Digital learning in social care workforce development in Wales

Learning from COVID-19 and shaping future approaches

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Executive summary

Background

During the pandemic there was an increase in the use of digital learning, to enable frontline social care staff to access training and development.

This report sets out the findings of research to understand the impacts, benefits, and challenges of digital learning for the social care workforce in Wales. We identify key learning points and provide recommendations for future approaches to digital learning.

We undertook an evidence review, as well as workshops and interviews with: local authorities' workforce managers and regional leads; social care providers; training providers; Social Care Wales managers; and frontline workers.

Findings

- **There were some positive experiences** – Local authorities (LAs), training and social care providers played an essential role in the rapid development of digital infrastructure, the provision of equipment to local organisations, and the improvement of digital resources. Some of these initiatives were supported by funding made available by Social Care Wales. Initiatives to develop digital literacy and skills are key in supporting staff, helping to raise confidence, and improve access to digital learning.

- **There are clear benefits from digital learning** – it can offer learners flexibility, the ability to pace their learning, and opportunities for independent learning. For providers, reduced staff travel and the wider reach of digital learning can make it more cost-effective when provided at scale.

- **There are also challenges** – efforts at digital learning can be hampered by connectivity issues, limited access to equipment, the quality of some digital resources, as well as limited digital literacy and skills in the workforce are barriers to accessing digital learning. In relation to the delivery of digital learning, people reported it needed to be more interactive as well as support the wellbeing of learners. Relationships and group dynamics can be limited, reducing opportunities for peer learning. When developed locally or at a small scale, there is a high cost for digital learning.

- **Participants contributed many useful suggestions for future approaches** – people wanted to see a balance between digital and face-to-face sessions, training that is practical and interactive, high-quality resources, and support for independent learning. Suggestions for improving the digital literacy of frontline staff included creating a digital champions programme and drop-in centres. People suggested the creation of an all-Wales learning platform that can host and manage learning with a focus on user experience.

Recommendations

These recommendations are designed to be a first step in guiding future approaches to digital learning in Wales.

Policy and strategic level

- **Adopt an All-Wales approach to digital learning** – in co-production with Social Care Wales, LAs, training providers, and social care providers including frontline staff.

  o **Create an all-Wales steering group** to oversee the creation of an all-Wales digital learning platform.
  o **Create an all-Wales 'one-stop shop' digital learning platform** to curate, host, and signpost to relevant learning resources, with a focus on user experience and inclusion.
  o **Create digital learning passports**, with an overarching system for recording attendance and completion, and providing training updates and alerts.

- **Create opportunities for collaboration between LAs** – to share learning and strategy views, and to encourage consistency in digital learning across Wales.

- **Provide guidance on digital, blended, and face-to-face learning** – to provide advice on the most effective/appropriate forms of delivery according to learners' needs, topic needs, assessment needs, and cost-effectiveness.

- **Continue and expand funding support.**

Local authorities

Supporting learners:

- **develop digital literacy** – digital champions, drop-in support centres, and basic skills training.

- **balance digital and face-to-face learning** – based on learners' needs

- **provide learner with supportive learning conditions** – protected time, adequate equipment, and basic skills (digital literacy).

Supporting providers:

- **continue and expand the support offered** – to training providers and social care providers to develop digital skills and access equipment.

- **develop local networks for training providers** – to share best practice.

Training providers and social care providers

- **Increase the focus on developing learning and development staff skills**

- **focus on learners' needs** – further adopting interactive and experiential methods

- **encourage learners to apply their learning into practice** – using practice learning logs, follow-up contacts, and guidance for managers on how to support staff.

Social care managers and staff

- **Managers should support staff in applying learning to practice** – discussing real-life examples during supervisions and meetings

- **managers should support staff with pre- and post-training** – to access pre-training materials and complete post-learning activities

- **staff members should continue to develop their digital literacy and etiquette** – actively seeking support and using resources offered by the LA.

1. Introduction

This report sets out the findings of research to understand the impacts, benefits, and challenges of digital learning for the social care workforce in Wales. The research focused on the areas of training managed by the 20 workforce managers working across the 22 local authorities (LAs) in Wales. In addition to an evidence review, we gathered the views and experiences of local authority workforce managers, training providers, social care provider managers, and frontline social care staff over the past two years.

Restrictions due to COVID-19 meant that social care services in Wales had to rapidly adapt to new forms of working. As well as developing new forms of engaging with individuals drawing on services, LAs, service providers and training providers responded to the challenges of managing their workforce and providing opportunities for training and development. Digital learning played a key role in the training and development available to frontline workers during the pandemic. The extent to which digital learning will continue in this ongoing COVID-19 context and beyond is not yet known, but there is a significant opportunity for learning from the past two years.

To inform future approaches and support further development of national workforce activities and approaches, Social Care Wales commissioned SCIE to identify the key learning points, good practices, and challenges related to digital learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.1 Objectives

The project aimed to address the following objectives:

- To understand how digital learning opportunities have impacted the social care workforce during the pandemic, identifying key enablers, challenges, and barriers to workforce development.
- To make recommendations to training providers, LAs, and service providers in their delivery of workforce training digitally, or using blended methods.
- To inform Social Care Wales digital learning approaches, providing recommendations and highlighting 'what works well' and how they can assist at a national level in future.

1.2 Methods

The research was informed by an evidence review and data collection with relevant research participant groups.

Evidence review – we carried out a review/scoping study of available evidence from UK over past two years. It focused on mapping the ways in which digital learning has been delivered in social care settings defining digital learning and identifying key enablers, benefits, and challenges to digital learning. A total of 90 references were selected for screening, of which 22 were included in the review.

Scoping phase – following the evidence review, three scoping interviews with workforce managers were undertaken to further refine the scope, research questions, and methods.

Qualitative data collection

Participants – we spoke to eight training providers, four social care provider managers, ten local authority workforce managers, seven workforce regional leads, three frontline social care staff, and three Social Care Wales improvement leads.

Methods – we gathered data between April and July 2022 with the following methods for data collection:

- **Workshop with workforce managers** – 90-minute workshop with local authority and regional workforce managers to discuss the experiences during the pandemic, key learning, and future approaches.

- **In-depth interviews** – one-hour in-depth interviews with training providers, social care provider managers, LA workforce managers, workforce regional leads, frontline social care staff, and Social Care Wales improvement leads.

- **Workshop with workforce regional leads** – 90-minute workshop to discuss key findings, and the relevance and feasibility of the recommendations.

Scope of the research – the research focused on areas of training managed by the LA workforce managers. This included a range of different social care settings, including residential, home care and other supported living services for children, adult and older adults' services. Early years and childcare were outside of the scope.

Although social workers were not specifically included in the scope, this research relates to areas of training that overlap with their professional development activities.

