

Digital Lifeline Fund

Interim Report

September 2021



Department for
Digital, Culture,
Media & Sport



contents





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Foreword:

A Digital Lifeline for people with learning disabilities

Digital Lifeline has been an incredible success and a true partnership programme.

Together with our national and community partners we've exceeded our goal, reaching 5,500 digitally excluded people with learning disabilities in just a few months.

Nine in ten people supported say their lives have already got better, whether through helping them connect with loved ones, or friendship and support groups, or growing their confidence when online.

Thank you to our 146 community partners. Thank you to our national partners: AbilityNet, Learning Disability England, VODG: Voluntary Organisations Disability Group, and Digital Unite. And thank you to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport for funding this life-changing initiative.

The pandemic exposed a deep digital divide. Digital Lifeline shows the benefits, but too many people with learning disabilities and disabled people are still left behind.

Helen Milner OBE
Group Chief Executive,
Good Things Foundation



'I have never been on the internet before until I got my tablet'

Digital Lifeline participant

Digital Lifeline Fund: the basics



Goal

Reach and support 5,000 digitally excluded adults with learning disabilities in England.



Aim

Use digital inclusion to alleviate the disproportionate negative impacts of Covid-19 on people with learning disabilities – impacts such as loneliness and lack of contact with support networks.



Offer for individuals

Lenovo M10 tablet, 24GB of data, case, stylus – and some support to use it and make it accessible. Devices – gifted not loaned.



Offer for partners

Access to free support and resources from Good Things, AbilityNet and Digital Unite, and a grant towards time spent doing set-up and support.



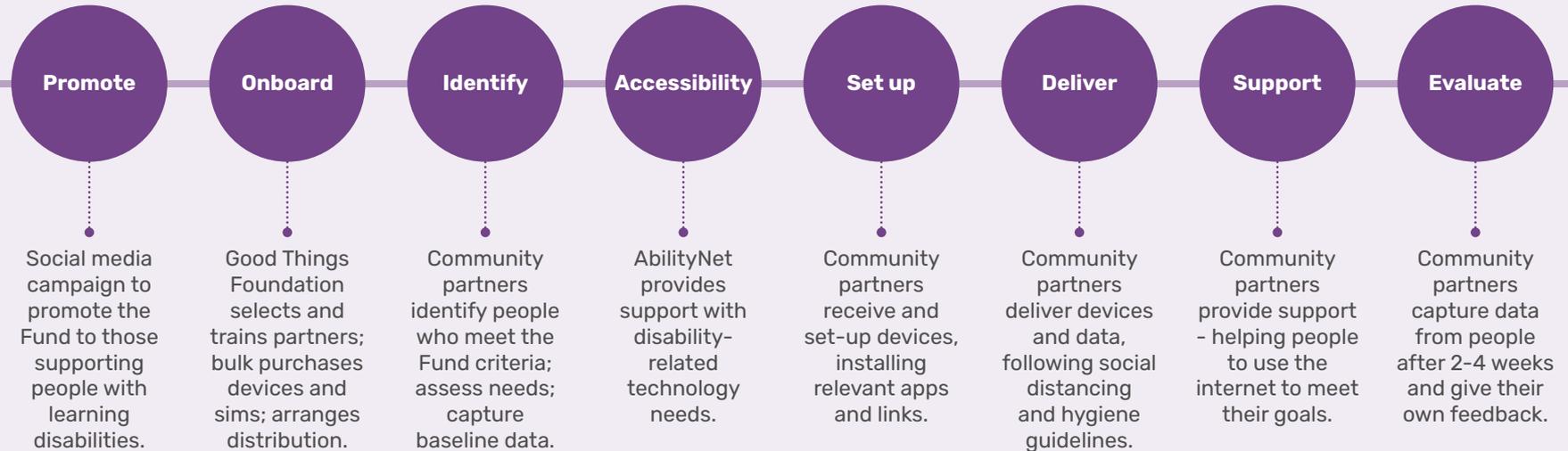
Digital Lifeline: making life better



Data: Good Things Foundation analysis of Digital Lifeline survey data. By 3 August 2021, baseline surveys had been completed for 5,356 people, and early impact surveys completed for 4,759 people.

