

# Commissioning Differently

Working in partnership  
to improve support  
for residents aged  
over 50 across Greater  
Manchester

May 2026



This summary is based on Ageing Better's work with strategic partner Greater Manchester Combined Authority. It includes detail of our joint work with co-design partner Humanly, an overview of Support to Succeed delivery by the Growth Company and excerpts from the evaluation by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) and WPI Economics.

Since 2016, Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) and Centre for Ageing Better (AB) have been working in partnership to develop and share innovative approaches to tackling social, economic and health inequalities in later life. A large part of this work has focused on exploring ‘what works’ in providing place-based employment, skills and wellbeing support for over 50s.

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## Understanding what works for over 50s

Ageing Better’s Rapid Evidence Review published in 2019 highlighted the need for enhanced evaluation of existing provision due to a lack of evidence as to what works for over 50s.

The partnership agreed on a joint project to look at opportunities for a new way to support people and to understand what works for economically inactive people in their 50s and 60s. In 2020, AB commissioned design organisation Humanly to lead an 18-month co-design process.

This work was carried out across two stages of co-creation and prototyping. Between July 2020 and January 2022, [Humanly](#) led the project team through an iterative process to:

- Understand users
- Challenge assumptions
- Redefine problems
- Co-create potential solutions with people over 50
- Develop innovative solutions to prototype and test

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## Involving key stakeholders – including those with lived experience of looking for work

The co-design process involved:

- 90 people aged over 50 with lived experience of being involuntarily out of work
- Service providers and voluntary and community sector organisations
- Commissioners
- Employers
- Experts in labour markets, economics, procurement and coaching for people aged over 50

168 stakeholders were engaged in 78 co-creation activities, including interviews, postal activities, workshops and surveys. Locations and participants were selected to ensure diversity of ethnicity, socio-economic profiles, levels of unemployment or economic inactivity, links to industry, and experience of long-term ill health or disability.

A key insight was that the failure of current employment support to meet the needs of people aged over 50 is a result of the way that support is commissioned.

People aged 50+ identified key ‘ingredients for good employment support’:

- Help uncovering transferable skills to improve confidence in moving into new industries
- Empathy for circumstances and a holistic view of the person’s life, not just their qualifications
- Support from people who understand their needs, industry and aspirations
- Education and training information in one place
- A mix of local online and face-to-face training
- The ability to try a job before applying, to see if it is suitable for both employee and employer

These key themes were used to shape several prototypes of support which were then tested with residents across Greater Manchester (GM). The insights from this process formed the basis of the Support to Succeed (STS) model for over 50s.

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## Meeting the need in Greater Manchester

Greater Manchester has seen persistently high levels of economic inactivity among adults aged 50-64. While many people in this age group want to work, they are more likely than younger cohorts to face multiple, overlapping barriers to employment. These include long-term health conditions or disability, caring responsibilities, skills mismatches, digital exclusion, confidence loss following redundancy or ill health, and

age-related discrimination in recruitment. For many, extended periods out of work have also led to social isolation and deteriorating wellbeing.

Existing employment support was widely seen as insufficiently flexible or accessible for this group. Conditional, job-search-focused provision often failed to engage people who were distant from the labour market or whose primary needs related to health, confidence or stability rather than immediate job entry. Within GM’s devolved employment support system, we wanted to test whether a voluntary, holistic and community-based model could re-engage economically inactive residents aged 50+ and support progress towards work and wider life outcomes.

Support to Succeed was commissioned as part of the wider Working Well system. It aimed to complement Jobcentre-led provision by reaching people who were not engaged with mainstream services and offering personalised support tailored to individual circumstances. Although the programme was open to adults aged 19+, a specific focus was placed on understanding how the model worked for people aged 50+, given both the scale of inactivity in this group and policy interest in extending working lives.

To understand how this model could work in practice Ageing Better commissioned the [National Centre for Social Research \(NatCen\)](#) and [WPI Economics](#) to carry out a large-scale evaluation of the 50+ strand of delivery. This not only looked at what worked in terms of delivery performance but also provided an opportunity for learning around commissioning differently, inclusive service design and holistic, responsive provision in a local setting.



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## The Support to Succeed model

Support to Succeed was designed to support economically inactive residents across the ten boroughs of Greater Manchester, offering support to people of all ages but with a specific focus on over 50s to understand what good support could look like for this age group.