Analysis – we identified the key themes from the data using specialist software (MAXQDA). The recordings of each interview and workshop notes were transferred into the software for analysis.

Informed consent – all participants were provided with an information sheet covering data protection, confidentiality, anonymity, background information on the research, and contact details for further information or withdrawing participation. Each participant provided verbal or written consent prior to each interview or workshop, and was given the opportunity to ask questions and discuss any issues related to the research and their participation.

Study limitations

Recruiting both social care provider managers and frontline staff was particularly challenging, and a range of approaches were tried. Potentially the topic was not of primary interest to them, but it is likely that time and capacity were key barriers. As such, this report has more limited insights from frontline staff in particular, although it should be noted that the views of those that did participate were aligned with those of LA workforce managers and training providers.

2. Evidence review

In this section, we present the key messages from the evidence review. The contents are organised following the four key areas that guided this review. We start by presenting the definitions of digital learning before moving on to outlining key enablers, benefits, and challenges to digital learning.

2.1 Digital learning definitions

The definition of digital learning is not consistent across educational or social care research, and a variety of terms are often used interchangeably (Singh and Thurman, 2019). Definitions are important to address to ensure organisations (including Social Care Wales), managers and staff have a shared understanding. Definitions can vary from broader terms such as online learning (Kourgiantakis and Lee, 2020; Blake *et al.*, 2022) and online training (Bryer and Heledd, 2021) to more focused terminology referring to specific elements of digital learning such as mobile learning (Basak *et al.*, 2018) and virtual coaching (Kobulsky *et al.*, 2020).

Vindaca and Lubkina (2020) broadly define digital learning as a process that "can be either spontaneous, unconscious, or planned and organized process, using a broad range of technology-enhanced educational strategies, including blended, flipped, online and personalized learning" (p.179). In a similar approach, Basak *et al.* (2018) defines digital learning as "any type of learning that is facilitated by technology or by institutional practice that makes effective use of technology" (p.194). Using this broad definition, classified digital learning as an umbrella concept that incorporates other aspects of digital learning including electronic learning (e-learning) and mobile learning.

We've built upon these definitions to develop an umbrella concept of digital learning for this research. Figure 1 shows how we've brought together the different activities that are part of digital learning for social care workforce development in Wales.

Figure 1: Digital learning in Wales
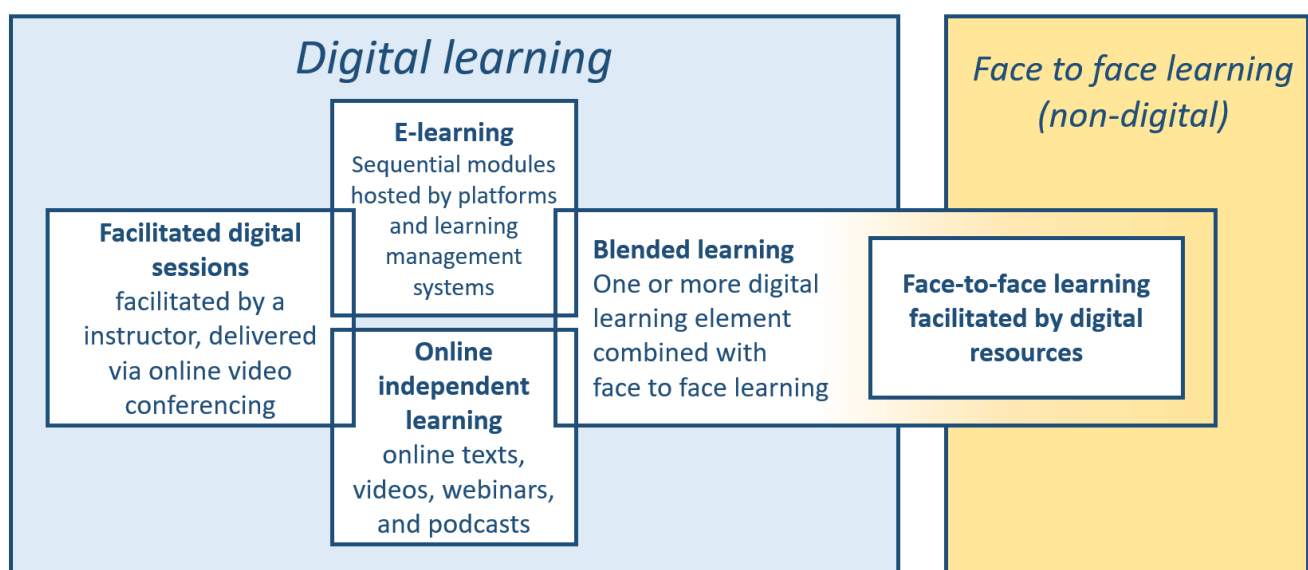
Digital learning – The key elements of digital learning in the diagram are:

- **Facilitated digital sessions –** also referred to as e-learning and "technology-enhanced learning" in the literature, is facilitated by a teacher or instructor and takes place online through recorded (asynchronous) or live sessions (synchronous) through video conferencing platforms. It doesn't include face-to-face sessions, but it allows participants and instructors to interact through forums, webchats, video calls, and interactive tools. It can also be combined with e-learning and online independent learning (Wheeler, 2012).

- **E-learning –** learning is facilitated by digital resources available on platforms and learning management systems (LMS) that can be accessed by the learner at any time. It can include interactive resources such as videos, quizzes, and games. Contents are usually organised by topics, with a logical sequence and often in "bite-size" formats (Faustmann *et al.*, 2019).

- **Online independent learning –** the learner uses the web to search and access documents, videos, infographics, webinars, and podcasts to obtain knowledge on a chosen topic. It can be guided by an instructor/supervisor or it can be undertaken independently by the learner (Singh and Thurman, 2019).

- **Blended learning –** it is a combination of one or more elements of digital learning with non-digital face-to-face learning. It can be based on face-to-face learning conducted by an instructor and facilitated by digital resources, or a mixture of digital and face to face sessions (Faustmann *et al.*, 2019).

- **Face-to-face learning facilitated by digital resources –** part of blended learning approaches consisting of in-person learning sessions facilitated by digital learning resources including platforms, tools, systems, and online learning.

- **Face-to-face learning (non-digital) –** in-person learning, facilitated by a teacher or instructor without the use of the digital learning elements described above.

A working definition of digital learning for the purposes of this project, and for consideration in future planning by Social Care Wales is:

> Any type of learning that is facilitated by online or digital technology, either live or pre-recorded/prepared. This includes online sessions facilitated by an instructor, e-learning facilitated by digital platforms and modules, online independent learning (through texts, videos, webinars, and podcasts), and blended learning combining digital and face-to-face sessions.

2.2 Key enablers for digital learning

The evidence analysed included reviews of digital learning initiatives, and highlighted those factors that contribute to more effective workforce development through digital learning.

