

MONEY FOUNDATION

Tackling Digital Poverty Strategy Year 1 Impact Summary



Empowering communities, bridging the divide: The Virgin Money Foundation's Tackling Digital Poverty Strategy – Year 1 Impact Summary

Our learning and evaluation, in partnership with [Brightpurpose](#).

About The Virgin Money Foundation

The [Virgin Money Foundation](#) is an independent charitable foundation. It's committed to bringing about positive change in communities, with a **focus on the North-East of England and Glasgow, both of which experience high levels of Digital Poverty.**

We invest at a neighbourhood level, working with local organisations and people to address pressing social issues, and to build stronger, more resilient communities. Our mission is to support local initiatives that make a real difference, helping individuals and families to thrive.

The challenge

Tackling Digital Poverty

In today's world, digital inclusion isn't a luxury. It's a must-have for accessing education, employment, financial services, and healthcare, as well as for staying connected to the outside world. But for millions across the UK, digital poverty is still a significant barrier. This can mean a lack of devices, internet access, or the essential skills needed to navigate the online world.

Recognising this, we launched our ambitious **Tackling Digital Poverty Strategy** in February 2024. Our objective is clear: to support digital inclusion, and enable individuals and communities facing high levels of digital poverty to access online services and opportunities. Ultimately, this will lead to a significantly improved quality of life, by strengthening people's education, financial stability, social connections, and overall health.

What we've learnt about digital exclusion

Our partners on the ground have highlighted common barriers to digital inclusion:

- **The 'Headspace Paradox':** People in crisis often lack the mental energy to focus on digital skills, even when digital access could help resolve their immediate problems (e.g. accessing benefits).
- **'Digital isn't for me':** Many see digital tools as irrelevant, or intimidating, often due to low confidence, or previous negative experiences.
- **Partial digital inclusion:** Some appear to be digitally active (e.g. using social media on a smartphone), but lack critical skills for essential tasks, such as online banking, job searches, or filling out forms.
- **Language barriers:** For refugees and people seeking asylum, limited English proficiency, combined with unfamiliar tech, significantly hinders digital participation.



Our Strategy

Hyper-localised, trusted support

Our strategy is built on a core belief: that **hyper-localised, tailored approaches, delivered by trusted local organisations** are essential in helping those still experiencing digital poverty, to overcome it.

Over the past 12 months, in partnership with Brightpurpose, our learning and evaluation experts, we've tested and delivered three key programmes:

- 1 **Building Digital Skills:** Multi-year grants for community anchor organisations.
- 2 **Digital Champions:** Virgin Money colleagues volunteering their time and expertise.
- 3 **Volunteer & Connect:** Grants to schools where Virgin Money colleagues volunteer.



Year 1 Key Highlights

Brightpurpose's findings at a glance



Tailored support works:

Our hyper-localised approach, funding trusted community anchors through the Building Digital Skills programme, is highly effective in tackling digital poverty and moving the dial on digital skills and/or confidence.



Dedicated volunteer force:

An impressive **82% of Digital Champion volunteering hours** were contributed by Virgin Money's branch-based colleagues, demonstrating a powerful commitment to community support.



Widespread skills and confidence boost:

During the Digital Champions programme, a sample of participants were surveyed. Of those, **10 out of 11 host organisations**, and **29 out of 30 volunteers**, reported improved digital skills among people supported by a Digital Champion. Similarly, **10 out of 11 host organisations**, and **28 out of 29 volunteers**, noted increased user confidence.



Flexible school funding:

The Volunteer & Connect Fund provided generous and flexible funding to schools. This enabled crucial support for pupils, especially those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) or English as an Additional Language (EAL).

Our programmes in action

Making a difference

The Virgin Money Foundation's Tackling Digital Poverty Strategy consists of three programmes, each designed to address specific needs within our communities, and to offer comprehensive support in tackling them.

Programme 1: Our Building Digital Skills Fund

This programme provides **multi-year grants to vital community organisations** in the North-East and Glasgow. The organisations are deeply involved in their communities, and are uniquely placed to deliver personalised support, helping individuals overcome the barriers digital poverty puts in their way.

How it works: Local community anchors design and deliver bespoke digital literacy programmes, provide access to devices and connectivity, and offer one-to-one guidance, tailoring support to individual needs.

Outcomes and impact:

Partners report strong, immediate outcomes for their communities:

- **Increased access** to essential devices and reliable internet connectivity.
- **Significant improvements** in individuals' digital skills.

These foundational changes lead to some impressive secondary outcomes too, which are improving people's lives, by giving them:

- **Better access to critical healthcare, educational resources, and financial services.**
- **Reduced isolation** and boosted personal confidence.
- **Greater independence** and resilience.
- **Skills and tools** to help them navigate the online world safely.



A community member's journey:

"The charity has been instrumental in providing digital support that transformed my educational journey. Through the provision of a laptop, internet router, and SIM card, I gained the tools I needed to access online learning, complete my coursework, and stay connected. This enabled me to achieve top grades in my HNC in Computing, and HND in Software Engineering. I'm now preparing to receive my Graduation Award from Glasgow Clyde, a milestone made possible by their unwavering support."
– Community Anchor Beneficiary

Programme 2: Our Volunteer & Connect Fund

This programme focuses on bringing digital inclusion directly into educational settings, by providing **grants to schools where Virgin Money colleagues actively volunteer**. It ensures that digital opportunities reach children and families who need them most.