The voluntary programme was delivered by the [Growth Company \(GC\)](#) as lead provider, with a supply chain of seven local organisations, all engaging with a range of additional local services designed to meet the needs of participants.

Initially, the eligibility criteria for the STS programme were as follows:

- Residency in Greater Manchester
- Aged 19 or over
- Not currently enrolled in a DWP/GMCA employment support programme, nor due to be referred to one
- Not part of the DWP intensive work search groups

From January 2025, the eligibility was broadened to include unemployed individuals, in addition to those classed as economically inactive. Despite a dedicated 50+ strand of delivery, there was a deliberate decision not to treat 50+ as a homogeneous group in recognition of the vast range of personal circumstance and experiences of participants. Participants could choose to access interventions designed specifically for over 50s, or to engage with all-age services as they saw fit.

Voluntary participation, community-based outreach and relationship-led delivery were central to engagement and sustained

participation. Face-to-face outreach in trusted local settings enabled staff to build relationships with people who were cautious or sceptical about employment services.

A dedicated team of Community Engagement Officers (CEOs) worked across all ten GM boroughs to drive referrals. Participants were also able to self-refer to support. Once enrolled, participants received support from dedicated Key Workers (KWs) who helped create personalised action plans and regularly reviewed their progress. [The Work Star Outcomes Star tool](#) was used to assess progress and set goals related to employment outcomes, such as motivation, confidence, job skills, and experience. Both participants and Key Workers could input into this, providing a visual representation of steps taken over time.

Participants were referred to specialist providers for a range of external support sessions. These included health and wellbeing support, financial support, social and confidence building sessions. The range of specialist provision available continually evolved based on need – with the lead provider able to shape delivery and expand access to a range of services such as nature and arts-based support.

For those who wanted or felt ready to look for employment, support was provided by Employer Engagement Consultants (EECs). This included assistance with job applications, work placements, volunteering, and further skills development focused on employment. EECs also engaged with employers to expand the opportunities available to STS participants.

A key principle underpinning STS was that all support be tailored to meet individual needs. All STS staff were given unconscious

bias training and stressed the importance of avoiding assumptions about a participant's requirements based solely on age or any other characteristic. Staff delivering STS were given access to the insights from the initial co-design phase of work as part of the commissioning process but did not receive further age-specific training to work with the 50+ cohort. Key Workers came from diverse backgrounds and had a wealth of experience of supporting people with different needs into employment.

As a result of this, over 50s engaging with the programme were offered a range of interventions similar to those offered to other adults, with age-targeted groups or sessions with a specific age focus on certain topics being offered based on need. Flexibility in pace, intensity and duration allowed the programme to respond to fluctuating health and caring responsibilities, and supported engagement among those who were not immediately ready for work.

Beyond age specific differences in the offer, it should be noted that STS was delivered by multiple organisations who delivered the programme in different ways (whilst complying with core requirements set by the GC). The evaluation saw differences in terms of the roles and responsibilities within each provider organisation, the pace and duration of the support and the degree to which KWs could accommodate participants' needs, based on KW workloads and availability. The evaluation did not find the differing approaches to have any specific impact on the 50+ cohort when compared to other age groups.