Some of the key factors that were considered enablers of digital learning are:

Developing workforce digital literacy – this will heavily affect the effectiveness of workforce development. It is a set of "skills, knowledge, and attitudes" needed to "access,

use, and create" information and digital learning content (Julien in La Rose and Detlor, 2021, p. 600). It will influence staff members' confidence and can make the experience of using digital platforms comfortable and positive, reducing barriers to learning (Uprichard, 2020).

Applying learning into practice – linking digital learning content with staff members' daily practice is an important way to make the content directly relevant, increasing uptake and improving outcomes. A variety of strategies for linking digital learning with practical issues were identified in the evidence base reviewed. The key ones included:

- Coaching (Kobulsky *et al.*, 2020): this is an effective strategy to reinforce learning of complex topics and support staff members in changing behaviour and creating new practices based on the content learnt in digital sessions. It can provide further structure and accountability to encourage continuous development.

- Expert champions (Jenkins *et al.*, 2020), to support staff members to reflect on the content learned and apply the knowledge in their practice. Champions can also be effective in supporting staff members with low digital literacy, helping them to build confidence in using digital platforms and devices.

- Follow-up sessions and continued support (Jenkins *et al.*, 2020), to provide staff members with the opportunity to discuss the learning content beyond the digital platform, providing them with access to further support through group discussion in team meetings and workshops, follow-up supervision, and post-training toolkits and learning logs.

2.3 Benefits of digital learning

We identified six benefits of digital learning relevant to social care:

Enhances staff members' access to relevant and standardised information (Kennedy and Yaldren, 2017; Keenan *et al.*, 2020) – digital learning can increase staff members' confidence in using digital platforms and encourage them to access further digital resources. This can allow continuing their learning autonomously, using digital resources to consult when necessary.

Supports the learning of situational and complex subjects (Keenan *et al.*, 2020) – one of the key advantages of digital learning is the possibility of using video clips, pictures, animation, and other visual interactive resources that can support staff members to better understand complicated scenarios. This can be helpful in allowing staff members to closely observe and discuss situations such as challenging behaviours and seizure episodes, providing an opportunity to understand the risks and discuss strategies to support individuals in those situations.

Allows access to a range of technical and pedagogical teaching tools (Regmi and Jones, 2020) – continual development of new technical and pedagogical tools will support teachers and instructors in adopting creative methods that facilitate learning and interaction between peers. This includes tools for collaboration and interaction, communication, recording learning, and assessing outcomes.

Flexibility and convenience (Cohen and McGill 2020; Estyn, 2021) – arguably the most well-known advantage of digital learning is that it can help staff members to fit the training sessions around their availability and specific needs. It is also key in allowing staff members

to choose the pace of learning and to access further support between sessions if needed (Regmi and Jones, 2020).

Reduced time and costs to access training (Blake *et al.*, 2022) – the flexibility of digital learning can contribute to reducing costs associated with travel. The ability to pace the training according to staff members' availability means that the time needed to complete the training can be managed individually, reducing the impact on delivery and service capacity.

A systematic approach to learning (Regmi and Jones, 2020) – digital learning often adopts a more systematic approach to learning when compared to traditional forms of teaching and training. Common digital learning approaches to organising content and conducting learning include moving from simple to complex, presenting ideas and knowledge in an interconnected way following a clear logic, and summarising and connecting sections of learning.

2.4 Challenges and barriers to digital learning

The evidence review also identified challenges and barriers associated with aspects of digital learning.

Low levels of digital literacy among people working in social care (Tobi and Liz, 2021) – one of the key challenges for effective digital learning is the lack of digital skills and knowledge among social care staff members. Issues varying from difficulties to logging in and accessing platforms, to operating devices and setting up audio and video resources adequately, can significantly affect learning experiences. Moreover, low levels of digital literacy may affect cyber-security and data protection, with staff members being unaware of or unable to use secure forms of communication.

Limited access to equipment and digital resources – this is widely reported as a major barrier to digital learning in health and social care workforce development in Wales and more widely in the UK (Enback, 2020; Bryer and Heledd, 2021). Despite investment during the pandemic and an increase in the equipment made available to services (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020), the challenge persists and it is significantly restricting social care staff's access to digital learning.

Challenges related to access to equipment and digital resources included (Uprichard, 2020):

- Lack of equipment: with staff not having devices available to use or having to share devices with colleagues.

- Outdated equipment and/or software: in some cases, equipment with outdated versions of windows or devices with no capacity to run interactive digital resources adequately.

- Lack of technical support: non-timely access to technical support or lack of adequate support to provide advice or to resolve hardware or software malfunction.

- Connectivity issues: limited access to fast and consistent internet connectivity.

Limited time available for assimilating and reflecting – with heavy workloads, social care staff benefited from the flexibility of digital learning and manage their training around their availability (Kelleher et al., 2022). However, this meant that staff were often switching between digital training and tasks related to their practice without opportunities to discuss and reflect on their learning. This can generate feelings of isolation, reduce their confidence, and amplify barriers to learning (Kobulsky et al., 2020).

Developing digital learning resources can be complex (Estyn, 2021) – producing learning resources and making them available through platforms requires specific digital skills that are not often available within training and development teams. In most cases, training and development is needed to provide staff members with the necessary skills.

Digital learning is less appealing to some staff members (Jenkins et al., 2020) – a proportion of staff members may find digital learning less effective than face-to-face training. This can be further affected by low levels of digital literacy and low levels of confidence in using digital platforms, influencing the quality of their experience and outcomes achieved and giving them a negative perception of digital learning.

Relationship and wellbeing issues (Regmi and Jones, 2020) – the significantly limited interactions between peers, and between peers and instructors, in digital learning environments, combined with high levels of stress and anxiety, "lack of students discipline and low-self efficacy" (p.7), and poor engagement, can be a major barrier to learning. Although these issues are not specific to digital learning, the limited interactions and likely higher level of isolation of individuals in digital learning can exacerbate wellbeing-related issues and further affect learning (Lister *et al.*, 2021).

Staff turnover and costs associated (Keenan *et al.*, 2020) **–** the high level of staff turnover in social care is often mentioned as a significant challenge to both digital and face-to-face learning. It affects service capacity, increasing training time and costs, and disrupting the team's skills building and development. It may also affect the informal post-training support that new staff members can receive from more experienced colleagues.

3. Findings

In this section, we present what people told us in the interviews. The section is organised under four main headings: positive experiences – what worked well; benefits of digital learning; challenges to digital learning; and participants' suggested solutions and thoughts on future approaches.

