Future priorities for supporting Leicestershire communities into work and learning

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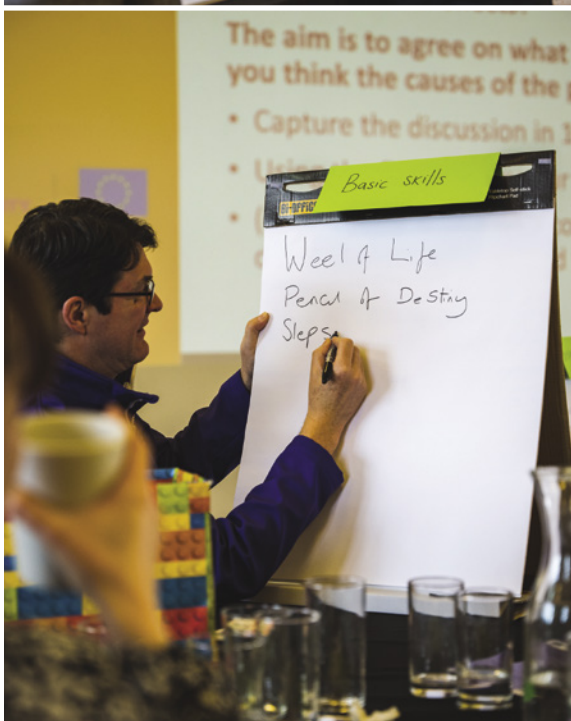

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Introduction

Work Live Leicestershire (WiLL) was a Building Better Opportunities project run by a non-profit partnership between 2019-2023. It helped economically inactive or unemployed people in Leicestershire, particularly rural residents, to move into job search, training, employment, or self-employment through a range of support and activities to improve people's health and wellbeing, social engagement, skills and work experience, and by addressing barriers such as lack of transport and employer attitudes.

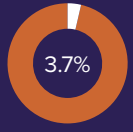
This report draws on findings from a learning evaluation carried out from November 2022 to March 2023, alongside a review of reports and data produced by government bodies, specialist agencies and universities on the changing post-pandemic employment landscape. In the evaluation, stakeholders discussed the benefits of the project and lessons learned. During a 'hackathon' event for WiLL stakeholders, delegates suggested solutions for emerging or persisting community needs. This report is intended to support those planning future services supporting people into work. It summarises the key needs identified and offers some practical solutions.

Causes of worklessness

The causes of worklessness are often divided into personal, human capital (aka skills), and environmental or contextual factors. These different groups of causes mean the levers for removing barriers to work lie in different places. Some, such as people's access to public transport, are policy questions for local or national government. Others, such as people's skills, depend on an individual's interest in learning, capability and the accessibility of relevant training or courses. These factors were affected by the pandemic, which had lasting effects on work and on people's engagement with the labour market. These effects emerged in real time during the WiLL project.

Unemployment is not spread equally across communities in the UK. Approximately 10.8% of 16 to 24-year-olds were unemployed in January 2023, compared to 3.7% of all working age adults. More than 565,000 people have become economically inactive since the pandemic, with over-50s and the long-term sick most likely to have dropped out of the labour market.[1]

Approximately 10.8% of 16–24 year-olds were unemployed in January 2023, compared, 3.7% of all working age adults.



More than

565,000

people have become economically inactive since the pandemic

[1] ONS, 'Worker Movements and Economic Inactivity in the UK: 2018 to 2022', 19 December 2022, https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/articles/workermovementsandinactivityintheuk/2018to2022.

Leicestershire context

Leicestershire is a rural and generally affluent county, with low levels of unemployment (2.8%, some 2% lower than the average for England). It has four neighbourhoods in the most deprived tenth in England.[2] The county is home to several large employers including Next, Caterpillar, Dunelm, Marks and Spencer, British Gypsum, PPL PRS and 3M and has three universities employing some 10,000 people between them. Over 98% of businesses, however, employ fewer than 50 people. Several key issues have been identified within the county:

- automation is likely to reduce employment in manufacturing;
- the county has twice the national average of low paid, labour-intensive jobs;
- there are skills gaps in science and engineering, social and health care, and hospitality;
- there are a significant number of residents with barriers to work, including travel, and low or no qualifications.[3]

These issues have been exacerbated by the national supply chain disruptions of Brexit and Covid-19.

Over **98%** of businesses, however, employ fewer than **50** people

Funding changes

Funding for employability and employment support is undergoing radical change as it moves to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. It is anticipated the UKSPF will only replace a limited amount of European funding. Although the government brought the start date for a new fund for skills investment forward to April 2023, the announcement at the end of March 2023 meant skills programmes had not been included in many local plans, and providers did not have programmes ready to go to capitalise on the funds, so it is likely there will be gaps in provision throughout 2023-4.[4]

This report seeks to support rapid project development and roll-out. It focuses on five areas of community work-related needs identified and prioritised during the evaluation of the WiLL programme. Where possible it suggests solutions that can be incorporated into future employment support programmes.

