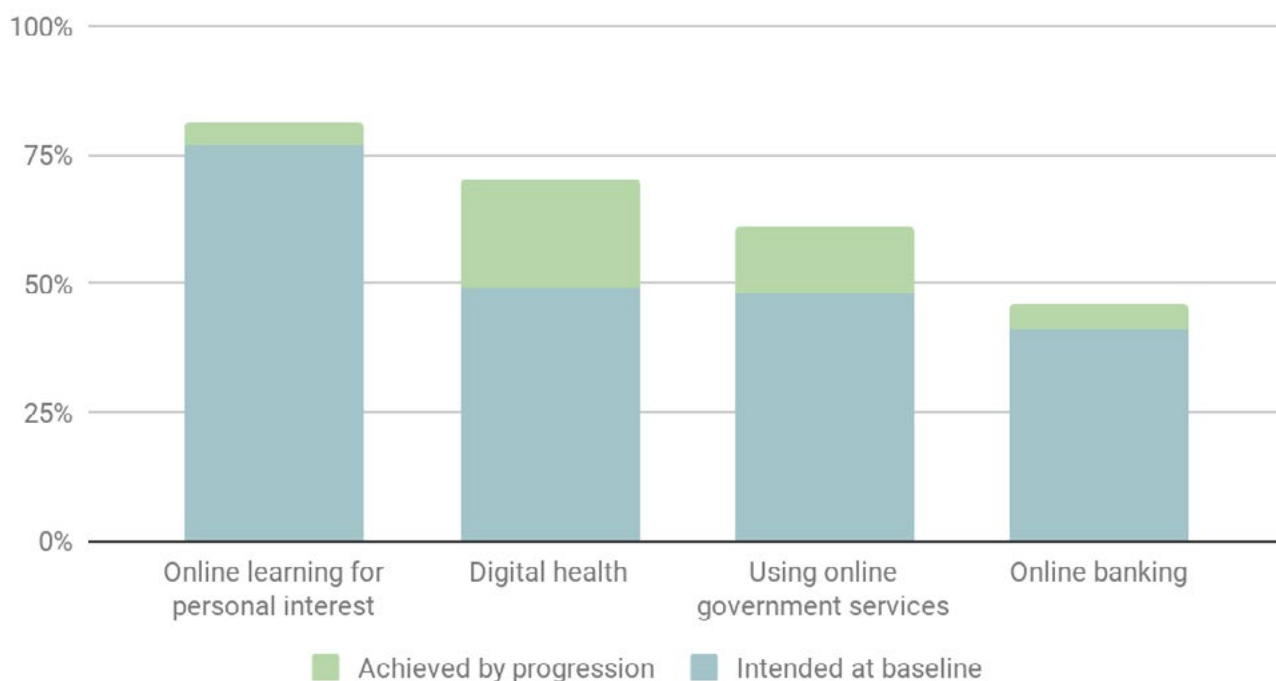
Analysis of data on progression to digital outcomes reveals interesting differences by initial intention. Among learners who were initially interested in online shopping, retired learners have about half the odds (48% lower) of having done so at the time they complete the progression survey; this slow progress may be connected to older learners' well-documented

fears of shopping online, and their frequent reliance on family proxies to buy things online on their behalf. Learning to find health information online is also influenced by intention: for those learners who did originally intend this outcome, older learners are more likely than younger to go on to do so; for learners who did not originally intend to find health information online, the situation is reversed. An explanation for this may involve a combination of personal circumstances (a lack of motivation to find health information probably correlates with not having a health problem) and older adults' traditional reliance on face-to-face health interventions.

Although a high proportion of retired learners achieve relevant social and personal outcomes (e.g. for greater independence, and feeling less lonely or isolated), this proportion is not significantly higher than those of the general learner population.

“The whole atmosphere that [the Centre Manager] sets up just makes you feel that if you came in and you just didn't feel very brilliant, you could sit down for two hours and just go over the things that you have started to learn...he listens, and he doesn't give you too much at a time, and he is patient.” - **Retired learner, E England**

### Intention vs Progression for Retired Learner Outcomes



## Appendix A: Methodology

### Academic consultant on realist evaluation: Dr Justin Jagosh, University of Liverpool

Dr Jagosh was employed in his capacity as Director of the Centre for Advancement in Realist Evaluation and Synthesis at the University of Liverpool, to act as an independent academic consultant for the realist evaluation, ensuring standards of best practice were defined, understood and adhered to. As well as providing international training on realist methods, Dr Jagosh's work has also included the NIHR-funded RAMESES II project to develop quality and reporting guidelines for realist evaluation.

**Semi-structured interviews** were designed with guidance from academic consultant on realist evaluation Dr Justin Jagosh, who also reviewed interview transcripts and provided ongoing advice. The ten Centre interview participants were selected to represent a range of Centre types, including:

- 2 libraries
- 2 adult education providers
- 2 general community centres
- 2 community centres providing specialist support to BAME populations
- 1 provider of specialist employment support
- 1 organisation providing support services to a specific group (people who are drug and alcohol dependent).

Learner interviews covered a range including learners with limited digital skills, long-term unemployed, those with low educational attainment, and learners working towards self-employment. In addition, data from other recent learner interviews carried out by Good Things Foundation was drawn on: for example, for the longitudinal study Routes to Inclusion, and the I Am Connected research project.

The **Online Centres learner survey** was completely revised for the realist evaluation, with new questions designed to test need for and availability of all of the resources in the programme theory, across a broad range of demographics and Centre types. A promotional drive for the realist evaluation led to 1452 responses to the survey being received between 1st July and 30th September 2018, creating a dataset that was large, reliable, and could be broken down to provide comparison between specific subsets of the learner population.

The **Centre-level census of FDI learners** was designed to provide a practical solution to the problem of conducting a random sample of FDI learners. By selecting a wide range of Online Centres and asking them to survey all learners supported through FDI/Learn My Way in a two-week period, we were able to create a dataset of 424 responses, against which to test the accuracy of the online learner survey; this comparison helped us to understand - among other things - that the online survey slightly overestimated the number of learners with limited digital skills, and underestimated the proportion of the learner population aged 25-44. The census also asked respondents if they were happy to take part in a follow-up interview.

The **quantitative survey of 252 Online Centres** was conducted through the regular quarterly membership survey of Online Centres, as well as through a telephone survey to increase representation from non grant-funded Centres. The sample comprised 67 Centres that received FDI funding, and 185 unfunded Centres. For each of the resources identified in the FDI realist programme theory, respondents were asked to state the relative importance for their delivery model, and how regularly they were able to apply it.

**Analysis of learner progression survey data** from the beginning of the FDI programme involved creating a single dataset from October 2014 to March 2018. The dataset was analysed by Dr Daniel Olnier, a research associate and human geographer at Sheffield Methods Institute within the University of Sheffield, using the R statistical computing application, in order to identify progression relative to initial intention across a range of learner types.

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