3.1 Positive experiences – what worked well

We heard about several positive experiences that supported the development of digital learning during the pandemic. Most of these experiences will continue to be relevant as they point to possible solutions to future challenges to digital learning. Positive experiences are organised under five key categories:

Infrastructure	Supporting learners	Working together	Improving digital learning	Funding and support

3.1.1 Infrastructure

Participants discussed different aspects of the digital learning infrastructure including platforms, digital learning resources, learning management systems, access to equipment, and connectivity.

Rapid development of digital learning infrastructure – the need to adapt to the changes imposed by the pandemic encouraged local authorities and local organisations (social care and training providers) to quickly develop resources and shift their training and development activities to digital environments. This has resulted in a rapid development of infrastructure, particularly around the implementation of platforms and systems.

> "The pandemic was great for pushing things forward, I would have liked it if the pandemic had not happened but it is also true that it has helped us, it is a [learning] curve that we needed to be on […] and we are a little further on that curve now, we can start to implement things and make it part of our culture […] and those who are not on board now will need to get on board soon."
>
> (Social care provider)

Participants often highlighted that the development of digital learning infrastructure was already part of their plans, but the pandemic encouraged many to prioritise and develop at a much higher pace.

Existing infrastructure – some LAs and organisations had started to develop digital learning infrastructure prior to the pandemic and this provided them with an advantage. For example, some organisations were already relying on e-learning modules to train their

workforce and had a learning management system (LMS) implemented prior to the pandemic. This enabled them to focus on improving the content offered on their platforms and move forward, facing fewer challenges than organisations that had to develop more of their infrastructure.

Providing access to equipment – the limited availability of equipment (laptops, tablets, and audio and video accessories) was one of the key challenges to digital learning and LAs have had a central role in addressing this issue during the pandemic.

> "We have been able to support anybody who needs equipment […] we have a combination of laptops, tablets and a digital classroom […] so equipment isn't a massive issue."
>
> (Workforce manager)
>
> "Our workforce development team [in the LA] has provided us with a projector and screen. [Before] all the staff would be huddled in a room looking at this one laptop screen […] but now it is a lot better."
>
> (Social care provider)

Safeguarding digital learning – a series of online safeguarding training resources was developed by Social Care Wales and launched in 2019. Referred to as the 'safeguarding platform', the bilingual e-learning package was highlighted by participants as a positive initiative, described as "helpful to staff and organisations" (Workforce manager). It is becoming a key resource for the social care sector to access training and guidance on safeguarding procedures, and provides a consistent approach to safeguarding. However, participants also highlighted that the platform interface could be improved, with more focus on "user experience" (Workforce manager) and more intuitive navigation.

3.1.2 Supporting learners

With digital literacy being one of the key challenges to digital learning in Wales, LAs and local organisations have adopted different strategies to support learners and increase access to digital learning. Some of these initiatives are described below.

Digital champions – these are staff members that dedicate part of their time to supporting colleagues facing difficulties to access digital resources. Although this was highlighted as one of the key drivers of wider digital literacy, participants also emphasised that time availability and competing demands are a major barrier to this model.

> "It is seen as a step up to do more for the same money […]. It should be an implementation officer, full-time, or part-time job but we are just relying on the workforce to carry out what they can."
>
> (Workforce manager)

Solutions to this challenge were also discussed with participants; suggestions included having dedicated posts, protected time to allow existing staff to dedicate part of their capacity to this role, and a more integrated training and support package.

Online drop-in centre – this was a virtual drop-in centre that staff members could contact either by phone or online to get help with a variety of digital issues, including basic skills such as logging in systems, navigating platforms, and undertaking training.

One-to-one support – some LAs were able to provide one-to-one support to staff members facing challenges to access digital learning resources. This was mainly through virtual remote assistance tools (sharing screen), through which staff members could be helped to access digital resources.

Peer support networks for learners – this worked well for staff members undertaking longer training modules with regular sessions. The initiative was encouraged by the LA and informally run by staff members offering them a space to ask questions, discuss challenges, and provide and receive support.

Additional learning resources – these initiatives supported learners to access additional resources and encouraged independent learning. It included distributing e-digests focused on learning opportunities, encouraging the use of digital communities of practice, and opportunities to attend webinars and conferences.

3.1.3 Working together

Collaboration between learning and development (L&D) teams – participants emphasised the importance of the partnership between L&D teams across LAs. "Everyone helped each other" (workforce managers' workshop) and L&D teams were able to "quickly adapt" (workforce managers' workshop) and develop digital learning resources to support social care staff.

> "[We need to acknowledge] all learning and development teams across the LAs in their response to the pandemic, how they adapted and developed new training materials online. It was a massive shift to everyone, and I think everyone has gone above and beyond to do it."
>
> (Workforce manager)

Administrative staff members – these staff were crucial in supporting L&D and management teams, to adapt and address the challenges imposed by the pandemic. Administrative staff were essential in dealing with technical and practical tasks including "setting up [digital] sessions, putting them into calendars", making sure all relevant information was made available, and "sending and collecting evaluation forms" (workforce manager). The shift to digital learning made these tasks more complicated and administrative teams were successful in gaining skills, quickly adapting and supporting L&D teams with technical and administrative issues.

3.1.4 Improving digital learning

Making digital learning more interactive and experiential – training providers and L&D teams invested time and resources to improve the learning experience. The development of skills meant that trainers were able to make better use of interactive resources available

(e.g., breakout rooms, comments, raising hands etc offered by MS Teams and Zoom), improving learners' engagement. A further example highlighted was the use of kits delivered to learners prior to the training session containing objects to be used during the session to stimulate and provide a sensorial (physical) experience.

The quality of digital learning increased – participants agreed that since the beginning of the pandemic the quality of digital learning being delivered has significantly improved. This included improved skills of instructors, better use of resources, better content, and more interactive sessions. It was also acknowledged that while this is very positive, it is still the beginning of a long journey, and continually improving the quality of digital learning is still a challenge.

3.1.5 Funding and support

Financial support provided by LAs – this was essential support offered to training providers, helping to absorb the extra costs for skills development, equipment, and software licenses. It allowed providers to adapt quickly and continue delivering training and development activities during the pandemic.

Social Care Wales financial support – LAs highlighted the importance of the support received from Social Care Wales to develop infrastructure, provide equipment, and develop skills. This allowed LAs to provide further support to partners and providers and was key in addressing some of the key challenges to digital learning during the pandemic.

Extra funding opportunities – some LAs benefited from accessing funding from external organisations, providing them with further resources to develop digital learning and support partners. Examples included the financial support accessed through the Wales Union Learning Fund (WULF) to support the development of digital literacy and digital skills.

3.2 Benefits of digital learning

Participants identified a number of important benefits to digital learning, which remain relevant beyond the pandemic.

Cost-effectiveness when developed on a large scale – developing digital learning at the national or regional level significantly reduces the local costs of infrastructure and resource development. A large-scale approach would contribute to reducing the "duplication of work" (workforce managers) that results from local and fragmented development of training on topics that are nationally relevant and would benefit from having a unified approach.