[2] 'All seven Leicestershire districts fall within the least deprived half of all local authority districts within England; North West Leicestershire is the most deprived district in the county (ranked 216th out of 326) while Harborough is the least deprived (ranked 308th out of 326); However, pockets of significant deprivation exist; four neighbourhoods in the county fall within the most derived decile in England. These areas can be found in Loughborough (Loughborough Bell Foundry and Loughborough Warwick Way LSOAs) and two in the Greenhill area of Coalville' Business Intelligence Service, Leicestershire County Council, 'Leicestershire Joint Strategic Needs Assessment 2018-2021: Demography Report' (Leicestershire County Council, December 2021), pp.vi-vii

[3] Leicester and Leicestershire Economic Partnership, 'Local Skills Report', March 2021.

[4] Jason Noble, 'Flex on UKSPF Skills Funding "Welcome" but Timing Questioned', FE Week, 24 March 2023, https://feweek.co.uk/flex-on-ukspf-skills-funding-welcome-but-timing-questioned/.

Problem 1: Work is in the wrong places

While there is growth in logistics and science-related work in Leicestershire, much of this is located on industrial parks some distance from population centres. This geography creates barriers to employment:

- Patchy public transport infrastructure. Manufacturing is the largest sector, accounting for 12.3% of roles, with Transport and Storage accounting for 10.2%, but those jobs are inaccessible for the carless.
- Barriers to commuting to the city or nearby towns.

Public transport

Public transport emerged as an issue in the scoping research for the programme. Attempts were made to address it in the original programme design via:

- personal travel plans;
- active travel options such as bike hire;
- car sharing.

These had very little take up. Stakeholders concluded the key issues – that public transport did not take people where they needed to go when they wanted to go there – were not addressed.

Frequency and unreliability. Public transport had declined since the pandemic. One participant reported a bus service reducing from 3 times to once an hour and becoming increasingly unreliable. One jobseeker found he was going for jobs but when employers *"found out I had to catch a bus, they said I wouldn't be reliable."*[5] Where people worked shifts in logistics warehouses or factories, or had to travel between clients, this problem was worse.

Transport destinations. Coalville is only 9.5 miles away from East Midlands Airport (EMA), the UK's largest dedicated air cargo operation. It works 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and supports over 6,000 jobs.[6] The bus service from EMA to Coalville finishes at 7pm, making late and night shifts difficult without private transport.

Similarly, there are freight centres around the M1/M6 junction including Magna Park near Lutterworth and Daventry International Rail Freight Terminal DIRFT just a few miles south in Northamptonshire. But as with EMA, public transport is not viable for many potential employees.

Speed. In addition to frequency and reliability, buses, Leicestershire's primary public transport solution, are slow. The bus journey from Coalville to Leicester city centre takes 1 hour 20 minutes, nearly three times the average commute in Great Britain of 27 minutes.[7]

[5] All statements in quotation marks are taken from research undertaken by the evaluators November 2022-March 2023.
[6] East Midlands Airport plc, Cargo: Find out More about Cargo at East Midlands Airport (blog), 2023, https://www.eastmidlandsairport.com/about-us/cargo/.
[7] Department for Transport, 'Transport Statistics Great Britain: 2022 Domestic Travel' (UK Government, Open Government Licence v3.0, 15 December 2022), https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/transport-statistics-great-britain-2022/transport-statistics-great-britain-2022-domestic-travel.

Barriers to commuting

"I hadn't considered that what people were looking for was not a solution to the journey. That they didn't want to make a journey in the first place. They want the job to be near to where they live."

Stakeholders explained, the reasons for people preferring to work near home were perceptual and practical.

Perceptual barriers to commuting

"They don't have the self-confidence about going somewhere different..."

One barrier not addressed in the original programme design, was the sense of belonging and differences between localities. For many living in towns or villages, *"going to Leicester would probably be an annual excursion,"* making it unlikely they had the self-confidence *"to get a job in Hinckley or Leicester."* This was reinforced when *"we're talking about low-wage entry level jobs."* There was a clear distinction between people in these jobs and people looking for higher skilled and professional roles who were more willing to commute, both because these jobs paid better, and because people were more used to travelling.

Practical barriers to commuting

Since the pandemic it has become evident that many people do not want to commute, at least not every day. Reasons for this include flexible scheduling (50%) and not having the stress or costs of commuting (43%). Working from home provided freedom to respond to the needs of family members.[8] These with social and caring roles may value being close enough to the school or family members to respond in an emergency. Limiting long-term illnesses and disabilities are indicators of care needs. These are highest in North West Leicestershire (18.1%), Leicester (17.3%) and Hinckley and Bosworth (17.0%) dropping to 14.6% in Harborough.[9] If public transport is infrequent and/or the journey too long, carers may not take up a role.

