DIGITAL INCLUSION NEEDS ASSESMENT REPORT
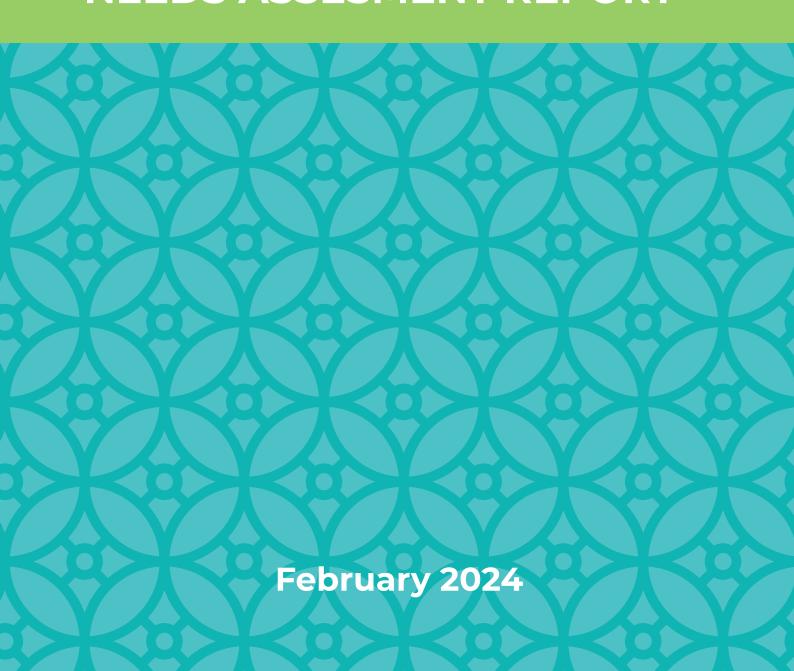
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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FOREW0RD

Imagine a world where displaced people, fleeing unimaginable hardship, not only rebuild their lives, but flourish, taking root and enriching new communities with their unique talents, skills and perspectives. In the UK, driven by forces like war, persecution, and political instability, individuals from diverse backgrounds arrive year after year, carrying dreams as vibrant and varied as the colors of their homelands.

Displaced people come with the potential to ignite innovation, bridge cultural gaps, and build bridges across languages and backgrounds. They could be the next groundbreaking entrepreneur, the skilled professional filling a critical gap, or the passionate educator inspiring minds. Evidence already speaks volumes: skilled refugees in the UK contribute nearly £1 million annually through taxes, while plugging vital skill gaps businesses desperately need[1].

However, a subtle yet formidable obstacle looms large, threatening to exclude many: the digital divide. The lack of access to digital skills and technology acts as an imposing barrier, hindering their potential for growth and prosperity. The components of this challenge are intricate and interconnected: language barriers complicate understanding and navigating the digital realm, financial constraints impede access to devices and training, the lack of devices and internet creates a tangible barrier to become digital natives, among many other challenges. Each one reinforcing the others, constructing a seemingly insurmountable obstacle for displaced individuals striving to reimagine their lives through the lens of the fast moving digital world.

My conviction is that no single entity can tackle these challenges alone, as reflected in the African proverb: "It takes a village to raise a child."

I strongly believe that this sentiment should resonate deeply among organizations and stakeholders dedicated to supporting displaced youth throughout the UK. It is evident that the solution lies in collaboration, not competition. Emphasizing synergies over silos is essential to define, build, and comprehensively support the journey of displaced individuals.

This report delves into the depths of the challenges faced by displaced youth in acquiring digital skills, but also spotlights the possibilities that lie with the power of a collective approach. It calls on all stakeholders – government, businesses, educators, and community leaders – to join hands and champion the crucial agenda of digital inclusion for displaced youth.

It is time to rewrite the narrative: from refugees as mere pitied survivors to valuable contributors, actively weaving their stories into the rich tapestry of the UK as a nation.

