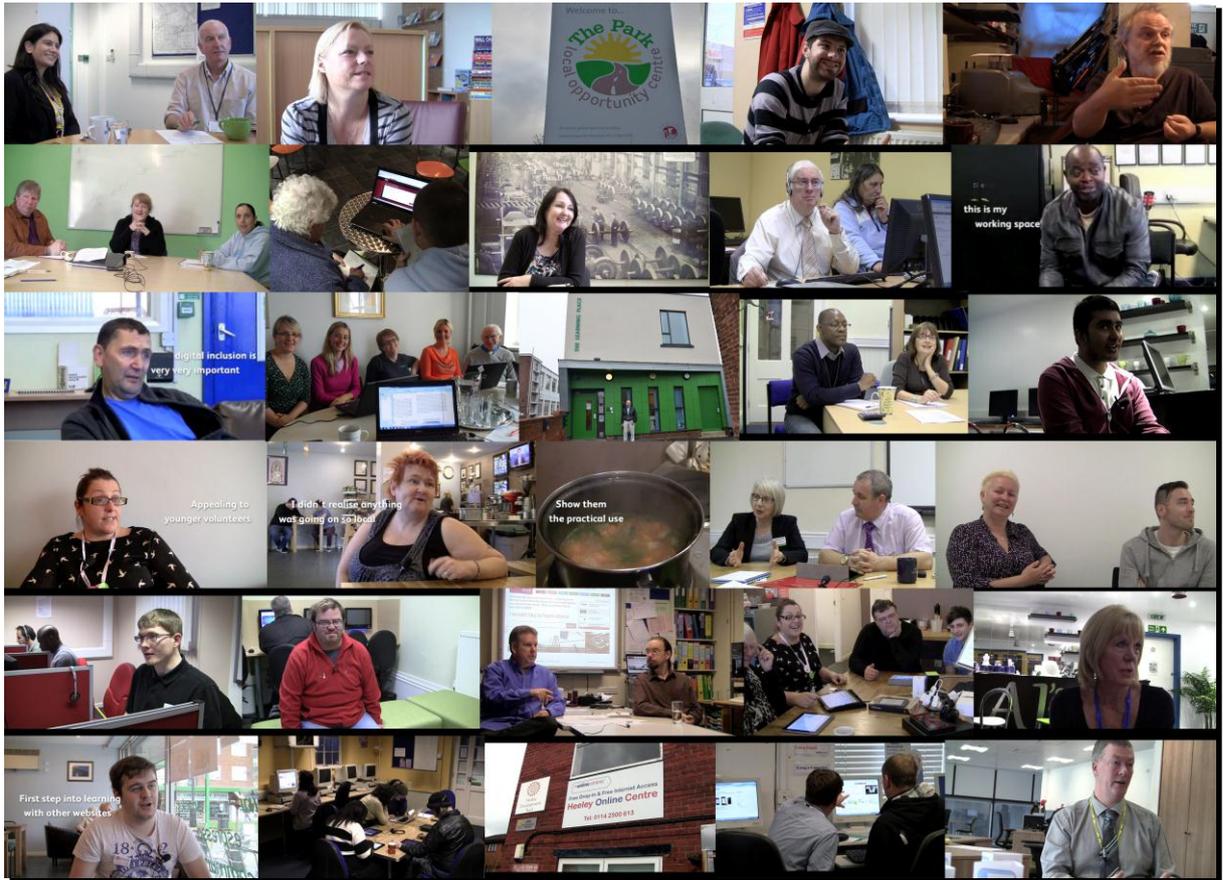


# Evaluating eReading Rooms: Abridged report

Online Centres Foundation

Prepared on behalf of the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)



## 1. Foreword

I'm passionate about helping to make good things happen at the most hyperlocal level. For a while I've thought that what happens in UK online centres around the country is as much about non formal learning as it is about digital skills, so I was delighted when we were asked to run the eReading Rooms pilot.

The Skills Minister and officials at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills had a vision of a network of informal places where local people could go for enrichment much like the Reading Rooms of the Victorian Age - but this time updated for the 21st Century through the use of technology. They asked us at Online Centres Foundation (OCF) to devise a pilot to see if this vision could become a reality.