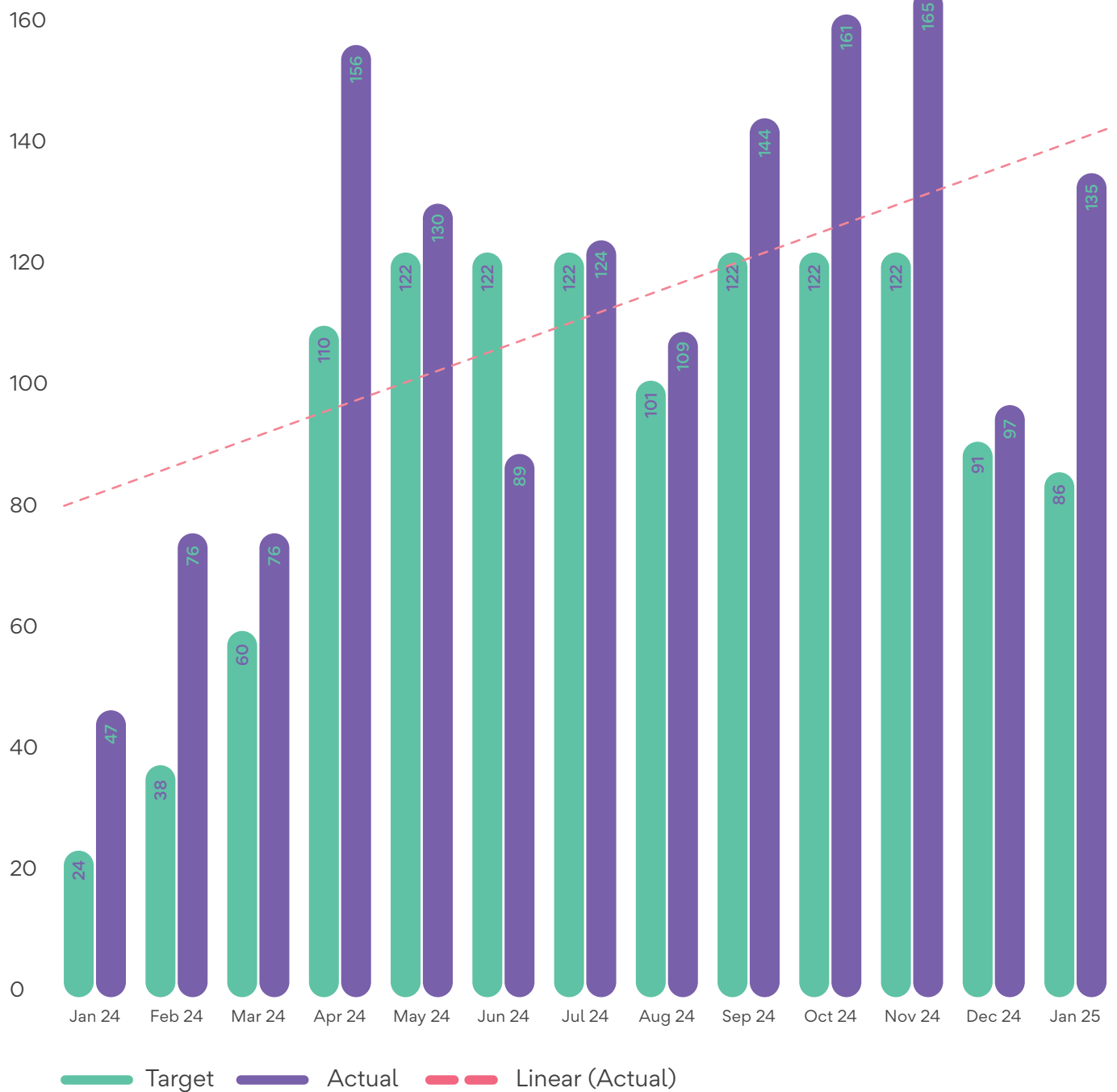
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## Who the programme reached

STS was designed to support those not engaging with existing employment support services. It successfully engaged people aged 50+ who are typically under-represented in employment support.

**Recruitment exceeded expectations, with over 1,500 participants aged 50+ joining the programme in its first 12 months of delivery, exceeding the recruitment target by 30%.**

## Performance by month (50+ Participants)



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Participants were, on average, far from the labour market, with long periods out of work, high levels of disability or long-term health conditions, lower qualifications and reduced confidence. Many would not have engaged with Jobcentre-led or mandatory provision, demonstrating the impact of the programme in reaching those that are consistently identified as high-need and hard to reach:

- The programme engaged a greater proportion of Disabled over 50s than is observed in the GM wider population, with 45% of those on programme classing themselves as Disabled.
- The top categories of presenting needs identified by participants during their initial assessment were the same for the older and younger age groups – confidence and motivation (53% of 50+ participants), followed by life skills (including digital skills) and lack of formal training/qualifications.
- Physical health conditions were more likely to be identified by the 50+ group (28% compared to 19% for those below 50).
- The 50+ group was slightly less likely to have basic skills such as numeracy and literacy at levels required for work (59% vs. 64%).
- 16% of participants aged 50+ had no educational qualifications compared to 11% of those aged below 50.

