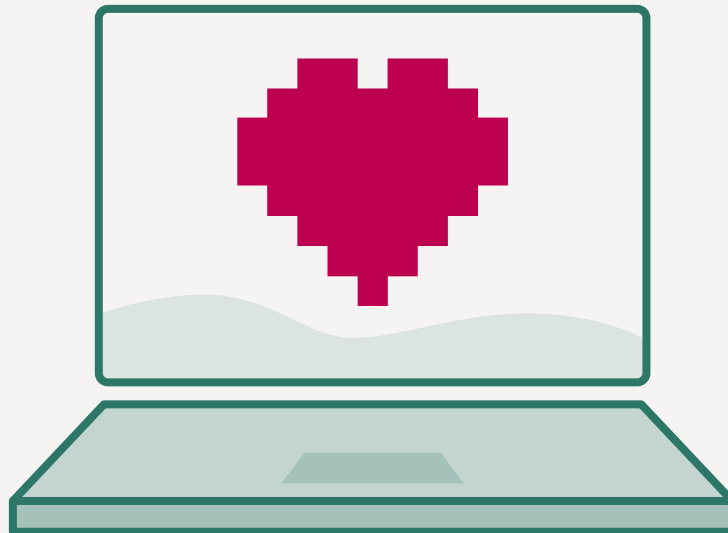


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Benefits and outcomes of digital in the context of health and social care



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Introduction

The design and introduction of digital health and social care services can often be seen by those who provide them as an opportunity to drive system efficiencies through maximising resources and achieving cost savings. The delivery of these services can bring many benefits and create value for people through improving access and convenience in relation to health and care experiences. The ALLIANCE’s Digital Health and Social Care Programme consists of many initiatives which support disabled people, people living with long term conditions and unpaid carers (people with lived experience) to have access to opportunities, which promote digital inclusion and allow them to experience the same benefits as other citizens. We do this by providing guidance, signposting, and supported skills training to access digital health and care tools and services, with all our projects upholding and endorsing our [Digital Health and Social Care Human Rights Principles](#). These principles were created in partnership with Scottish Care and VOX Scotland and were co-produced with individuals, stakeholders and people with lived experience.

This report focuses on the benefits of digital to health and social care for the individual, families and carers. It will explore beyond the elements of access, convenience and ease which are well known gains but will report on the positive impact digital services can make on an individual’s experience of care, confidence, self-worth and wider health and wellbeing outcomes.

We recognise there are intrinsic barriers to digital and our members report these to include digital exclusion, poverty, lack of privacy and the equity and fairness of services. It is also worth noting, there are disparities in the delivery of and access to established national digital services such as Near Me, online appointment and prescriptions booking systems across primary care and Health and Social Care Partnerships (HSCPs). The lack of consistency in access and opportunities to engage in these digital services prohibit some citizens from being active partners in their health care and practicing self management.

At the ALLIANCE we are continuously working with key stakeholders to improve access to digital services across Scotland. Our Digital Citizen Panel ensures that people with lived experience are supported to influence digital service delivery and design, whilst the Discover Digital programme improves people's knowledge, awareness and access to trustworthy digital tools and services. We work in partnership with our membership to empower frontline staff and communities to access digital health and care services, and by doing so we have heard first hand the positive impact this has made on people's experiences and the contribution it has had to their/ those they support health and wellbeing outcomes.

Approach to surfacing value and benefits of digital in health and social care

To understand the value and benefits of digital in health and social care the Digital Health and Social Care Team reviewed reports, case studies and project evaluations collected within the last three years from across all three areas of work: Discover Digital (which includes findings from our digital small grants programme 2022 and discovery and enabler grants 2023/24), Digital Citizen Panel (DCP) and the Digital Links Project (funded by the Digital Inclusion Programme). We also conducted engagement through short questionnaires completed by our DigiFest 2024 event attendees and an online engagement session with our DCP members, focussing on the four broad questions:

How has the ALLIANCE impacted your ability to access digital health and wellbeing support?

How have digital solutions aided or supported your self management?

What makes a good digital health and care experience?

How has accessing support digitally improved your health or care experience?