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Project Manager

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[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/skilled-refugees-contributing-1m-to-uk-economy-each-year#:~:text=Skilled%20refugees%20are%20contributing%20nearly,the%20vital%20skills%20they%20need

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose of the Project

The Digital Inclusion North East (DI NE) project aims to comprehensively understand and address the needs and challenges faced by displaced youth (age 18 to 35) in the North East of England, in acquiring digital skills and integrating into the digital culture. Conducted by Digital Opportunity Trust (DOT) UK in partnership with Good Things Foundation, the initiative seeks to identify and help fill the gaps in mainstream support, highlighting the importance of tailored assistance for displaced youth integration in the region.

Key Findings

1. Existing Support Ecosystem:

The research project mapped and identified displaced youth support organisations, revealing a nuanced landscape of organisational services in the North East which includes those offering housing, English language services, asylum seekers case support, refugee integration services, and business and enterprise training.

2. Ecosystem Gap:

Despite the diverse array of services available in the North East, there is a notable gap in terms of organisations offering digital skills training for entrepreneurship, remote work and employability, to prepare displaced youth for successful transition and integration into the competitive workforce. This gap underscores the need for a collaborative, ecosystem approach to pool resources and expertise to foster an integrated, synergistic environment that amplifies collective impact.

3. Challenges Faced by Displaced Youth (to acquire digital skills):

Mental health disclosure, language barriers, limited access to devices, and connectivity issues emerged as significant hurdles for displaced youth to access and unlock essential digital skills.

4. Challenges Faced by Organizations Supporting Displaced Youth:

Competition for funding stifles collaboration and partnership, negatively affecting the holistic development of displaced people.

Next Steps

To address the identified challenges for the displaced youth to seamlessly acquire digital skills, the following short to mid-term actions were recommended:

1. Collaborating with key organisations and youth with lived experience in the North East to co-design inclusive digital skills programmes and test in an initial pilot to up to 120 young people.

2. Improving programme outreach methods to cater for both online and offline groups.

3. and effective sharable resource mapping and pooling to avoid effort duplication.

These actions will be applied in Phase II of the Digital Inclusion North East (DI NE) project, supported by the Good Things Foundation's latest Digital Inclusion Impact Grant, starting January 2024. The upcoming phase will focus on the design and implementation of a digital skills training programme tailored for displaced youth, starting with the Newcastle area.

In the long run, a call is made for the formation and promotion of stakeholder collaborations involving government (local authorities), universities, and industry (corporates and non-profits). This will allow holistic problem-solving and help unlock larger funding for the organisations involved.

Call to Action

Finally, the initiative calls upon all organisations serving displaced youth in the North East to partner and collaborate with us on digital skills training and other support that will ensure their transition to work, joint funding applications or any other initiatives that will help uplift the displaced youth in the region and across the UK.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Context

Skilled refugees are contributing nearly £1 million each year in income tax and national insurance thanks to UK government pilot schemes to help those fleeing their homes find employment and transition to work, helping to boost the UK economy and enabling businesses to access the vital skills they need.

[1] However, despite evident innovation and determination among displaced populations, mainstream support often inadequately addresses their unique needs, especially in terms of accessing vital development services such as digital skills training to overcome the digital divide and thrive in the UK.

Digital Opportunity Trust (DOT) UK[2], in partnership with Good Things Foundation[3], is conducting outreach and research in the North East of England, mainly the Newcastle area.

The main objective is to do a comprehensive mapping of the existing support ecosystem for displaced youth in the region. Simultaneously, conduct a thorough needs assessment to understand the specific challenges faced by displaced youth to access essential digital skills training they need to successfully transition into employment, remote work or entrepreneurship.

DOT UK's advisory board of talented youth with lived experience, the YLAB (Youth Leadership Advisory Board)[4] acted as a strategic council and project managers for this project. Having gone through to set their mission, they represent lived experience and meaningful insights into the barriers faced by young displaced people in the UK.