Digital Lifeline: our model

Good Things Foundation rapidly iterated Everyone Connected (formerly DevicesDotNow) to reach 5,500 people with learning disabilities. A pilot with Cafe LEEP and advice from Learning Disability England, Mencap and others improved the model, including use of easy read materials.

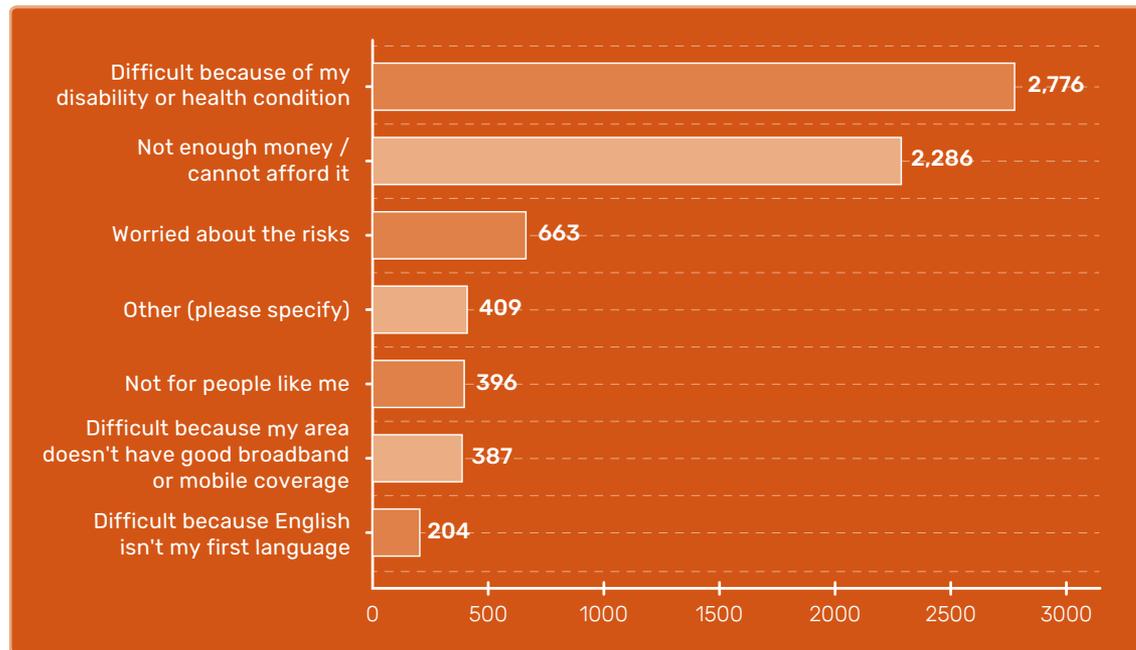


Reducing barriers

We asked people to tell us what prevents them from accessing the internet (or using it more) at home. (People could select more than one barrier).

The most common barriers to using the internet at home were having a disability or health condition (58%) and not being able to afford a device (48%).

Digital Lifeline met these head-on by providing a tablet (chosen for value and accessibility), connectivity and access to specialist support.



Data: Good Things Foundation analysis of Digital Lifeline survey data. By 3 August 2021, baseline surveys had been completed for 5,356 people, and early impact surveys completed for 4,759 people.

Achieving personal goals

Achieving goals

19%

learnt how to do a video call for the first time



The most common goals were to connect with friends and family, for interests and hobbies, and to connect with support. Digital Lifeline helped people achieve these. Nearly 7 in 10 felt more confident in general, and over half felt more connected (57%) and less lonely (52%).

'I have really missed my friends and wider family so its great to be able to see them and talk to them at same time'

Digital Lifeline participant

Learning skills

64%

felt their digital skills got better



Through Digital Lifeline, 25% of people felt they improved their skills in finding information, and 63% either learnt how to use their device for their interests for the first time or improved at this. Some wanted to learn more skills, such as using online health services (20%) and shopping online (18%).

'A staff member set all the apps I needed like google play, games, Youtube and the news so I can watch it. The tablet has helped my carer access universal credit with me'

Digital Lifeline participant

Staying safe

32%

improved their online safety skills



Even in the short period (2 - 4 weeks) between data collection points, one third of people who had worries about internet risks at the start said they felt more confident staying safe online as a result of the support they received. At least 13% learnt to do this for the first time.