Wider reach – from the perspective of providers and LAs, one of the key advantages of digital learning is the possibility to enrol more people per session from different areas. This increases the number of people attending and improves the cost-effectiveness per session.

Flexibility – learners can complete training and development activities in ways that fit within their work schedule. For example, they can complete smaller sections of the training at a time and fit it around their work, with less impact on their frontline role. This is particularly relevant considering current issues around staff shortage, recruitment, and service capacity.

Paced learning – learners have the possibility to adapt the pace of learning to their learning style. In many cases, they are able to break sessions down into 'bite-size' sections allowing them more time to assimilate messages and understand the content. It also allows them to take their time to ask questions to their colleagues and managers and gain extra support.
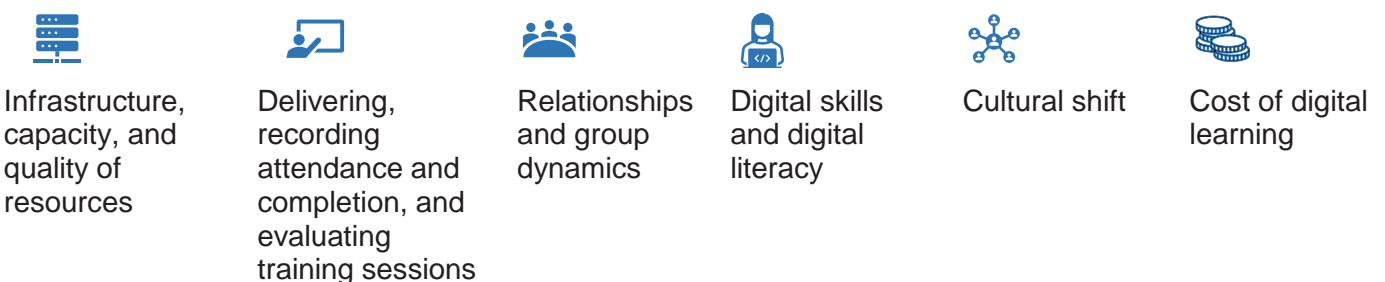
No need to travel – without the need to travel, learners and trainers save time, significantly reducing the impact on the delivery capacity for their organisations. It can also reduce the amount of physical energy spent on training and development activities as people feel "less tired and more ready" (frontline worker) after sessions.

More frequent training and development opportunities – lower costs related to logistics, time spent travelling, and setting up equipment, means that training sessions can be offered with more frequency, offering learners more options and flexibility to attend.

More opportunities for independent learning – digital learning encourages the development of digital skills and can change the relationship that learners have with digital resources, giving them more confidence and making it part of their daily routine. This allows them to access extra resources where they can read, watch videos and webinars, and learn more independently.

3.3 Challenges to digital learning

In this section, we present the key challenges to digital learning identified by this research. These challenges were discussed in the pandemic and post-pandemic context and participants highlighted that all challenges remain relevant to future approaches as they need to be addressed in the long term or continuously. We present these challenges under six categories:

| Infrastructure, capacity, and quality of resources | Delivering, recording attendance and completion, and evaluating training sessions | Relationships and group dynamics | Digital skills and digital literacy | Cultural shift | Cost of digital learning |

3.3.1 Infrastructure, capacity, and quality of digital resources

Staff shortage and service pressure – this is an ongoing challenge for the social care workforce in the UK and has an effect on digital learning in Wales. Participants described how the pandemic made it more difficult to recruit staff members, resulting in several services being understaffed.

> "A lot of people realised that they don't want to work in 24 hours care. The pandemic has made people appreciate time with their family a lot more […] and now we are really struggling with recruitment."
>
> (Social care provider)

This has put extra pressure on services and "it has been difficult to find time to do training and to support staff members" (Workforce Manager). As well as affecting capacity, issues around service pressure affect staff members' wellbeing, reducing their productivity and readiness to learn and develop.

> "It has taken a massive toll on a lot of staff, and they are still feeling exhausted, [only] now that we are coming out of it that people are starting to realise what we have been through."
>
> (Social care provider)

Smaller LAs and organisations – the difference in size directly affects LAs' and local organisations' availability of resources with some having "half or a third of capacity" (workforce managers' workshop) compared to other LAs. This means that there is an inconsistency in the level of development of digital infrastructure across LAs in Wales that "needs to be taken into consideration" (workforce manager) and addressed in future approaches to digital learning.

Connectivity issues – despite the improvements in connectivity in some regions and for some organisations, this remains as one of the key issues for digital learning in Wales.

> "I don't use my work device. I use my mobile because I know I will get a good wifi, [the connection is often bad here] so I can walk around and look for a better signal."
>
> (Frontline worker)

Connectivity issues identified are related to "reliability and speed" (workforce manager) of connection and can be related to:

- **Connectivity infrastructure** – some regions have "notoriously poor" (training provider) access to a reliable high-speed connection; this appears to be a regional issue related to infrastructure.

- **Adequate equipment and connection** – some organisations don't have access to the equipment needed to improve signals (modems, repeaters, 4G/5G dongles), and/or don't have resources to upgrade connection packages, or don't have the autonomy to switch to better internet providers.

- **Access to equipment** – more organisations now have access to more equipment through grants and loans schemes from LAs, however, the amount of equipment available is still not considered adequate. Participants reported that staff members often have to share devices and access training sessions within a group. While this is fine for some types of training, it can negatively affect their overall learning experience.

> "[More equipment is necessary] now that all staff need to be registered by October."
>
> (Workforce manager)
>
> "I couldn't speak to you on the computer because it has no sound, so I am using my own personal account, that also impacts because we don't always have the right facility… it has been a problem for other staff members." "We have two laptops in the building for everybody [over fifty staff members]." (Frontline workers)

Access to equipment remains urgent given local authority workforce managers' expectation that staff members will be more reliant on digital platforms to manage their learning and comply with new development requirements in Wales.

Quality of digital resources and focus on user experience – the quality and design of digital resources directly affects people's ability to access and navigate those resources. Even when staff members had basic skills and confidence in using digital resources (see Section 3.3.4 on digital literacy), they found accessing and using some platforms "too difficult" (frontline worker). Managers described some platforms as "not fit for purpose" (Workforce Manager). This exacerbates digital literacy issues by creating additional challenges for staff members in developing their basic skills and confidence. It also increases the number of staff members needing support, particularly the ones who have already developed basic skills and confidence but are still facing challenges due to issues around the quality and design of digital resources.