One stakeholder also pointed out how commuting could disadvantage some people with disabilities. They argued that the *"ability to work from home provides opportunities for people who could not do standard 9-5."*

Poor or inadequate public transport factors mean many people are forced to commute by car, with the costs of learning how to drive and run a car or motorbike. This was described as a catch-22. You need a job to be able to pay your travel costs to get to a job.

[8] 'Working from Home UK Statistics 2023 WFH', The Home Office Life (blog), 1 January 2023, https://thehomeofficelife.com/blog/work-from-home-statistics#:~:text=Benefits%20of%20working%20from%20home&text=There%20are%20a%20number%20of,according%20to%2043%25%20of%20respondents.
[9] Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, 'Percentage of People Who Reported Having a Limiting Long-Term Illness or Disability, 2011. (%)' (Crown Copyright, 2022), https://localhealth.org.uk/#bbox=390768,356228,96683,73669&c=indicator&i=t3.l_term_ill&selcodgeo=E07000134&view=map10.

Solutions 1: Work is in the wrong places

At the hackathon, the question of public transport was felt to be a factor beyond the scope of the project, but solutions to local employment and enabling commuting were suggested.

The first set of solutions revolved around encouraging employment closer to where people live:

- identifying local employers and working with them to define work opportunities and skills gaps;
- encouraging employers and participants to attend local job fairs in districts;
- working with the Leicester and Leicestershire Enterprise Partnership (LLEP) and district councils to source employment grants for rural and semi-rural businesses;
- supporting self-employment and entrepreneurship via work with co-operative and social enterprise support agency CASE, a WiLL partner;
- working with employers to promote remote working;
- considering opportunities for co-working spaces in rural areas;
- working with employers to understand training and disability support in the tax and benefits system.

The second set of solutions focused on improving people's ability to commute to work.

- engaging employers on large business, retail and logistic parks to consider running staff buses from local towns and cities;
- if active travel options are suitable, working with third sector organisations such as Bikeworks to source inexpensive bicycles and encourage employers to take up salary sacrifice options to help staff buy bikes;
- exploring options such as the Kickstart moped and electric bike hire charity currently running in Rutland.[10]

[10] Kickstart Moped Hire, 'Welcome to Kickstart', 2023, https://kickstartmopeds.org.uk/.

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Each table a different topic. Go to a table that interests you.
You will take turns telling new stories about what works well or less well.
1. Storyteller: Tell your story.
2. Listeners: write the story down, ask questions , fill in story template.
3. When you have finished writing, choose the next storyteller.

Problem 2: Disappearing workers

During the pandemic many people became *'economically inactive'* – that is, not in paid work and not actively looking for and/or available for work. This, and changes to freedom of movement from the EU have led to shortfalls in workers in key sectors that are big employers in Leicestershire, such as transportation. Non-UK workers down approximately 8% since March 2019 and manufacturing and administration both down 2%.[11] This implies there should be sufficient demand for workers in the county.

The reasons for economic inactivity in Leicestershire were:

- long-term sickness (26.3%);
- caring for family (18.9%);
- retirement (16.2%); and
- studying (27%).[12]

Across the East Midlands, of those who wanted to but were not working, 43.5% cited ill health, a quarter are caring for family or homemakers and 5.3% are classified as *'discouraged workers'*.[13] The latter needed long-term help to find or access work. Across the UK over 1.7 million people want to work but need help with skills or job search, health or disability support or childcare.[14] There is an equalities aspect to the disappearing workforce, too, as it is low paid and female dominated roles such as care and cleaning that cannot be performed remotely, that have disproportionately lost staff for health reasons.

Leicestershire stakeholders described a similar picture. However, there was also a sense that there had been a change in mindset for some people.

"I think there was an expectation that people looking for employment are either going into it for the first time or going back into it after a period of not working, so they'd be young or old. We found that it was people in their 30s, 40s. People were looking at a career change or they'd had children or wanted to change their circumstances."

Research participants explained there were key blockages preventing clients with skills from accessing work:

- **anxiety:** *"People are more anxious than before the pandemic and probably further from the labour market so need more nurturing, more volunteering, etc."*
- **no experience, and no access to work experience:** The first step into work was found to be the hardest. Employers wanted workers who have proven their reliability as well as job-specific skills, and this can be difficult to do for those who have just finished education or are returning to the labour market after a gap.
- difficulty finding *'good work'* that made working financially worthwhile after childcare and commuting costs.

WiLL was able to work with 'discouraged workers' for longer than some other projects, enabling them to offer support across multiple barriers as participants moved closer to the labour market.