Digital solutions increase self management

An individual's ability to effectively self manage their health and care is improved significantly using digital solutions. Digital services enable them to be in the driving seat of their own condition, being able to access information, signposting to services/peer support, setting/tracking individual health goals, and supporting independent living. People use digital tools to record and track symptoms increasing their role in managing their health, increasing their confidence, self-assurance and sense of purpose and worth.

Improved access to information

Digital solutions help people to access information about their conditions at a time that is convenient for them. Trustworthy resources like NHS Inform provide access to health information twenty-four hours a day. Other tools like AVA (Arthritis Virtual Assistant) exist which support people to retrieve instant answers to question they have about their condition, treatment and pain management.

“

Being online makes me feel good as when I have a problem in my mind, I can look it up online and get help.

”

Connecting to Peer Support

Peer support is a supported self management intervention, linking people with similar health conditions or health experiences. It empowers people, their families and carers to feel less isolated, improving their well-being and giving individuals the confidence to self manage. Peer support reduces feelings of isolation and loneliness that some people with lived experience encounter and diminishes the 'why me?' feelings that can often overwhelm people when they face barriers in day to day activities and experience exclusion and inequity.

Being online improves an individual's ability to find quality peer support, either by:

- Using ALISS (A Local Information Service for Scotland) to find local opportunities for in-person peer support
- Attending online peer support sessions

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Being online will be a great help because I can't get out at the moment but through this I am hoping to interact and connect with others with the same condition to share information and learn.

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One of our 'Enabler Grant' projects highlighted the importance of digital, not only to link people with similar experiences of care but also as a source to the foundations of well-being:

“

Digital allows people to store information such as memories, stories and experience in one place, which is important for people who may not be able to hold onto physical objects. For care-experienced young people, who often experience more transient lives, having access to a 'digital treasure box' greatly improved wellbeing and connection with others.

”

Increased Independence and Control

In 2023, we recorded a [Digital Lived Experience Series](#) which showcased the positive impact digital could make on people health, care, independence and control over their long-term condition. This series highlighted the work of Scottish Care's 'Care Technologists' and more specifically how people increased their independence and control by utilising voice activated technology. The Scottish Care programme supported people to learn and use everyday technologies such as Tapo plugs and SwitchBot devices to support their care.

“

It's very straight forward and it just makes me feel safe in my own environment. Gives me a better sense of wellbeing.

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“

Gives me a bit more independence. Makes me feel better knowing I can do that because I can't physically do it myself.

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“

Strengthening workforce digital knowledge and skills.

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Our Discover Digital roadshows and workshops have equipped frontline and third sector staff to be more knowledgeable and confident in assisting people to utilise digital as a self management tool.

“

I recommended and registered a client with the Sleepio app, gave her advice on how to use it. After five weeks she reported her ability to sleep well has significantly improved.

”

Remote monitoring has allowed people living with long term conditions to feel more supported, being able to identify major health risks quicker and introducing a method for people to become more independent. People shared that by using the app, they can see what has happened over night, share information with their consultant and can access specialist support when necessary. Being able to do this digitally and remotely reduces stress, entails zero travel and allows people to make the most out of their dedicated face-to-face appointment times.

“

It has the potential to save lives and make a significant positive impact on the population's health outcomes and life expectancy.

”

Empowerment and Informed Goal Setting

There are lots of digital apps available, supporting people to actively manage their health and care, some of which have a preventative purpose and others which help people manage specific conditions. The [PBC foundation](#) co-developed an app with members of the PBC foundation which provided guidelines for care, resources, tracker for symptoms, test results, medication and appointment information. A similar experience can be achieved with My Diabetes, My Way.

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Having access to all the information and being able to record my symptoms just makes me feel so much more in control of my own care.

”

“

Most of it looks good, think it's the best way to let people improve themselves.