3.3.2 Delivering, recording attendance and completion, and evaluating training sessions

Participants highlighted the following key points related to the delivery of training and collection of relevant information to monitor and evaluate sessions:

Collecting feedback and evaluation – it is harder to collect feedback on training sessions and resources delivered digitally. A smaller percentage of learners will complete and return evaluation forms compared to face-to-face sessions. Some of the solutions proposed are to make the release of certificates conditional on the return of evaluation forms and improving communication pre- and post-training with the option of text messages, not only emails.

Sensitive subjects – training that involves the discussion of subjects that can affect learners' wellbeing can present challenges when delivered digitally. For example, themes related to safeguarding which can often include the discussion of violence and victimisation can trigger emotions in learners, particularly those with a history of trauma. In these cases, it is essential that facilitators and trainers are able to read body language, have private conversations to check on learners' wellbeing and provide individual support when necessary. Some solutions to this include identifying colleagues who are able to reach out to learners and agree on a protocol to check on their wellbeing, agreeing that all learners should keep their cameras on at all times, and having an extra person in the delivery team responsible for checking on learner's wellbeing and making one-to-one interventions and referrals to further support where necessary.

Digital wellbeing – screen fatigue was often mentioned as one of the key factors affecting learners' wellbeing. Participants described in different ways how being exposed to longer digital sessions can affect the learning experience. For most, interacting online is more tiring than face-to-face as it requires more attention and focus.

> "Because the brain is trying to pick up on these micro signals in terms of body language and because of the slight delay with the screen it means that [the brain] is constantly […] battling […] to analyse and feed it back to you, going through that loop in a way that it wasn't used to, which means it is more tiring."
>
> (Training provider)

Recording attendance and completion – while e-learning platforms offer effective ways to generate reports on attendance and completion, in other forms of digital learning the challenge remains. In more independent forms of learning such as online reading and watching videos, listening to podcasts, and attending webinars, it is not always possible to effectively record attendance and completion.

E-learning can be seen as a 'tick box' exercise – some e-learning modules are focused on compliance and appear to prioritise recording attendance, completion, and grades. The lack of focus on learners' experience can encourage learners to prioritise completing the task and 'tick the box' instead of focusing on the content and learning process.

> "This is what you got to do, you must watch this and the system will tell the boss whether or not you have done it so that box can be ticked."
>
> (Workforce manager)

Participants also described how, in some cases, learners can skip parts of videos and sections of the module to complete the training more quickly and still be able to "tick the box". Some solutions discussed included more focus on learners' needs and user experience, connecting topics for a more embedded learning experience, and supporting learners to make sense of the content and apply the learning into practice. In addition, some digital learning products can track how much time has been spent on digital learning activities.

Security and permission issues – this remains a challenge, despite improvements during the pandemic. Challenges related to being able to access resources that are blocked by firewalls and other security barriers, sharing content and collaborating with external organisations, and using specific features on software such as MS Teams and Zoom.

Increase in the number of absences or 'did not attend' (DNA) – participants reported an increase in the number of absences recently. Some of the reasons discussed include understaffed teams and service pressure, forcing learners to prioritise service delivery and change plans last minute, as well as screen fatigue and resistance to digital learning.

3.3.3 Relationships and group dynamics

Reduced opportunity to build relationships and networks – for frontline workers this is a significant disadvantage, and it can be a key reason for resistance to digital learning. Not being able to "ask questions [spontaneously], discuss in a better way and have that interaction before and after [sessions]" (frontline worker) were pointed to as some of the reasons why some frontline workers are "looking forward to" having more face-to-face training. This is similar for non-frontline staff who rely on networks to develop their work. Some argue that the informality of meeting people face-to-face is key to providing opportunities to get to know people and build networks.

Fewer interactions and limited informal learning – the ability to spontaneously ask questions and have informal discussions can be an important part of the learning process. As a group, learners can benefit from each other's views and expand their learning. In digital

platforms, spontaneous and informal interactions are largely limited as most conversations are moderated, organised, and more formal.

Managing group dynamics – for trainers and facilitators, the ability to read learners' reactions, and to understand how they are receiving the content and how they are interacting with their peers, are key to supporting a positive group learning experience. Based on these, the facilitator can check on learners' needs and wellbeing and provide support through small interventions to ensure they have an individual learner's attention and more direct forms of intervention such as "sitting at their table" (training provider) and supporting the discussion until the group gets back on track.

3.3.4 Digital skills and digital literacy

L&D staff members' skills – trainers, facilitators, and L&D managers from LAs and external organisations had a key role in the shift to digital learning during the pandemic. Assessing staff members' needs, getting to know solutions and technology available, and having to gain skills at the same time as supporting other staff were some of the challenges they faced during the pandemic. It was also highlighted that "there is still a need to continue developing skills", particularly towards "more interactive methods and new tools" (training provider) to improve digital learning.

Digital literacy – this was one of the key issues during the pandemic and it is likely to "persist in the next two years or so" as the turnover of staff is high and "most people being recruited are not from younger generations and are not as ready for digital upskilling" (workforce manager). Participants reported the following types of challenges related to digital literacy:

- **Basic skills** – staff who do not use computers and other digital devices regularly face difficulties in "turning devices on", "using mouse and keyboard" (social care provider), using applications, and "registering, logging in, and navigating" (training provider) digital platforms.

- **Confidence** – some staff may face difficulties in using specific applications and "registering, logging in, and navigating" specific digital platforms but can confidently use digital platforms in their daily life for shopping, entertainment, and personal administrative tasks. In these cases, staff members needed encouragement and guidance to "gain confidence" and "independence" (training provider).

Digital etiquette – this refers to online behaviour and appropriate use of communication features that impact on learning experiences and online interactions. Participants highlighted the following issues:

- **Presentation and professionalism** – these include issues related to "blurred boundaries" between personal and professional behaviours such as attending training sessions "on pyjamas, in bed, with their partner next to them" (training provider), or while "doing shopping with the phone attached to the trolley" (workforce manager).

- **Being present and participating** – keeping their cameras and microphones off at all times, and not participating through any means. This is a major barrier for trainers in

assessing learners' development and wellbeing, and often affects group dynamics by encouraging other learners to do the same.

- **Wellbeing and confidentiality** – digital etiquette can have implications for wellbeing as limited participation and presence (as outlined above) can reduce trainers' ability to monitor learners' reactions to the content presented (especially for sensitive subjects) and intervene when necessary. It can also affect confidentiality by reducing trainers' ability to understand the environment in which learners are attending the session from, and if there are people around them who should not be listening to the discussions.

Limited technical support – participants highlighted that L&D staff members often have limited access to technical support to solve problems, implement new technology, and develop skills. This was exacerbated during the pandemic with the increase in demand for technical support, and it remains an issue for some LAs and local organisations.

3.3.5 Cultural shift

In order to fully embed and make the best use of digital learning, participants reported that a continuous cultural shift is needed. While the pandemic had changed the attitudes of organisations toward digital learning, this shift was still seen as ongoing.

