



## SDCP Lets Get Digital Impact Report

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Rialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland



Comhairle Contae  
Átha Cliath Theas  
South Dublin County Council

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## **Executive Summary**

Within today's society it is impossible to ignore how technology has permeated so deeply into the areas of education, employment, and day-to-day life. Society's reliance on technology has grown exponentially in previous decades, particularly during and after the effects of COVID-19 restrictions. With its growing importance, education systems must adapt in turn to ensure that students are prepared for the modern digital world and obtain the skills to navigate a technologically advanced society.

However, such education has only been implemented in recent decades. For individuals who are out of education, training, or employment this new demand for digital skills leaves a large proportion of the population with the responsibility of upskilling or risk being left behind in the current job market. As a result of this demand for trained employees, innovative strategies of delivering in education and training in digital skills must be made available in order to ensure that local communities can work, live, and thrive in this new digital society.

Taking on this challenge is the South Dublin County Partnership, who by recognising a potential skills gap and the benefits of further education in digital skills, have created a program to educate and upskill their local community members.

### **SDCP's Let's Get Digital Program**

The South Dublin County Partnership (SDCP) is a local development company whose mission is to advance social inclusion, address issues of unemployment and disadvantage in Dublin South County through partnership with local communities to support education and employment. The SDCP is committed to proactively encouraging, facilitating, and supporting the delivery of locally focused and tailored educational and social resources to communities in the area.

The SDCP's Let's Get Digital program was developed in partnership with and funded by Microsoft Datacenter Community Development and the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Program (SICAP). It aims to provide digital skills to members of the community to address the digital divide and tackle issues of unemployment and social exclusion. It's a free personalised programme targeted towards adults young and old in Tallaght and Clondalkin area. The program is unique in its approach as it not only provides an in person teaching experience, but they have also created outreach programs, and innovative strategies of delivery to help best accommodate participants.

### **Value and Impact**

The program works by recruiting participants through various mediums such as through outreach Tech Tasters and campaigns, coordination with other companies and charities such as the Peter McVerry trust, or the drop-in centre available in Rowagh Community Centre, Clondalkin. Participants may start their journey differently depending on their interests or skills levels, but the majority will get to sample the Tech Tasters workshop, and then move on to the Microsoft's StepIn2Tech and mentoring programmes which provides a structure for participants to build upon difficulty wise.

By implementing a structured supportive learning environment and collaborating and coordinating with partners the Let's Get Digital program allows individuals to learn independently and grow their interest and confidence in themselves and their skills which they can then use in future when applying for further education or employment.

### **Qualitative Data**

The impact of the program is clear to see when speaking with both past and current participants. They note how the program has provided a sense of independence and confidence in the new digital age- both for younger and older individuals. There is an assumption that young people have no issue with technology as they have more than likely grown up with it. However, for many they acknowledge the gaps in their knowledge and their willingness to learn.

*“I really enjoyed the experience from start to finish, as a taster it has done enough to make me take an interest in learning more about coding and such services available locally, I’m currently looking forward to learning more via this program.”- Tech Tasters Participant.*

Participants acknowledged the value of programs such as Let’s Get Digital to help bring individuals up to speed on current technology. Additionally, the programs provided support to individuals who were looking to re-join the workforce and as a result, took it upon themselves to upskill.

*“It was very helpful for me- I found out how to write a professional e-mail. It was very interesting to hear the stories of other participants and leaders, it gave me more self-confidence. Now I know that I should not take it personally if I did not get a job. I also found out that I should ask for feedback after an interview, even if it went wrong”- StepIn2Tech and MS mentoring participant.*

Another key point of impact was the innovative delivery of the program for individuals who may not have the ability or the means to attend in person classes. *“it’s just so great for the people like me who are minding kids or staying at home... I was using the platform when my baby was taking a nap, so that was so great for me to do the classes at any time”- StepIn2Tech Participant.* The program has the potential to bridge the skills gap which currently exists for many communities and can be seen in the experiences and outcomes of its participants.

