Digital Communities Wales: digital confidence, health, and well-being (final evaluation)

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Digital Communities Wales: digital confidence, health and well-being (final evaluation)

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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Glossary

AI

Artificial Intelligence

BCUHB

Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board

CAVUHB

Cardiff and Vale University Health Board

CIW

Care Inspectorate Wales

CDPS

Centre for Digital Public Services

CE

Creating Enterprise

DCW

Digital Communities Wales: Digital Confidence, Health and Well-being (2019-2025)

DSPP

Digital Services for Patients and Public

DHCW

Digital Health and Care Wales

DI

Digital Inclusion

DIAW

Digital Inclusion Alliance Wales

DPA

Digital Poverty Alliance

DWP

Department for Work and Pensions

HEIW

Health Education and Improvement Wales

HR

Human Resources

IMTP

Integrated Medium-Term Plan

KPIs

Key Performance Indicators

LDW

Learning Disability Wales

MDLS

Minimum Digital Living Standard

NHS

National Health Service

NWIS

NHS Wales Informatics Service

OT

Occupational Therapy

SHA

Special Health Authority

SME

Small and Medium Enterprises

SPF

Shared Prosperity Fund

ToC

Theory of Change

VR

Virtual Reality

WBFGA

Wellbeing of Future Generations Act

WEST

Wellbeing Employment Skills and Training

WLGA

Welsh Local Government Association

1.   Introduction

1.1   OB3 Research was appointed by the Welsh Government to undertake an evaluation of the Digital Communities Wales: Digital Confidence, Health, and Well-being (DCW) programme. DCW is a six-year programme, following a decision by the Welsh Government to activate the option to extend the original three-year delivery contract. The programme is delivered by Cwmpas, in conjunction with the Good Things Foundation and Swansea University, to reduce digital exclusion and help improve basic digital skills levels across Wales.

1.2   The Welsh Government invested £6m revenue funding[1] into the programme over a three-year period between 1st July 2019 and 31st June 2022 (the first phase, Years 1 to 3). Additional revenue funding of £6m was made available for a further three-year period between 1st July 2022 and 31st June 2025 (the second phase, Years 4 to 6).

1.3   The aims of the evaluation were to:

- review and summarise existing evidence around the relationship between digital inclusion and health

- review the effectiveness and efficiency of the delivery of the programme

- assess the extent to which the programme aims have been achieved and targets met

- provide evidence of the outcomes of the programme for individuals and the services they access.

1.4   The evaluation was undertaken across three key stages:

- the first stage involved the preparation of a process evaluation and theory of change report, published in 2021[2]

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[1] Revenue funding differs to capital funding in that it funds fixed or short-term activities such as staff. Capital funding is used to fund purchases which can be used over a longer-term period such as equipment.
[2] Digital Communities Wales: Digital Confidence, Health and Well-being | GOV.WALES

- the second stage involved the preparation of an interim process and outcome evaluation, published in 2022[3]

- the third stage involved the preparation of this summative final evaluation. It was originally intended that this would be conducted in 2022 but was extended to 2025 to coincide with the programme extension.

1.5 In addition, a short update report was prepared in 2023[4] to review programme performance against targets for the delivery period between July 2019 and June 2023.

1.6 This report draws upon the findings of desk-based research and fieldwork with Welsh Government officials, delivery staff, supported organisations and programme beneficiaries. It is intended to focus upon overall programme achievements and outcomes.

1.7 This report is presented in 11 chapters as follows:

- chapter one: this introduction to the report

- chapter two: sets out the methodology for this final stage of the evaluation

- chapter three: provides an update on the strategic and policy context for the DCW programme since the second stage evaluation report was prepared in 2021

- chapter four: briefly considers the progress made by the programme against previous evaluation recommendations

- chapter five: sets out recent changes and developments made across the programme

- chapter six: considers the effectiveness of programme implementation

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[3] Ibid.
[4] Digital Communities Wales: Digital Confidence, Health and Well-being | GOV.WALES

- chapter seven: reviews the performance of the programme against its funded targets

- chapter eight: considers the outcomes achieved by DCW and the difference made to supported organisations and beneficiaries

- chapter nine: reviews the work and difference made by Digital Inclusion Alliance Wales (DIAW)

- chapter 10: sets out the fieldwork findings in relation to the future of the DCW

- chapter 11: offers our conclusions and recommendations for the Welsh Government and other partners to consider for the future.

2. Methodology

2.1   This chapter summarises the method used for the summative final evaluation. It also sets out the profile of interviewed organisations and beneficiaries who contributed to the final stage evaluation and discusses some key methodological considerations.

Method

2.2   The evaluation activities undertaken between July and November 2024 involved:

- attending a final stage inception meeting with Welsh Government officials and refining the summative evaluation work programme

- reviewing recent policy and strategic documents, including DCW programme documentation and monitoring data

- drafting discussion guides for interviewing contributors and a bilingual online survey for members of Digital Inclusion Alliance Wales (DIAW) (set out at Annex A)

- interviewing five Welsh Government officials (including members of the digital inclusion team responsible for contract managing DCW), and eight DCW delivery team members: of these, six were based at Cwmpas and one each from Swansea University and the Good Things Foundation

- requesting details for 12 supported organisations from DCW and selecting six of these for in-depth case studies. It was intended that each case study would involve an interview with a key member of staff from the organisation, an interview with a DCW advisor who had supported them, observation of a training event (ideally on a face-to-face basis) and interviews/group discussions with beneficiaries such as participating staff, members, volunteers and service users

- undertaking the following fieldwork:

- virtual interviews with four DCW advisors[5]

- virtual interviews with nine staff representatives from across the six organisations

- gathering feedback from 23 beneficiaries across five of the organisations. Other than in one case, these involved virtual interviews with:

  - one care home manager

  - one member of the public

  - three members of staff who had received Digital Champions training

  - an in-person focus group session held with 18 service user beneficiaries

- observation of a virtual training session delivered by DCW to staff of one health board organisation

- considering the value of re-interviewing the 10 organisations who formed case studies within the interim process and outcome evaluation (2021) and discussing these with DCW staff. DCW staff noted that the programme had supported seven of these 10 organisations over the last year or two, and that they would be worth approaching for a follow up interview to talk about their recent experiences of DCW. The seven organisations were approached for an interview and four contributed to the evaluation. In one case, a different individual was interviewed at the organisation due to staff changes. No response was received from the remaining three organisations

- undertaking fieldwork about specific areas of work across the DCW programme. This involved:

  - for the DIAW: facilitating a discussion with members of the DIAW Steering Group, at a pre-arranged meeting in

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[5] Two of these advisors had each supported two case study organisations

September 2024 and arranging for the programme to distribute the survey link to members of DIAW. The survey was distributed to all members (139 individuals) and 38 responses were received, representing a response rate of 27%. All respondents completed the survey in English. The analysis of DIAW's work also draws upon the interviews held with delivery staff and case study organisations

- o for the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities: interviewing a representative from an organisation which supports gypsies and travellers across Wales and drawing upon the interviews held with DCW staff members

- o for the disabled community: interviewing two representatives from two disabled groups and drawing upon the interviews held with DCW staff members

- synthesising the findings of the desk-review and fieldwork; and preparing this final summative evaluation report.

Profile of contributing organisations

2.3 The six new case study organisations provided a cross-section of organisations who had engaged with DCW:

- the six were geographically dispersed across Wales: one had a pan-Wales interest, one was located in north Wales, two were located in south west Wales and two were located in south east Wales

- a range of organisations were included: two were local authorities, two were health organisations (one a health board and one a health trust), one was a social housing provider, and one was a third sector organisation with an interest in supporting Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic older people.

2.4 The profile of the four re-interviewed organisations was as follows:

- in terms of geographical distribution across Wales, two were located in south east Wales, one in north Wales and one in south west Wales

- in terms of type of organisations, two were health boards, one was a local authority and one was a housing association.

Methodological considerations

2.5 While this report considers DCW's overall achievements and outcomes, the feedback from case study organisations naturally focuses on their engagement with the programme over the past one to two years. As our interim report was prepared in 2021, we recognise that evidence concerning the programme's interventions between 2021 and 2022 may not be strongly represented in the feedback gathered. To address this, we have ensured that the desk review of programme documentation reflects DCW's activities during this period.

2.6 There was some element of selection bias in the identification of new case study organisations, as we agreed that DCW would select these in order to capture the experiences of organisations who had worked most intensively with the programme over the last three years. To mitigate against this to some extent, we requested details for a sample of 12 organisations and selected half of these for inclusion in the study. The six organisations were selected at random but ensuring that the final sample offered a cross-section by type of organisation and geographical location.

2.7 It was intended that we would observe as many training sessions and meet with as many beneficiaries on a face-to-face basis as possible, not least because the COVID-19 pandemic had restricted us from doing so as part of the interim evaluation fieldwork. However, most of DCW's training provision was being delivered digitally over the course of the final evaluation, so the opportunities to observe activities on a face-to-face basis were limited.

2.8 It proved more challenging than anticipated to recruit beneficiaries for interviews not least because we were reliant upon selected case study organisations to identify and recruit contributors on our behalf. Case study

organisations took longer than anticipated to identify possible contributors, as this often involved liaising with colleagues to identify a suitable contributor. Contributors who were employed by organisations, particularly in the health and social care sector, also had limited availability due to work and leave commitments over the fieldwork period. In the end we managed to speak with beneficiaries at five of the six case study organisations.

2.9   During the initial stage of the final evaluation, we considered the possibility of reviewing provision associated with a new element of work introduced across DCW relating to paid internships, but as this was only being put in place at the time of our fieldwork we concluded that there would not be much value in interviewing interns who had only been in their role for a few weeks.

3.   Recent strategic and policy developments

3.1   This chapter summarises the strategic and policy context for the Digital Communities Wales (DCW) programme since the preparation of our interim process and outcome evaluation report in 2021.

Digital inclusion trends

3.2   Whilst a gradual drop in the proportion of adults in Wales not using the internet was observed from 14% in 2012/13 to 7% by 2020/21, the latest data from the National Survey for Wales[6] for the year April 2022 to March 2023 suggests that the proportion has since plateaued, at 7%. The 2022 to 2023 survey data suggests that 93% of adults use the internet at home, work or elsewhere. 92% of internet users reported using the internet several times a day, with this proportion having increased from 76% in 2019/20. The main device used to access the internet was a smartphone, cited by 91% of those using the internet. Data on the proportion of households in Wales with internet access is no longer captured via the National Survey for Wales, and the latest data for the three-month period between April and June 2021 put this proportion at 92%.

3.3   After changing contractors in 2023, the current 2024-25 National Survey is under way, with the first results due to be published in the summer of 2025. Due to cost pressures and falling response rates that are being experienced by surveys generally, fieldwork for the 2025-26 National Survey will not proceed, and work has already begun on an online-first survey approach which is expected to run from 2026-27 onwards. Questions relating to digital inclusion will be considered for the 2026-27 survey, pending cognitive testing; and will be largely based on the existing Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS) research.

3.4   The proportion of adults using the internet in Wales continues to be lower than any other UK region. Whilst some caution should be taken given the small sample sizes drawn from Wales, the Lloyds Bank UK Consumer

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[6] National Survey for Wales: results viewer | GOV.WALES

Digital Index for 2023[7] reports that 96% of adults across the UK are online[8] compared to 92% across Wales. In other words, the proportion not online in Wales, at 8%, is double that of the UK average, at 4%, and close to the National Survey for Wales proportion cited above.

3.5   The Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index for 2023 also notes that internet use has in fact reduced since 2022 (when it stood at 99%) due to reduced use amongst individuals over the age of 60. Whilst overall usage of the internet has dropped, the data suggests that those who are online are more digitally engaged and have more developed digital skills. Those with the lowest digital skills are most likely to be in older age groups, earn lower incomes and be female.

3.6   The Economic Impact of Digital Inclusion in the UK (2022)[9] prepared by the Centre for Economics and Business Research for the Good Things Foundation suggests that investment in improving digital skills would be beneficial for the UK economy. It calculates that for every £1 invested in digital inclusion provision, a £9.48 return is secured. This represents a lower benefit cost ratio compared to 2018 calculations, largely due to an increase in the proportion of those aged 75 and over that require external support to attain basic digital skills. The report notes that fixing the digital divide is an urgent priority, and that those who need support are becoming harder to reach. It calls for 'more intensive and sustained support for those who aren't yet online'[10].

Recent policy developments

3.7   Our process and theory of change report (2021) considered the policy context at the time of establishing DCW and concluded that Welsh Government policy and legislation was supportive of continued public intervention to address digital exclusion among key groups and that there was a clear need for intervention to focus on the health and social care

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[7] Consumer digital index | Lloyds Bank
[8] In that they engaged with the internet in the previous three months
[9] The Economic Impact of Digital Inclusion the UK | Report | Good Things Foundation
[10] Ibid. p.6

sector. It also concluded that DCW had adopted many of the recommendations offered by evaluations of predecessor programmes.

3.8 Our interim process and outcome evaluation report (2022) concluded that DCW was well placed to respond to, and could help deliver, the increasing policy emphasis being placed upon digital inclusion and the greater prominence afforded to improving digital resilience within Welsh Government policies such as its Digital Inclusion Forward Look (2020)[11], its Digital Strategy for Wales (2021)[12] and its Programme for Government (2021-2026)[13].

Digital and data strategy for health and social care in Wales

3.9 The Digital and Data Strategy for Health and Social Care in Wales (2023)[14], which builds upon Informed Health and Care: A Digital Strategy for Health and Social Care (2015)[15], sets out the Welsh Government's ambition to transform digital skills and partnerships; build digital platforms that meet the needs of Wales; and make services digital-first.

3.10 The strategy is set out across six missions, three of which are of particular relevance to DCW:

- Mission 1: Digital skills: develop the digital skills of the workforce to have the skills and confidence they need to make the most of digital services and improve care

- Mission 5: User-centred services: deliver high quality digital services designed around the needs of the citizen, professionals and services

- Mission 6: Digital inclusion: equip users with the access, skills and confidence to engage with digital health and social care services based on their specific needs or preferences.

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[11] Digital inclusion forward look: towards a digitally confident Wales | GOV.WALES
[12] Digital strategy for Wales [HTML] | GOV.WALES
[13] Programme for government | GOV.WALES
[14] Digital and data strategy for health and social care in Wales | GOV.WALES
[15] Digital health and social care strategy | GOV.WALES

3.11   Under Mission 6, it is recognised that continued investment in DCW will help to 'give everyone in Wales the opportunity, motivation, skills and confidence to engage with health and social care services digitally'[16].

3.12   In comparison with the previous strategy, the Digital and Data Strategy for Health and Social Care in Wales demonstrates an increased focus on digital workforce, improvement and innovation, Artificial Intelligence and the co-development of services informed by practitioners and shaped around user needs.