[11] Portes, Jonathan, and John Springford. 2023. Early Impacts of the Post-Brexit Immigration System on the UK Labour Market. p2[12] Stephen Evans and Naomi Clayton, 'Understanding Trends in Economic Inactivity' (Learning and Work Institute, February 2023).
[13] Evans and Clayton.
[14] Evans and Clayton.

Solutions 2: Disappearing workers

Outreach

WiLL worked with 1,066 participants over the course of the programme. Keyworkers found the best results for recruiting people who were not engaging with other employment support programmes were through its active 'outreach' approach. This included links to the Department for Work and Pensions, but also council services such as libraries, community events and local jobs fairs, and having a presence at voluntary organisations such as food banks. This outreach was reinforced by the keyworker approach.

Person centred, holistic processes

Will's person-centred, holistic view of needs included support such as job search support, skills support, health and wellbeing, and opportunities for volunteering. Keyworkers coordinated information, guidance, and support providing some in-house and linking to partners or external agencies. They were able to help participants *"take the first step, take that leap of faith"* and to stay with those who felt overwhelmed or stuck. The programme was able to take referrals for clients at some distance from the labour market because the support window did not *'time out'*.

What worked included:

- weekly or fortnightly meetings with a keyworker. Monthly meetings were not sufficient;
- not limiting the time an individual could be supported was essential for those furthest from the labour market. *"If somebody only needs six weeks, they're probably determined and would have got there anyway";*
- taking a wider view of support for skills development, wellbeing, and opportunities to gain experience that encompassed volunteering. Stakeholders said volunteering *"builds confidence."* WiLL was unique in the county in offering volunteering opportunities.

Supporting employers

Employers do not always know about Access to Work,[15] a publicly funded employment support programme that helps disabled people start or stay in work, or grants for skills training from local or central government. We recommend working with employers to help them understand training and disability support opportunities.

Volunteering

Volunteering was a route to *"help gain basic skills and competence"* in job-related skills and work experience. It also boosted confidence and self-esteem and widened job search horizons. Soft outcomes were found in participants' managing social anxiety, gaining social support and improved mental wellbeing.[16]

[15] Access to Work Guidance: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/access-to-work-factsheet/access-to-work-factsheet-for-customers
[16] Krista Blair et al., '2021 Report of the Evaluation of the Work.Live.Leicestershire Programme' (De Montfort University, 31 January 2021).

Problem 3: Work doesn't pay the bills

"A lot of the referrals I've been getting recently have been more about concerns regarding money and maximising benefits."

Cost of living crisis

The work environment in the UK changed over the period of the programme. Covid, Brexit and the war in Ukraine all contributed to a cost-of-living crisis. By Spring 2022 a longitudinal study of the impacts of Covid-19 found that financial concerns had increased since summer 2022, reaching levels 'on par with when the pandemic first started'.[17] Younger adults (18-29) were most likely to report feeling not in control of their finances or their plans, indicating a need for support in budgeting as well as employability. The erosion of real terms pay continued into the end of 2022, despite some growth in nominal pay, largely in the private sector.[18] The Consumer Price Index including owner occupied housing costs rose by 9.3% in the 12 months to November 2022, with the largest upward contributions being housing, housing services (e.g. utilities), and food.[19]

The CPI including owner occupied housing costs rose by

9.3%

in the 12 months to November 2022

WiLL workers reported that *"people are making difficult choices about where or how to spend."* One foodbank suggested that 70% of their customers were in work but could not afford their bills. In an internal report to their board, food banks in Leicester reported that a rise in customers in August 2022 was *'all in the group on low incomes, whether they are on benefits, pensions or in-work poverty. The latter sector appears to be single parents with low hours around childcare, but also includes agency and zero hours contract workers.'* One WiLL worker said their focus had shifted to *"cost of living support rather than work or volunteering"*.

Insecure, low paid work

Insecure work increased during the pandemic while the workforce shrank. Insecure workers are more likely to work in occupations like food preparation, agriculture, and cleaning, caring, leisure or sales and customer service. On average, they earn half as much as all workers per week. Research by Citizens Advice found that during the pandemic, they were more likely to be at risk of losing their jobs.[20] The percentage of people in employment on zero hours contracts in July to September 2022 remained above pre-pandemic levels at 3.2%. WiLL workers reported frustrations at having to turn away potential clients who were in work, but needed support in accessing more hours, or better paid jobs.

Suitable work

"I want a job, but I only want 18 hours a week to fit around my free nursery placement. You know, I don't want to work more than that."