Our eReading Rooms model was inspired top-down and bottom-up. From the top down, we are experts in supporting people to learn digital skills and we wanted to test whether we could take this further - supporting a wide range of informal adult and community learning, with technology as a key enabler. We also wanted to see if we could harness the power of the internet to engage people in non formal learning as we know that 73% of people who are online say they have used the internet to learn something. It is also bottom up - we hear from our local partners all the time that once people have got the digital skills they need they're desperate to learn more, about a whole host of different subjects, and we wanted to explore the best ways to help local partners meet this demand.

We wanted to ignite that spark within someone who hasn't learnt since they were at school and nurture them so it leads to a love of learning. And when that spark sits alongside the local support available in communities we have a real and positive impact on people's lives. Brian, one of the learners from the pilot sums up the eReading Rooms approach for me. He used to think that he was too old to learn and he was really disinterested in computers, but then he discovered a love of digital photography, and now he has a desire to share it with others as a volunteer facilitator at the Lifewise eReading Room in Rotherham. The potential of this knock-on effect – of people being inspired and of them then inspiring others - is huge.

The eReading Room pilot evaluation looked at what we at OCF do at a national level to make a difference to the success of our hyper-local partners - in the pilot and in our digital skills work too. The evaluation found that OCF provides fantastic digital tools, and a framework for delivery that is clear and relevant. It also found that through conversation with and between local partners we discover great local ideas and then seed those ideas with other partners, leading to a rapid scaling of the innovation across many previously unconnected people and places. We have for the first time been able to estimate the impact of this as having a three-fold effect over what would have happened without that national guidance and scaling. Now we can begin to see how this impact can be felt across the nation as the whole.

I continue to be in awe of the fantastic work achieved by local people who are committed to "just" improving the lives of their friends and neighbours. Thank you to our 20 partners involved in the pilot. I look forward to what we do next.



Helen Milner  
Chief Executive, Online Centres Foundation

## 2. Executive Summary

The eReading Rooms programme took place from September 2012 to February 2013, with the aim of engaging non-traditional learners and supporting them to access non formal learning opportunities in their communities, using technology as a key enabler.

20 pilot centres took part in the project, employing 77 staff paid staff who were able to engage 134 volunteers who have in turn reached 1337 learners. All eReading Rooms have attracted and successfully engaged hard-to-reach groups including:

- 60% of centres who engaged older learners
- 65% of centres who worked with unemployed learners
- 30% of centres who engaged ESOL learners
- 55% of centres who involved disabled learners
- 45% of centres who involved young people
- 55% of centres who have focused on families and intergenerational learning
- 25% of centres who have targeted individuals in work who were previously disinterested in further learning.

There are five key themes that emerged from the pilot:

- **Hyper-local and very informal is important.** A bespoke approach that utilises local knowledge and applies this to shape relevant delivery. Keys to success include friendly local places, solid local partnerships, a name local people will respond to and a focus on outreach including bringing learning to people where they are.
- **Learner-led sessions lead to local ownership.** A learner-led approach, with a curriculum shaped by learners as well as sessions modelled on learner demand, and blended learning, led to good attainment and faster progression to further informal or formal learning.
- **Culture shift is needed.** All pilot partners shifted their culture to be more open and innovative during the project, embracing ideas from others as well as adapting their approaches to delivery - including the use of emerging technologies and the use of volunteers as a vital aspect of the project.
- **Technology inspires new content and new learning places.** Technology provides a gateway through which everyone can discover content they previously thought was out of their reach. Emerging technologies - and especially mobile – allowed centres to take learning to where it is relevant, such as a kitchen in order to learn cooking.
- **The OCF network effect drives increased scale, speed and impact.** The benefits of the OCF network effect articulated through the pilot shows that dynamic national stewardship and nurturing support drives the seeding and scaling of local innovation and excellence. We have estimated that this network effect leads to at least a three-fold increase to previous outcomes.

The cost per learner of each individual engaged with through the eReading Rooms programme is £37 per head, which represents excellent value for the pilot investment provided by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS).

Following the pilot period, we recommend BIS continues to invest in eReading Rooms, allowing the innovation displayed by the pilot centres to be scaled up nationally, with the OCF network effect providing a tripling of the impact felt in local communities.

### 3. Introduction

The eReading Rooms pilot ran for six months from September 2012 until February 2013. The aim of the programme was to dramatically increase the numbers of people engaging in non formal learning by providing free and friendly places – eReading Rooms – where any topic could be explored thanks to the power of the internet. The programme set out to reinvent traditional adult education with trusted community venues and online resources.