'Now I can talk to my advocate privately'
Digital Lifeline participant

'[We] have supported a further 15 people to stay safe online'
Digital Lifeline community partner

Data: Good Things Foundation analysis of Digital Lifeline survey data. By 3 August 2021, baseline surveys had been completed for 5,356 people, and early impact surveys completed for 4,759 people.

'I'm excited for the future'

This is Maisie.

Maisie has learning disabilities, autism and diabetes. The first lockdown severely affected her mental health and wellbeing. Being separated from her friends and her support network left her feeling scared and isolated.

Maisie was left even further behind when she couldn't keep up with others in her self-advocacy group. Maisie's visual impairment made it harder to access the group video calls on her small smartphone.

Through Digital Lifeline, Maisie got a device and mobile WiFi router, as well as training and support to use them.

"I can do Zoom, Teams... I've done some training. I did a Zoom with my grandma on Mother's Day. I applied for this job - I got the job! Things are getting better and I'm excited for the future."

With Café Leep's support in Leeds, Maisie developed her confidence, got more involved in volunteering, and is now employed in the café.

[You can watch Maisie's story here](#)



Who we supported

Among Digital Lifeline participants, people with conditions that impact their lives a lot were around 10% more likely to agree that their digital skills had improved and/or they felt more confident in general – compared to those whose conditions impact their lives a little. This may reflect: a starting point of deeper digital exclusion; and/or the benefits of extra specialist support.

Older adults were less likely to experience some of the benefits measured in the survey, despite typically receiving more hours of support than younger adults. This may reflect: prior level of internet use; skills of those supporting them; and/or age-related cognitive ability to learn skills quickly.

'This has changed my life'
Digital Lifeline participant

'When I went into respite I took my device with me, it had all my apps on that I like'
Digital Lifeline participant

Around one fifth live alone. They typically reported better outcomes than those in supported housing and worse outcomes than those living with partners or children. People living alone experienced the best outcomes of all groups for gaining video calling skills (44%) and the second best outcomes for feeling less lonely (53%), learning to use devices for interests and hobbies (65%) and overall improvement in digital skills (66%).

Across demographic groups, the main aims for device use were similar – although younger people and those from minority ethnic groups were more likely to say they would use their devices for learning, training, work or business.

16%
minority ethnic or mixed background

19%
living alone

33%
in supported living or residential care

40%
aged 18-34 years old

38%
significant disability or condition

43%
women

Data: Good Things Foundation analysis of Digital Lifeline survey data. By 3 August 2021, baseline surveys had been completed for 5,356 people, and early impact surveys completed for 4,759 people.

Accessibility and adaptations

AbilityNet supports people of any age, living with any disability or impairment, to use technology to achieve their goals at home, at work and in education. It provides specialist advice services, free information and help to organisations.

"If he hadn't had that [adaptive] switch, you might as well have thrown away the tablet. He's now in full swing with it, whereas before, they didn't have funds or ability to go out and buy something like that."

Digital Lifeline partner supported by AbilityNet

59% of people assessed by AbilityNet had multiple disabilities

People with learning disabilities may have other impairments (e.g. visual) which can create additional barriers to using a device. Digital Lifeline ring-fenced funds so AbilityNet could buy extra equipment where required; 2,354 pieces of adaptive kit were provided.

121 partners used AbilityNet support

Digital Lifeline enabled AbilityNet to support over 120 community partners. Many hadn't been aware of the free and simple ways to adjust a standard device, and make it easier to use. For example: Action Blocks (shortcut buttons for popular tasks).

971 people benefited from specialist accessibility support

AbilityNet specialist assessors did assessments with people, often with their support workers or carers: 971 people had an initial and follow-up assessment; some received extra kit; 371 (of the 971 people) had a needs assessment and advice on next steps.



Data: AbilityNet; find out more from their impact infographic based on survey and interview data from 256 individuals and 26 organisations.

'It's given me more independence'

Janet's story

Janet admits feeling nervous getting started with the tablet she received via Digital Lifeline, through The Hive Library in Worcestershire. AbilityNet helped to assess Janet's needs. High on her list were wanting to play games and make video calls.

One of AbilityNet's volunteers supported Janet at her local centre. The addition of shortcut buttons, recommended by AbilityNet, was a big help. The App enables you to configure tailored buttons for the home screen to automatically jump to a task. Janet says using the tablet has boosted her confidence.