Other developments

Digital inclusion progress report: towards a digitally confident Wales

3.13   This report[17] sets out the progress made between December 2020 and March 2022 to help more people confidently engage with digital technology across the six priority areas outlined in Digital Inclusion Forward Look (2020). It highlights a number of DCW achievements which have contributed towards the realisation of the strategy, including:

- establishing a network for organisations which support Welsh language communities, in collaboration with Mentrau Iaith Cymru

- adopting a more consistent approach to digitally upskilling library staff across Wales

- supporting health boards to embed digital inclusion into their strategy and delivery e.g. the development of a new digital strategy, entitled 'Our Digital Future' in the case of Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board (BCUHB) and support to Cardiff and Vale University Health Board (CAVUHB) to implement their Digital Strategy

- developing a Good Practice Guide to Digital for Care Homes[18] to support care homes and their staff

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[16] Ibid. p.39
[17] Digital inclusion progress report: towards a digitally confident Wales [HTML] | GOV.WALES
[18] Care Homes (gov.wales)

- collaborating with Social Care Wales to develop an e-learning course which sits on the Social Care Wales e-learning platform and can be accessed by their 30,000 plus staff

- commissioning research with citizens from ethnic minority communities to understand the barriers faced to become digitally confident and using the findings to inform a pilot project, Digitally Connected Communities[19]

- working with housing associations across Wales to support digitally excluded tenants, including training residents as Digital Champions and implementing device loan schemes.

Towards a Welsh Minimum Digital Living Standard

3.14   The Welsh Government commissioned a project to develop a Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS) for Wales[20]. The work builds upon a UK wide project to develop a UK Minimum Digital Living Standard, and DCW, as well as the DIAW, have supported the study. To date, two reports have been produced, an interim report (2022) and a final report (2023), and two pilot projects are being implemented in partnership with housing associations. The final report recommended that the MDLS definition and content developed at the UK level for households with children[21] were appropriate for Wales and should be adopted.

3.15   The report (2023)[22] found that the elements set out within the MDLS were relevant and important to families, that digital exclusion is inseparable from social exclusion and poverty, and that digital affordability is a key barrier. It found that there is no 'one size fits' all solution and that needs vary. A key finding is that broadband social tariffs[23], whilst welcome, are not fit for purpose in meeting the needs of households with children. It concludes that

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[19] [Digitally Connected Communities – Health & Wellbeing (gov.wales)](#)
[20] [Towards a Welsh Minimum Digital Living Standard: final report | GOV.WALES](#)
[21] Ibid. p.6
[22] [Towards a Welsh Minimum Digital Living Standard: citizen and stakeholder perspectives | GOV.WALESGOV.WALES](#)
[23] Individuals claiming Universal Credit, Pension Credit or other forms of benefits can qualify for discounted broadband tariffs

MDLS should be considered as 'a starting point for assessing whether specific households fall below a 'nationally and deliberately derived standard' as opposed to simply a 'list of kit and skills'.

Digital inclusion in Wales: report of the Auditor General for Wales

3.16 The Auditor General for Wales published its report on Digital Inclusion in Wales (2023)[24] to provide a high-level overview of issues relevant to digital inclusion in Wales. It considers the data on digital exclusion and access to the internet as well as barriers to digital inclusion. It concludes that digital inclusion is 'complex' and not 'simply an issue of access to technology'. It recognises the advantages as well as the disadvantages of public bodies moving services online. It further acknowledges the funding made available by the Welsh Government to invest in digital inclusion projects, via both DCW as well as through the work of the Centre for Digital Public Services (CDPS).

Reflections from the fieldwork

3.17 Whilst the Digital Strategy for Wales (2021) and its focus on Digital Inclusion was thought to have reinforced the need for the DCW programme, DCW delivery staff did not think it had generated much impact upon public services response to digital inclusion. As one DCW provider staff noted:

> 'we should have seen an increase in the people coming to us for support and advice … but it [the Digital Strategy for Wales] had no impact on the demand [for DCW]' [DCW delivery staff]

3.18 DCW delivery staff welcomed the introduction of the Chief Digital Officer role, hosted at the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), as it enabled DCW to work more strategically with local authorities. Delivery staff noted that the postholder effectively championed DCW among local authorities and acted as a bridge to the sector, leading to 'a couple of local authorities coming to us following their discussions with [name of officer].' However, the appointee's departure left a gap, which was seen as a missed

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[24] Digital inclusion in Wales | Audit Wales

opportunity for DCW, although an interim appointment has since been made to the role.

3.19   Contributors also highlighted a number of digital developments which have taken place across the health and care sector, which have had bearing upon the landscape within which DCW operates. For instance, Digital Health and Care Wales (DHCW) was established in April 2021 as a new special health authority (SHA) to replace the NHS Wales Informatics Service (NWIS). In 2022, DHCW signed up to the Digital Inclusion Charter and has since collaborated with DCW to bring about digital health benefits to patients and carers. The post and office of a Chief Digital Officer for Health and Care (OCDO), based at DHCW, became functional from April 2022 onwards and aims to support digital transformation across health and care in Wales. Furthermore, DCW has collaborated with Digital Services for Patients and Public (DSPP) who are responsible for delivering the NHS Wales App to develop and deliver training to community organisations who are able to support people to use the app.

3.20   A key policy theme that emerged during the fieldwork concerned how the DCW programme was funded. It was noted that funding currently comes from two Welsh Government departments, Social Justice and Health, and managed by the Social Justice department. However, it was suggested that the funding base should be broadened to include additional policy areas, particularly if the Welsh Government aims to achieve the MDLS. This would help shift digital inclusion from being viewed as the responsibility of two Welsh Government departments. Whilst funding from several departments might pose governance issues for the Welsh Government, it was argued that doing so would help digital inclusion become a cross-cutting objective, rather than a policy limited to health and social care:

    'It's not just a social justice problem – it's the responsibility of everybody' [Beneficiary organisation]

3.21   Another topic that emerged during the fieldwork was the development of digital inclusion policies in England and Scotland. Contributors noted a growing interest in digital inclusion in both nations. Scotland, in particular, is

relaunching its digital charter and establishing a Digital Inclusion Alliance (DIA), while UK government officials are increasingly looking to the Welsh Government's approach as a model for digital inclusion and developing an action plan. There is a general perception that Wales is leading in this area, with other home nations keen to learn from its efforts. However, contributors thought it regrettable that, despite championing work in this area, the Welsh Government had recently been required to consider reducing its funding for digital inclusion initiatives in response to broader budgetary pressures.

Similar alliances operate across England and Scotland, but they are evolving in different ways:

In Scotland, a new Digital Inclusion Alliance (DIA) is being introduced with a similar role to the DIAW to bring organisations together and coordinate activity, support cross-sectoral collaborations, and remove barriers to furthering digital inclusion. The Scottish Government, who is more actively involved than the Welsh Government in setting the strategic direction of the DIA, has recently commissioned a scoping exercise to explore and define priorities.

In England, the Digital Poverty Alliance (DPA) is an independent charity. Previously an initiative of the Learning Foundation, launched in 2021 in conjunction with Currys plc and the Institute of Engineering and Technology, the DPA became a public facing brand and working name of the Learning Foundation in 2024. Its main focus is on policy and advocacy, but it has recently begun to deliver proof-of-concept projects to address gaps in evidence. These proof-of-concept projects are being supported by private sector partners such as Barclays and Intel. It plans to deliver commercial opportunities and as a result, Cwmpas – who attend on behalf of DIAW – has withdrawn as a member.

4. Progress against evaluation recommendations

4.1 This chapter briefly considers how DCW progressed with the recommendations offered within the interim process and outcome evaluation report and the 2023 update report[25].

Progress made against interim evaluation recommendations

Recommendation 1: The Welsh Government should consider extending the DCW programme post 2022, as there is strong justification for doing so in terms of need and programme performance to date.

Progress made: Actioned. Programme funding extended to June 2025.

Recommendation 2: The Welsh Government needs to ensure that DCW is well positioned and enabled at a strategic level to support the implementation of future digital strategies such as those set out by health boards within their IMTPs; as well as the future work programme set out by the Chief Digital Officer for Health and Care. Similarly, the Welsh Government needs to ensure that DCW actively engages with the digital priorities set out within the Money and Pensions Service Strategy.

Progress made: Actioned, continued funding to DCW until June 2025 has allowed the programme to continue its strategic level engagement with Health Boards and umbrella organisations. Greater cross-departmental commitment from the Welsh Government to Digital Inclusion would have been beneficial.

Recommendation 3: The DIAW would benefit from focusing upon and achieving a small number of key priorities over the remaining funding period to demonstrate its value and make a tangible difference. It would also benefit from securing representation from organisations which are currently under-represented from across health, Welsh language, and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Communities.

Progress made: Actioned, with DIAW quarterly meetings each focusing on one the five priority areas set out in its strategy Inclusion to Resilience, and

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[25] Digital Communities Wales: Digital Confidence, Health and Well-being | GOV.WALES

expanding its membership base over time, albeit that broader representation is still required.

Recommendation 4: In the case of the DCW programme not being funded post 2022, there is an immediate need to consider the longer-term sustainability of the DIAW. Regardless of this matter, the DIAW needs to explore how it could sustain its work on an on-going basis in the future.

Progress made: Not applicable given funding extension, but continues to be relevant post 2025.

Recommendation 5: DCW needs to prioritise and reflect upon how it can better engage with the private sector, exploring other approaches where possible e.g. via trade unions to reach private sector employees.

Progress made: Actioned, but with little success. Recommendation no longer relevant in light of funding agreement changes.

Recommendation 6: DCW should build upon its successful sector-wide approach to working across the health and social care sector, by mapping out and approaching national umbrella and membership organisations it could engage with, including across other sectors where appropriate.

Progress made: Actioned, as demonstrated via its work with partners such as Social Care Wales, HEIW and the WLGA.

Recommendation 7: DCW should continue to develop and deliver its bespoke solutions for Welsh language audiences and prioritise its approach to engaging Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities over its remaining period of delivery.

Progress made: Actioned, with thematic approach now reaching other under-represented audiences, such as Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

Recommendation 8: DCW should reflect on the lessons learnt from its approach to loaning equipment during the pandemic and in future, make available digital equipment only as part of a wider package of support to organisations and individuals rather than in isolation.

Progress made: Actioned, equipment is loaned on a short-term basis to organisations who receive support, with a view that they invest themselves following the pilot.

Recommendation 9: DCW needs to consider how it can offer a blended programme of digital training provision over its remaining period of delivery, looking where possible to produce virtual resources which can be sustained post programme funding by partner organisations.

Progress made: Actioned, with a greater focus on virtual delivery than face-to-face delivery of late.

Progress made against 2023 annual report evaluation issues for consideration

Issue to consider 1: KPI 4 should include a minimum proportion or number of staff from the health and social care sector to be supported.

Progress made: Whilst not specifically addressed, there has been a notable increase in the number and proportion of staff from these sectors supported.

Issue to consider 2: KPI 2 targets for volunteers should be reduced.

Progress made: Volunteer targets have since been removed from the programme.

Issue to consider 3: An action plan for how KPI 3, to work with the private sector, should be developed.

Progress made: This was not actioned, and the target since removed from the programme.

Issue to consider 4: More consistent outcome survey data for supported organisations should be captured.

Progress made: This had not been actioned, and it continues to be the case that different outcome survey data has been captured over time.

5.   Recent changes and developments to delivery requirements

5.1   This chapter considers some of the key developments and changes to have taken place since the preparation of our process and outcomes evaluation report in 2021, and the impact of these upon programme delivery. It draws upon key documentation, as well as interviews with programme staff and Welsh Government officials.

Contractual changes

5.2   The Welsh Government's draft budget, published in December 2023, proposed a 50% reduction to DCW's remaining budget from April 2024 onwards. The reduction was split equally from across the Welsh Government's social justice and health directorates. This announcement was unexpected and created much uncertainty amongst programme staff and tensions in the relationship between Welsh Government and the lead contracted provider. Cwmpas had to issue redundancy notices to programme staff as they anticipated their staffing requirements would need to be reduced drastically as a result. A new DCW delivery plan was agreed by the end of January 2024, which adopted a more thematic approach to delivering support to priority groups. Some provisions, such as DCW's work around volunteers, supporting the use of the new NHS app and work with the private sector, were also removed.

5.3   However, in light of increased UK Government funding to Wales, the Welsh Government reinstated the original £2m budget for DCW by late February 2024 and all programme staff were retained. The proportional split between the social justice and health directorates was amended, with 75% of the funding (£1.5m) coming from the social justice directorate and 25% (£0.5m) allocated from the health directorate. Despite this, the Welsh Government agreed that programme delivery would not reduce its focus on the health sector as a result of the change in funding. It was also agreed that DCW would retain the new thematic approach to delivery, set out within the revised delivery plan. Some previous key provisions, such as the programme's work around the NHS app and volunteering, were reinstated but other elements, notably DCW's work with the private sector and Digital

Heroes were not. Although the Welsh Government wished to retain the Digital Heroes initiative as it was considered a positively impactful element of the programme, the delivery team felt they lacked the capacity to support its face-to-face delivery.

5.4   Under the new funding arrangements one of the delivery partners, Swansea University, no longer receives programme funding, but has continued its involvement with DCW on a voluntary basis.

5.5   The revised DCW delivery plan agreed for April 2024 to June 2025 is structured around the following seven themed activities:

- Health – digitally included and empowered citizens

- Health – a workforce who are confident in using digital technology to enable efficient, safe and quality care

- Social care – a workforce who are confident in using digital technology to enable efficient, safe and quality care

- Social housing – a digitally confident workforce who are able to support tenants

- Older people – an older population who are confident in accessing information and public services online

- Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities – provide diverse communities with the capabilities, opportunities and motivations to engage fully from online services and digital technology

- Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities – provide Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities with the capabilities, opportunities and motivations to engage fully from online services and digital technology.

5.6   The revised DCW delivery plan for April 2024 to June 2025 also contains a reduced and amended set of KPIs and outcome targets, which are reflective of the thematic approach being adopted. The programme now works towards three, rather than four, KPIs and outcomes. The KPI targets are also lower compared with previous delivery periods to reflect the

winding down and closure period expected over the last three months of delivery. These are set out at Tables 5.1 and 5.2.

Table 5.1: Key performance indicators (April 2024 to June 2025)

No.	Key performance indicators	Target
1	People indirectly supported to become digitally confident (motivation, basic digital skills and confidence)	16,660
2	Staff directly supported to become digitally confident (motivation, basic digital skills and confidence)	1,000
3	Support to ensure ownership of digital inclusion by stakeholders and clients	6

Table 5.2: Programme outcomes (April 2024 to June 2025)

No.	Programme Outcomes
1	People having sufficient basic digital skills and confidence to be able to support digitally excluded people to engage digitally (and with digital services) in their everyday and working lives
2	Increased levels of people using technology to manage their health (physical & mental) and wellbeing independently
3	Increase in ownership of digital inclusion by stakeholders and clients

5.7   Feedback from delivery staff suggests that a significant amount of DCW management resource was consumed with dealing and responding to these contractual changes. Furthermore, delivery staff were negatively impacted in terms of morale and wellbeing, due to being issued with redundancy notices. The funding cut also raised questions about Welsh Government's commitment to the digital inclusion agenda which has given rise to uncertainty amongst staff and partner organisations about the future.

5.8   The proposed funding cuts resulted in negative backlash from partner organisations, which points to the value placed upon the programme by these contributors. Several interviewees explained that they advocated the continued case for DCW e.g. by writing to the Ministers and making the case for reinstating the funding; and this echoed Welsh Government officials' experience:

'it [the funding cut] was the wrong thing to do' [supported organisation]

> 'we were lobbied hard … that is credit to DCW's reputation' [Welsh Government official]

5.9 Despite these challenges, the shift towards a thematic programme approach has been positively received and brought about a number of benefits. One of the key implications is that senior programme staff have taken on national rather than regional responsibilities. This shift has enabled them to work across specific sectors, such as health, social care, or housing, fostering a more consistent understanding of the issues faced and a more uniform support offering to these sectors. The programme has also adapted its resource allocation to each thematic area, recognising that some themes (e.g. health) are particularly broad and complex, while others (e.g. housing) are more limited, with well-established relationships already in place. Additionally, it has enhanced reporting to the Welsh Government, as progress reports now provide greater clarity on sector working and achievements.