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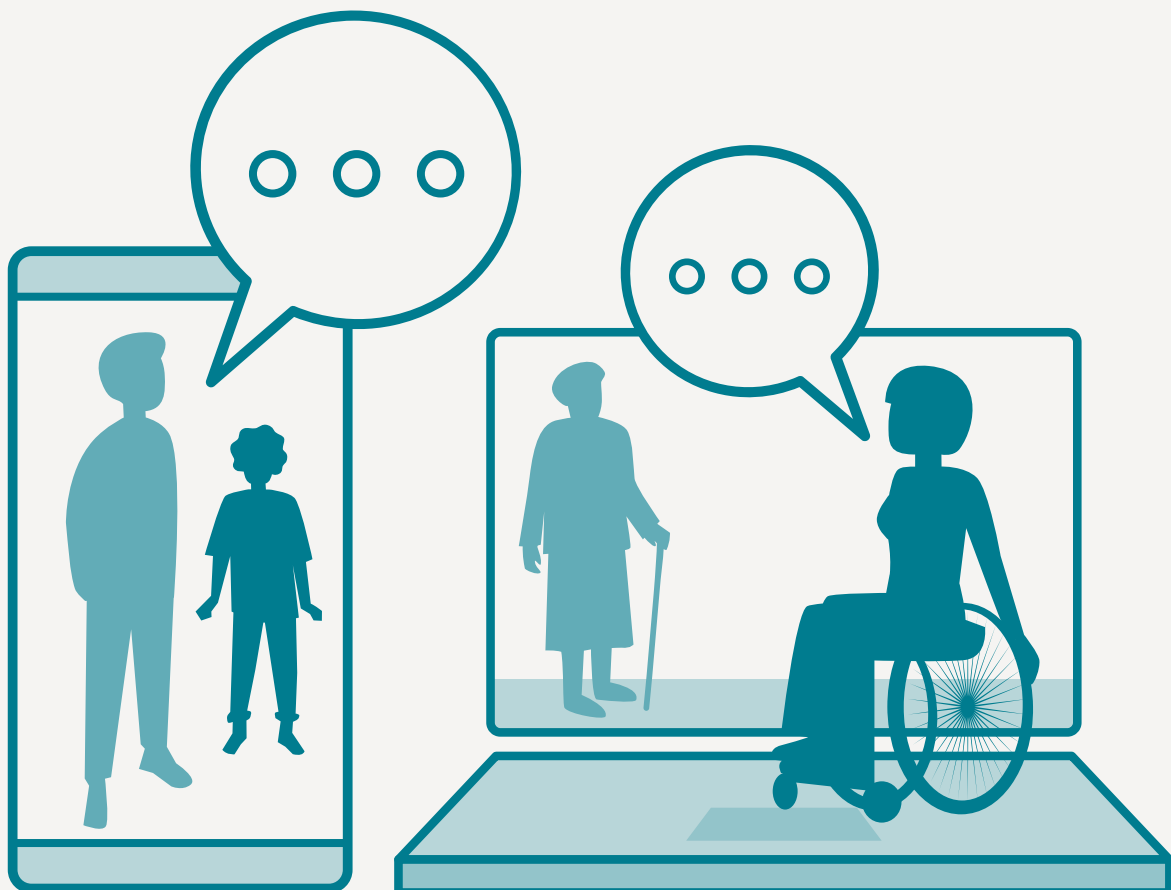
Creating the conditions for good digital health and care experiences

People need to know and understand why they are using digital services from the outset. People had different expectations of what post COVID 19 health and care services would look like, and for some the uninformed or unexpected implementation of digital provokes anxiety. For many disabled people information on the transformation of services to digital comes from mainstream media, which can be fairly negative and sensationalised around 'government cuts' and 'GP shortages'. Whilst recognising the pressures facing both the health and social care systems are increasing, 'good' is about working collaboratively across sectors and involving people throughout this transformational journey. So, a good digital health and care service would start by informing people, ensuring they are offered a choice and ensuring their needs are understood.

Across our projects we heard the following recurring themes which we shared with the Digital Citizen Panel for further exploration and deeper understanding:

- people are keen to learn the confidence and skills to access digital services and support but feel overwhelmed at the array of services out there and are unsure who can help support them to embark on a digital journey and to stay safe
- people want choice, to access health and social care support in a way which is appropriate to them- which can alter and change across services and over time
- Lastly, people want a simple system, to allow information and data to be shared between themselves and health/ social care providers. People strive for digital to make life 'easier', 'save time' and 'reduce repetition'.