Resistance to digital learning – in the early stages of the pandemic, a proportion of staff members had doubts about the effectiveness of digital learning. According to participants, this resistance reduced significantly as staff members "got used to and accepted" (social care provider) and started to see the benefits of digital learning. Despite the improvements, participants highlighted that there is still a residual resistance which is now more related to staff members' need for more relationship-based learning and the expectation from some frontline staff and managers that all training will return to face-to-face as before.

> "I like to be interactive in training […] [and when it is face to face] you got other people around, and you can bounce ideas off each other […] I can raise a scenario with someone, have a conversation, and somebody could say something completely different […]. You can understand things much better."
>
> (Frontline worker)

As described above, training that enables spontaneous interactions between peers is important for most frontline workers. It is essential that more opportunities for relationship-based learning are offered through blended learning (face-to-face sessions alongside digital learning) and through innovative methods of digital learning that allow more spontaneous interactions between peers during online sessions.

Digital learning as a 'quick fix' during the pandemic – participants indicated that part of the social care workforce understands "digital learning as a quick fix to challenges during the pandemic" (workforce manager). This may generate an expectation that things will be "getting back to normal" (workforce managers' workshop), which reinforces the idea of digital learning as a temporary solution, reducing the perceived value of investing time and effort in getting to grips with it.

3.3.6 Cost of digital learning

Developing digital resources at a small scale is costly – costs related to software and platform licenses, skills development, production of content, and web development to develop quality digital learning resources. In addition, ongoing maintenance is required, to keep content up-to-date and to address technical issues; this is not cost-effective when developed at a small scale. It also leads to a duplication of work, as most LAs have common topics of training for which contents could be unified and delivered across regions.

> "The cost is astronomical […], if we were to look at doing it in-house, it is very time-consuming, it needs a team dedicated to it, and it has cost us thousands of pounds to have one small package[...]. [Before the pandemic] companies used to charge up to half of what they charge now."
>
> (Workforce manager)

It was also highlighted that costs have been rising since the start of the pandemic, due to high demand for services and products, and costs are unlikely to decrease in the short term.

To make digital learning cost-effective, there is an economy of scale (see Section 3.2, Benefits of digital learning), although at what point that economy is reached is unclear.

3.4 Participants' suggestions for future approaches

In this section we present some of the solutions to the challenges identified and other factors participants suggested should be considered in future approaches. These are organised under the following three categories.

Format of digital learning

Supporting learners

Infrastructure, systems, and resources

3.4.1 Format of digital learning

Blended approach – participants widely agreed that a blended approach is the ideal format for digital learning going forward. However, more discussions around the balance of face-to-face and digital learning and the factors to be taken into consideration to define the best approach are necessary. Factors to consider include "learners' need and user experience" (workforce manager), topic-specific needs – "prescriptive/about protocols, reflexive, or practical" (frontline worker), and "assessment needs and cost-effectiveness" (training provider).

Face-to-face learning where necessary – frontline workers and social care providers highlighted the importance of face-to-face learning to address the need for more relationship-

based learning. This is mostly related to the need for learners to have more opportunities to "socialise and learn in groups" (frontline worker) while also building relationships and gaining "peer support" (training provider) (see Section 3.3.5 Resistance to digital learning for more on relationship-based learning).

Interconnected topics – as part of improving the quality of digital learning and moving away from the "tick box" type of resource, participants suggested focusing more on embedded learning where topics would relate to each other and make more sense in practice. This was suggested in two ways: "embedding" and offering multi-topic training where possible, e.g. "first aid and dementia" or "equality and diversity" combined with "all other topics" (workforce managers' workshop), and offering post-training support through supervision and follow-up sessions to support learners to understand the correlation between topics.

Combining supervision or coaching with digital learning – to provide learners with the opportunity to reflect, make sense, and apply the learning into practice "is really important and it does add value and weight" to the learning outcomes. With the new system for continuous development coming into place it "should be easier for managers to quickly see a list of what training is taking place on a dashboard so that will facilitate those discussions" (Training provider) during supervision.

Quality assurance – participants raised the importance of having a unified approach for "quality assurance and benchmarking" (workforce managers' workshop) of digital learning resources. This may be facilitated by the development of a national approach to digital learning with a focus on curating and ensuring the quality of content offered.

More opportunities for peer and independent learning – supporting learners to access digital forums and communities where they can interact with peers and learn more independently. This would work particularly well for staff members with interests in specific topics and with the intention to build expertise and progress in their careers. Digital literacy and the lack of protected time for development are key barriers to this.

3.4.2 Supporting learners

Digital champions – as outlined in the previous section, the digital champions approach was highlighted as a way to support learners with low digital literacy. Participants pointed to the importance of expanding programmes that provide support for digital literacy, particularly from colleagues that are locally based within their organisation. However, challenges to implementing such a model have also been raised including the lack of reward to people providing support, lack of time/capacity dedicated to this role, and not enough training and support available. Potential solutions suggested included having "dedicated posts", "protected time" (Workforce Manager) for this role, and robust training and support package. See Section 2.1.2 for more details on this.

Inclusion – offering options for different learning styles and allowing learners to pace their learning by breaking sessions down into "bite size" sections enabling them to organise the learning around their needs. This also includes "offering contents in Welsh language" (Workforce Manager) and providing "resources for people with visual impairments" (Workforce Manager).

Pre- and post-session support – provide materials in advance welcoming learners and preparing them for the session or module. This could also include some agreements on digital etiquette establishing basic norms and presenting the rationale for that. Post-session materials may include further information and resources as well as post-training activities – such as practice learning logs – to support learners to apply their learnings to practice.

3.4.3 Infrastructure, systems, and resources

All-Wales approach – this was one of the key suggestions made by several participants to improve consistency, quality, and accessibility, and to reduce costs and duplication of work at the local level. It would involve developing an all-Wales learning platform to host and/or signpost key training and development activities, centralising resources and facilitating consistency, quality assurance and benchmarking of digital learning resources. Participants also highlighted challenges to the development of the approach that would need to be taken into consideration:

- **Politics at local and national level** – currently, LAs are adopting different learning management system (LMS) platforms and resources; a successful all-Wales platform would require leadership buy-in and a collective decision on the best system and approach. Addressing these challenges could mean that some LAs would need to review their approach and change their platforms, therefore, it is essential that this is widely discussed to reach a collective decision with plans to support those LAs that will need to invest in any necessary changes.

- **Compatibility between platforms and resources:** it is necessary to map platforms and resources currently in use across Wales to better assess the possibility of integrating or developing systems for information exchange between platforms. The ideal would be to develop an all-Wales platform that could host or signpost but that can manage learning, ensure quality, and focus on learning experience.