The ongoing impact of COVID-19

5.10 Another important impact observed by DCW delivery staff is the ongoing effect of the pandemic on attitudes towards digital adoption amongst target organisations. As a result, the programme has needed to place less emphasis over time on persuading organisations, particularly in the health sector, to engage with the digital inclusion agenda. As one staff member commented:

> 'It's become easier to go knocking on their door ... organisations really get it by now' [DCW delivery staff]

A shift to focusing on outcomes

5.11 DCW delivery staff valued the shift to focusing on programme outcomes which had taken place, and the reduced emphasis upon programme outputs was thought to have helped improve the quality of provision. Regular reference was made during interviews to the programme's Theory of Change model, suggesting that this was being utilised extensively and informing the programme's reporting.

Responding to increased cost of living

5.12   A key theme raised over the course of the fieldwork was increased costs of living. DCW delivery staff suggested that the programme's training provision had been able to embrace this issue by placing a greater emphasis upon digital for cost saving purposes.

6.   Effectiveness of implementation

6.1   This chapter considers the effectiveness of programme implementation since 2021, including Digital Communities Wales (DCW)'s communications and marketing; engagement with target groups and partner organisations; engagement with the private sector; and key programme provisions. It draws upon the views of programme delivery staff, Welsh Government officials and, where appropriate, supported organisations.

Effectiveness of the implementation model

6.2   The DCW delivery model was considered to be broadly appropriate at the time of our fieldwork, and regular reference was made to the long-term consistency, expertise and passion for digital inclusion amongst delivery staff. The Digital Inclusion Unit team at the Welsh Government were also highlighted by contributors as being knowledgeable and committed to the digital inclusion agenda; and effective in advocating the case for the programme. As was the case at the interim phase, relationships with the Digital Inclusion Unit at the Welsh Government were considered by programme staff to be positive, and vice versa, despite the difficulties experienced as a result of the decision to cut DCW funding.

Effectiveness of communications and marketing

6.3   DCW continued to be promoted via a variety of methods over the 2021 to 2024 period. The website has evolved over time and contains a wide range of case studies, news updates as well as useful resources. DCW also continued to have strong social media presence and the DCW newsletter was distributed regularly. Efforts were also deployed to reach audiences which are not online, such as monthly articles on digital for Papurau Bro[26]. The latest quarterly progress report (April to June 2024) suggests that the website was well used, with over 4,000 users during that quarter visiting the site. The report also notes that DCW created 46 tweets during the quarter.

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[26] Welsh language local community newsletters, produced by volunteers and generally published monthly.

6.4   Through stronger advocacy from key stakeholders, including from the Older People's Commissioner, Digital Health and Care Wales, Social Care Wales, and the WLGA via the Chief Digital Inclusion Officer in recent years, DCW has been able to increase awareness and understanding of digital inclusion and promote its services more effectively to target organisations. One programme delivery staff member described this as a 'greater collective ownership' of digital inclusion whilst another noted that these organisations now 'understand digital inclusion and are leading by example.' This increased support has enabled DCW to more effectively promote its services and deliver certain elements jointly to organisations within the same sector.

6.5   There was broad recognition that DCW had successfully established itself as a strategic co-ordinating body and that the DCW brand was now highly recognised and valued.

6.6   It is also noteworthy that the programme's messaging to organisations has shifted of late, with the planned closure of DCW from June 2025 onwards being used by delivery partners to encourage organisations to embed digital inclusion into their strategic work. However, some supported organisations suggested that they were reliant upon DCW to help meet their digital skills training requirements, and the withdrawal of the provision would leave a gap in the support available to them.

Engagement with four target groups of beneficiaries

6.7   DCW has continued to engage with the same four target groups, as these are the ones who continue to be identified within national datasets as being the most digitally excluded. Overall, programme delivery staff and Welsh Government officials thought that good progress had been made with all four target groups and examples of this work is outlined at Chapter 8.

6.8   One theme raised regularly over the course of fieldwork was the need to better reach the small, yet stagnant, proportion of people who remain completely digitally excluded in Wales. It was acknowledged that a national programme, primarily delivered on a virtual basis, was not necessarily the most suitable mechanism for reaching and supporting such a cohort. Doing

so would require localised and much more intensive resources to work with individuals on a face-to-face and ongoing basis.

Operating in a more strategic way

6.9　A key message from our fieldwork was that DCW has been able to operate more strategically over the last couple of years with its target organisations and help to facilitate local and regional collaborations.

6.10　These engagements have often been facilitated or supported by key bodies such as Social Care Wales, WLGA and HEIW. For instance, DCW created training modules for inclusion on Social Care Wales' training platform and collaborated with HEIW to develop appropriate digital inclusion competencies for inclusion in its health sector competency framework. The programme has also worked closely with Public Health Wales and Digital Health and Care Wales. The role played by the DCW Programme Director to ensure that the programme retained this strategic focus was recognised by contributors.

6.11　Two examples were gathered where DCW was playing a key role in supporting the work of local or regional digital inclusion networks. In one local authority, a DCW advisor was supporting a cross-departmental local authority team attended by staff from housing, libraries, community services, and education. Over time, this network has expanded to include external organisations such as third sector organisations. The network aids co-working, shares good practice and addresses any duplication of services.

6.12　In a similar manner, DCW was thought to play a key role in helping to join up working between different Welsh Government departments. One such example related to support for asylum seekers, which was put in place when the Home Office withdrew broadband connectivity support for asylum seekers across the UK. In this particular case, DCW supported discussions between various Welsh Government policy teams such as asylum policy leads, the infrastructure team and the Digital Inclusion team, as well as external partners such as the DIAW and the Good Things Foundations (in their remit as the lead for the National Data Bank):

'That is a sign of maturity – in making those connections and joining up. It is another good example of something that happens when you invest in the soft infrastructure of networks and alliances and organisations.' [DCW delivery staff]

Increased awareness of digital inclusion

6.13   Programme staff and case study organisations expressed a positive outlook regarding the increased awareness and understanding of digital inclusion among partner organisations of late, attributing much of this progress to DCW's communication efforts. DCW staff noted a significant shift in partner organisations' attitudes toward embedding digital inclusion practices, with these approaches now more commonly applied across their various departments. Additionally, many organisations have appointed digital inclusion managers or coordinators to further this work.

6.14   There was also a shared confidence that DCW has helped to successfully raise awareness about digital inclusion amongst national, umbrella level organisations as a result of the co-ordination role it had adopted. Digital inclusion was being more commonly discussed by Digital Health and Care Wales for instance, and this organisation had committed to the DI Charter. This change has taken time but is evidence that having the programme advocating the case for digital inclusion over a six-year delivery period has been effective:

'We're constantly hearing about digital inclusion from health…Digital inclusion is being mentioned and talked about. DCW has been saying that it takes years to build this [momentum]…in year six it's starting to come into fruition' [Welsh Government official]

Increased engagement from health boards

6.15   Programme delivery staff as well as Welsh Government officials reported a marked improvement in DCW's relationships and levels of engagement with health boards, with a number of excellent working relationships highlighted at the time of our fieldwork. This improvement was thought to have been a result of two key factors: the time it takes to build up

relationships within large, complex organisations such as health boards, which is often hindered by high staff turnover; but also because of the work undertaken by Welsh Government officials to encourage health boards to engage with digital inclusion and DCW.

> 'It has taken all that time until now to fully engage and speak with the sector. It is such a massive sector with so many facets' [DCW staff]

6.16 Referencing its work with the health sector, one staff member observed that:

> 'It has grown or we have retained and sustained relationships. That is critical to what we do. Building trust over time so that organisations see that we are a good delivery partner and we deliver with integrity. We've strengthened those relationships.' [DCW staff]

6.17 Engagement with health boards appears to work well when digital inclusion is embedded across the organisation, for instance when health boards employ digital inclusion champions and when digital inclusion is considered from the outset when designing programmes or services.

Engagement with the private sector

6.18 There was a broad consensus that DCW's work with the private sector, up until its removal from the delivery programme in April 2024, had been one of the least successful aspects of the initiative. It was noted by both delivery staff and Welsh Government officials that this area had proven challenging, as Cwmpas, an organisation primarily focused on the third sector, had struggled to engage with the private sector. Delivery staff indicated that this component did not necessarily align well with the other elements of the programme, and that the needs of the private sector, particularly Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), were already being addressed by other provisions such as Business Wales. Welsh Government officials expressed some frustration that this strand had not been more successful given that it was an explicit requirement set out in the delivery specification and that some members of the DIAW came from the private sector, yet their involvement had not led to more tangible outcomes. Welsh Government

officials also thought that DCW had missed an opportunity to explore how the private sector could have contributed to the delivery of the programme by supporting communities such as by volunteering staff time or donating technology.

Training

6.19   The training provision has been routinely delivered virtually of late, unless a business case is made to justify face-to-face provision, as it is much more efficient and effective as an approach for disseminating knowledge and expertise. Despite the budget having remained unchanged, the shift towards online delivery has also been driven by increased operating costs and the need to remain within the programme's budget.

6.20   Face-to-face delivery has been retained for training specific communities, such as Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups, as well as Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic communities. In-person sessions have also been reserved for situations where the digital equipment requires hands-on use and demonstration, such as with virtual reality headsets or smart speakers.

6.21   DCW delivery staff noted that face-to-face provision tends to be inefficient use of their time. For instance, DCW staff previously spent time at GP surgeries showing patients how to use the NHS Wales app, but the low uptake made this an ineffective use of resources. Feedback gathered from organisations and some beneficiaries who were interviewed over the course of the evaluation indicates that they still value face-to-face delivery, as it allows those with the lowest levels of digital confidence to engage more effectively.

6.22   DCW has continued to deliver both bespoke training sessions for organisations and open-to-all sessions. Bespoke training is tailored based on skills audits, with organisations responsible for promoting the sessions and ensuring staff attendance. Some training sessions have also been delivered jointly with organisations such as the Money and Pension Service and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). From April 2024 onwards, the content of these sessions became more focused, with an increased emphasis on Digital Champions training, as well as topics like AI

and online safety. Over time, the programme has prioritised training Digital Champions, with the expectation that these individuals will pass on their skills and knowledge to others within their workforce or community.

> As part of our evaluation, we observed a DCW virtual training session on Artificial Intelligence (AI) for Health Board staff.
>
> The session was well attended, with 14 participants, although most had their cameras off and interacted primarily through the Microsoft Teams chat function. The training focused on using AI to engage people and create content, covering tools such as ChatGPT, Midjourney, Runway, Haiper, Speechify, and Microsoft Co-Pilot. Despite some technical difficulties, the trainer demonstrated strong expertise and delivered an engaging session that was well received by participants.

6.23   An increasing proportion of DCW's training provision has been taken up by health board workforce in recent years. One key issue raised by delivery staff and health board representatives is that attendance can be low amongst health sector practitioners, due to work pressures. This made it difficult to justify the continuation of in-person sessions when, for example, only a handful of staff would turn up to a digital drop-in session.

6.24   Feedback from interviewed organisations suggests that health boards would value more work-based training content. Representatives from one health board also suggested that the examples used across training sessions could be more varied, as there was some repetition of content between sessions. They were also concerned that the breadth of training available to them had become more limited since the thematic approach was adopted by DCW and could now only choose from ten types of training modules which DCW can deliver virtually to their staff.

Device and connectivity management

6.25   DCW continued to loan kit and equipment to organisations, mostly to pilot new devices with staff and clients; with the intention that they then invested in similar resources of their own, having demonstrated their effectiveness. Equipment such as virtual reality (VR) headsets and smart speakers have

proved effective, and these have proved successful across health sector e.g. in mock up kitchens and bedrooms for occupational staff to test. Equipment loaned to care homes are now reaching their end of life, and these devices will be gifted to care homes.

6.26 The following examples illustrate how DCW has loaned digital equipment to different types of organisations:

> Digital devices were loaned to Swansea Mosque[27] to explore how they could improve their digital inclusion offer. DCW loaned laptops for a six-month period which allowed staff to access in-house training to learn about Google platforms such as Google Drive, in order to save documents and content more securely on a cloud storage platform. The laptops were also used to deliver more engaging lessons for young people who were attending daily learning sessions at the Mosque, thereby further benefiting 72 young people. At the end of the loan period, the Mosque invested in a dozen new Chromebooks and introduced other digital tools, such as electronic interactive whiteboards and a PA system.

> Digital devices were loaned to Swansea Bay Health Board's Caswell Clinic, a mental health unit[28]. A VR headset with iPad, Chromebooks and tablets were made available to patients and they were supported by staff to access the technology. Patients were supported to use email and undertake everyday tasks online, as well as use the equipment for relaxation and hobbies. The VR headset was used to provide virtual travel experiences for patients, such as taking a virtual hike.

Funding allocation

6.27 Feedback gathered from delivery staff suggests that higher than anticipated operating costs over the delivery period has made things challenging for the programme. The contracted provider has accommodated this by

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[27] [Device loan inspires Swansea Mosque to invest in digital (gov.wales)](#)
[28] [VR unlocks horizons for patients at Swansea Bay's Caswell Clinic](#)

reducing programme travel and a planned project closure period, from April to June 2025.

6.28   There was also a suggestion from the delivery team that the breadth of work expected from the DCW programme was challenging within the overall budget allocated. Whilst they suggested that the programme may have benefited from adopting a more focused approach several changes were approved by the Welsh Government over the course of delivery to reduce the scope of the programme, such reducing the number of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) at the mid-point stage and introducing thematic working focused upon a smaller number of priority areas from April 2024 onwards.

7. Performance and achievements

7.1 This chapter considers the overall performance of the DCW programme. A detailed analysis of performance between 2019 and 2023 is provided in the 2023 Update Report[29].

DCW KPI performance: Years 1 to 3 (July 2019 to June 2022)

7.2 During the first phase of DCW and up until the end of March 2021, the programme reported against nine annual KPIs. Our Interim Process and Outcome evaluation concluded that the programme was performing well against four of these, having exceeded two of them by some margin. It was performing reasonably well against another three KPIs but was significantly under-performing against the remaining two.

7.3 Four new KPIs (outputs) and four programme level outcomes were adopted by DCW from 1 April 2021 onwards[30], replacing the nine indicators previously used. Between April 2021 and June 2022, DCW exceeded one of these new KPIs but, whilst good progress was made against the other three, the programme did not fully achieve them.

DCW KPI performance: Year 4 (12 months) and Year 5 (9 months) (July 2022 to March 2024)

7.4 Over the second phase of funding annual targets were set for three of the four KPIs. Table 7.1 sets out DCW's achievements over the 21-month period during Year 4 (July 2022 to June 2023) and the first three quarters of Year 5 (July to March 2024). The targets set out in this table for three of the KPIs have been calculated on a proportionate basis, in order to offer a view about DCW's performance over the 21-month period. This was not possible for KPI 3, as no annual targets were set for this indicator.