For people to have good digital health and social care experiences, services and tools need to be of a high-quality standard and meet the needs of everyone. A framework for such exists in our [Digital Health and Social Care Human Rights Principles](#) were developed in partnership with [Vox Scotland](#) (Voices of Experience) and [Scottish Care](#) and were codesigned with citizens and front-line staff health and social care staff. Embedding these principles into service design and improvement of public services would ensure that they are accessible to all, and rather 'digital by default' we would advocate the importance of digital choice and digital where best suited.



Digital Health and Social Care Human Rights Principles

1. People at the centre

2. Digital where it is best suited

3. Digital as an ongoing choice

4. Digital inclusion, not just widening access

5. Access and control of digital data



People need to feel supported

We know that there is an increase in interest and support for technology, with [Scottish Care reporting a forty percent increase in the adoption and acceptance of technology](#). From our projects we know that people (if they have the means to), would like to try and improve their digital skills and confidence to access digital services as part of their health and care.

We hear from panel members that when they have been supported, with someone demonstrating and walking them through the process on how to access services digitally, even if it is a few times, they then independently continue to do so and have a good experience. As part of our [2022 Digital Lived Experience Series](#), we heard how the Glasgow Disability Alliance's Connects project supported people to access digital health support:

“

I was frightened of it [Chromebook]I thought just click on the links and see where it takes you. It just opened up such a lot of possibilities for me and for everyone, for my health, for my wellbeing.

”

For a good experience, people need to be confident in the fact that if they do experience difficulties in accessing a digital service there is a human point of contact or a backup plan. People experience apprehension before digital appointments but also are anxious that a let-down in the functioning of the technology reflects badly on them as a recipient of health, and this will be negatively reflected upon them. Also, 'supported' for our members means being listened to especially when it comes to communicating accessibility needs and what matters to them. One of the Panel members was well informed of existing online tools, through Discover Digital, and signposted to trustworthy resources. This allowed the panel member to help find care solutions for the service user they were working with:

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One of my clients who has been diabetic for over 20 years gets cold very easily. She saw the 'Feel Warmth heat belt', when I was going through the app (Alzheimer Scotland ADAM platform) and bought it. She said it keeps her warm throughout the day and she can wear it underneath her clothes, and it doesn't show.

”

Simplicity of systems

A good digital service is one that works. The technology needs to be user friendly and easy to access on multiple devices, with clear instructions using 'simple and culturally sensitive language using lay terms.' The need for another app on a device to complete authentication makes things more difficult and can be practically challenging for people with lower digital literacy. Quality infrastructure should also be in place. Hospital WiFi can often be poor and so hinders the quality of video calls. Finally, there needs to be adequate provision for people with additional needs - particularly sensory needs.

Developing digital services in partnership with the people who will use them increases their efficiency and output. The PBC (Primary Biliary Cholangitis is a long-term, auto-immune condition) Self Management app was co-produced and as a result:

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Eight out of ten respondents in their survey said that using the app reduced their sense of isolation and nearly nine in ten agreed that it helped them manage their symptoms.

”

Digital Choice

A good digital service is one that people have ‘opted in’ or have chosen to access. People want to know all the options available to them. Often people are not aware of what digital services are available as they are not highlighted or signposted to them. Equally, when people want to make an informed decision on what suits them regarding engaging with services, this should be free of judgement and negative consequences. We heard from people that even though they preferred accessing services via digital means, they still appreciate the ‘human contact’ of video/telephone, eradicating fears of not being understood or listened to correctly.

“

I can make it [technology in digital spaces] bespoke so I can tailor it to how I want to use it. Provide the power of choice.

”

In 2023, we recorded a [video exploring five people’s points of view on what good health and care means to them](#). The participants shared positive experiences of using digital services and also highlighted the desire to engage with digital health and care services that already exist despite them being unaware of them as they haven’t been offered them in their area/practice.

Continuity

Continuity has a three-fold understanding in relation to good digital services.