1.2 Key Objectives

Understand the existing support ecosystem for displaced youth in the North East of England, particularly Newcastle
- » Identify and describe existing support organisations and programmes for displaced people in the area
- » Analyse the gaps and overlaps in the support ecosystem

Assess the barriers
- » Conduct surveys and interviews to comprehensively understand the challenges faced by the displaced youth to access digital skills
- » Conduct surveys and interviews to understand the overall challenges faced by organisations supporting the displaced youth
- » Identify the key themes from the needs assessment

Develop recommendations for improving access to digital skills training for the displaced youth
- » Propose strategies for improving access to digital skills training.
  Suggest ways to improve resource utilisation and awareness

[1]https://www.gov.uk/government/news/skilled-refugees-contributing-1m-to-uk-economy-each-year#:~:text=Skilled%20refugees%20are%20contributing%20nearly,the%20vital%20skills%20they%20need
[2] https://uk.dotrust.org/
[3] https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/
[4] https://uk.dotrust.org/media/sites/10/2023/04/UK-YLAB-Co-design-Report_January-2023.pdf

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Methodology

To achieve the stated objectives of the project, a mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to provide a comprehensive understanding.

Participating organisations were pre selected and recruited to ensure diversity of offerings. These organisations were grouped into three categories for analysis, covering the critical stakeholders in government, university, and industry (private sector / charities):

Charities:	Social Enterprises:	Government:
Organisations focused on providing humanitarian aid, skills training and social support to displaced youth such as Princes Trust and North of England Refugee Service (NERS)	Organisations that support refugee entrepreneurs through various programmes, including mentoring, training, and access to resources e.g North East BIC and Ideas for Change Consulting	Local government agencies leading the skills and development programmes for displaced youth e.g Gateshead Council (Learning and Skills)

2.2 Quantitative Data Collection

Online surveys were distributed to displaced youth in the North East through outreach with collaborating organisations. The surveys focused on skills baseline and in understanding the challenges faced by displaced youth in accessing digital skills from their perspective.

2.3 Qualitative Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key contacts from the collaborating organisations to gain deeper insights into their experiences, perspectives, and specific needs. The interviews also explored their recommendations for improving the state of support for displaced youth.

3. KEY FINDINGS

3.1 Mapping of the Ecosystem

The following organisations were examined to compile the overview of services within the ecosystem, as delineated in the table below:

	Housing	Educational Programmes	Digital Skills Training	Entrepreneurship and Apprenticeship	Language Services	Asylum Advice	Refugee Integration Service	Digital Tools (Devices/SIM Cards)
Prince's Trust	✓			✓				
North East BIC				✓	✓	✓	✓	
North of England Refugee Service (NERS)	✓				✓	✓	✓	
Action Foundation	✓			✓	✓	✓		✓
Gateshead Learning and Skills		✓		✓	✓			

Table 1: A summary of the scoped ecosystem services

Find below a more detailed description of the organisation reached and scoped during the research project:

≫ **Princes Trust[5]:**

1. Confidence-Building Courses: For ages 16 to 25, focusing on developing life and work skills.

2. Employment Support: For ages 16 to 30, connecting individuals with top employers and providing support for CV building and interview techniques.

3. Business Start-Up Support: For ages 18 to 30, offering mentorship and funding assistance to launch and run successful businesses.

North East BIC[6]:

1. **Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF):** Supports refugees in transitioning into appropriate employment in the UK.

2. **Social Enterprise Team:** Assists individuals with entrepreneurial ambitions in starting their own businesses.

Northern England Refugee Service (NERS)[7]:

1. **Asylum Advice Service:** Provides advice and support throughout all stages of the asylum process.

2. **Integration Service:** Supports individuals granted refugee status and leave to remain, aiding in their transition into mainstream society.

3. **Housing:** Offers short-term housing and individualised support for up to two years to vulnerable individuals granted leave to remain.

4. **Interpreting and Translation Services:** Provides English language services for clients and other organisations, facilitating communication across a range of sectors.

Action Foundation[8]:

1. **Language:** Provides free English lessons for asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants,coordinating assessments and enrolments.

2. **Interaction:** Hosts weekly drop-ins for asylum seekers and refugees to access advice, build connections, and receive support.