7.5 It shows that the programme exceeded its target for KPI 1 (People supported to become digitally confident) and made good progress against KPI 2 (Volunteers providing support to citizens) and KPI 4 (Health and care,

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[29] Digital Communities Wales: Digital Confidence, Health and Well-being | GOV.WALES

[30] Three new outcomes were adopted originally, with the fourth added in July 2022

public, private and third sector staff supported to become digitally confident). The programme is to be commended for its work in boosting its outputs against KPI 2 between July 2023 and March 2024, and this success would suggest that the challenges stemming from the ongoing impact of the pandemic upon the recruitment of volunteers has now waned.

7.6   Over a 21-month delivery period, the programme achieved just over half of the three-year target set for KPI 3 (Support to ensure digital inclusion is recognised strategically and embedded within organisational delivery). As annual targets were not set for this KPI it is difficult to offer a view on the programme's success in achieving this target. It is notable however that the programme has had considerably more success in supporting third and public sector organisations across this KPI and that no private sector organisations were recorded against this indicator.

Table 7.1: DCW performance during Year 4 (12 months) and Year 5 (9 months)

KPI		Year 4 (July 22 to June 23, 12 months)			Year 5 (July 23 to March 24, 9 months)			Years 4 to 5 (July 22 to March 24, 21 months)		
		Target	Achieved	Achieved as %	Target[31]	Achieved	Achieved as %	Target[32]	Achieved	Achieved as %
1	People supported to become digitally confident (motivation, basic digital skills, and confidence)	34,000	41,780	128%	25,500	24,061	94%	59,500	65,752	111%
2	Volunteers providing support to citizens	1,000	623	62%	750	907	121%	1,750	1,530	87%
3	Support to ensure digital inclusion is recognised strategically and embedded within organisational and delivery across the:									
	• Private Sector		0					10	0	0%
	• Local Authorities		4					12	6	50%
	• Health Boards (IMTP)		4					9	5	56%
	• Third and Public Sector		16					24	20	83%
	Total	n/a	24	n/a	n/a	7	n/a	55	31	56%
4	Health and care, public, private and third sector staff supported to become digitally confident	1,350	1,877	139%	1,013	1,648	162%	4,050	3,525	87%

Source: DCW programme quarterly reports

[31] We have calculated these targets for a nine-month period using the 12 months targets set for DCW, in order to offer a view on programme performance. All targets set out in this column are 75% of the annual target

[32] Three of these four targets have been calculated on a proportionate basis, using the annual targets set for the DCW programme for the three-year period between July 2022 and June 2025. However, in the case of KPI 3, no annual targets were set therefore the overall target of 55 was expected to be achieved over a three-year period.

Discussion of KPI achievements: Years 1 to 4 (July 2019 to March 2024)

7.7   We now turn to consider some of the key issues for these KPIs:

KPI 1: People supported to become digitally confident

7.8   DCW supported 65,752 people to become more digitally confident between July 2022 and March 2024, bringing the total number of outputs against this KPI since April 2021 to 106,451. The third quarter report produced for Year 5 (up to March 2024) notes that most of these outputs were achieved via participants being indirectly supported via Digital Consultation Plans[33] and indirectly supported via training provision.

KPI 2: Volunteers providing support to citizens

7.9   DCW engaged 1,350 volunteers to provide support between July 2022 and March 2024, bringing the total number of outputs against this KPI since April 2021 to 2,391. It continued to be the case during Year 5 of delivery (July 2023 to March 2024) that the main source of these outputs was the Digital Heroes workstream[34] (which accounted for 568 of the 907 volunteers recruited between July 2023 to March 2024). These volunteers were children and young people, trained within their school settings to support their families and members of their local communities. The ability to return to deliver sessions in school settings after the pandemic period helped the programme to boost its volunteer recruitment work. The delivery of the Digital Heroes workstream came to a close in March 2024 because this element was resource intensive and was not aligned to the programme's thematic approach adopted thereon.

7.10   Delivery staff noted that the challenges of recruiting volunteers since the pandemic continued. These challenges were not thought to be unique to DCW, as volunteer engagement since the pandemic had not recovered more broadly. There was broad consensus that removing the target from April 2024 onwards was sensible. The removal of the target does however

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[33] Digital Consultation Plans were developed for organisations who engaged with DCW, setting out how organisations would support their users/members to become more digitally confident.
[34] Digital Heroes are children and young people who are confident users of tech, and who use their skills to help others with digital. See: Digital Heroes (gov.wales)

raise questions about the underpinning theory of change for DCW, in that the programme was designed to use volunteers to cascade digital skills and knowledge to others.

KPI 3: Support to ensure digital inclusion is recognised strategically and embedded within organisational delivery

7.11   The March 2024 DCW quarterly report notes that the programme had engaged with 2,084 organisations in total, and of these, 786 had received a Digital Consultation Plan. Quarterly reports provide details about the support provided to clients being claimed during each reporting period and provide further evidence that there is significant ongoing work with these organisations.

7.12   The DCW programme struggled to engage private sector organisations although quarterly reports up to March 2024 outline some activities e.g. the delivery of training to Monmouthshire Building Society staff. With the adoption of the revised delivery plan from April 2024 onwards, the targeting of this sector ceased.

KPI 4: Health and care, public, private and third sector staff supported to become digitally confident

7.13   DCW supported 3,525 people to become digitally confident between July 2022 to March 2024, bringing the total number of outputs against this KPI since April 2021 to 4,916. Quarterly reports for Year 5 show that 57% (933 of 1,648) of staff supported to become digitally confident were from the health and social care sector whilst 4% (715) were from other sectors. This is a marked improvement on Year 4 (when only 29% of staff supported were from the health and social care sector) suggesting the programme appropriately targeted more of its resources to support the sector's workforce in line with the remit of DCW.

7.14   Over the course of Year 5, over half of the training provision was delivered online e.g. 95 of 164 training sessions delivered during quarter 3 of Year 4 was delivered online.

DCW KPI performance: Year 5 (April to September 2024, 6 months)

7.15   Table 7.2 sets out DCW's performance to date for the first six months of
        delivery against the targets set for its remaining 15-month delivery period
        between April 2024 and June 2025. After a relatively slow start during the
        first three months between April and June 2024, which perhaps was not
        surprising in light of the changes which the project had to introduce in order
        to adopt a more thematic delivery approach, DCW has made excellent
        progress over the latest quarter to September 2024. It looks realistic that
        the project will be able to achieve, possibly exceed, its KPIs by June 2025
        despite the need to focus on project closure over the final few months of
        the funding period.

Table 7.2: DCW performance to date April 2024 to June 2025 (15 months)

No.	Key performance indicators	Target (15 mths)	Achieved to date (6 mths)	Achieved to date as %
1	People indirectly supported to become digitally confident (motivation, basic digital skills and confidence)	16,660	14,998	90%
2	Staff directly supported to become digitally confident (motivation, basic digital skills and confidence)	1,000	625	63%
3	Support to ensure ownership of digital inclusion by stakeholders and clients	6	4	67%

Progress against programme outcomes: Years 1 to 5 (July 2019 to September 2024)

7.16   Our previous evaluation reports considered the feedback gathered by the
        DCW programme from client organisations and individuals trained, as
        means of measuring the extent to which programme outcomes were being
        achieved.

7.17   There was a marked improvement in the outcomes reported over time, and
        our most recent report (the annual update report), which considered
        outcomes data for Year 4 (July 2022 to June 2023) showed that between
        79 and 98% of trained participants reported improved outcomes as a result
        of being involved in DCW. Survey data captured by DCW for supported

organisations showed a slightly more mixed picture, albeit an improvement in the outcomes compared to the interim evaluation. The data is set out again at Table 7.3, for ease of referencing.

Table 7.3: Progress against DCW programme outcomes

Outcome 1: People having sufficient basic digital skills and confidence to be able to engage digitally (and with digital services) in their everyday and working lives	• 88% felt that digital skills had improved • 92% felt more confident using technology • 98% said they know how to stay safe online • 91% feel motivated to use technology in daily lives • 89% were more confident sharing digital skills with others
Outcome 2: Increased levels of people using technology to manage their health (physical & mental) and wellbeing independently	• 79% better understand how to use technology to improve and manage health • 88% have the skills and confidence to do all the things they want to with technology
Outcome 3: Increase in digital inclusion being embedded in organisational strategy and delivery	• 90% of organisations (43 of 48) said that support helped them to work towards digital inclusion goals • 62% of organisations (30 of 48) developed digital partnership with other organisations as a result of DCW • 50% of organisations (24 of 48) were aware of the Digital Strategy for Wales
Outcome 4: Improved understanding of the use of digital health services and tools through cohort specific research projects and longitudinal mapping	• No specific metrics were reported within the quarterly reports against this outcome, but work was underway to support the development of the NHS Wales app.

Source: DCW programme Year 4 (July 2022 to June 2023) quarterly reports (309 participants and 48 organisations)

7.20 Table 7.4 sets out the outcomes data reported by DCW over the first three quarters of Year 5 (July 2023 to March 2024). It is not possible to combine the data for the first three quarters of Year 5 with that of previous years as different reporting indicators have been used. Table 7.6 shows that the

overwhelming majority of trained beneficiaries reported positive outcomes as a result of their engagement with the programme. It is also worth noting that no specific metrics were adopted for Outcomes 3 and 4.

Table 7.4: Progress against DCW programme outcomes (Quarters 1 to 3, Year 5 data)

Outcome 1: People having sufficient basic digital skills and confidence to be able to engage digitally (and with digital services) in their everyday and working lives	• 94% felt more confident using the internet and technology. • 98% said they know how to stay safe online. • 94% felt more confident helping others get online. • 93% felt more confident communicating online. • 91% felt more confident using the internet to solve problems
Outcome 2: Increased levels of people using technology to manage their health (physical & mental) and wellbeing independently	• 92% better understand how to use technology to improve and manage health.
Outcome 3: Increase in digital inclusion being embedded in organisational strategy and delivery	• No specific metrics were reported within the quarterly reports against this outcome, but the outcome can be evidenced via our case study examples, set out at Chapter 8 of this report.
Outcome 4: Improved understanding of the use of digital health services and tools through cohort specific research projects and longitudinal mapping	• No specific metrics were reported within the quarterly reports against this outcome. Neither does the evidence gathered via our case study examples set out at Chapter 8 of this report provide insight about the achievements against this outcome.

Source: DCW programme Year 5 (July 2023 to March 2024) quarterly reports (425 participants)

7.23   Table 7.5 sets out the outcomes data reported by DCW since April 2024 (the last quarter of Year 5 and the first quarter of Year 6, April to September 2024). It shows that very similar high proportions, albeit slightly fewer for some indicators, of trained beneficiaries reported positive outcomes as a result of their engagement with the programme.

Table 7.5: Progress against DCW programme outcomes (Quarters 5, Year 5 and Quarter 1, Year 6)

Outcome 1: People having sufficient basic digital skills and confidence to be able to engage digitally (and with digital services) in their everyday and working lives	• 88% felt more confident using the internet and technology. • 93% said they know how to stay safe online. • 87% felt more confident helping others get online. • 93% felt more confident communicating online. • 93% felt more confident using the internet to solve problems.
Outcome 2: Increased levels of people using technology to manage their health (physical & mental) and wellbeing independently	• 87% better understand how to use technology to improve and manage health.
Outcome 3: Increase in ownership of digital inclusion by stakeholders and clients	• No specific metrics are reported within the quarterly reports against this outcome, but the outcome is evidenced via case study examples, set out at Chapter 8 of this report.

Source: DCW programme Year 5 (April to June 2024) and Year 6 (July to September 2024) quarterly reports (122 participants)

8.   Difference made to supported organisations

8.1   This chapter considers Digital Communities Wales (DCW's) provision to supported organisations and reflects upon the difference made to organisations and participants. It draws upon feedback gathered from six organisational case studies, as well as follow-up interviews with four organisations that took part in the mid-term evaluation. The chapter has been structured to provide evidence about the difference DCW has made across its three programme outcomes, although some of the case studies set out below provide evidence for more than one outcome. The case studies also provide evidence of how DCW has contributed towards its more recent thematic model of working around health, social care, social housing, older people and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities.

8.2   This chapter also includes specific case studies which help illustrate the difference DCW has made to organisations which support disabled people and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

Outcome 1: People having sufficient basic digital skills and confidence to be able to engage digitally (and with digital services) in their everyday and working lives

8.3   The following case studies help to illustrate how DCW has supported the digital skills and confidence of the workforce across two health settings:

A Health Board identified low digital skills and confidence within its workforce and saw DCW as an opportunity to address these gaps.

As a large employer, the Health Board aimed to develop digital skills among staff, hoping that this would positively impact the wider community. DCW supported the Health Board by training a team of Digital Champions to enhance their digital proficiency and confidence.

Training sessions, held virtually, equipped staff with skills to support both personal and professional digital use. One participant, already a 'digital advocate' in their hospital ward, further advanced their skills through the programme and later took on a larger digital role within the organisation. This participant supported colleagues with digital issues, ranging from tasks such

as turning a device on to guiding others on using Microsoft Teams, and suggested that they would have benefited from training which had a greater focus on supporting colleagues rather than patients.

Following the initial training, DCW established a year-long training schedule based on a skills audit, with sessions offered weekly in manageable, 1 to 1.5-hour modules. Recent topics included digital safety, dementia care, and Artificial Intelligence.

Though attendance varies due to workload pressures, the co-delivered training sessions focus on practical workplace applications and ongoing support. DCW's involvement has substantially increased the Health Board's capacity to deliver consistent, tailored digital training to its workforce:

'Because there's only two of us in the team we rely on DCW for   training opportunities because we can't coordinate all of this and   deliver the training.'

One health trust, supported by DCW, successfully adopted the Digital Inclusion Charter, which has become central to its digital strategy.

'Their charter had a lot of detail in it and it gave me a really good   steer and structure for what I needed to do'

DCW has continued to support the Trust with monthly advisory meetings, helping to address challenges like limited capacity. This sustained collaboration has been instrumental in driving the Trust's digital inclusion initiatives forward. The Trust has now secured funding to hire an in-house digital inclusion trainer, demonstrating its commitment to expanding its work in this area.

'They've really got what the Charter is about and that is really encouraging' [DCW delivery staff]

The Trust delivered DCW's Digital Champions training to its Welfare Rights Team, boosting their confidence in digital skills and enabling them to support their patients with online applications. This move aligns with the Trust's goal of increasing virtual consultations, in order to improve efficiency. The training,

informed by an audit of team skills using the HEIW Digital Capabilities Framework, is being tailored to meet the team's specific needs.

'The training has boosted the confidence of some team members who were more nervous about technology, helping them see they have more digital knowledge and skills than they realised.'

The Trust's commitment to digital inclusion has not only improved the quality of service offered to patients but has also evolved into a Trust-wide initiative. Collaboration between the digital team and human resources (HR) has ensured that digital skills are embedded into standard staff induction processes.

This comprehensive approach to digital inclusion aims to improve workforce efficiency and productivity, data security, and create user-friendly digital experiences for staff resulting in improved health and wellbeing outcomes for patients.

Feedback from the Trust highlights the positive impact DCW has had on their work, and acknowledged DCW's role in upskilling staff, which is gradually benefiting patient-facing services.