The internet clearly has an important role to play in informal adult learning. Although surveys show that only 38% of people had participated in adult learning in the last three years, research from the Ofcom Media Literacy Audit reveals that 73% of those questioned had used the internet to learn. The eReading Rooms pilot aimed to harness this potential to engage with groups of people who would not previously have accessed any form of adult learning.

The pilot was instigated by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) following their consultation on IACL (Informal Adult and Community Learning) - *'New Challenges, New Chances: Next Steps in Implementing the Further Education Reform Programme'* – which indicated that IACL should offer value for money as well as supporting government objectives and reducing burden on other areas of public spending. The programme ran in parallel to the Community Learning Trusts pilot, and adopted a shared approach of community-led learning.

OCF's objectives for the programme were to:

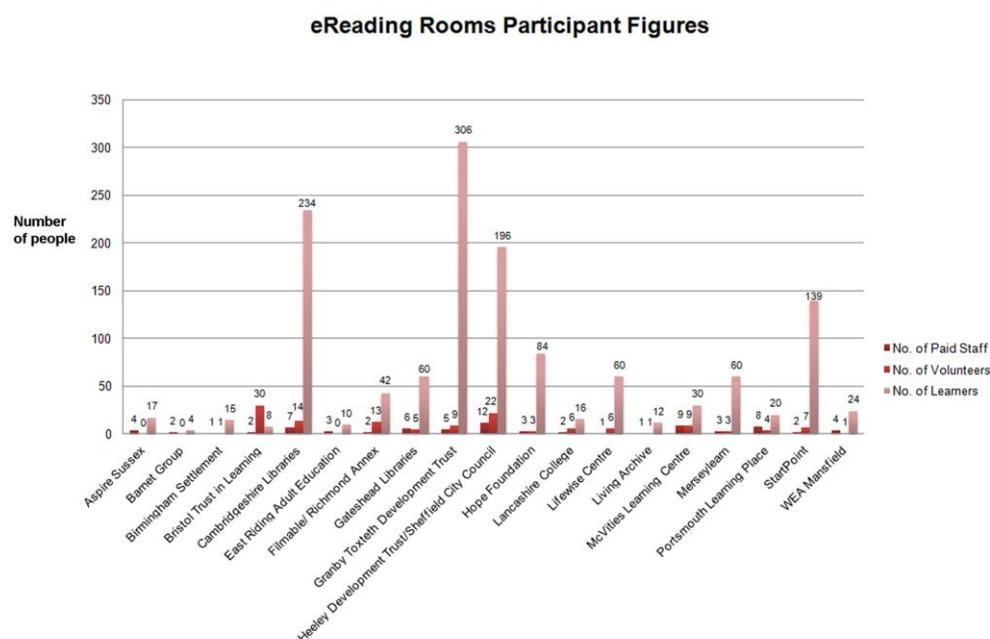
- Focus on hard-to-reach and non-traditional learners from the lowest socio-economic groups, who don't currently access adult learning, including people with disabilities
- Be demand led, focusing on the passions of individuals, and delivering locally designed learning programmes
- Be responsive to local need, but be connected through a common learning offer – My Learning Zone
- Weave basic English, Maths and digital skills into the experience once the passion to learn had been nurtured
- Use the latest technology and superfast broadband locations to help introduce people to digital technology as well as delivery access to other non-formal learning content
- Build on partnerships and existing infrastructure.

To achieve this, 20 local partners were invited to take part in the pilot. Each centre was given a grant of £1,000 to support their implementation of the eReading Rooms model in their community. The programme was brought together by the project management and guiding co-ordination of OCF, which included the design and development of My Learning Zone, an accessible website that curated the best free non formal learning content on the web, and eReading Rooms in a box, a toolkit of products and services to support the delivery of the eReading Rooms programme.

## 4. The findings

20 eReading Rooms based in local communities were invited to take part in the pilot.

77 paid staff were involved with the eReading Rooms project, and they engaged 134 volunteers to reach a total of 1337 learners. This provided an average eReading Room model of 1 staff member, 2 volunteers and 17 learners supported.



*Paid staff, volunteer and learner figures from across the eReading Rooms*

While participation for harder to reach groups has resulted in lower figures of learner involvement at some centres, the life changes that have occurred at a personal level have been significant, especially with regard to engaging previously digitally unengaged groups.