- Participants aged 50+ had spent a longer time out of work - around 279 weeks or 5.4 years, compared to 248 weeks (4.8 years) for those aged less than 50.

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## What worked in engaging over 50s?

Unlike some employment support programmes that rely primarily on referrals from one or two partners, **STS invested significant resources in developing a multi-faceted recruitment strategy** to achieve positive outcomes. This approach involved building a broad network of referral partners and conducting extensive community outreach to engage a diverse range of participants, including those aged 50+.

‘We know that our target participants don't want to go to mainstream services on their own accord for the most part; you have to go to them, but there isn't just one place where all these people are. They're dotted around. They're in local communities. There might be one or two people. The amount of stakeholders and resource you need to engage to get the referrals is absolutely huge in comparison to just having a really good working relationship with the Jobcentre.’

*Strategic stakeholder*

A key enabler supporting successful 50+ and wider recruitment, was that each partner was able to draw on their **extensive knowledge of local areas** and their existing networks and groups.

**Face-to-face, community-based recruitment** methods were seen as crucial to engaging 50+ participants. This approach allowed staff to explore needs and build trust and interest in the offer. Staff based themselves at, and regularly visited, a wide range of services and community settings known to be used by 50+ residents. Staff also highlighted the importance of running recruitment focused events where they could showcase the benefits of STS and have conversations with 50+ participants to encourage sign-up.

**Word of mouth** was also seen as important to the recruitment of 50+ participants. Staff reported instances where 50+ residents approached CEOs after having seen their peers being recruited onto the programme, or after hearing positive feedback about STS from peers.

**Marketing materials were co-designed** to ensure appropriateness for an over 50s audience. Key features included:

- Having materials with age-appropriate participants pictured on them and font sizes that were accessible.
- Getting the balance between giving key information whilst also being simple, bold and eye-catching.
- Highlighting the health and wellbeing elements of STS when considering 50+ participants. This was particularly engaging for those who were not looking at immediate progression into work.

- Having a selection of age/background appropriate ‘good news stories’ which highlighted participant journeys through STS.
- Using a range of platforms to promote the programme whilst recognising that face-to-face recruitment was often key to encouraging participation, including from 50+ participants.

Successful recruitment of 50+ participants was also felt to be enabled by the range of locally available support on offer and the fact that accessing support was not conditional on securing or searching for jobs. These features of the programme were seen as important when it came to encouraging 50+ participants and those furthest from employment to sign up. A helpful framing of STS for this group was felt to be describing it as a gentle and supported “first step” towards making positive changes.

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## What difference did it make?

STS was designed to support progression towards work by improving wider life circumstances, rather than just focusing on job outcomes. Reflecting this, the evaluation considered both the changes experienced by participants during their time on the programme, and the potential impact the approach could have if delivered to a wider group of residents. This was particularly important given the characteristics of STS participants and their distance from the labour market, which differed from those engaged by many other employment support programmes.

The evaluation found clear evidence that STS participants experienced meaningful improvements in wellbeing over the course of the programme. Participant progress was measured against [Outcome and Work Star models](#):

- Life satisfaction increased from 5.0 at entry to 10.5 at exit - a significant rise of 109.2% within the participant group.
- Work Star stability scores (covering finances, housing, and wider life circumstances) rose by 1.3 points (+24.9%).
- Work Star health and wellbeing scores increased by 1.6 points (+28.9%).

Qualitative evidence reinforced these findings, suggesting that participation in STS was associated with renewed purpose, motivation and happiness. Participants described feeling more positive about their day-to-day lives and having something to look forward to, particularly where they had previously experienced isolation or a lack of structure.

‘It’s kind of like a new life for [this 50+ participant]. She said, ‘I can look forward to the day and know that I’m not staying at home all day or not doing nothing.’

*Key Worker*

Participants frequently linked improvements in life satisfaction to the practical support provided through STS, particularly in addressing issues related to housing, finances or benefits. This is also reflected in participant-level outcomes recorded by STS staff, which show that **73 per cent of participants aged 50 and over made progress in overcoming structural barriers to employment.**

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### What helped drive these positive changes?

- Regular participation in structured activities and progress against personal goals, offering a renewed sense of purpose, especially for those furthest from work.
- Opportunities for social connection, reducing isolation commonly experienced among 50+ participants on entry.
- Specialist support, helping participants better understand and manage long-term health conditions and providing valuable peer support in group settings.
- Practical problem-solving support from Key Workers - including help with benefits, housing and other pressing challenges - reducing stress and improving peace of mind.