'They're really responsive. They're there when we do need support. They've also signposted us to resources that we can use. So, they've definitely had an impact on the work we've done, and the quality of our work has gone up because of their involvement for sure.'

Despite their progress, the small size of the Trust's digital team has made it challenging to meet needs across the organisation. They are keen to expand their network of in-house Digital Champions but lack the resources to sustain and support this initiative fully.

'It would be great to be able to say to our new members of staff   that we work in partnership with Digital Communities Wales and explain that they can provide support for you and your department when you need it. This would take a lot of pressure off us as a digital services team'.

Outcome 2: Increased levels of people using technology to manage their health (physical & mental) and wellbeing independently

8.3   This outcome is best illustrated through the individual stories captured either directly through interviews with beneficiaries or via written feedback provided by case study organisations about the way their initiative, with the support of DCW, had led to positive physical and mental health improvements amongst beneficiaries. The following three examples illustrate how DCW has helped library users, care home residents and members of a community group.

Loaning of equipment to library users

A library participated in the tablet loan scheme, in partnership with a housing provider and DCW, allowing users to borrow two iPads purchased through Creative Rural Communities funding. The iPads, loaned to users for three weeks at a time were preloaded with library apps such as BorrowBox and RBDigital, as well as health and wellbeing apps. Library staff provided brief instructions for users, with a Digital Champion also on hand to provide more in-depth support when needed.

Initial concerns about potential damage or misuse, and apprehension amongst library staff about some of the technical aspects led to limited promotion of the iPads initially, resulting in low take-up. However, these issues were resolved, and demand grew, particularly among older library users who did not have smartphones or internet access at home.

One elderly couple, who regularly visited the library, were particularly impacted as it enabled them to read digitally after recent eye surgery. The iPad proved invaluable to them, and at the end of the loan period, they planned to purchase one of their own to continue with reading.

Another beneficiary, who had accessed a loan iPad noted:

'[the iPad] has brought me much benefit. I have a niggling wrist injury. The iPad allowed me to research and remedy the problem myself…I am 71, live alone and receive pension credit. Imagine my delight at being lent a cost-

free iPad. I couldn't believe my good fortune. It's given me healing, education and much pleasure.'

Care home residents

One residential care home manager noted that DCW provided the home with equipment during the COVID-19 pandemic to facilitate online communication and entertainment for residents during lockdown periods. The care home did not require any training, as they had a digitally competent staff member who supported colleagues in using the equipment.

DCW provided equipment such as smart speakers, iPads, and Fire Sticks, and set up Facebook Portal connections on larger TV screens. This technology enhanced the residents' quality of life, and DCW's approach was highly praised. Smart speakers allowed residents to play music or listen to podcasts, giving them greater choice over what they wanted to listen to, while iPads were used for communication with family members. Although staff initially had concerns about privacy related to these devices, these worries lessened over time:

'Whoever thought of this, it was a brilliant idea. I don't think we   would have implemented this ourselves at that time. Everything   happened so quickly.'

Now, the use of equipment such as smart speakers has become the norm across the care home.

Support for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities

DCW worked with an independent volunteer-led group supporting Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities to overcome social exclusion. The group, working with People's Collection Wales to record the story of elderly community members sought help from DCW to help develop digital skills to engage with a storytelling project. They also needed support with connectivity and access to equipment.

Members, typically aged over 50, retired and living in social housing accommodation, wanted to make better use of their existing digital devices, such as laptops, smart phones and tablets, to use everyday applications such as email, the internet, web browsers and video call platforms. They described feelings of anxiety, confusion and fear about not being able to work devices properly and felt embarrassed about having to rely on family for help:

'I was really struggling to keep up with the pace of the new digital technology that was coming out…I couldn't cope'

DCW delivered a six-week face-to-face programme tailored to the interests and needs of participants and covering subjects such as using smartphones and iPads, online safety, and using video platforms such as Zoom. The trainer was described as 'patient' and 'relaxed', working at a pace that ensure that participants fully understood the content. The group felt that the support gave them greater confidence to use their devices. One member of the group joked:

'one of the big things we were taught was how we could just switch the device off and on again if we felt we needed to start again. This sounds silly, but I found it reassuring and it gave me the confidence to try things'.

The training had also helped members to recognise scams and be more secure online e.g. by changing passwords. Over the pandemic period, the ability to use technology to community with others was highly valued and DCW's support was instrumental:

'There are also lots of us who use our devices to speak with family members all over the world, which is so important. The impact of being able to do this is massive'

Members were now applying their new knowledge and skills to everyday tasks such as shopping online, watching TV on their laptop or checking bus times:

'I use my device to check bus times This has saved me loads of time…I just click on the app and the information is just there'

Following the training, members were able to record their stories through the People's Collection Wales project, with DCW support having removed barriers that otherwise might have blocked their participation. Their engagement with the storytelling project proved incredibly powerful, giving them a voice and an opportunity to share their history.

'We all know…more about where we have come from and what we have been through in our lives. It has been really powerful for us'

Members also reported improved wellbeing and mental health, feeling more independent, with technology allowing them to keep in touch with friends and family, and helping them overcome loneliness:

'I live on my own and my phone is my lifeline. It brings happiness into my life and…contact with the people…who care for me'.

Whilst benefiting from the training, members stressed that they would still benefit from further support to stay connected and secure online.

Outcome 3: Increase in ownership of digital inclusion by stakeholders and clients

8.4   This outcome is best demonstrated via organisational level case studies across the health, local authority and social housing sectors.

8.5   The following case studies illustrate how DCW has supported health settings, local authorities, and social housing organisations to embed digital inclusion into organisational strategy and delivery.

Health sector

8.6   Compared to the mid-term evaluation, more examples of good practice across health sector organisations were emerging, showing health boards fully embracing digital inclusion. Three health boards or trusts were highlighted for implementing key measures, including creating Digital leads/staff roles, adopting the Digital Inclusion Charter and deploying Digital Champions across essential services. Some contributors suggested that the role of a Digital Inclusion Manager should be mandated for all health boards.

8.7   This first health sector case study shows how one health board has fully embedded digital inclusion in its organisational strategy and digital transformation efforts, with support from DCW:

> One health board has collaborated closely with DCW from the outset. DCW supports the health board with advice and expertise and delivers an ongoing programme of digital training for staff.
>
> The health board has appointed a Digital Transformation Team which includes a Digital Director, a Digital Inclusion Manager and Advisor and has embedded digital inclusion into organisational strategy and delivery. They are recognised as leaders within the health sector. Staff from the health board reflected that they started on this journey in earnest three to four years ago with the agenda being driven by a passionate internal team.
>
> The DCW advisor attends a Regional Digital Inclusion Steering Group, led by the health board and attended by stakeholder organisations from the third and public sector which meets on a quarterly basis. The DCW advisor brings expertise to this group, which is intended to share good practice, and address gaps and opportunities.

8.8   This second health board case study helps to illustrate how DCW support can support transformational change within specific teams, by enhancing their ability to use digital technologies in patient care:

> An occupational therapy (OT) team based within a health board received support from DCW to enhance digital access for mental health patients, especially older adults in cognitive decline, during the lockdown period.
>
> With funding secured, the team appointed a Digital Inclusion Officer and partnered with DCW to create a training programme for staff focusing on the use of digital technologies with patients to support online communication and independent living. DCW advised on suitable devices such as tablets and smart speakers and helped procure equipment that could be loaned out to patients for trial periods.

By the end of the pilot funding period, OTs had delivered digital inclusion support to patients across five service areas and the equipment and practices continued to be used. The training and support provided by DCW were instrumental in the project's success:

'The advice they gave us around the use of smart technology, Mi-Fi35, and what devices to use was invaluable'

Smart devices, like the Alexa Show, were particularly popular and impactful for patients, allowing families to virtually 'drop in' on their relatives. Smart Speakers also proved valuable, helping patients manage daily tasks such as taking medication or attending appointments.

The project highlighted several ethical challenges, particularly around the short-term nature of the loaned devices. In some cases, patients became reliant on the technology, which led to distress when the devices had to be returned. Families also expressed concerns, as some could not afford to purchase the technology themselves:

Despite these challenges, the feedback from staff and patients was overwhelmingly positive. The ability to trial devices in a real-world setting helped overcome initial resistance, with many individuals with significant cognitive decline able to successfully use the technology.

'Do you know what is lovely? Alexa talks to me, and I feel less lonely.'

The OT team was candid that while digital inclusion is referenced in strategic health board policies, ongoing support and funding for devices remain limited. There is some frustration at the difficulty in obtaining funding for digital devices compared to other forms of assistive technology, such as stairlifts or handrails:

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[35] A portable, battery-powered or rechargeable wireless device that taps into 4G or 5G mobile phone networks to create a mini broadband hotspot.

'The benefits of this technology can be just as impactful, but that isn't yet fully recognised within the system'

There is further work required to embed digital inclusion across all departments in this setting, rather than relying on a specific team or individual.

8.9 This third health sector case study illustrates the progress made by one health board around digital inclusion, as well as the challenges faced in sustaining these efforts:

A health board reported delays in updating its digital strategy, with Digital Inclusion (DI) initiatives lagging due to higher priority demands and leadership changes. Frequent turnover in senior roles has slowed decision-making, including approval of the Digital Inclusion Charter, and financial constraints make appointing a DI coordinator unlikely. Digital remains an 'add-on' rather than a core part of their strategy.

A DCW advisor has provided crucial guidance on various projects and strategic developments, including digitalising paper-based nursing records and improving digital skills within the estates team, which had low digital literacy. The advisor also provided guidance on the digitalisation of mental health records and an upcoming e-prescribing project.

The potential loss of DCW support after June 2025 poses a significant challenge, as the board lacks in-house DI expertise and funding for a dedicated DI champion to coordinate efforts.

The health board called for stronger integration of DI within national policies, like the NHS Wales Planning Framework, to support advancement within their organisation. They also made a strong case for embedding DI into broader system approaches such as the Regional Partnership Boards (RPBs) and Public Services Boards (PSBs) as they play an essential role in driving sustainable systemic change.

Local authorities

8.10 Contributors reported that relationships between DCW with local authorities have matured during the final years of the programme. There were good examples where DCW has been able to extend their work across local authorities over the last few years. For instance, in one case DCW has provided training to staff based within education, community services, library services and are in the process of exploring training for facilities staff (caretakers and cleaners) as well as waste collection and counsellors. This training has better equipped staff to support members of the public e.g. using smart speakers to remind service users to take medication; and library staff being able to advise users and help them with online applications, such as online Blue Badge applications.

8.11 The feedback from case study local authorities was positive, suggesting that DCW's advice has supported the local authority's priorities. Feeback on the quality of provision was also positive:

> 'As a senior manager who is spinning lots of plates, it's given me confidence that we have experts helping us… I've always felt that Cwmpas have been really good at engaging staff up and down the organisation, and so people want to work with them.' [Local authority]

8.12 One local authority case study illustrates the value of the DCW programme to their organisation, and the implications of withdrawing the support and training from April 2024 onwards:

A local authority recognised the need to improve its workforce digital skills but lacked in-house expertise to assess their digital skill gaps. DCW supported the authority to undertake a digital skills audit, provided templates and guidance, which showed that digital skills were generally strong but there were certain pockets of staff, such as those working in care homes and depots, with limited skills. The skills audit also highlighted demand from other staff for more advanced digital training on software such as Power BI. The audit allowed the authority to prioritise their future focus.

DCW supported the authority to train Digital Friends from across all departments, who would support their colleagues. In addition, DCW delivered a programme of more generic digital skills training sessions for the wider workforce in response to specific requests:

'I found out that one service area had issued iPhones to refuse workers…and wanted staff to use a QR code to report incidents. The only problem was that nobody had given staff any training around this, and many staff were   struggling. [DCW] agreed to send somebody out to our depots to run some iPhone training sessions…it made a massive difference to those staff'.

Since the change in DCW's programme of work in March 2024, the local authority has been unable to fill the gap due to lack of internal expertise and resources. Progress on digital inclusion has stalled somewhat with the Digital Friend initiative losing momentum and a key member of staff leaving their post. The post has recently been filled and they are considering sourcing alternative training to deliver the provision:

'This change has certainly left a gap, and we now need to look at how to run effective training for our staff. The DCW provision was responsive and tailored to our needs, so it won't be easy finding a replacement for that level of support'.

8.13   Another local authority case study illustrates how DCW has supported the organisation to develop its digital strategy, and more broadly how the organisation is now delivering digital inclusion support directly to residents:

DCW helped a local authority develop its digital strategy, with support that included best practice insights and guidance. A senior leader at the authority championed digital inclusion, creating roles like Digital Inclusion Manager and Officer to drive the strategy forward.

'There is a real sense that they're walking alongside us, and they've also been really positive as well'.

> The Digital Inclusion Officer has worked with Openreach to improve broadband access for both individuals and businesses. One project involved securing fibre internet for a cluster of homes where residents had previously struggled with poor connectivity, impacting work and study. After over a year of collaboration, Openreach installed full-fibre broadband, significantly enhancing residents' quality of life and supporting community stability and growth. One resident noted:
>
> 'It has made a big difference to us as a family and to our neighbours. It has kept local young people in the area and attracted some other youth here.'

Social housing

8.14   The following two case studies help illustrate how DCW has supported the social housing sector, and the outcomes achieved from these interventions. The first case study relates to the national eCymru project, which helps demonstrate how DCW has worked with the social housing sector in a strategic way whilst the second is focused on the support provided to a social housing provider that works with tenants with learning disabilities[36].

> eCymru project[37]
>
> DCW has strategically supported the social housing sector across Wales through the eCymru project, an approach to address the digital inclusion needs of the wider social housing sector across Wales. DCW played a crucial role in connecting with social housing providers, brokering arrangements that led to the establishment of an eCymru membership model. DCW continues to promote the eCymru project to social housing organisations that are yet to become members.

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[36] We acknowledge that the term 'learning disabilities' is not compatible with the Social Model of Disability. However, this terminology is chosen by representative organisations for people with learning disabilities.
The ongoing use of the widely understood term 'learning disabilities' is reviewed regularly by the Welsh Government, notably by the Learning Disability Ministerial Advisory Group which provides independent advice and challenge to ministers and includes members with lived experience, representative bodies, professionals, and organisations from the public and third sectors.

[37] eCymru – events for the community

The eCymru initiative hosts DCW's content on its platform, providing members with access to a range of digital courses and resources. Both staff and tenants can access these resources.

The progress of the eCymru initiative has enabled tenants to participate in more digital sessions, expanding the range of services available across the network and offering tenants more choice. Having completed the pilot phase, eCymru now has a project plan in place until 2028. As a key partner DCW continues to provide expert advice and share best practice with the group.

One social housing provider described the development as highly beneficial for the sector. They noted that the initiative has offered a platform for housing associations to share and access digital resources, allowing them to offer a broader range of activities and resources to tenants. Tenants have benefited from digital activities such as online choir sessions, quizzes, bingo, and Welsh cultural sessions. The pooling of resources has also proved to be cost-effective and enabled providers to commission work that would have been too expensive independently of each other:

'Everyone brings different areas of expertise to the project, and by pooling our resources, we can now afford to offer a much wider range of activities and content to our tenants.'

They emphasised DCW's key role in the establishment and development of eCymru which has allowed social housing providers to access additional support and resources from DCW and given them greater structure and momentum to deliver digital inclusion activities across their organisation.