"It's given me more independence. It's allowed me to keep my interests and access them in a different way. I'm able to do things I'm interested in when I want to do them. I feel proud of myself."

Case study compiled by AbilityNet for Digital Lifeline

Jameela's story

Jameela got her Digital Lifeline device through the self-advocacy group Herts People First. AbilityNet assessed Jameela's needs, including help for her hearing, mobility, dexterity, and concentration issues. Specialist assessors recommended apps and adaptations to help Jameela meet her goals, like going online for games, video calls, web searches and shopping.

"I didn't have anybody visiting, and I couldn't see anyone. I got myself in a bit of a mess with things like putting out the rubbish. It was a lot better keeping in touch after I got the tablet."

The regular churchgoer was able to join the weekly services she had desperately missed:

"It felt so good to be there online, it felt like I was there."

Case study compiled by AbilityNet for Digital Lifeline

More support is needed

10,000
devices requested

The pandemic disproportionately affected disabled people. Disabled people made up almost 6 in 10 of all deaths involving Covid-19 from March to July 2020. According to ONS (2020), 75% of people with a learning disability said their wellbeing has been affected by the impact of coronavirus, compared with 37% of non-disabled people.

'I want to learn more but it will take a lot of time'

Digital Lifeline participant

Research by Prof. Jane Seale (2020) found people with learning disabilities felt a great sense of loss and disrupted routines; anxiety about when they'd be able to re-engage in groups or services; and significant loneliness. With support, many

people with learning disabilities were able to use technologies and benefited greatly from being able to stay occupied and in touch.

Digital Lifeline Fund received requests for nearly 10,000 devices, indicating the scale of digital exclusion among people with learning disabilities in England. Some partners – reflecting tight timeframes – said they prioritised people they could engage quickly. Only a very small number didn't want to keep their device (these were reallocated in line with Fund criteria).

'[He] has deep and complex support needs and much of the time has been spent introducing the tablet into his world. Over time the tablet has the potential to be life-changing'

Digital Lifeline participant



Added value: building capacity

Digital Lifeline helped community partners learn about available - and free - resources which they'd not been aware of. Many partners reported that it helped them to better understand the issue of digital inclusion among people with learning disabilities, and barriers preventing access to technology.

Community partners were mainly community centres, specialist providers, and adult colleges. There were also self-advocacy, user-led and parent or carer-led groups, and local consortia.

Partners were at different stages of their own journey in supporting their members or service users to be digitally included. Several described a lack of digital skills and confidence in their own workforce, and carers more generally. Some saw online services as a growing part of their own work, making it even more important to address digital exclusion.

Partners using AbilityNet advice and training reported greater confidence in supporting disabled people to use technology.

"Being part of the programme has given us more of an appreciation for the extent and impact of digital exclusion. This will play a role in how we plan to engage with our members"

Learning Disability England

Not all partners had yet tapped into optional support for their own organisations to apply for licenses to use Digital Unite's Aspire platform for online Digital Champions courses; this is still open. Feedback from Aspire users has been very positive about the courses, and impact on knowledge, skills and confidence.

2,023

people registered to use Learn My Way

165

new partners joined Online Centres network

213

AbilityNet training sessions held

101

AbilityNet buddies assigned to partners

60

partners access Digital Unite's Aspire platform

187

Digital Unite 'Champion' courses completed

Lessons for future programmes

Keep

Cross-sector collaboration meant the Fund reached target groups at scale and quickly.

Partnering with community and specialist providers enabled a non-stigmatising, trust-based approach.

Expert procurement by Good Things Foundation meant public money was well spent.

Partners liked that devices were given (not loaned) and new (not old or refurbished); this aided support.

Partners welcomed the grant of £100 per person to contribute to time and costs of providing support.

'It's great thank you, im well happy'

Digital Lifeline participant

Change

24GB of data connectivity was valued, but not enough for everyone's needs.

Virtual workshops to do a live 'set up' could help - setting up devices was a main pain point.

Allow more time to set up devices before distributing them, and to follow up with participants.

Further improve online resources, like Learn My Way, for people with learning disabilities.

Increase grants to cover extra time needed to engage people with more complex support needs.