How it works: Schools use our flexible funding to address their pupils' specific digital needs. These include buying devices, improving internet access, and creating engaging digital learning environments.

Impacts and outcomes: The schools value the generous and flexible funding, which primarily supports:

- Meeting individual learning needs particularly for pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) or English as an Additional Language (EAL).
- Bridging inequality by improving access to devices, connectivity, and digital learning opportunities (e.g. through lending libraries, afterschool tech clubs, or providing families with MiFi units for home internet access).

Outcomes include:

- **Greater confidence** among pupils, especially those from low-income families, or with additional needs.
- **More interactive, inclusive classrooms**, fostering improved engagement and creativity.
- **Enhanced academic progress**, particularly through homework and independent study.
- **Improved digital skills**, including coding, editing, and multimedia creation. Some pupils have shared their new skills with parents, extending the skills benefit beyond the classroom.



School feedback: "Before this, several pupils would be completing homework on their phones, which made it difficult to engage fully with online learning platforms. Since receiving the laptops, we've seen a noticeable improvement in the quality and consistency of homework submitted, as well as increased confidence in using digital tools for schoolwork. This support has helped bridge the digital divide for these students, and has had a positive impact on their engagement when learning at home."

Programme 3: Digital Champions Programme

Our **Digital Champions Programme** harnesses the power of our own Virgin Money colleagues. They volunteer their time and expertise to provide crucial one-to-one, or small-group digital support, in community settings such as food banks, and libraries. This directly addresses capacity gaps often faced by host organisations.

How it works: Virgin Money colleagues receive training through the Virgin Money Foundation and volunteer as 'Digital Champions', offering practical, hands-on assistance to community members. They deliver their flexible support directly within trusted community spaces.

Key insights:

- An amazing **82% of volunteering hours** within this programme are contributed by Virgin Money's branch-based colleagues. This demonstrates a deep commitment to our communities.
- Volunteers mostly help with practical tasks, such as setting up email apps, filling out online forms, addressing online safety, and navigating access to benefits.

A volunteer's view: "Being a digital champion has made me realise how daunting the digital world can be for some people. Everyone I've helped lacked the confidence and skill to use a device. It's really rewarding, and people are genuinely relieved to have their issue sorted. I'm proud to work for a company that supports its communities in this way."

Significant impact on service users:

- **Digital skills improved:** An overwhelming **10 out of 11 host services, and 29 out of 30 volunteers**, confirmed that users' digital skills improved significantly.
- **Confidence increased:** Similarly, **10 out of 11 host services, and 28 out of 29 volunteers**, reported a considerable increase in people's confidence when using digital tools.

Positive experience for volunteers and host organisations:

- Host services highly value the support, confirming that it fills vital capacity gaps they otherwise couldn't have filled.
- Volunteers rated their experience highly (**7.7/10**), saying that they felt better-connected to their communities, and were positive about Virgin Money's purpose.
- Volunteer reliability was rated exceptionally high by host services (**9.2/10**), highlighting the professionalism and dedication of our colleagues.



Key learnings for future impact

The evaluation by Brightpurpose identified critical factors that make Virgin Money Foundation's approach to digital inclusion so effective, and different from conventional interventions:


- **Trust and relationship:** Support from a trusted person or organisation creates a safe environment, which encourages individuals to voice their needs, learn new skills, and engage with digital opportunities. This trust and safety are crucial for reaching people who were previously hesitant.
- **Deep community knowledge:** Workers and volunteers who intimately understand their community's needs and barriers, can tailor support effectively, by meeting people where they are.
- **Stealth engagement:** For those who find digital off-putting, offering relevant and appealing activities that happen to use online technology, has proven to be an effective approach to engagement.
- **Relevance:** Digital support must be directly relevant to an individual's life and requirements. For people facing significant challenges, that means prioritising digital assistance which helps them address urgent needs. Things like claiming benefits, and applying for housing or e-visas.



The road ahead: Continuing our journey

The Virgin Money Foundation is immensely proud of the progress made in the first year of our Tackling Digital Poverty Strategy. We're committed to building on those successes, and integrating the valuable learning from this evaluation to further refine, adapt, and expand our programmes.

By continuing to invest in hyper-localised, trust-based interventions, Virgin Money Foundation will ensure its strategy continues to empower communities and bridge the digital divide, making a lasting difference to the lives of many.



Brightpurpose ends by saying: *"The work funded under the strategy is supporting people who are genuinely digitally excluded, by improving their digital access, skills and confidence. The variety of approaches creates multiple routes to reach different groups. The Foundation has been able to offer different levels and types of support, all through trusted local organisations that understand, and can respond to, people's individual needs."*

Our sincere thanks to Brightpurpose for their invaluable support, and comprehensive evaluation of our strategy's first year.

Learn more and get involved: Discover more about the Virgin Money Foundation's work: virginmoneyfoundation.org.uk

Follow our journey and talk with us on LinkedIn: 

The Virgin Money Foundation is a company limited by guarantee, registration number 9457101. It is a registered charity, registration number 1161290 in England and Wales and SC050400 in Scotland. The registered address is Jubilee House, Gosforth, Newcastle NE3 4PL.

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