Social housing tenants with learning disabilities

A social housing provider supporting tenants with learning disabilities adopts a proactive approach to implementing their Digital Inclusion plan. A key aspect of their collaboration with DCW has been the hands-on support, regular visits to tenant settings, troubleshooting, and training.

The organisation has recently created two new appointments, a Tenant Participation Officer and a Health and Wellbeing Coordinator, which will allow the organisation to focus upon targeted digital inclusion activity going forward.

DCW's work with the social housing provider has involved a variety of initiatives, such as the '7 Days of Digital' project, where tenants recorded their daily use of technology such as using digital tools for reminders, staying in touch with friends and family and engaging in online meetings, giving insight into the practical ways it improves their lives.

DCW was praised for its commitment, energy and flexibility. The collaboration led the provider to secure second place in the 'Digital Excellence' category at the Welsh Housing Awards.

DCW has also provided well-received support through digital training and troubleshooting sessions, with tenants bringing loaned devices to sessions to address any issues. DCW's commitment to aftercare and continuous support has been critical in ensuring tenants make long-term use of the technology.

One of the significant outcomes, made possible as a result of the partnership with DCW, is the establishment of a Tenant Panel, allowing tenants to attend meetings virtually, giving them a voice in the organisation's decision-making process.

'We now have a panel of about 10-15 tenants that regularly attend, using the digital knowledge and equipment that DCW has given them'

The collaboration has had a positive impact on both tenants and staff. The use of digital tools has empowered tenants, improved access to services, and reduced social isolation. The flexibility of the programme has allowed each tenant to benefit in their own way. The housing provider believed that even simple uses of technology, such as watching YouTube or playing

> games, can be seen as a success, and the programme should respect each tenant's individual digital journey.

Organisations which support disabled people

8.15 This section draws upon feedback from two organisations who support disabled people:

> A social enterprise associated with a housing association has worked closely with DCW to support tenants and residents with digital skills and device access. Support provided by DCW has included:
>
> - digital skills training: the social enterprise offers essential digital skills courses to tenants and residents, supported by DCW's 'train-the-trainer' sessions. These sessions empower staff and volunteers to deliver practical digital skills training, especially targeted towards older adults and disabled people who need assistance with device use and navigating the internet
> - access to devices: DCW provides the social enterprise with tablets for residents in sheltered accommodations, facilitating greater accessibility to digital resources. This partnership also includes helping volunteers and residents develop confidence in using these devices independently, fostering social inclusion and connectivity
> - a community-centred approach: more recently the social enterprise has concentrated on implementing a MDLS assessment to evaluate each new tenant's digital needs, allowing for tailored support
>
> Through intergenerational digital initiatives, DCW supports the social enterprise's approach by fostering digital engagement across age groups.
>
> Another learning disability charity has worked with DCW to make digital resources more accessible to their members:
>
> - training provision: the charity and DCW offer joint digital skills training for support workers, family members, and individuals with learning disabilities. DCW provides adaptive technology resources, ensuring that

individuals with learning disabilities receive tailored guidance to participate digitally

- supporting the 'Gig Buddies' project: DCW supports the charity's 'Gig Buddies' initiative, which pairs disabled people with volunteers who share similar interests, enabling them to attend events together. This project helps reduce social isolation and fosters friendships through shared digital access

- addressing social isolation: DCW's efforts during COVID-19 expanded to include more accessible digital tools and training to help people with learning difficulties stay connected.

Outcomes and impacts

The main benefits of DCW's provision for these organisations are:

- enhanced digital skills and confidence: DCW's support has empowered staff and volunteers across both organisations to confidently deliver digital skills training. Many participants, including disabled people, now feel more comfortable using digital tools for everyday tasks, social connections, and accessing services

- embedding digital: each organisation observed how DCW support had shifted digital inclusion from a 'specialist add on' to a core component of their work, with adaptive technology becoming more widespread and mainstream in its use

- increased social connectivity and reduced isolation: DCW's work during COVID-19 expanded digital engagement opportunities for people with learning difficulties. This connection allowed people to maintain contact with loved ones and engage socially through virtual events, significantly reducing feelings of isolation. For instance, the Gig Buddies initiative enabled many to attend events and foster friendships:

'I see DCW as kind of the mother company of digital in Wales to be honest. They are our go-to for any support.'

Looking to the future

The partnerships with DCW have demonstrated the ongoing need for digital inclusion across various demographics to remove inequality. Both organisations continue to prioritise digital inclusion by expanding device access, refining digital skills training, and promoting adaptive technology across their communities.

One organisation plans to extend the reach of accessible digital tools, especially in rural areas, and the other is focused on sustaining MDLS assessments to better meet tenant digital needs.

By providing essential resources, training, and support, DCW has empowered these organisations to bridge digital divides, enhance wellbeing and support meaningful community engagement for disabled people.

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities

8.16   This section draws upon feedback from DCW staff as well as a representative from an organisation that supports Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities in Wales:

The initiative arose from an identified need for digital skills training for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, particularly following an event hosted by an organisation which supports this community attended by DCW representatives that highlighted key challenges faced by these groups.

DCW colleagues approached the organisation at the event and provided them with a background to the support available. Subsequent meetings between DCW and staff from the organisation identified key issues facing the community including limited access to technology, low digital literacy, and a lack of awareness about available resources.

Implementation

DCW's support over the last six months has included:

- training: the DCW advisor conducted foundational training sessions, including a Digital Champions course and Essential Digital Skills course,

for staff. This training aimed to empower staff to better assist their community members

- device loans: DCW provided three Android tablets and three Apple iPads to the organisation for loan to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community members. This initiative aimed to increase digital access, allowing individuals to practice essential skills and engage with online resources

- outreach and engagement: between April and June 2024, outreach efforts intensified. DCW worked closely with the organisation, facilitating door-to-door engagement at a Gypsy, Roma and Traveller site in Cardiff, which helped establish trust and rapport with community members:

'The culture is so different to traditional groups that DCW work with. We can't assume any knowledge – we can't be patronising'

- community activities: DCW organised computer clubs and open events at community spaces. These sessions included informal learning environments where participants could explore technology without pressure, fostering a supportive atmosphere for digital skill development

- resource development: DCW's advisor developed interactive resources, such as a driving theory test quiz on PowerPoint tailored for low literacy levels, making it more accessible for community members. This resource helped individuals to pass their driving tests, which is crucial for their independence.

Outcomes and impacts

The main outcomes of this work include:

- increased digital skills: staff reported that participants gained confidence in using digital devices for everyday tasks, such as checking train times, CV development, job searches and accessing educational resources. For example, one woman, who initially struggled with technology, became proficient in using a tablet for various online activities

- improved health and wellbeing: staff reported that the digital skills gained positively impacted participants' wellbeing, reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation by improving social connections through social media platforms like Facebook
- driving theory success: several community members have successfully improved their performance on driving theory tests, a significant milestone for many who rely on driving for mobility and employment opportunities
- increased confidence and breaking down barriers: staff reported that there has been a notable increase in confidence amongst community
- members who have engaged with the support, in both their skills and abilities and in accessing online services (such as online banking).

Looking to the future

The organisation has seen a substantial enhancement in its digital inclusion practices. The collaboration with DCW has empowered staff with the skills necessary to provide direct support, leading to increased confidence in addressing community needs. The organisation has also initiated computer clubs and secured additional funding for devices to continue supporting the community beyond the DCW project.

'It's all been helpful. Without it we wouldn't be so far ahead'

DCW aims to maintain momentum until the end of the DCW funding period and plans to continue delivering the computer clubs as well as engaging with additional sites at Merthyr, Carmarthenshire and North Wales and explore the use of devices for practical applications, such as ordering online and accessing services. The organisation is committed to sustaining these efforts post-DCW, having already invested in additional devices to ensure continuity of digital inclusion work.

'This won't be the end. We will be continuing the work'

9. Digital Inclusion Alliance Wales

9.1   This chapter considers the work of the Digital Inclusion Alliance Wales (DIAW) and is informed by our desk review of key documents, focus group discussions at a meeting of the DIAW held in September 2024, and interviews with Welsh Government officials, programme delivery staff and supported organisations. It also draws upon our independent survey distributed to DIAW members[38]. The survey was distributed to 139 members and 38 responses were received, representing a response rate of 27%.

9.2   Feedback from contributors suggests that the purpose of the DIAW has become clearer over time, with an increased focus and clearer agenda being put in place. The DIAW first set out its agenda for digital inclusion 'From Inclusion to Resilience' in 2021 and this was updated in 2023[39]. The agenda set out five priority areas which have informed DIAW's work.

9.3   The DIAW meets virtually on a quarterly basis, with meetings held since October 2023 focusing on individual priority areas of work e.g. the October 2023 meeting focused on Priority 2. Contributors welcomed this development, as it has allowed a detailed discussion of each priority area.

9.4   Membership of the DIAW has grown over time, and at the time of preparing this report had 139 members drawn from the public, third, private and academic sectors. A small number of members are elected to form a steering group[40] to oversee the work of the DIAW. Contributors to the evaluation thought that the DIAW governing structure was broadly appropriate, led by a strong chair and effective secretariat support. The formation of the smaller, elected steering group was also welcomed.

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[38] We do not provide any percentages when analysing the survey data, given the low number of responses. Rather, and in order to be consistent, we use the following terms to describe proportions throughout this report: Nearly all=with very few exceptions; Most=90% or more; Many=70% or more; A majority=Over 60%; Half=50%; Around half=Close to 50%; A minority=Below 40%; Few=below 20% and Very Few=Less than 15%

[39] From Inclusion to Resilience: an Agenda for digital inclusion

[40] Digital Inclusion Alliance Wales – Steering Group (gov.wales)

9.5 In its most recent progress report (July 2024) titled 'Agenda for Digital Inclusion: From Inclusion to Resilience' the DIAW confirms its purpose as 'working together to make Wales a digitally inclusive nation'. It sets out the progress made by the DIAW against its five priority areas as well as its future vision for these priority areas. The key points made within the progress report are:

- Priority 1 - Embedding digital inclusion across all sectors: it notes that the DIAW plays an important role in bringing diverse organisations together to embed digital inclusion by sharing experiences and raising awareness

- Priority 2 - Mainstreaming digital inclusion in health and social care: it reports there has been a marked increase in awareness of digital inclusion across the Digital and Data Strategy for Health and Social Care (2023) when compared to the previous 2015 strategy

- Priority 3 - Addressing data poverty as a key issue: the ongoing cost of living crisis is exacerbating data poverty and digital exclusion which means that more support is needed

- Priority 4 - Prioritising essential digital skills for work and life in the economy: a survey of DIAW members in December 2023 showed that only 13% agreed that the current provision of digital skills training for adults in Wales was sufficient

- Priority 5 - Implementing a new minimum digital living standard: DIAW has been closely involved with the research for a MDLS, with members having supported the research.

9.6 Between October 2023 and June 2024, the DIAW published four reports relating to its priority areas (excluding Priority 3). These were informed by network meeting discussions and feedback from members. Of those members who provided feedback directly to the DIAW at the time[41]:

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[41] The number of members who provided feedback varied, with between 30 and 45 members responding to each one.

- 96% thought that the DIAW was making a positive impact on organisations embedding digital inclusion (Priority 1)

- 90% thought that the DIAW was making a positive impact on digital inclusion awareness across health and social care services (Priority 2)

- 76% thought that the DIAW was having a positive influence on the provision of digital skills training in Wales (Priority 4)

- 96% thought that the DIAW had a positive impact on the work to create the MDLS (Priority 5)
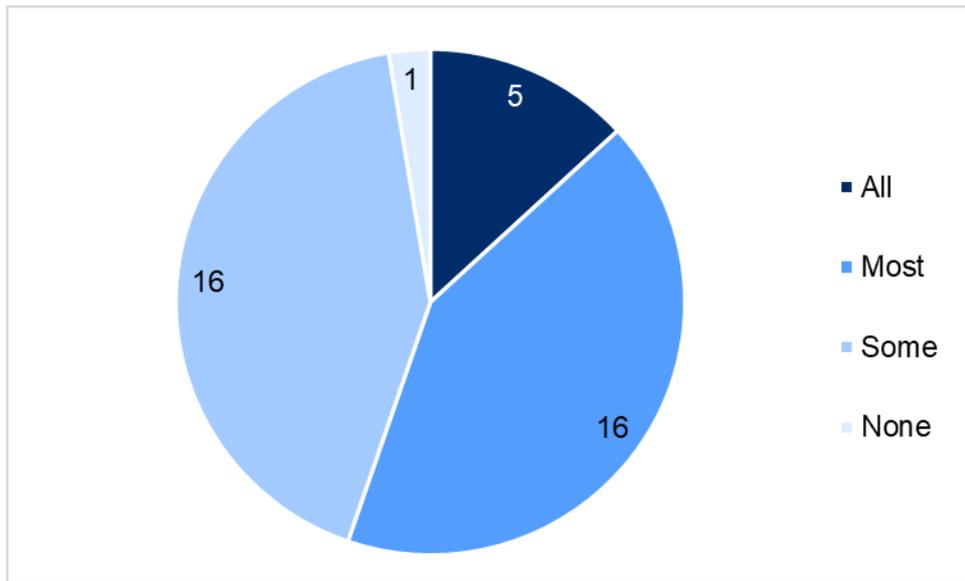
Profile of surveyed DIAW members

9.7　Many of these respondents were based at either third sector (15) or public sector (14) organisations. The remaining minority were based at private sector organisations (5), academia (3) or another type of setting (1)[42]. In addition to being members of the DIAW network, four of the 38 respondents were also members of the DIAW steering group.

9.8　Figure 9.1 sets out how frequently survey respondents attended DIAW meetings over the previous year. Overall, it shows that respondents were fairly frequent attendees, with nearly all attending at least some of the sessions held, suggesting that they saw value in attending.

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[42] The respondent did not specify the type of setting at which they were based.

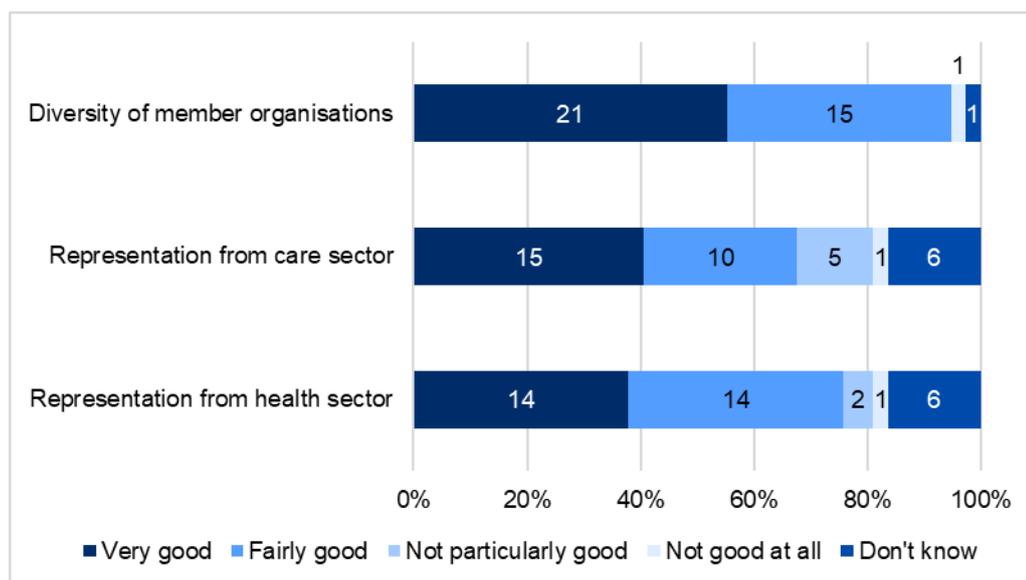**Figure 9.1: Frequency of attending DIAW meetings over previous year**

Source: OB3 survey (38 responses)

Profile of membership

9.9   Figure 9.2 shows that all but two survey respondents thought the DIAW had good diversity across its member organisations, suggesting that it has been able to successfully expand its membership in recent years. Many survey respondents also thought that the DIAW had good representation from the health sector whilst a majority thought it had good representation from the care sector. When providing open ended comments, one key strength was the representation from 'a wide range of sectors' although one survey respondent did note that they 'would like to see more attendance from social care and third sector social care' organisations.