As discussed in Problem 1, WiLL's original design misidentified the desire for local work as a need for transport. The cost-of-living crisis has made 'suitable work' close to home even more vital. And for those with disabilities or on benefits, there was an additional calculation to be done before taking on a new role or extra work: *"A lot of people that are on, say, Universal Credit, if they work more hours, it's going to affect the benefits negatively."*

[17] Daisy Fancourt et al., 'COVID-19 Social Study', Results Release 22 (2020): 4.
[18] IES, 'Labour Market Statistics, September 2022', Briefing (Institute for Employment Studies, [13] September [2022]), https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/labour-market-statistics-september-2022.
[19] Office for National Statistics, 'Consumer Price Inflation UK: November 2022', 14 December 2022, https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/bulletins/consumerpriceinflation/november2022.
[20] Citizens Advice, 'On the Edge: Insecure Work in the Pandemic', December 2020, https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/Global/CitizensAdvice/Work%20Publications/On%20the%20Edge_%20Insecure%20work%20in%20the%20pandemic.pdf.

Solutions 3: Work doesn't pay the bills

Work with a range of employers

Although keyworkers liaised with employers on a case-by-case basis, one of the gaps in WiLL's structure was that employers were not represented. An employers' forum, including rurally based businesses, could advise on their employment needs, and partnerships be developed to support residents into jobs near home.

Employers could also be offered training in how to access in-work disability support such as Access to Work or County Council support for employers.

Broaden the recruitment criteria

"The working poor are in as much financial difficulty as the unemployed – support could be de-linked from employment."

As discussed above, in-work poverty has complex causes. It arose as an issue in WiLL as the recruitment criteria were limited to those completely out of work. One solution is to provide support that covers those in work but underemployed, or those in low paid work.

Broad employability support

The increasing complexity of needs identified throughout this report led to WiLL's support extending beyond that traditionally expected in an employability project. This included supporting participants to understand taxes and pension contributions and to support them in creating a budget to make the most of their wages once in work. One stakeholder found *"Important services now are debt advice, home budgeting e.g., showing people how to calculate the cost of a meal."*

Incorporate a budget to support work-related costs

One interviewee explained the *"Job Centre can help with travel costs, internet access and laptops – they have some funding for this."* Clients may need help with interview clothes, travel costs, or to buy tools to enable them to take up a job. A discretionary grant or loan fund could be incorporated into a future project for keyworkers to access as required.

> *"Important services now are debt advice, home budgeting e.g. showing people how to calculate the cost of a meal."*

Problem 4: Basic, Work-Related and Soft Skills

The WiLL programme measured basic skills such as IT, literacy and numeracy; job search and job-related skills; and workplace experience and social skills. 62% of participants had high job search skills support needs, with 54% reporting high needs in job skills and work experience.[21]

WiLL addressed these needs through:

- one-to-one support and activities to provide social interaction;
- keyworkers helping to clarify goals and supporting job related skill development;
- providing job search advice and support with CVs;
- courses;
- business start-up advice;
- volunteering opportunities to develop skills and confidence.

Research undertaken November 2022 - March 2023 also identified the importance of support for basic and life skills:

- support for work-related financial literacy, including understanding taxes, pensions etc.;
- life skills, including finances and budgeting, managing debts;
- digital skills;
- soft skills, such as communication and customer service skills.

Multiple barriers

As one interviewee explained, WiLL was working with *"participants who are far from the labour market, with multiple barriers and issues and we really can't work with them within 12 weeks and move them on."* Stakeholders argued that basic skills were the foundation on which everything else was built.

"If you can't read and write, if you can't add up, you're not going to be able to get on in life, you're not going to get other skills. It doesn't just affect your work or your training. It affects your whole life. You might have good interpersonal skills; you might work in a social way much better. But the lack of basic skills could obscure that."

Basic skills were not necessarily sufficient to help people with other barriers, but this first step was the highest, and people often had no idea where to turn for help. Even when they had English and maths, they may not have job search skills, interview skills or up-to-date IT skills. For rural communities with limited access to the college courses or community groups found in urban areas, this could be demoralising and isolating.

[18] Blair et al., '2021 Report of the Evaluation of the Work.Live.Leicestershire Programme', 8.

Skills gaps vary by generation.

Interviewees and hackathon participants explained that skills gaps found among school leavers are different to those among older cohorts. This latter group can be subdivided too. There are people in their 30s and 40s returning to work after parental leave. There are people over 45 who have substantial work experience but have been made redundant or can no longer undertake manual labour. One stakeholder organisation offering digital skills said over half their clients were over 45. In addition to needing training in digital skills, these groups *"feel that they're not going to get taken on because they're too old. So, it's building that confidence up..."*

18–24-year-olds who were in school and college during Covid and have no work experience are also struggling with confidence. *"It's trying to get them out of that rut that ... they hide away in their bedrooms. It is more so now than it was before Covid".*

> *"If you can't read and write, if you can't add up, you're not going to be able to get on in life, you're not going to get other skills."*

Solutions 4: Basic, Work-Related and Soft Skills

Co-ordinate information, advice and guidance

Coordination of work-readiness services is necessary to help people take the first step, whether they have basic skills or not.