All centres involved in the eReading Rooms pilot have engaged with hard-to-reach groups with:

- 60% of centres engaging with **older learners**
- 65% of centres working with **unemployed learners**
- 30% of centres attracting **ESOL learners**
- 55% of centres working with **disabled learners**
- 45% of centres engaging with **young people**
- 55% of centres focusing on **families and intergenerational learning**
- 25% of centres targeting **individuals in work who were previously disinterested in further learning.**

Despite the hard-to-reach nature of the learners targeted by the eReading Rooms pilot, this resulted in a cost per learner supported of £37 per head, which represents significant value for money for the investment made in the pilot programme. However, it is important to note that the £1,000 grant paid to local partners did not cover the cost of learning delivery. Therefore, in the next phase of development we will analyse what sources of income can be used to support this learning and/or what the true cost is.

There were also significant social and personal outcomes across the eReading Rooms programme, with:

- All learners saying they had developed their skills and confidence, supporting them to progress to employment or advance in their field.
- All centres highlighting that the programme had a significant impact in improving levels of digital inclusion within their communities.
- 70% of centres saying they had seen positive changes to individuals' mental and physical health and wellbeing through participation in eReading Rooms.

Through the significant quantitative research involved in the eReading Rooms evaluation, we have been able to quantify the network effect provided by OCF, which leads **to an estimated tripling of impact experienced in local communities** through:

- Engaging centres who would not previously have engaged with non formal learning, and through the support of OCF, have been able to support a significant number of people in their community with brand new delivery.
- Supporting those already involved in non formal learning to extend what they can offer, reaching more people.
- Helping those already involved in the adult learning sector to offer improved learning support with a deeper impact.

## 5. Defining eReading Rooms

There are five key themes that have emerged from the eReading Rooms model that are all detailed below. These themes are:

- Hyper-local and very informal is important
- Learner-led sessions lead to local ownership
- Culture shift is needed
- Technology inspires new content and new learning places
- The OCF network effect drives increased scale, speed and impact.

Supporting these key themes within all of the individual projects was innovation, and a flexible and adaptable approach to delivery.

### Hyper-local and very informal is important

A bespoke approach that utilises local knowledge and applies this to shape relevant delivery. Keys to success include friendly local places, solid local partnerships, a name local people will respond to and a focus on outreach including bringing learning to people where they are.

It was by harnessing local knowledge, and creating local spaces that appealed to learners, where eReading Rooms were truly successful. As all centres felt the name "eReading Rooms" was too closely linked to reading, the majority adopted a local approach to naming their project based on the needs of the community, with Lancashire Adult Learning adopting My Learning Zone, as a natural mirroring of the tool they were using, and Lifewise naming their project after the monthly sessions they held.

The majority of centres ran outreach sessions in the local area, and these centres provided the highest numbers of learner engagements, with activity held in community locations familiar to learners - in children's centres, community centres and mosques, as well as parks and gardens. One of the key successes of the programme was when learning happened in a place where the topic was most relevant - for example in parks, allotments and the local community. Barnet Homes adopted this approach, encouraging their learners to discover more about their local area while walking the streets using mobile technology.

Existing and new partnerships in the local area were another key driver of activity, with many centres working with their local Jobcentre, as well as other partners in the third or community sector including local pubs, sheltered housing, day service centres or credit unions.

One of the key contributors to the success of eReading Rooms was ensuring they were located in friendly and welcoming local spaces that were recognisable to learners. A number of pilot centres wanted to avoid negative associations with institutional buildings, with Birmingham Settlement using the reception area at the Childrens' centre, and the Hope Foundation converting a room into a cafe to give the feeling of 'someone's front room'.



*Filmable volunteer webmaster Paul working on the project website.*

### **Learner-led sessions lead to local ownership**

The successes of a learner-led approach, with a curriculum shaped by learners as well as sessions modelled on learner demand, and blended learning, led to good attainment and faster progression to further informal or formal learning.

Ensuring learners were involved in shaping their own learning and progression was key, and ensured that those who traditionally would not engage with non formal learning were able to access it.

A number of centres took an events-driven approach. Heeley Development Trust, for example, believe that a specific focus is key to encouraging engagement, and have run events on home composting, jewellery making and saving money on fuel bills, and Lifewise have run a series of

evening events based on learners requests, which have focused on local services, genealogy and libraries.