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## Employment outcomes

Despite not being a “work-first” programme, figures provided by the Growth Company showed 9% of 50+ found employment. Those over 50 were also more likely to be employed than those aged 40-49 after their time on programme. The support offered by STS also led to participants reporting a particularly large increase in confidence of securing work – 37.1% higher at the end of the programme than at the start.

STS participants experienced significant improvements across a range of skills-related Work Star domains, indicating increased confidence, capability and readiness to move towards employment:

- **Job search skills:** increased from **4.2 to 6.1 (+1.9)** showing improved confidence and readiness to look for work.
- **Job skills and experience:** 5.0 to 6.4 (+1.4) showing greater recognition and development of work-related skills.
- **Basic skills (English, maths, digital): 5.1 to 6.7 (+1.6)** showing reduced skills gaps that previously blocked employment.
- **Workplace and social skills: 5.1 to 6.7 (+1.6)** – showing better communication, teamwork and relationship-building.



# Case Studies

The following case studies give examples of the wider impact of STS – they show the range of interactions with participants, and the range of outcomes for these people – from finding work, to reducing social isolation and improving digital skills.

These case studies were developed as part of the value for money assessment of the programme, highlighting that employment alone should not be used as the measure of a programme's success and that wider impact has implications for local budgets.

Across all case studies, the results suggest that STS provision is very likely to generate positive value for money, i.e. benefits that exceed its costs, at the individual level.

## **1 A participant enters work after reducing language barriers and participating in volunteering**

A participant who was a refugee with limited English language skills has been brought into STS via targeted refugee outreach activities by the provider.

Although the person already had basic work skills, the STS Key Worker worked with them to learn more about UK work culture, get a UK job reference and improve their English. To support these aims, the participant was signposted to ESOL sessions and found a volunteer placement at a local charity shop.

Following their time on STS, they went on to find work.

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### **Value for Money impact**

The programme breaks even for an individual moving into employment (benefits equalling costs).

## **2 A participant who experienced reduced social isolation when in retirement**

A participant who was in contact with an addiction recovery service found out about STS through staff at the service. They had been dismissed from their last job and had just reached the point where they were able to access their work pension from a previous job.

They felt that they were now too old to work and were not looking for a job, but had no other activities planned to keep them engaged and active. Their Key Worker identified a range of lifestyle and wellbeing activities - going for walks, visiting museums, relaxation exercises and drop in coffee mornings - to increase their confidence and begin to engage them in social activities again. The participant actively took part in these and said that this helped with their feelings of being socially isolated.

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### **Value for Money impact**

Where the programme reduces social isolation, participants only need to experience a modest improvement in life satisfaction (around 0.76 points) for the cost of their participation to be offset.

### **3 A participant experiencing improved health and wellbeing leading to increased volunteering**

A participant who had been a carer both for their mother and their wife, was now unemployed and receiving Universal Credit. They had previously found work stressful so the idea of working again made them feel anxious and they had avoided looking for jobs.

They said they heard about a 'back to work scheme' and eventually met with an STS Key Worker. They liked that the environment was quiet, relaxed and calm, and that they were not pressurised to look for a job. They were referred to mental health support and also did CV writing. Although the participant was already volunteering, improvements in their health and sense of wellbeing encouraged them to volunteer more. The increased volunteering consisted of visiting people in care homes and driving a minibus to take them on days out. They reported feeling much more positive about their life since engaging with STS.

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#### **Value for Money impact**

Participants only need to experience small improvements (around 0.76 points in life satisfaction) for the cost of their participation to be offset. There are also additional benefits of increasing volunteering.

### **4 A participant taking first steps by reducing digital skills, and health and wellbeing barriers**

A participant who suffered from anxiety and depression who therefore found it difficult to get and keep a job. They were currently in receipt of Universal Credit. They saw a leaflet about STS in their local library and contacted the project. The participant lacked the digital skills needed to create an electronic version of a CV, to email it and to use a smart phone. The Key Worker referred them onto the digital skills course, which they liked because they felt the course tutor was relaxed and was not judgemental about their lack of digital skills. They were also referred onto mental health support and reported improved self-confidence through interacting with STS participants. The participant had tried an eight-week work placement in a warehouse to get experience of being interviewed and to try out the job, but felt the job wasn't right for them. They are now applying for jobs in plumbing and are trying to get a construction skills certificate.