Figure 9.2: Diversity and representation of DIAW members

Source: OB3 survey (38 responses)

9.10   Feedback gathered through interviews and focus group discussions with members of the DIAW largely support these survey findings. Participants felt that the DIAW had made good progress in increasing and broadening its membership. High attendance at meetings (typically with 40 to 50 members present) and strong engagement in discussions were seen as indications of the value of the DIAW.
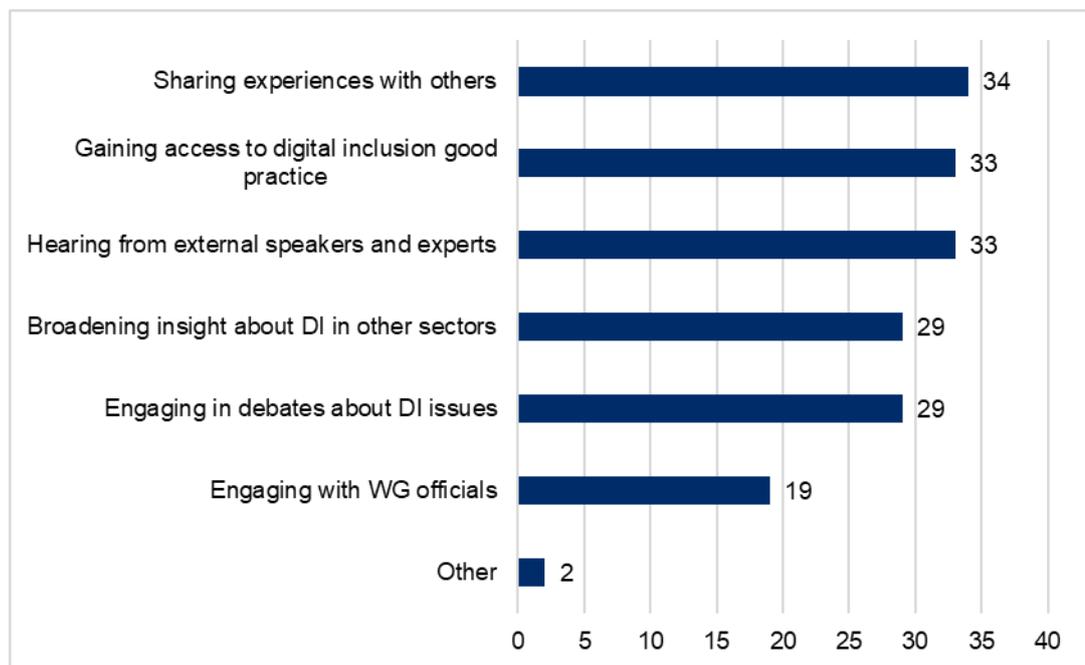
9.11   However, while there is now greater representation from some Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic groups, such as the Hispanic and Iberian Society for Wales, engaging these groups remains challenging. Additionally, representation from Welsh language community groups was noted as being lower than desired. Although there are some members from private sector organisations, it was suggested that this membership could be further expanded. Furthermore, it was also suggested that the DIAW would benefit from a greater breadth of local authority representation, particularly from their IT departments.

Value of the DIAW

9.12   As shown at Figure 9.3, the main aspect which survey respondents found useful about being a member of the DIAW was sharing experiences with others, cited by most respondents. Survey respondents also valued being

able to gain access to digital inclusion good practice and hearing from external speakers and experts. The DIAW was considered less useful as a mechanism to engage with Welsh Government officials. Some survey respondents added that they found the DIAW 'an immensely valuable forum' which provided them an opportunity 'to catch up on developments'. One also observed that the DIAW was useful to learn from 'organisations closer to those in need' so that their own services could be better adapted.

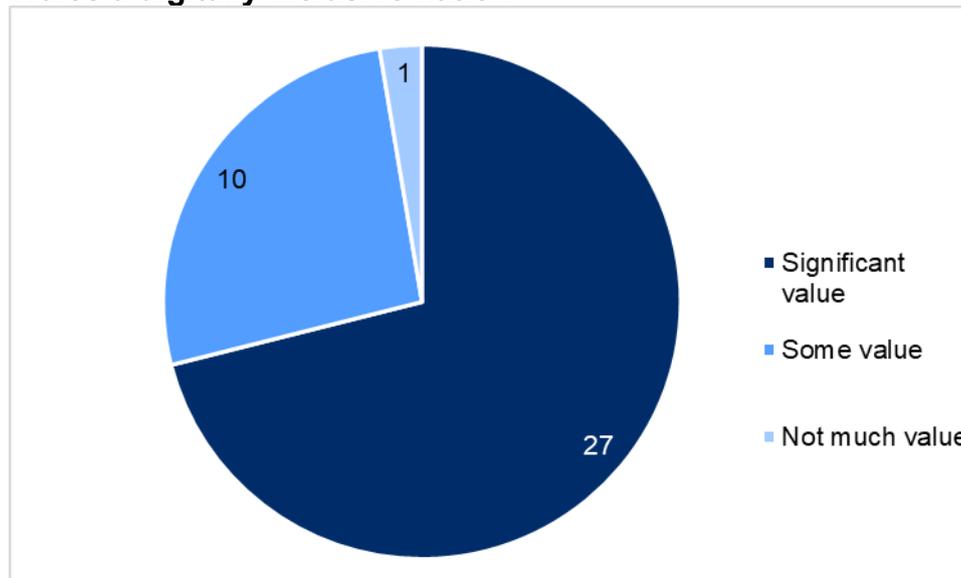**Figure 9.3: Usefulness of being a member of the DIAW**

Source: OB3 survey (38 responses)

9.13   Interviewees and focus group contributors equally placed value on the DIAW being a useful information exchange group for sharing experiences with others, particularly with organisations from different sectors to themselves, as this helped to challenge 'silo working'. The network was regarded as a useful forum for sharing good practice and facilitating connections between people, people whom they might not otherwise have come across.

9.14   Contributors also highlighted that the DIAW was increasingly becoming a recognised body of organisations. By way of example, the DIAW was asked to provide evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee on digital inclusion in Wales, suggesting that the network is gaining traction and

increasingly being regarded as a 'collective voice' in relation to digital inclusion.

9.15 All but one survey respondents attached either significant, or some, value to the DIAW as a mechanism for making Wales a digitally inclusive nation, as shown at Figure 9.4.

Figure 9.4: Value attached to the DIAW as a mechanism for making Wales a digitally inclusive nation

Source: OB3 survey (38 responses)

Digital Inclusion Charter

9.16 Members of the DIAW are required to adopt the Digital Inclusion Charter[43] and commit to six key pledges to show their commitment to promoting basic digital skills and helping people get online. Just over half, 20 of the 38 survey respondents, had adopted the Digital Inclusion Charter whilst a further minority (nine), were working on it at the time of the survey. One survey respondent had yet to start work on it and the remaining eight did not know.

9.17 At a broader level, feedback from DCW delivery staff suggested that most DIAW members had adopted the Charter, albeit that organisations are interpreting it in different ways. As illustrated via some of the case studies at Chapter 8, some organisations fully embrace the principles of the

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[43] Digital Inclusion Charter

Charter and use it to underpin their approach to digital inclusion, whereas others regard it as a 'tick box' exercise.
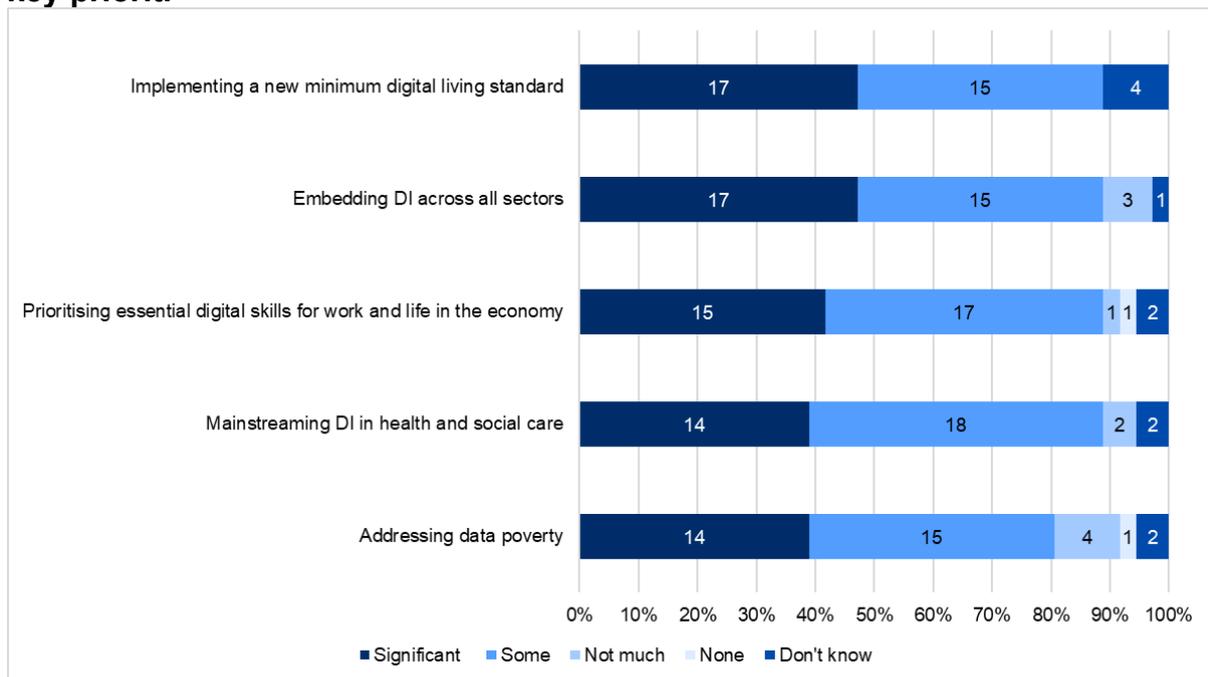
9.18   A few survey respondents explained the difference adopting the charter had made to their organisations, with an emphasis on it helping to raise awareness and providing an appropriate framework for action:

- 'raised the profile of digital inclusion within the organisation'

- 'provided a framework for us to embed digital inclusion'

- 'it is very useful in helping us be mindful about the digital inclusion agenda and keeping us on track, creating actions around our digital inclusion and keeping the conversation going.'

Difference made

9.19   As set out at Figure 9.5, many survey respondents thought that the DIAW was making either a significant, or some, contribution towards realising its five key priorities. Whilst still positive, slightly fewer thought that the DIAW was making a contribution towards Priority 3 (addressing data poverty). Perhaps this is not surprising given that the DIAW is yet to produce a Priority 3 impact report.

Figure 9.5: Contribution made by the DIAW to date towards realising its five key prioriti

	Significant	Some	Not much	None	Don't know
Implementing a new minimum digital living standard	17	15	4		
Embedding DI across all sectors	17	15	3		1
Prioritising essential digital skills for work and life in the economy	15	17	1	1	2
Mainstreaming DI in health and social care	14	18	2		2
Addressing data poverty	14	15	4	1	2

Source: OB3 survey (38 responses)

9.20   Interviewees and focus group contributors highlighted the contribution which the DIAW had made towards the new Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS) Priority 5 of its agenda. Contributors noted that the DIAW had advocated the need for the Welsh Government to fund the work in Wales, to enhance the evidence already captured by the UK Government. It was noted that the DIAW steering group helped to shape the research in Wales, and that members of the network identified research participants to contribute towards focus group sessions. In this sense, there was much applaud for the advocacy role played by the DIAW:

> 'as we've grown our collective voice about what needs to be done across digital inclusion is becoming louder' [DCW staff]

9.21   Contributors were slightly more critical that the DIAW had not delivered any tangible, on-the-ground initiatives, such as piloting specific approaches to address particular issues directly. In this regard, it was suggested that the DIAW should take a more 'hands-on' approach, with members becoming more actively involved; however, some questioned whether this would be feasible:

'I couldn't tell you what its actually achieved … it needs to be more hands-on' [DIAW member]

'it's doing gentle and soft stuff but if the desire is for significant pace and major delivery I'm not sure it's possible to deliver this through an Alliance. [DIAW member]

9.22   When asked about the DIAW's main achievements to date, survey respondents highlighted the following points:

- DIAW has successfully brought together organisations from different sectors, fostering collaboration and breaking down silos
  'Bringing together a large amount of different organisations and voices into one place to drive digital inclusion forward.'

- it has played an important role in raising the profile of digital inclusion at a national level, keeping it on the agenda during challenging times and pushing for its recognition across Wales:
  'Raising awareness of the need for digital inclusion at a national decision-making level'

- DIAW serves as a platform for sharing best practices and ideas, providing members with opportunities to learn from each other and improve their digital inclusion efforts:
  'A home for those working on digital inclusion, offering space for mutual support and collaboration'

- DIAW has helped influence Welsh Government and other stakeholders, advocating for continued focus on digital inclusion through consultations and representation:
  'Pushing the topic with Welsh Government, who we hope will continue to see the significance'

- DIAW has supported members by providing education and resources, helping organisations to improve their own services:
  'Creating the opportunity for myself and my team to enhance the service we provide'

The future of the DIAW

9.23 There was strong support for the DIAW's continuation into the future. Notably. All but two survey respondents believed the DIAW should continue beyond the current DCW funding period. One respondent disagreed, and another was unsure.

9.24 A key priority for the future is the sustainability of the DIAW, particularly regarding its funding. Both survey respondents and interviewees raised concerns about the potential impact on the DIAW when DCW funding ends. Currently, members are assessing options to ensure the DIAW's continuation and are exploring various funding strategies, given that staff costs are the primary expense. These strategies include a membership model, private sector sponsorship, and continued Welsh Government funding.

9.25 Contributors to this evaluation highlighted both the advantages and drawbacks of each funding option. Concerns were raised about the potential influence of private sector sponsorship on the DIAW's work, as this could shift the network's current ethos. Similarly, questions were raised about whether organisations would perceive enough value in the network to justify financial contributions. Although Welsh Government funding was welcomed, it was noted that it could also bring influence over the DIAW's operations.

9.26 While Welsh Government officials stressed the importance of developing a financially sustainable model for the DIAW as soon as possible, there was a general consensus among other contributors that it may still be too early in the DIAW's development to determine the most suitable funding approach. As a result, many of these contributors favoured continuing with the current funding model for now.