A blended approach has also helped support the needs of learners through the pilot, with practical demonstrations, one-to-one tuition, online resources and groups sessions making non formal learning exciting and relevant. This was demonstrated by East Riding, who ran drop-ins in parallel to more formal sessions, and Startpoint where theory and practice were intertwined, for example in their soup-making classes where learners would search for a recipe online, and then make it in the kitchen.

The eReading Rooms pilot led to a stronger link between informal and accredited learning, where driven by learner need - for example Birmingham Settlement used My Learning Zone as a transition into more formal learning.



*Informal IT sessions at the Startpoint coffee shop*

### **Culture shift is needed**

All pilot partners shifted their culture during the project, embracing ideas from others as well as adapting their approaches to delivery including the use of emerging technologies and the use of volunteers as a vital aspect of the project.

A key theme running throughout the eReading Room projects was of organisational change - whether in a culture shift driven by the new approach to learning and the new technologies that support it, or in the recruitment and management of volunteers.

Organisations have had to adapt to changing learner expectations brought on by the programme. This included their view of the role of technology - and mobile technology in particular - and how it is used in the changing face of non formal learning. For many organisations, this means overcoming preconceptions, accessing information in new ways, and broadening their learning offer to meet local needs.

Volunteers were seen by the majority as vital to the success of eReading Rooms, as they were able to support community learning at a wide variety of locations, lead sessions based on their own

interests and extend the reach of the projects significantly. Volunteers are seen as the key to sustainability, for example at Filmable where disability services users have progressed to become trainers, and WEA Mansfield where learners became volunteers and in turn tutors. Even for those centres that weren't in the position to recruit volunteers for the pilot, they saw them as crucial to the long-term sustainability and reach of eReading Rooms.

### **Technology inspires new content and new learning places**

Technology provides a gateway through which everyone can discover content they previously thought was out of their reach. Emerging technologies - and especially mobile - allowed centres to take learning to where it is relevant, such as a kitchen in order to learn cooking.

One of the key cornerstones of the project - the potential of technology to bring learning to many more - has remained a key finding of the project.

Access to online resources was essential to all pilot centres, with the majority using the My Learning Zone site and its curated content as well as contributing to the curation process by feeding into the development of the website and its content. Where centres did not use My Learning Zone, a familiar list of websites cropped up again and again - with the most popular being Google, YouTube and VideoJug. Due to the short timescale of the pilot we were not able to make My Learning Zone curation a two-way activity. In the next phase of development we would prioritise the formation of a dynamic process so that content used by local partners (e.g. on YouTube, or locally created) would be uploaded and featured on My Learning Zone.

Alongside content, mobile devices and new technology were key to the delivery of the eReading Rooms programme, with tablets contributing significantly to its innovative approach. These mobile devices allowed centres to take learning out into the community to places people wanted to learn – Birmingham Settlement ran sessions in allotments and Cambridgeshire Libraries have been able to take laptops to the homes of travellers to support them where they felt comfortable.



*ESOL learners at Heeley Development Trust take a first step into non formal learning online with the help of tablets.*

## **The OCF network effect drives increased scale, speed and impact**

The benefits of the OCF network effect, articulated through the pilot, shows that dynamic national stewardship and nurturing support drives the seeding and scaling of local innovation and excellence, which we have been able to estimate provides a three-fold increase to previous outcomes through the emerging 'network' effect model.

The impact of OCF's co-ordination of the project was important, driving significant culture change in a number of the organisation's taking part in the pilot which has resulted in powerful social impact in a number of communities.

The OCF model for scaling up meaningful local action to a significant national scale is to:

- **Discover** by listening to and analysing activity that is happening at a grassroots level
- **Seed**, by testing, piloting, sharing and giving others the confidence to promote their success
- **Scale**, by amplifying the activity through productising, and by supporting and driving new activities on a large scale.

This was demonstrated with the delivery of webinars for the eReading Rooms programme, where we were able to recognise good practice happening around tables, enabling the organisation to share their experiences, actively facilitating conversation and accelerating the speed of innovation for other partners.

## **6. Conclusion**

The evaluation of the project has shown the eReading Rooms pilot to be a great success, not only in the impact on individuals and communities, but also in creating a model that can be scaled up nationally. Volunteers were important in enabling the pilot to engage 1,337 learners via 20 local partners.