Learning Experience Platform (LXP) and Learning Management System – an LMS is a system through which system administrators can assign and track structured training content. Conversely, an LXP is a user-focussed platform in which the user chooses their own learning from more personalised content. Further discussions and a definition of priorities of future digital learning approaches are still needed, however, some participants raised the need to focus on user experience (LXP) rather than on learning management and compliance (LMS). According to participants, the lack of focus on user experience can lead to the development of resources that are not user-friendly and that are "too complicated" (frontline worker) to use and can be, alongside a lack of digital literacy, a major barrier to accessibility of digital learning (see Section 3.3.1, Quality of digital resources and focus on user experience for more on user experience).

More collaboration between LAs – to encourage knowledge exchange and consistency in local approaches to digital learning and workforce development more widely. The suggestion is to create a "structured approach for collaboration between LAs" (workforce manager), to share experiences and solutions as well as strategic plans for digital learning.

Digital learning passports – this was suggested as one of the strategies to allow staff members to carry their certificates across employers, reducing the duplication of training, and allowing staff members and employers to give more focus to continuous development rather than catching up with mandatory training.

4. Conclusion

This report outlines the findings of the research presenting the positive experiences, challenges, benefits, and ideas for future approaches to digital learning for social care workforce development in Wales. We spoke to local authority workforce managers and regional leads, training and social care providers, Social Care Wales managers, and frontline workers. Although the number of frontline workers engaging with the research was lower than planned, there was consistency and agreement amongst all participant groups with regards to challenges faced, possible solutions, and future approaches.

It is important that future planning and design of digital learning includes frontline staff. Moreover, we propose a definition of digital learning (Section 2) based on the literature reviewed and on participants' views. This is a good starting point for a more consistent definition to support future discussions on digital learning in Wales.

We found that while what people told us in interviews and workshops were consistent with the literature reviewed, the interviews and workshops provided important additional context with regards to both how digital learning is used within social care and how that training and support is organised in Wales. As such, this report identified additional challenges, enablers, and particularly solutions to digital learning based on views from different job groups within the social care system.

The people we spoke to highlighted a lot of differences between local areas and provider types, with some already having a well-developed digital learning strategy and provision before the pandemic, while others were having to rapidly develop it. There has been more of a cultural shift in some places than others and greater hesitancy remains within some areas. All approaches therefore need to support LAs at different stages, co-producing the digital learning strategy with those at different points.

The recommendations set out in the next chapter are specific to Wales, but some of these will be relevant to digital learning in social care in the UK more widely. By including a range of perspectives, a set of recommendations has been developed in consultation with workforce managers and regional leads, aimed at each of four different groups or areas: Policy and strategic; local authorities; training providers and social care providers; and social care managers and staff.

5. Recommendations

The recommendations are based on the findings presented above and are designed to be a first step in guiding future approaches to digital learning in Wales. These recommendations were finalised in consultation with the workforce regional leads.

5.1 Policy and strategic level

- **Create an All-Wales approach to digital learning** – in co-production with Social Care Wales, LAs, training providers, and social care providers including frontline staff.

    o **Create an all-Wales steering group** – with representatives from all regions, key social care and training providers, and key representatives from technical and infrastructure organisations to oversee the creation of an all-Wales digital learning platform. The steering group will be key in maintaining all LAs and relevant organisations involved in the process, providing opportunities to negotiate, make collective decisions, and implementing actions in a timely manner.

    o **Create an all-Wales 'one-stop shop' digital learning platform** – to curate, host, and signpost to relevant learning resources. This platform should focus on user experience (LXP over LMS), inclusion (outlined in the previous section), and staff members' needs – such as opportunities for relationship building and flexibility – to benefit those with lower digital literacy.

    o **Create a digital learning passports** – with an overarching system for recording attendance and completion, and training updates and alerts. This would ideally be integrated with the all-Wales digital learning platform.

- **Create opportunities for collaboration between LAs** – to share learning and strategic views on digital learning and to encourage consistency in digital and blended learning across Wales.

- **Provide guidance on digital, blended, and face-to-face learning** – to advise LAs, training providers, and social care providers on the most effective/appropriate forms of delivery according to learners' needs, topic needs (prescriptive/about protocols, reflexive, or practical), assessment needs, and cost-effectiveness. This could also include guidance on digital etiquette (e.g., outlining reasons and benefits for keeping cameras on and situations when that is essential or optional).

- **Expand funding support** – for skills development, access to equipment, and infrastructure development.

5.2 Local authorities

Supporting learners:

- **Developing digital literacy** – digital champions (with dedicated posts and/or protected hours), drop-in support centres, and basic skills training.

- **Balancing digital and face-to-face learning** – based on learners' needs (wellbeing, relationship building, interaction, informal support) particularly (but not only) for sensitive topics such as safeguarding.

- **Provide basic conditions for learners** – to access training sessions – protected time, adequate equipment, and basic skills (digital literacy).

  Supporting providers:
- **Continue and expand the support offered** – to training providers and social care providers to develop digital skills and to access equipment.

- **Develop local networks for training providers** – to share experiences and learning, and to provide input to the all-Wales steering group.

5.3 Training providers and social care providers

- **Increase the focus on developing L&D staff skills** – particularly towards the use of interactive and innovative methods for delivering training and developing content.

- **Focus on learners' need –** further adopting interactive and experiential methods of digital learning.

- **Encourage learners to apply their learning into practice** – e.g. using practice learning logs, follow-up contacts, and guiding managers on how to support staff members to apply the learning.

5.4 Social care managers and staff

- **Managers to support staff to apply learning to practice** – discussing real-life examples during supervisions and meetings.

- **Managers to support staff pre- and post-training** – support staff to access pre-training materials and to complete post-learning activities such as practice learning logs.

- **Staff members to continue developing their digital literacy and digital etiquette** – actively seeking support from colleagues and managers and using resources offered by the LA.

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7. Appendix

Evidence review methodology

Summary of interests	• impacts, benefits, and challenges of digital learning for the social care workforce • identify the key learning points, good practices, and challenges related to digital learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.
Settings	Social care settings, including residential, home care and other supported living.
Scope	Children, adult and older adults' services Training managed by the LA workforce managers **Exclude:** Early years and child care
Digital learning for these frontline social care staff	Domiciliary care workers Residential child care workers Residential care workers Care workers, care officers or care assistants Front-line care worker Senior care worker Personal assistants Care home cleaners, gardeners, and other ancillary staff **Exclude population:** Social workers Adult care home managers Managers Foster carers Registered social care nurses
Date limit	Jan 2020 – March 2022
Search terms	digital learning training skills e-learning online learning virtual learning virtual training blended hybrid remote distant/distance
Screening	We identified 90 references that were screened for relevance, resulting in 29 references. 22 references were included in the final document.