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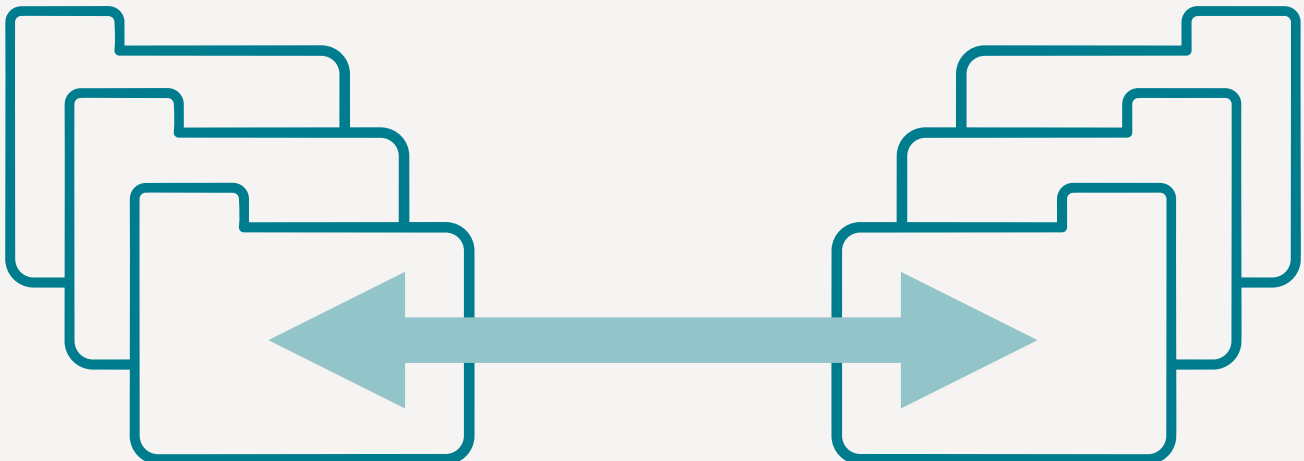
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One being the continuity of the offer of digital services. The Digital Citizen Panel (DCP) membership is national, and they experience great disparity of the offer of digital services. The panel would like to see everyone having the same opportunities across Scotland.

We hear in this [video](#) from Janice how moving to another area meant she was no longer able to access an online appointment booking service, a service she previously described as ‘wonderful’. Some of our rural DCP members have shared how Near Me has resulted in the eradication of travelling time, fuels costs, the need for hotel stays, reliance of family/friend support to attend routine appointments with consultants, whilst others report that this service is not on offer or being provided.

Digital services having the opportunity to share data between health and care providers means a continuity of support, with the ability to reduce the amount of repetition for the service user. We heard from people and carers of people living with long term conditions despite the aspirations of Health and Social Care Partnerships, the aims of integration and the findings of the [Independent Review of Adult Social Care in Scotland](#) people continually have to repeat their stories.

Individual Data Stores are being championed by Mydex Community Interest Company who advocate the possibility of building a personal data ecosystem that is interoperable, flexible, certifiable, scalable and that is also safe, secure and consensual. Taking a [human rights](#) based approach results in genuine personal, social and economic benefits. Third sector organisations have explored options to try and reduce repetition, support the transference of information to health and care providers, minimise risk, reduce care errors and improve the pace of accessing appropriate health and care. Examples include [Macmillan Cancer Support Individual Digital Store](#) and [PAMIS Digital Passports](#).



Participants from the Digital Links Project report having had good experiences when trying and testing digital services. Many have shared that they feel so self-assured, because they are supported by two named contacts, a Digital Links Worker and a Community Links Worker providing the continuity. For many, the road to digital inclusion is filled with anxiety and self-doubt so to have trusted professionals signposting them to trustworthy and free services allows people to feel more confident as they build their digital skill set. We know from our Digital Links Project and from key stakeholders such as Glasgow Disability Alliance, people's ability and desire to continue their digital journey and learning is much higher if they know they can pick up the phone to ask a trusted person for help if and when they need it.



How has accessing support digitally improved your health or care experience?

Reduced Anxiety

From one of our 'Enabler Grant' projects we heard that accessing support digitally allowed individuals to feel safe and avoid sensory overload. Tailor Ed foundation, reported that for people who face stigma or experience potential triggers for their condition in their community, find accessing digital support services reduces feelings of anxiety, fear of being judged and makes them feel less vulnerable. Change Grow Live, supports this and noted online peer support meant that people could set up supportive communities, free of relying on geographical access and risking local stigma.