3. **Letting:** Offers supported accommodation for newly granted refugees at risk of homelessness during their transition.

4. **Housing:** Provides supported accommodation and legal support for destitute individuals refused asylum.

5. **Digital Inclusion:** Supplies devices, data, and basic IT training to help people engage safely with the online world.

1. **Educational Services:**
Offers a wide range of courses, from entry-level to Level 6, to support diverse learning journeys of displaced people.

2. **Apprenticeships:**
As the second-largest Local Authority provider of apprenticeships in the UK, supports both recruitment and individuals seeking apprenticeship opportunities.

3. **Specialised Teams:**
Includes teams for maths, English, ICT, and ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) provision.

3.2 Ecosystem Gap

While the presented organisations in the North East demonstrate a commendable array of services, it's evident that there is a noticeable gap in the provision of digital skills training programmes. Currently, the ecosystem primarily focuses on housing support, education and training, apprenticeships, entrepreneurial guidance, and language services (English lessons and translations). However, the absence of dedicated digital skills training programmes represents a critical void in addressing the evolving needs of displaced individuals in an increasingly digitised world.

Recognizing the significance of digital literacy in today's society, there is an opportunity for organisations within the North East to incorporate specialised programmes that equip displaced individuals with essential digital skills. Bridging this gap will not only enhance the employability of beneficiaries but also empower them to navigate the online world effectively, fostering greater participation in the digital economy. As the landscape of employment and daily life continues to digitise, filling this gap in digital skills training is pivotal for ensuring comprehensive and future-oriented support for those seeking refuge and resettlement in the North East.

3.3 Needs Assessment

This section highlights the key challenges encountered both by displaced youth in the North East and the organisations dedicated to supporting them.

3.3.1 Key Challenges for Displaced Youth to Acquire Digital Skills

An analysis was conducted to understand the complex challenges confronted by displaced youth in the North East that hinder their acquisition of digital skills. These challenges include mental health issues, particularly anxiety and depression, as well as obstacles such as language barriers, restricted access to devices and connectivity, ineligibility for funding, and other systemic barriers. These factors collectively pose significant impediments to the acquisition and development of essential digital skills.

Mental Health:

Mental health surfaces as a central concern affecting the transition of displaced youth into diverse employment or self-employment paths. Notably, anxiety and depression are prevalent issues within this demographic, casting a substantial impact on their ability to engage in such transitions. Moreover, a pervasive theme involves a noticeable absence of confidence and self-belief, further complicating their journey toward sustained well-being and professional development.

Yes, the first thing that kind of comes to mind is mental health. To successfully transition, whether that's into employment or self-employment, mental health is a huge thing. A lot of the kind of cohort of young people that we work with experience this challenge. Whether that's like anxiety or depression, they seem to be the more common ones." - CB

Language Barriers / ESOL Provision:

Insufficient proficiency in the English language and barriers to accessing "English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL)" programmes contribute to the hindered pursuit of digital skills among displaced individuals. Financial limitations frequently impede their enrollment in language courses or access to high-quality learning materials. Moreover, the bureaucratic complexities in enrollment processes, including stringent documentation requirements and administrative barriers, pose additional hindrances to their participation. For example, asylum seekers awaiting legal recognition may encounter challenges accessing government-funded language programmes due to their unresolved immigration status.

It's still an issue because obviously, that is the first basic hurdle. If you're coming from a country that's not English speaking, then you know your stuck because all your talent is hidden behind this barrier" - SanjR

Limited access to devices and connectivity::

It is crucial for young displaced people to participate in the digital world and develop the skills they need to competitively transition into the workforce. However, many young people, especially those from marginalised communities, lack access to necessary devices such as phones, tablets and laptops, and do not have reliable internet connection. This hinders their ability to learn, connect with peers, and access opportunities digitally.

" *One of the biggest barriers is access to devices and connectivity. Without these, young people cannot access digital opportunities and develop the skills they need for employment and education" - SR*

"Asylum seekers may have to wait six months before they can access support. This means that they miss out on crucial opportunities to develop their digital skills" - SR

Other Systemic Barriers:

Issues such as socioeconomic disparities, and discrimination within the UK, limit the ability of displaced youth to access digital opportunities.