'We ran out of the free data within 2 weeks'

Digital Lifeline participant

Wider recommendations

Improve digital access, skills and confidence of family members and informal carers.

Improve digital access, skills and confidence of the social care workforce, disabled people's organisations and self-advocacy groups.

Raise awareness among care providers and community groups about free resources (like Learn My Way, AbilityNet helpline) and advice to help them support people to use the internet.

Encourage providers, disability and community organisations to join the network coordinated by Good Things Foundation to fix the digital divide.

Spread the word about easy ways to adjust settings and quality, free accessibility Apps.

Take action to reduce data poverty.

'There has been progress and steps forward - over time these would be even greater'

Digital Lifeline community partner

'It's his choice how he uses the tablet'

Mark's story

Before the pandemic, Mark enjoyed an active social life. Mark's mum, Cheryl, says that the pandemic has been extremely isolating for him: ***"It's made him lonely. I've had to work, so he's spent a lot of time on his own."***

Mark says: ***"I've missed my friends and the SeeAbility staff."***

Mark received a tablet through Digital Lifeline. Now he has his own tablet, he's been following his church's services online. He's turned on a feature that reads out on screen text - now he loves to have the news read to him every day.

Mark has been able to attend his day centre online via video call and is thrilled to have reconnected with his friends he hasn't seen since the pandemic began. He says that he now doesn't feel left out. And Cheryl is comfortable in the knowledge that he's able to have some fun and chat with friends while she works.

Case study compiled by SeeAbility with VODG for Digital Lifeline

Bruce's story

Before the pandemic, Bruce enjoyed walking, the pub, taking part in activities at the SeeAbility Millennium Centre, and visiting his family. The restrictions have meant he's been unable to see his mum and other family for long periods. Bruce hasn't had his own device and has had to share with other residents in the care home where he lives.

Thanks to Digital Lifeline, Bruce received his own tablet. Now he can speak to his family as often as he likes. Bruce loves to take photos of the world around him. The new tablet has given him the freedom to take as many photos as he likes, and share them with his family. Louise, one of Bruce's key workers, says:

"Bruce is taking the lead and seeing what he enjoys doing. We're trying different activities and then it's his choice how he uses the tablet."

Case study compiled by SeeAbility with VODG for Digital Lifeline

What next: evaluating Digital Lifeline

This report has shared analysis from baseline and follow-up data collected by community partners on behalf of Digital Lifeline. The report has also drawn on data and insights provided by specialist partners AbilityNet, Digital Unite, VODG and Learning Disability England.

A qualitative evaluation of the Digital Lifeline fund is underway, due to complete in October. This is led by Good Things Foundation with University of East London and RIX Social Researchers (peer researchers with learning disabilities). It comprises focus groups and interviews with people who received support; families/carers; and community partners.

While Digital Lifeline Fund delivery was in progress, partners were asked to capture data from participants at two points: baseline and 2 - 4 weeks after getting their device.

Baseline data aimed to learn about beneficiaries, the barriers they face to using the internet, and what they wanted to use their devices for.

Follow up data aimed to understand early progress towards personal goals, any initial improvements in digital skills and wider benefits.

Alongside this, community partners were invited to feedback on their own experiences in a short survey. AbilityNet also collected feedback from individuals and community partners.

Some partners valued the light-touch approach to reporting; others found it challenging. Partners worked very hard to collect data; some felt the true impact of Digital Lifeline might be under-represented in such a short period, as devices would make a bigger impact over time.



5356
baseline surveys

4759
follow-up surveys



For more information about the evaluation, please contact: research@goodthingsfoundation.org

Community partners, staff and volunteers

A HUGE thank you to all our 146 community partners and to all our staff and volunteers who have made Digital Lifeline such a success!