While participation for harder to reach groups has resulted in lower figures of learner involvement at some centres, the life changes that have occurred at a personal level have been significant, especially with regard to engaging previously digitally unengaged groups. All centres have engaged with hard-to-reach learners and in particular unemployed learners, disabled learners, and family learners. The report clearly shows how the eReading Rooms approach is effective in facilitating central Community Learning Trust objectives through the engagement of people who would not otherwise undertake learning, supporting progression of all kinds, working with local partners to increase coherence and putting local communities in the driving seat.

Informal Adult and Community Learning's must not only offer value for money but must also bring benefits for "many other Government objectives" and "reduce the burden on other areas of public spend, such as the NHS and welfare costs" through:

- Delivering locally designed family learning programmes that motivate harder-to-reach parents/carers and actively involve them in their children's education.
- Contributing to older people's health and quality of life by enabling them to stay physically and mentally active and preserve their independence longer.

- Making a significant contribution through introducing people to digital technology to delivering the Manifesto for a Networked Nation commitments published in summer 2010 by the UK Digital Champion, Martha Lane Fox

Despite the hard-to-reach nature of the learners targeted by the eReading Rooms pilot, this resulted in a cost per learner supported of £37 per head, which represents significant value for money for the investment made in the pilot programme.

The success of eReading Rooms has been in the partnership of national co-ordination with locally responsive non formal learning. All the centres involved with the project have been committed to delivering pioneering learning practice at a local level in their communities, which have been propelled and supported by online resources and new technologies.

All pilot centres agreed that the current name for the project – eReading Rooms – doesn't feel right. We propose using the name Community eLearning when taking the project forward.

The eReading Rooms programme has resulted in significant culture change within a number of organisations, who will continue running aspects of the programme beyond the pilot end date. But most importantly, the programme has ignited passions in learners to discover more – both on and offline – and this certainly will be one of its most pertinent legacies.

Despite the huge successes of eReading Rooms, there have also been a number of challenges, not least the limited timeframe and funding for delivery, alongside the significant culture shift required proved a challenge for some centres. The change from a more structured learning approach to the more flexible, eReading Rooms approach required significant commitment from the local partners to embed. While mobile technology proved one of the greatest successes of the project, it wasn't without its troubles – with security and the cost of acquiring new technology a worry for some.

With support, all of the centres involved in the pilot have overcome these issues.

### **Next steps**

The eReading Rooms project has shown the very real potential of this pilot approach to benefit the lives and practice of many. Therefore to scale its impact, and be of wider benefit to the Community Learning agenda, we recommend the further embedding of non formal learning through sustained support and development of the eReading Rooms model in two key areas:

#### **Development of a Digital communities programme**

- Capacity building of community organisations to create greater impact through a process of bottom-up learning and community-wide scaling (Discovery, Seed and Scale);
- Community Learning Trusts, UK online centres Community Capacity Builders and others to be supported to grow the variety, breadth and impact of their learning offer via hyper-local partners and digital tools;
- Pilot in Birmingham to explicitly link to DWP's agenda for 'local assisted digital' with sign-posting to city-wide advice/support services to mimic best practice from the Sheffield Channel Shift project (see video) to demonstrate the cross Government relevance of non formal learning.

#### **Integrated Learn my way community e-learning platform, merging with My Learning Zone, offering non-formal learning with data capture and surveys**

- To extend our elearning platform (or MOOC) – Learn my way - for a broad range of non-formal learning subjects (determined by learners) alongside digital skills

- To develop a product for Community Learning Trusts (CLTs) and others which includes a CRM (for all community wide providers and access places) linked to data capture from the elearning platform. The product will be integrated with service and support for example capacity building, training, mentoring and coaching CLTs (and others) to use digital to engage hard to reach learners and to deliver learning even more efficiently
- Provide use of 'a wrapper template' to create own local online courses linked to the CRM and data capture CRM tool
- The types of courses would include:
  - More lightweight, interest driven content to hook people onto learning and onto 'being online'
  - Progression after online basics (not just digital skills)
  - Link with other cross government activity ie Department for Work and Pensions, Jobcentre Plus, National Careers Service, and NHS England helping reduce inequalities through technology
  - Employability
  - Maths, English, ESOL.
- Conduct further research and insight into eRR part two which looks at the impact of non formal learning on individuals