People also reported that once they received some initial guidance regarding finding free, trustworthy digital tools and services their anxiety around managing and living with their condition reduced. Having the knowledge on where they could access quick and reliable information and support, at any hour made them feel self-assured. Digital support for independent living, makes disabled people and people living with long term conditions feel less removed from health and care services, which enhances their lifestyle choice, making them feel more positive about living in remote and rural communities in Scotland.

Increased Control and Independence

People have shared with us the independence they feel by accessing digital tools. Using online resources like NHS Inform allows them to feel more knowledgeable about their condition. For those who discussed mental health conditions they reported that being able to access the information themselves reduced the perceived shame and stigma which can be associated with mental health problems. From the privacy of their home, people have been able to seek mental health support such as digital Cognitive Behavioural Therapy resources, which enhanced their access to support, making the experience less stressful, confidential and best suited to the individual's needs.

People with access to personal data stores, or condition specific apps can look up test results, appointment and condition information whenever they want. This improves their health and care experience as it helps them to prepare for appointments and record things they may wish to ask.

Flexible and Convenient

Accessing support digitally, via video consulting services has enabled people to access health appointments from their own homes, at a time that is convenient to them. Through our engagements, people have reported that this improved their experience of accessing services immensely. For some, this takes away all the inconveniences and pressures of travel time, costs and need for childcare. For other people, it provides a way to access support confidentially, which can be increasingly important for those who feel stigmatised and/or live in smaller rural communities.

Enhancing Digital Choice

Having the opportunity to access everyday digital health and care services means that people can prioritise what is important to them and follow the 'What Matters to You' agenda.

“

Being able to log into a system, choose a time, book the appointment. That was incredibly easy to use. Such a good service.

”



How has the ALLIANCE impacted your ability to access digital health and wellbeing support?

Digital Links Project



The Digital Link Project is funded by the 'Connecting to Care' fund, working in partnership with the Glasgow Community Links Worker Programme, which is embedded in eighty GP practices across Glasgow. The Digital Links Worker works with individuals to improve digital skills and confidence, whilst working with the Community Links Workers (CLWs) and practice managers to increase frontline staff digital skills and the practices' provision of digital health services.

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I believe that the patients registered with the practice that I am based in have greatly benefited by accessing digital support via the practice. The short waiting times to access devices such as mobile phones and tablets, and the support to access mental health and wellbeing resources online, in my opinion has made a difference in patients' lives. Their resilience is promoted by accessing online resources, while on waiting lists for mental health services. For some of them, it has been a way to increase their confidence in their digital skills and connect with their children better over the use of technology. For others, the digital support was essential in order to access online counselling, which minimised the waiting time for support. Each referral towards the Digital Links service, has been unique, and all the patients that engaged for support, so far, have provided positive feedback.

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Since May 2024, there have been referrals from fourteen different CLWs, including the CLW who works specifically with people who are experiencing/at risk of homelessness and the CLW who works specifically with refugees and people seeking asylum across five Glasgow GP practices. At the point of referral, digital skills of participants vary, some have never been online whereas others possess basic digital skills but have minimal digital confidence. For those who have existing online experience, the project is their first experience in utilising digital health and care tools to improve their mental health and wellbeing.

Discover Digital



In 2023/24 Discover Digital delivered a small grants programme, enabling community and third sector organisations to explore and overcome barriers and to feel the value of accessing digital support. We heard from organisations that there was usually a 'hook' for people, which made them interested in achieving digital skills:

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The digital support sessions allowed us to show service users how they could connect with people that lived far away and those closer to home also in a different way.

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and with dedicated step-by-step digital support people were able to advance to accessing digital health and care tools:

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People reported positive experiences of being able to make more informed decisions about their health through digital health and wellbeing tools, but the lack of regular support meant people often felt they forgot what they had learned between sessions and needed more regular support to commit this to memory. People also felt they benefited from 1:1 support.