Accord Housing Association
ACE Adult Community Education (Wigan)
Active Prospects
Advance Housing and Support
Alabare Christian Care and Support
Amaze
Argyle Community Trust
Artworks
Avalon Group (Social Care)
Barrow Library
Beacon Centre For the Blind
Belong
bemix
Bethphage
Better Futures-Improving Lives Plymouth
Bognor Regis Library
Bridge Creative Enterprise CIC
Brighter Futures
Brighton & Hove Speak Out

Bromley Mencap
BTM (Bradford Talking Magazines)
Buckinghamshire Adult Learning
BwD Adult Learning
BYCS
Camden Disability Action
Camphill Village Trust
Caritas Westminster
Carlisle Library
CAS Community Solutions
Centre 404
Changing Our Lives
Chapelton & Harehills Area Learning Project
Cheshire and Warrington Carers Trust
Choice Care Group
Choice Support
Chrysalis
Citizen Checkers CIC.
Community Integrated Care
Compudoug Services Limited
Computers Within Reach (Doncaster)
Converge (C/O York St John University)
Cornwall Advocacy
Coventry City Council Adult Social Care
Creative Support

Crewe Library
Crossland and Dudson Training
DaCE Cumbria
Darlington Association on Disability
Devon County Council
Dice Enterprise Limited
Dimensions
Disability Sheffield
Discover IT Plus
Diversity and Ability
Dorchester Library and Learning Centre
Down's Syndrome Association
ECL Roundwood
ESPA
FitzRoy
FORESIGHT
Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People
Greenwood Learning Disability Day Service
Guinness Care
Havelock Family Centre
Headway Arts
Health Connections Mendip
Heathlands, The Laurie Brewis Trust
Herts People First
Hft Personalised Technology

Community partners, staff and volunteers

Individual Support Solutions	New City College (Tower Hamlets)	Spectrum Days
Innovations	Newcastle City Library	St Paul's Crossover
InSiTe	NHS Croydon Community Learning Disability Team	Starting Point
Integrated Learning Disability Service, Kestrel Centre	North East Autism Society	Stoke On Trent City Council, Adult Social Care
Jennyruth Workshops Ltd	Nottingham Mencap	Sunnyside Rural Trust
JobnetworkBristol & Computer Clubs	One Housing	Surrey Choices
Kendal Library	Options for Supported Living	Swindon Advocacy Movement
KeyRing Living Support Networks	Outward	Sydenham Library- c/o Aurelie Ramgoolam
Knowsley Disability Concern	Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust	Symbiont CIC
Leading Lives Ltd	Penrith Library	Talkback UK
LEAP CFC (St Peter's Partnerships)	People Matter IW	The Ark Trust CIO
Learn Devon Newton Abbot	Peter Bedford Housing Association	the b@sement
Leonard Cheshire Disability Head Office	Positive Individual Proactive Support	The Butterfly Creche and Burnley Training College
Limehouse Project	Premier Learning	The Grace Eyre Foundation
In-House Day Services, Lincolnshire County Council	Premier Learning	The Hive
Link-Ability	PSS (UK) Ltd	The Hope Hub
Linkage Community Trust	Pure Innovations Ltd	The Kintsugi Project CIC
Little Grove CIC	Reach Learning Disability	The Number4 Group
Liverpool Adult Learning Service	Red2Green	Think SMART
Local-Social CIC	Restorative Justice for All	Thurrock Lifestyle Solutions CIC
MacIntyre	Rock Foundation UK Ltd	Turning Point
Maldon District Digital Buddies	Royal Mencap Society	United Response
Media Savvy CIC	SeeAbility	Whitehaven Library
Midland Mencap	Sense	Wirral Lifelong and Family Learning Service
MK SNAP (Special Needs Advancement Project)	SoapBox Youth Centre	Workington Library
My Life My Choice	Something in Kent	

References and resources

References

- [ONS \(2020\) Coronavirus and the social impacts on disabled people in Great Britain](#)
- [Seale, J \(2020\). Using technology to support people with learning disabilities to stay well and connected during lockdown](#)

About data used in this report

- By 3rd August 2021: 5,356 baseline surveys and 4,759 outcome surveys had been completed. Fifty community partners also responded to a feedback survey.
- Additional data supplied by AbilityNet and Digital Unite; lessons learned supported by VODG and Learning Disability England.

For information about the ongoing Digital Lifeline evaluation

research@goodthingsfoundation.org

For information about Digital Lifeline lead partners:

- [Good Things Foundation](#)
- [Online Centres network](#)
- [Learn My Way](#)
- [AbilityNet](#)
- [Digital Unite](#)
- [Learning Disability England](#)
- [Voluntary Organisations Disability Group](#)



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For more information

For more information about Good Things Foundation and joining our network of community partners, please visit our website:
www.goodthingsfoundation.org/our-network

For more information about Digital Lifeline and this report, please contact:
research@goodthingsfoundation.org