" *If you're claiming Universal Credit, then you can't be a full time student. If you're a full time student, you can't claim Universal Credit." - HR*

"Systemic barriers, such as socioeconomic disparities, lack of access to education, and discrimination, can limit the ability of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to access digital opportunities. Policymakers should work to address these systemic issues through initiatives such as universal broadband access, affordable devices, and targeted education and training programmes." - SR

3.3.2 Challenges Faced by Organisations Serving Displaced Youth

In this section, the overall challenges facing organisations supporting displaced youth are examined. Contributors emphasise issues with existing funding models, stressing the need for innovative approaches to enhance engagement and foster more collaboration.

Funding Competition:

Organisations compete for limited funding, leading to suspicion and replication of efforts. The current funding landscape doesn't align with the smaller amounts sought by these organisations.

" And then there's the fear element, and I think that's probably the single most concern that drags all the community, all the organisations, and creates that conflict between organisations. So the fear is the competitiveness and the competition of various organisations." - HR

"One of the problems that they have is also and partly I blame funding is that they've made them all compete for small amounts of money. Sometimes they're suspicious of each other, and sometimes people are looking at what someone else is doing and copying their homework." - SanjR

Partnership Dynamics:

Collaboration is essential for overcoming challenges in youth digital inclusion for displaced populations. Smaller organisations face difficulties in securing funding for local projects, prompting a call for innovative solutions and integration of national networks.

" Funding competition drives this kind of very individual approach" - CB

"However, their problem was that they needed small amounts of funding, but at the moment the money that's available are big amounts of funding. So things like the shared prosperity fund, it actually asks you to your lowest value project to about £1,000,000. But these organisations, they're looking for £100,000 or, you know, £200,000. So they need to collaborate with bigger organisations to perhaps deliver bigger, larger scale projects and their networks seem to be quite local." - SanjR

Furthermore, the **private sector's lack of robust** engagement is a significant impediment. While urged to provide technology access, fund programmes, promote responsible online practices, and offer internships, the extent of their commitment remains a pivotal challenge in bridging the digital divide for young displaced individuals.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Short to Mid-term

Collaborative Design and Implementation of Digital Skills Programmes:

Organisations in the North East are urged to actively engage with displaced youth in a collaborative effort to co-design the digital skills curriculums and oversee their delivery. This collaborative approach will ensure the identification and addressing of specific needs and nuances, fostering the development of a tailored and effective digital skills programme for displaced youth.

> *"As success for me is solely about the individual leading the project and their approach." - LP*

In the second phase of the Digital Inclusion North East (DI NE) project, DOT UK aims to collaborate with its Youth Leadership Advisory Board (YLAB), comprised of displaced youth with lived experiences, to co-design and co-deliver the digital skills curriculum. This initiative seeks to equip approximately 120 displaced youth with the digital skills essential for their empowerment and inclusion.

≫ Improving Outreach Methods:

Reaching underserved displaced youth, who may lack consistent internet access, requires adaptive outreach strategies. DOT UK and collaborating organisations in the North East should leverage a combination of mobile technology, community centres, drop-in days and other offline outreach methods to connect with displaced youth and ensure that there is awareness of digital skills programmes for those who need them.

"We need to reach people where they are, especially those who are not online or who have limited access to technology. This means using mobile technology, community centres, and partnerships with local organisations." - SR

≫ Resource Mapping and Collaboration:

Creating a comprehensive database of sharable organisational resources in the North East, whether it is equipment, space, or other assets, will help facilitate efficient collaboration. This will help optimise efforts, avoid duplication, and collectively contribute to the growth and success of displaced individuals initiatives.