Training partners and budgets

Two widely praised aspects of WiLL's approach were the range of services and the person-centred keyworkers. In thinking about skills, partnerships were essential in providing basic and digital skills training. Ideally these could be dispersed across the county to reduce travel costs. One suggestion was to use a mobile classroom. However, for participants with specific job-related skills gaps such courses may not be taught by a provider. In these circumstances, participants could be supported by a dedicated training budget.

Volunteering

Volunteering enabled participants to gain soft skills and confidence and was highly valued by partners. *"We were able to take a holistic view of needs including mental health and offer volunteering as well as other work services. There's a lot of people that never thought about volunteering."*

Third sector organisations were flexible in their approach to volunteers who struggled to take up work or return to work because of mental health issues. They were able to provide opportunities that were one day a week, or flexible to accommodate individual needs.

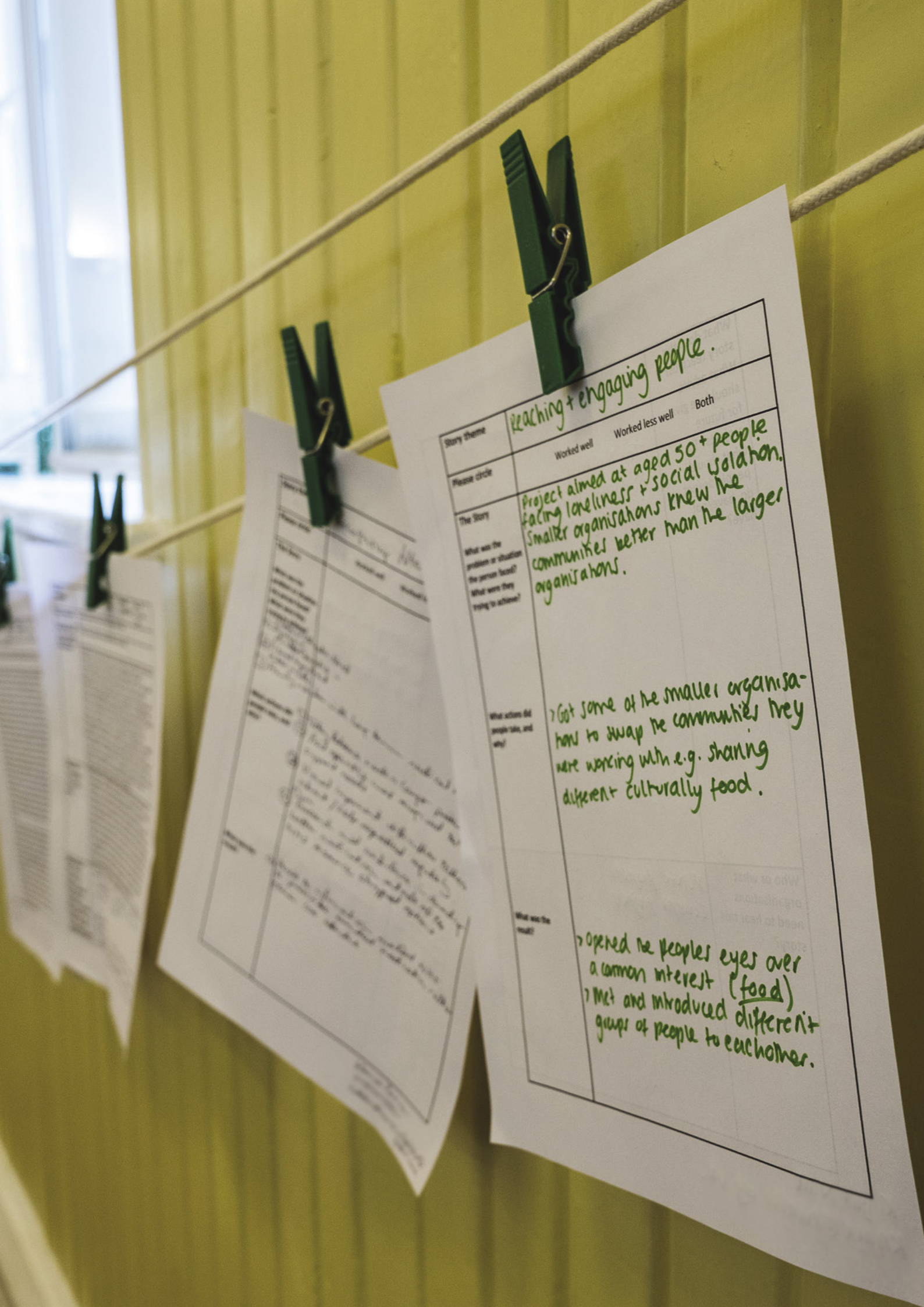
Measure soft outcomes

Volunteering was a key route to support participants who were furthest from the labour market in terms of mental health and well-being and individuals who were socially isolated. The evaluators were told of one person who rarely left the house so was *"never going to access education or training. But what they are doing now is volunteering."* However, in the WiLL project, soft outcomes, the steps taken to move individuals closer to work, were not treated as targets, so there was a perception they were not valued.[22]