9.27 Other key priorities for the DIAW in the future were identified as being its work around the MDLS; expanding the network; encouraging more organisations to adopt the Digital Inclusion Charter (and gain accreditation) and continued support around collaboration between organisations to prevent unnecessary duplication of efforts around digital inclusion.

9.28   Survey respondents also suggested the following improvements to the DIAW:

- clearer outcomes and more measurable achievements, including better communication about the DIAW's impact:

    'it is not clear what this project has actually delivered itself'

- better collaboration tools, including the need for a secure platform to share documents and contacts outside of meetings:

    'a secure place to hold documents, presentations and contacts so we can network outside the meetings'

- increased diversity, and the inclusion of more Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic organisations within the network:

    'there are hardly any ethnic minority based organisations as part of the network'

- greater networking opportunities, with more in-person events and 'opportunity for networking with members'.

10.   The future

10.1   This chapter considers the views of contributors about the future when the current DCW funding comes to an end in June 2025. It considers two main issues – the nature of future priorities; and how these should be funded and delivered.

Future priorities

10.2   Welsh Government officials, DCW delivery staff and interviewed organisations all believed that digital inclusion efforts should continue beyond June 2025. Discontinuing DCW would leave a significant gap, particularly impacting organisations that rely on ongoing training because they do not have the internal capacity to deliver it themselves. There is also concern that without continued support, Wales - historically a leader in digital inclusion - could fall behind Scotland and England, both of which are advancing in this area.

10.3   During our fieldwork, Welsh Government officials were conducting stakeholder engagement events to assess current digital inclusion efforts across Wales. Insights from these events will be crucial for planning future interventions.

10.4   DCW has issued policy recommendations to help eliminate digital exclusion. In Digital Inclusion: Vision for the Future (2024)[44], it advocates for a six-year commitment to a digital inclusion programme targeting the 7% of people who do not personally use the internet; and to support organisations and community groups. Other key recommendations include:

- implementing the findings of the Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS) research pilot and expanding it to all households in Wales

- continuing the funding for the Digital Inclusion Alliance which will enable it to consider options for a transition to alternative funding sources

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[44] Digital Inclusion: Vision for the Future - Cwmpas

- that the Welsh Government should develop strategic partnerships with the technology industry to support an expanded digital inclusion programme

- that all digital transformation programmes in the future should include a percentage of their funding for digital inclusion.

10.5   The evaluation fieldwork identified seven future priorities for any successor digital inclusion intervention, accepting that future funding for digital inclusion provision would be limited, and as such would need to be prioritised effectively.

A national, strategic digital inclusion effort

10.6   The evaluation identified the need for a sustained, national approach to digital inclusion, with broad support for continuing the coordination role and maintaining the well-regarded DCW brand. Discontinuing DCW would risk losing staff with valuable knowledge, skills and expertise to deliver digital inclusion provision, potentially causing Wales to fall behind other nations:

'Cwmpas have done this for 15 years and they have a fantastic team with excellent knowledge and expertise. It would be a significant risk to the Welsh Government to lose this ... there's a risk that Wales would fall behind [other home nations]' [Welsh Government official]

Digital inclusion as a cross-cutting intervention

10.7   There is a desire to embed digital inclusion across multiple Welsh Government policy areas, beyond health and social care, extending to areas such as social housing, employability, and support for Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities. This cross-cutting approach would reflect digital inclusion's wide-reaching impact:

'DCW is part of the jigsaw. It is not the whole and it is not the solution' [Welsh Government official]

The need to target the most digitally excluded

10.8   One of the main priorities is reaching the 7% of people in Wales who remain digitally excluded. The largely online DCW programme is not fully

suited for this group, and place-based, hands-on support should be explored. Two such approaches were being piloted at the time of our evaluation, with support from the Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF), across Denbighshire and Powys. It would be worth considering the findings from any evaluations of these projects, and any lessons about how to reach specific excluded cohorts.

Flexible, localised delivery

10.9   While DCW resources are largely focused on national coordination, future funding could also be used to support more localised initiatives, potentially through a grant scheme, to support local groups to tap into resources to deliver in-person intervention. There was a suggestion that a two-pronged approach might be appropriate in the future, building upon some of the hands-on thematic provision made available since April 2024.

Targeted sectoral support

10.10   The continued digitisation of health services creates a need to support users of these services, with emphasis on health boards that are slower to adopt digital inclusion. There are increasing pockets of good practice, but not across all health boards.

10.11   There was a strong suggestion that the remaining health boards who have yet to fully embrace digital inclusion to the extent that sector leaders have done, need to be encouraged to embrace this agenda. It was suggested that the Welsh Government needs to provide greater direction and guidance to bring all health boards to a similar position as the sector leaders.

10.12   Similarly, targeted resources for social housing residents are essential, as this cohort still experience high levels of digital exclusion and are a focus within the MDLS.

KPIs which can accommodate delivery changes

10.13   There was a call for any future programme to set more generic KPIs which could accommodate any changes to programme delivery over time, without the need to revisit and amend them on a regular basis, as has been the

case within the existing programme. It was acknowledged that this would be challenging from a Welsh Government procurement perspective, as any future intervention would still require some output metrics to assess performance and achievements.

Improving digital exclusion metrics

10.14   Accurate metrics are critical for assessing progress. The current single indicator for personal use is outdated, and the new MDLS and survey questions show promise, particularly for capturing the needs of specific groups, such as households with children.

11. Conclusions and recommendations

11.1 This chapter sets out our conclusions about the Digital Communities Wales (DCW) programme and offers a set of recommendations for the Welsh Government to consider for the future, post June 2025 when the current programme comes to an end.

11.2 Over the past three years, there has been a sustained and positive policy focus on digital inclusion across Wales, with DCW frequently recognised as a key programme for advancing these policy goals. The programme has also meaningfully influenced policy development, particularly in contributing to the creation of Wales's Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS).

11.3 Whilst DCW has made a positive contribution to reducing the number of digitally excluded people in Wales, other external factors, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of online services, have also been instrumental in halving the proportion of adults in Wales not using the internet since 2012/13.

11.4 However, the levelling off of the proportion of digitally excluded people in Wales over the past two years warrants consideration, as it suggests that continuing with the same approach may not further reduce this number substantially. Those who remain digitally excluded are increasingly difficult to reach and, as such, are likely to need more intensive, hands-on, face-to-face support to engage in the digital world. From a funding perspective, engaging these under-represented groups will be more costly and offer a lower cost-benefit ratio for any funded programme. A national programme like DCW, which is primarily delivered virtually, is currently not designed to provide this level of targeted support.

11.5 In terms of future support, there is a clear case for continued Welsh Government investment in digital inclusion initiatives in Wales, with levels of investment needing to incrementally increase over time. Additionally, there is a strong argument for the Welsh Government to offer greater direction to the health sector on what constitutes good practice at both a strategic and operational level. This could include setting out an expectation that organisations develop a digital inclusion strategy and

establish a digital transformation team with either a dedicated digital inclusion capacity or embedded digital inclusion roles.

Recommendation 1: We recommend that digital inclusion warrants a greater priority across the Welsh Government and that Welsh Government funding for digital inclusion should be considered as a cross-cutting area of work, and not restricted to one or two Welsh Government departments.

Recommendation 2: Any future funding for digital inclusion initiatives should include resources to target and offer intensive support for under-represented, digitally excluded individuals. There is scope to explore the use of flexible, place-based mechanisms to deliver more hands-on support to specific target audiences, drawing as appropriate upon the input of volunteers and successful DCW initiatives such as Digital Heroes.

11.6   Since the preparation of our interim evaluation report, the DCW work programme has undergone considerable change, with a revised thematic approach introduced from April 2024 in response to proposed funding cuts. Although this shift posed significant challenges and consumed limited programme resources, the new thematic focus has been a positive development, enabling DCW to work in a more targeted manner. The programme's intensified support for Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities appears effective and could serve as a model for engaging other under-represented with limited digital skills in the future.

Recommendation 3: The thematic approach adopted during 2024 should be maintained and used to inform the design and structure of future digital inclusion programmes.

11.7   Over the course of delivery, the DCW brand has become highly recognised and valued, and it is important that this is not lost when programme funding comes to an end in June 2025.

11.8   In addition, the DCW programme has become more strategic in its operation over time, enabling it to fulfil its ambitions through stronger collaboration with key stakeholders. In doing so, DCW has taken on a more influential role as both a strategic leader and coordinating body in

advancing the digital inclusion agenda across Wales, establishing itself as a highly respected entity.

Recommendation 4: There is value in retaining the DCW brand beyond June 2025, along with the national strategic and coordinating functions undertaken by the programme.

11.9 DCW has generally performed well against its various KPIs over its six-year funding period. While progress on targets related to supporting health and care staff was initially slow, this area saw vast improvement over time due to increased engagement from health and social care organisations. Given that it looks realistic that the programme will achieve, possibly exceed, its current KPIs by June 2025 there may be a case for DCW to explore how it could use more of its resource to provide intensive support for under-represented, digitally excluded individuals between now and the end of the programme.

11.10 However, targets for recruiting and training volunteers have remained challenging since the pandemic. Although the decision to remove these targets from the delivery contract from April 2024 was appropriate, their removal raises questions about the underlying theory of change for DCW, as the programme was originally designed on the premise that volunteers would cascade digital skills and knowledge to others.

11.11 The main area where the programme has faced challenges is in meeting its target for private sector organisations. DCW's achievements in this sector have been unsatisfactory, and the factors contributing to this have been explored in the report. Should the Welsh Government wish to pursue this objective further in the future, it may be beneficial to consider an alternative approach for working with the private sector - such as partnering with Business Wales or making more effective use of the DIAW, which has private sector representation within its membership.

Recommendation 5: We recommend that the Welsh Government considers how the private sector could be better engaged to address digital exclusion issues across Wales. Consideration should be given to working with an

appropriate organisation or initiative which has the necessary reach and influence across this sector.

11.12   The Welsh Government has had to revise DCW's KPIs on several occasions over the programme delivery period, to accommodate the impact of external changes such as the COVID-19 pandemic and changes in programme delivery. This has often caused challenges due to changes to the funding agreement and makes it difficult to quantify the overall achievements of DCW over the six-year period. There is a strong argument for adopting broader KPIs which offer greater flexibility in the future, which can accommodate changes to the operational approach to a programme of work without needing to change the expected outputs. There is also a strong case for ensuring that any future digital inclusion programme can report outcomes which are aligned to the definitions set out for the MDLS.

Recommendation 6: We recommend that more flexible funding targets are set for any future digital inclusion programmes, which do not need to be amended to accommodate major revisions to the programme of work over time.

Recommendation 7: We also recommend that future digital inclusion interventions capture and report on outcomes which are aligned to the definitions set out within the MDLS.

11.13   One of the main impacts of the DCW programme has been an increase in awareness and meaningful engagement with digital inclusion across target organisations, particularly from within the health sector. While some bias may exist in our findings due to the selection process for case study organisations, there is strong evidence that health sector organisations are now genuinely embracing this agenda. Consequently, they are effectively drawing on DCW inputs. This is demonstrated by the growing number of health sector practitioners participating in DCW training, a testament to the sustained efforts of the DCW delivery team and Welsh Government officials to promote digital inclusion within the sector.

11.14   The evidence captured via case study organisations demonstrates that DCW is effectively achieving its three programme outcomes. The feedback

gathered from case study organisations also suggests that the loaning of digital equipment to organisations, and their users or members, continues to be highly effective where this embedded into wider support and training provision.

Recommendation 8: Any future digital inclusion initiative should continue to make available digital equipment to organisations and their beneficiaries on a loan basis, provided this forms an embedded element of the support provided.

11.15   In terms of Outcome 1 (people having sufficient basic digital skills and confidence to engage digitally in their everyday and working lives) there is good evidence that DCW has supported organisations in identifying digital skills gaps within their workforce and provided targeted digital skills training to help address these. In some cases, DCW has significantly enhanced the training capacity of organisations that would otherwise be unable to deliver such a comprehensive programme to their workforce. The extent to which trained workforce staff then pass on their newly acquired skills to others, whether colleagues or members of the public, varies across different settings. However, the evaluation fieldwork has highlighted some excellent examples where this has successfully occurred.

11.16   There is also good evidence, gathered through this evaluation and DCW's own case studies, of individuals using technology to better manage their health and wellbeing (Outcome 2). These examples include library users, care home residents, community group members, and health patients. The case studies gathered via this evaluation demonstrate how DCW support has led to improvements in wellbeing and mental health be that through improved digital connectivity which helps alleviate loneliness or by enhancing individuals' ability to manage their own health using various digital equipment.

11.17   In terms of Outcome 3 (increase in ownership of digital inclusion by stakeholders and clients) there is again a plethora of case study examples which demonstrate how organisations across the health, social care, and social housing sectors are fully embracing digital inclusion. In some of

these cases, digital inclusion has been embedded into organisational strategy and resulted in the establishment of digital transformation teams, and an ongoing programme of digital training for the workforce. The case studies shed important light on the challenges faced by these organisations to sustain their digital inclusion efforts be those relating to leadership issues, financial constraints or limited policy support. In this sense, they reinforce the vulnerable situation in which digital inclusion currently sits, and the withdrawal of the DCW intervention could very well lead to a loss of momentum across such organisations.

11.18   In terms of the social housing sector, the two case studies presented in this report suggest that these organisations are in a significantly stronger position in terms of digital inclusion provision by the end of the programme delivery period. They have established appropriate structures to sustain their delivery even if DCW resources are withdrawn. However, it is possible that these case studies represent social housing providers which are in the strongest position, rather than reflecting the position of the broader sector.

11.19   Conversely, the evidence gathered via the local authority case studies discussed in this evaluation suggest that whilst this sector is making good progress in terms of digital inclusion, developments are not sufficiently embedded enough to be fully sustained without future support and guidance from a programme such as DCW. There is a danger that the momentum gathered to date could be lost in some cases as a result of DCW's reduced focus on local authorities as a target audience.

11.20   Over the programme funding period, the DIAW has grown and expanded its membership base. It has also secured greater clarity in its purpose and adopted a more structured approach to delivering its key priorities. The DIAW has positioned itself as a credible voice in Wales' digital inclusion agenda and made an important contribution to the development of the MDLS in Wales. Evidence gathered over the course of this evaluation would suggest that it's been an effective mechanism to share best practice, facilitate cross-sector collaboration and provide a strong platform for advocating digital inclusion.

11.21 Ensuring long-term financial sustainability post-DCW funding remains an important priority for the DIAW. However, at present the network is not in a position to be self-sustaining and there is a danger that it will cease to exist without further Welsh Government support. In terms of future priorities for the DIAW, further diversification of membership is necessary to more effectively represent Wales' ethnic and linguistic communities. In addition, while the DIAW has contributed positively to the broader digital inclusion landscape, there is scope for it to become more involved in tangible, on-the-ground initiatives to directly address issues such as data poverty.

Recommendation 9: We recommend that the Welsh Government continues to financially support the DIAW over the next three years. Over this period of time, member organisations should be required to make a financial contribution to the DIAW, with the aim of gradually reducing the Welsh Government's share of overall funding over time.

Recommendation 10: We recommend that any future Welsh Government funding provided to the DIAW requires the DIAW to test proof-of-concept initiatives and is aligned to specific outputs and outcomes. Given DCW has had relatively little success in engaging the private sector, this might be one suitable area to explore.