"One of the suggestions I'm making with this research is that you could map out what organisations have. So there's a church that has a lot of space that they could, for example, another organisation could utilise if they were wanting to collect." - SanjR

≫ Improved Connectivity:

To ensure uninterrupted participation in online activities, DOT UK has applied to be part of the Good Things Foundation's National Databank10, which will allow each displaced youth participating in the programme in the future to have interrupted access to the internet. We also call upon other organisations in the North East to take advantage of this programme.

"Access to laptops and other necessary devices is crucial for conducting business-related research, exploring ideas, and identifying available funding opportunities." - CB

4.2 Long-term

4.2.1 Formation and Promotion of Multi Stakeholder Collaborations

There is an opportunity for the institutional frameworks of university, industry, government collaborations. In this model, these three sectors have the opportunity to work together to create a dynamic knowledge infrastructure, fostering collaboration and hybrid consortiums. This approach contrasts with earlier models that emphasised more control or separation between these institutional domains11.

"No one organisation can do this alone. We need to work together to share resources, expertise and reach, to reach more young people." - SR
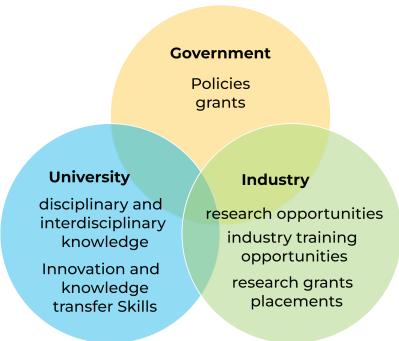
Government

Policies
grants

University

disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge

Innovation and knowledge transfer Skills

Industry

research opportunities

industry training opportunities

research grants placements

Figure 1: Multistakeholder Collaborations

4.2.2 Roles of Different Stakeholders

**Government
(Local authorities):**
The government's active role in collaborating with charities and universities becomes crucial for advocating changes in policy and overall methods to positively impact the displaced community.

Focus areas:

≫ Digital inclusion

Improved outreach, partnered care for equitable access. But also in terms of mental health, there is an opportunity to run specialised programmes, counselling, support groups, and awareness campaigns. For example, NHS collaborates with Vita Health Group)12 to provide a free and confidential psychotherapy that enhances the mental well-being of the displaced people. Additionally, they frequently collaborate with organisations dedicated to serving displaced people, contributing to improved outreach and awareness efforts.

≫ Employability

Broadband infrastructure, affordable devices, online services access.

≫ Health care

Increase targeted education & training programmes for skills development.

Outcome:

Positive policy changes, inclusive environment, successful resettlement & integration.

University:

Universities can leverage their expertise and knowledge to help in confronting the challenges encountered by displaced youth. They can provide invaluable insights and state-of-the-art research in this niche but important subject, offering a foundation for the development of effective strategies to guide

Industry:

Industry, particularly private sector companies in the technology sector, is an important stakeholder. They contribute essential resources to tackle challenges such as language barriers and limited access to devices and connectivity. Industry can provide support through training programmes, technological resources, and connectivity solutions, apprenticeship and remote work enabling displaced youth to overcome hurdles and integrate more effectively into their new environments.

> " *The private sector has a role to play in supporting youth digital inclusion. Businesses can provide access to technology, fund programmes, and promote responsible online practices. They can also offer internships and apprenticeships to give young people hands-on experience in the digital economy." - SR*
>
> *"So this is why I think it might be quite interesting to put in more national networks into the mix and see if there's some sort of collaborative activity that could benefit the small organisations in being part of a national project." - SanjR*

4.2.3 Why Collaborations Among Stakeholders?

Holistic Problem Solving:

The proposed collaborations integrate expertise, resources, and policy initiatives, allowing a comprehensive understanding and formulation of solutions for the complex challenges faced by displaced youth to enhance digital skills and support their transition into the workforce.

Holistic Problem Solving:

Triple Helix collaborations unlock larger grants and funding for research, programme development, and implementation through joint proposals.