Engage employers in solving the problems

Evidence from volunteer organisations was that some WiLL participants took time to develop the soft work skills required for full-time work, but that employers were not as flexible as voluntary organisations in understanding *"when they [participants] relapse sometimes, and when they don't turn up for meetings or when they don't do what they're supposed to have done because they've had a bad week."* An employers' forum would enable these issues to be discussed and potential solutions developed that enabled participants to (re)enter work at a pace that suited both parties.

[22] WiLL did track soft outcomes. It used Triangle Consulting's Work Star™, a tool that covers seven outcome areas linked to employability and employment: job skills and experience; aspiration and motivation; job-search skills; stability; basic skills; workplace and social skills; and health and well-being.


Story theme
Reaching + engaging people.
Please circle
Worked well
Worked less well
Both
The Story
What was the problem or situation the person faced? What were they trying to achieve?
Project aimed at aged 50+ people facing loneliness + social isolation. Smaller organisations knew the communities better than the larger organisations.
What actions did people take, and why?
> Got some of the smaller organisations to swap the communities they were working with e.g. sharing different culturally food.
What was the result?
> Opened the peoples eyes over a common interest (food)
> Met and introduced different groups of people to eachother.

Problem 5: Digital Exclusion

'Citizens in rural and deprived regions of the UK do not have access to the same quality of services to those living in more affluent towns and cities.' [23]

Digital inclusion has three facets: skills, access to appropriate equipment, and reliable data. While access to computers and phones is now quite widespread, it quickly became apparent during the pandemic lockdowns that digital access is highly variable. This is partly a result of poorer broadband access in rural areas, partly of people's ability to afford digital devices, and partly of variations in people's digital skills.

WiLL found that job search went online during the pandemic and has largely stayed there. One stakeholder said about 95% of recruitment had remained online. Even those with prior work experience often needed support with digital job search skills, as they may not have used the Internet for job search or had a Zoom interview.

Older people, vulnerable young people, those in social housing, those on lower wages or who are unemployed, those with disabilities, offenders or ex-offenders, people with fewer educational qualifications, people living in rural areas, people who are homeless, and people whose first language is not English are most excluded.[24]

Digital skills

WiLL workers have found poor digital skills meant a more isolated workforce, with a greater divide between manual and non-manual workers and between older and younger workers. One partner commented that "50-plus are a concern now. They have been made redundant from a manual job and don't have digital skills." The support needed was skills and confidence-based, complemented by access to equipment to search for work and access benefits.

For others, the IT training available was not appropriate. They were not interested in qualifications or coding, they "don't want to learn it all. They just want to learn, [how] to go on the Internet. Do the shopping or read emails." While younger people tend to be digitally literate, there were gaps in their knowledge. One WiLL partner explained: "It was surprising how many [16-18-year-olds] weren't able to use Google to do something as simple as finding out different parts of a journey." Stakeholders argued for informal training tailored to the individual's or group's needs.

[23] Ernst and Young, 'House of Lords Communications and Digital Select Committee Inquiry "Digital Exclusion and the Cost of Living"', Written evidence (House of Commons, 29 March 2023), 1, https://committees.parliament.uk/work/7296/digital-exclusion-and-the-cost-of-living/publications/.
[24] Josie Sparling, 'Cost-of-Living Crisis: How to Tackle Digital Exclusion' (Charity Digital, 3 March 2023), https://charitydigital.org.uk/topics/topics/cost-of-living-crisis-how-to-tackle-digital-exclusion-10515.

Access to equipment

88% of adults in the UK had a smartphone in 2022.[25] Desktops accounted for 48% of devices. When thinking about accessing benefits and developing work skills, smartphones may not be adequate. And, even when a household has access to a desktop device it may have to be shared.

One stakeholder said the "people I work with don't even have a computer." They indicated this was generational and problematic because as people aged, they were more likely to need assistive technologies, and to access online services such as deliveries or appointments.

> *"It was surprising how many [16-18 year olds] weren't able to use Google to do something as simple as finding out different parts of a journey."*

Poor digital infrastructure

"People in urban areas are more likely to be connected to a 4G mobile network than in rural areas of the UK (82% compared to 77%). This is due to better coverage levels in UK cities."[26]

Poor rural connectivity affects people's ability to work from home or job search and contributes to isolation and poor mental health. While services such as libraries do provide access to computers and were WiLL partners, they too have suffered from cuts so have often reduced hours or closed altogether.