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Knowledge and Training

Discover Digital uses multiple initiatives to raise awareness of digital tools which promote health and wellbeing. We have developed our Discover Digital Guide into training packages and learning for professionals which are available on SSSC Open Badges, Highland Digital School Hub and the Right Decision Service.

The roadshows and workshops have increased the knowledge of existing digital services and have given frontline staff and communities the confidence to seek out appropriate digital support, when it is needed. It has upskilled staff to consider their own role within digital leadership as one participant shared,

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following the training I am looking at an iPad loan scheme for NHS referrals that will have a curated list of health resources.

”

Citizens report a 'really positive experience' from the ALLIANCE to find and use apps and understand how data is used and stored. Signposting to digital support such as Breathing Space and SilverCloud has helped people to access the self management support they needed without a GP referral or travel. The roadshows are

“

better than just receiving a pile of leaflets or an email about apps, has made them more understandable and accessible, and easier to promote.

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Digital Citizen Panel



The Digital Citizen Panel now has a membership of one hundred and forty-eight, and although we offer a range of ways for people to be access panel opportunities, the majority prefer to attend online Zoom sessions for both engagement and informal catch ups. These online Zoom sessions bring together a group of likeminded people and provides the opportunity to connect with others from across Scotland, who otherwise may be quite isolated. As well as bringing people with lived experience together to inform and influence the design and improvement of digital services, it also enables people who engage in digital services to share and recommend tools that have been helpful to them.

The panel has been running since early 2021, with some members having been present from the start, and they have advanced their knowledge through the Discover Digital Learning Programme. They now can share their expertise on the benefits of digital but more importantly point out the pitfalls to service providers, such as this year when Digital Citizen Panel members lead an ALLIANCE Live podcast which shared information and support to vulnerable groups about the digital landline switchover, as well as their concerns.

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Being part of Digital Citizen Panel has made me aware of what there is digitally and what I can do to help my health and wellbeing.

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Conclusion

Since the pandemic, the ALLIANCE has conducted a range of engagement activities on health and social care services and digital is a strand which is recurring across all, whether it be as an aspiration, a solution or an experience. Technology is an integral part in supporting people to manage their health, live independently in their own communities and promotes independence, offering individuals control over various aspects of their lives.

The organisations and people we spoke to when compiling this report made it abundantly clear that digital enhances opportunities for people and can improve health and care outcomes, not only for people with lived experience but their families and carers. Digital is the super social determinant of health of which access is a human right for the people of Scotland. We recognise much work is needed to achieve digital inclusion and enable digital choice in health and social care. This report provides evidence of the value and benefits digital can have on individuals' lives and emphasises the need to keep striving and aspiring for better outcomes for all.

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Before getting a DLW I didn't know about any digital health and care tools, it's been brilliant, it's opened up a whole new world for me.

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I can access health services whenever I want, and that's the great thing about being online.

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Having access to digital makes you feel like you're part of the human race again.

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About the ALLIANCE

The Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland (the ALLIANCE) is the national third sector membership organisation for the health and social care sector. We bring together over 3,700 people and organisations dedicated to achieving our vision of a Scotland where everyone has a strong voice and enjoys the right to live well, with dignity and respect. Our members are essential in creating a society in which we all can thrive, and we believe that by working together, our voice is stronger.

We work to improve the wellbeing of people and communities across Scotland by supporting change in health, social care and other public services so they better meet the needs of everyone in Scotland. We do this by bringing together the expertise of people with lived experience, the third sector, and organisations across health and social care to shape better services and support positive change.

The ALLIANCE has three core aims.

We seek to:

- **Empower people with lived experience:** we ensure disabled people, people with long term conditions, and unpaid carers are heard and that their needs remain at the heart of the services and communities.
- **Support positive change:** we work within communities to promote co-production, self management, human rights, and independent living.
- **Champion the third sector:** we work with, support and encourage co-operation between the third sector and health and social care organisations.



The ALLIANCE is committed to upholding human rights. We embed lived experience in our work and aim to ensure people are meaningfully involved at every level of decision-making.

Working together creates positive, long-lasting impact. We work in partnership with the Scottish Government, NHS Boards, universities, and other key organisations within health, social care, housing, and digital technology to manage funding and develop successful projects. Together, our voice is stronger, and we can create meaningful change.