> " *Investing in digital skills and inclusion programmes is essential to prepare young people for the future of work and ensure their full participation in the digital society. Governments, foundations, and other funders should prioritise funding for these programmes, particularly those targeting marginalised communities." - SR*

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 Next Steps

Digital Opportunity Trust (DOT UK) is initiating Phase II of the Digital Inclusion North East (DI NE) project, focusing on the digital skills programme design and delivery for displaced youth in Newcastle, North East England. This new phase will be guided by the recognition that ensuring access to digital skills necessitates a layered ecosystem approach, substantiating the need to bring together resources and expertise to cultivate an integrated, synergistic environment that enhances collective impact.

Phase 2 of the programme will conscientiously attend to the specific needs of youth, addressing the issues identified within the scope of this research and beyond through programme co-designing.

To deliver the Digital Inclusion North East project, an advisory board of talented youth with lived experience, the YLAB (Youth Leadership Advisory Board)[13] is in place and will act as a strategic council.

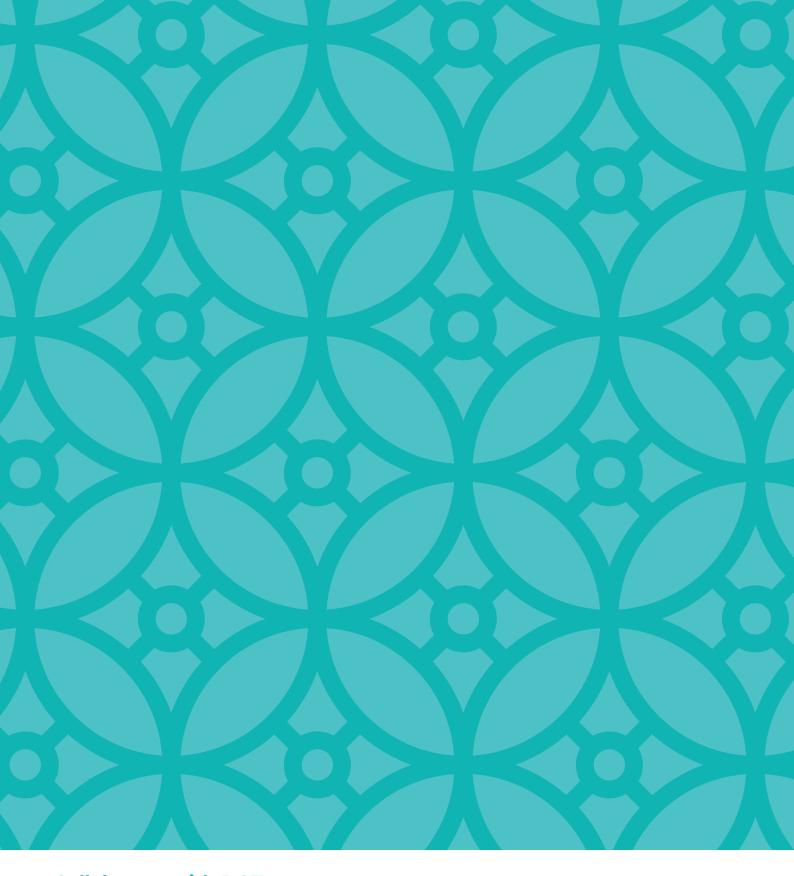| January - February 2024	Co-designing to customise the DOT Learning Management System (LMS) proven curriculum with the YLAB, evaluating its synergy with Learn My Way.
February 2024	Informing and registering the target audience through selected partner youth serving organisations (YSOs).
Early March 2024	Onboarding YLAB members as facilitators / PMs to help deliver the programming, leveraging their lived experience and technological expertise.
March - June 2024	Launching the programme according to the prescribed schedule and methods. Empowering up to 120 young people. Gather learning for a scaling plan.

5.2 Call to Action

As the initiative gains momentum, we extend a call to all organisations serving displaced youth in the North East. If you are eager to collaborate on digital skills programmes or funding applications, we encourage you to reach out to Digital Opportunity Trust (DOT) UK through pmpokwa@dotrust.org. Together, let us forge partnerships that amplify the impact of digital skills training, creating avenues for empowerment and success among displaced youth in the North East.

Collaborate with DOT

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