[25] Catherine Hiley, 'UK Mobile Phone Statistics, 2023' (Uswitch, 1 February 2023), https://www.uswitch.com/mobiles/studies/mobile-statistics/.
[26] Hiley.

Solutions 5: Digital Exclusion

Holistic service

People need skills, access to equipment, and data. WiLL were the only ones providing all three. This provided an opportunity to engage with and recruit participants. One stakeholder found that people would engage for help with digital skills or access to equipment, and from there they could identify and offer other support.

Tap into existing schemes

In February 2021 the LLEP[27] announced grants amounting to £300,00 for seven projects addressing digital exclusion, including a re-use scheme recycling unwanted business equipment for community groups (Reaching People); community-based education to develop digital confidence, creativity and competence (WEA); digital hubs; and a device loan and skills development scheme. While these schemes have come to an end, WiLL workers have found them valuable. Where partners are not providing these services, these could be built into a project's budget.

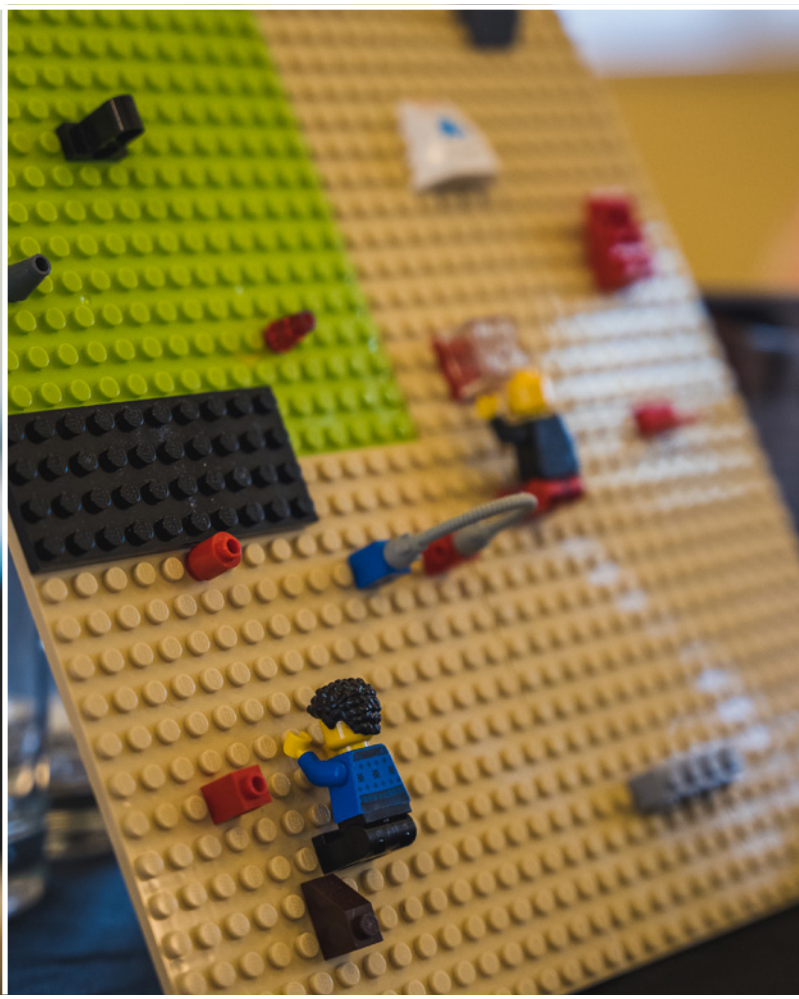
[27] Leicester and Leicestershire Economic Partnership, 'LLEP Digital Poverty Grants Awarded', 1 February 2021, https://llep.org.uk/news/llep-digital-poverty-grants-awarded/.

[28] Please see the Work Live Leicestershire Good Practice Guide 'Walk in their shoes' for a discussion of learning from the WiLL project on developing and delivering employability support to local communities.

Conclusion

During the research for this report, several stakeholders commented on the loss of continuity and learning that occurs when support for communities is funded and delivered as short-term projects. Building Better Opportunities funding enabled employability support for communities in Leicestershire to be developed and delivered by local organisations, helping to mitigate such losses.

This report has discussed emerging and persistent needs in communities that WiLL stakeholders and staff have observed in their work. It set out – as a starting point for further discussion – possible solutions, drawing on what people have learned from working in or alongside the WiLL project.[28] Although WiLL staff and stakeholders consulted for this report have suggested many actions that could be taken, the proposed solutions have a number of common threads: making use of a local area's assets, including the expertise of local organisations; encouraging discussions and joint working amongst local stakeholders; and recognising the importance of holistic, flexible support that can help people to overcome the many different barriers to work they can encounter.



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Our partner network included:

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