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#### **Value for Money impact**

Benefits associated with improved digital skills mean the programme is likely to break even at the individual level compared to an average cost per participant. This indicates, considering only this benefit could by itself justify the cost of participation.

## **5 A participant experiencing reduced practical and digital barriers and completing a work placement**

A participant in their 60s wanted to find a job when they arrived in the UK because their partner did not earn enough to support the whole family. They recognised that their mental health and lack of digital skills meant they would need help to find the right type of work. A local librarian told them about STS, and they contacted a Growth Company Key Worker.

Through STS they were referred to the digital skills course, provided with a laptop to practise these skills, and helped with travel expenses to attend the course. The Key Worker also supported them by advising them about suitable jobs and UK work culture and referred them to job interviews and job fairs. The Key Worker also referred them to the Manchester Step into Care programme. They did a six-week administrative placement in a GP surgery. They applied for a similar post but did not get it. With feedback from the Key Worker, they are still trying to improve their skills and interview technique. They welcomed the support they had received and were hopeful of finding a job.

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### **Value for Money impact**

Acquiring digital skills generates downstream benefits. These benefits could increase in the future if the participant were to obtain a job. The programme remains cost effective at the individual level even if the participant could only get a job several years later.

# What does this mean for future employment support provision for people 50+?

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## What works well

- **Strong recruitment and engagement:** Investing in outreach models which prioritise trust-building and local, community-based engagement has a positive impact on 50+ residents.
- **Positive changes in wellbeing and skills:** Tailored support and engaging activities help participants build essential skills and many reported feeling an overall improvement in their approach to both looking for work and feeling positive about progressing towards opportunities in the future.
- **Personalised support:** Flexible, participant-led approaches and strong relationships with Key Workers are key, particularly for those with complex needs.
- **Peer support and social connection:** Age-similar peer groups and specialist health support were effective in reducing isolation and building confidence. Participants continually fed back on the positive nature of support and the impact this had on their wider circumstance. The impact of provision on those experiencing social isolation should not be underestimated.

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## Lessons for future provision

- **Engage residents and key stakeholders in programme development:** Speaking to those who will need and access support is the best way to ensure that services developed are needed, targeted and do not duplicate existing activity.
- **Design for engagement:** People aged 50+ who are economically inactive often require face-to-face, community-based engagement and time to build trust. Commissioning models should recognise that reaching this group is resource-intensive but essential if inequalities in employment are to be addressed.
- **Balance wellbeing and employment:** A Key Worker model that offers flexible, one-to-one support is critical for helping older participants navigate complex and overlapping barriers such as health conditions, digital exclusion and social isolation. Programmes should be designed to allow this to sit alongside more job-focused interventions for those ready to work or progress with accredited training.
- **Expand specialist provision:** Increased capacity for health and wellbeing support and tailored digital skills training would better meet the needs of older participants with complex barriers. Funders should explore allocating resources for specialist health and digital inclusion services as part of integrated employment support and enable strong local partnerships rather than standalone employment provision.

- **Focus on benefits other than finding paid work:** For people who have been out of work for many years, progression towards work, improved wellbeing and increased confidence may be more appropriate early outcomes than immediate job entry. Commissioners should align outcome frameworks accordingly. The positive impact on their progression towards work should not be discounted when looking at the impact of support.
- **Programme duration:** If providers of support are to better progress participants furthest from the labour market, then they need longer-term delivery models with scope for both targeted and wide-reaching interventions. Longer term interventions also allow space for more positive rapport building with Key Workers and allow participants more time to work on confidence and transferable skills, something seen as particularly important for 50+ participants.
- **Strengthen data and progression tracking:** Including reporting on outcomes, including intermediate and 'distance travelled' measures, for 50+ and 60+ participants as standard across employment support provision, will lead to a better understanding of what does and does not work for this age group.

Let's take action today for all our tomorrows.

**Let's make ageing better.**

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Our work focuses on creating better workplaces, homes and communities, while tackling ageism and addressing inequality in later life.