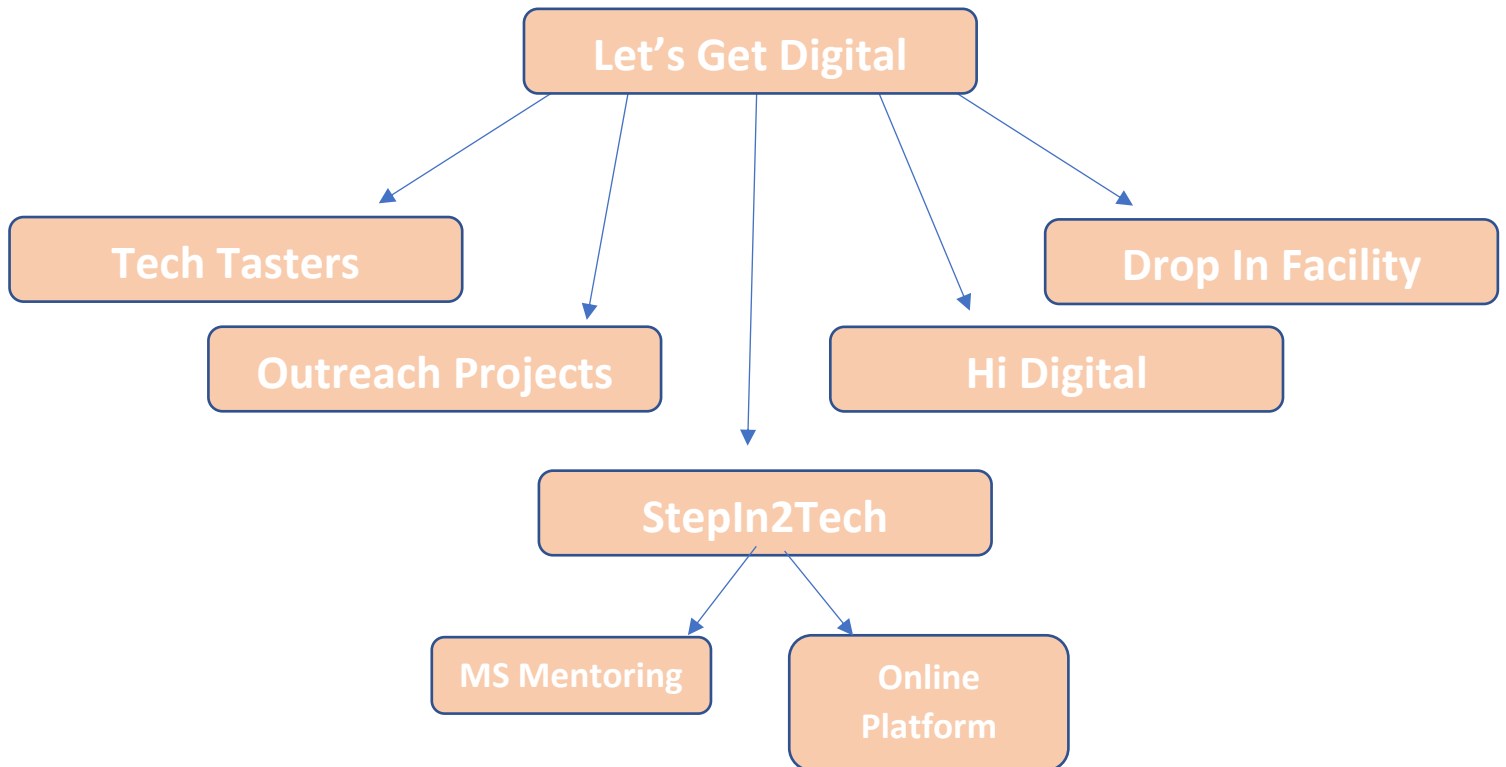
#### **Final Thoughts and Next Steps**

While reflecting upon the need for highly trained digitally skilled individuals for the current job market, particularly in Ireland, the impact of the Let’s Get Digital program is clearly positive. Through their outreach programs, drop-in centres, and innovative delivery methods, it provides the opportunity for individuals both young and old to re-enter training and employment. The SDCP is committed to facilitating and supporting the delivery of locally focused and tailored educational and social resources to communities in the area. From the time of its conception during the COVID-19 pandemic the program has shifted and adapted with the current climate and plans to continue to do so- when listening to participants feedback it is clear that this flexibility and determination to adapt with the current demands of the community are greatly appreciated.

The program will continue to adapt more multifaceted in its outreach and engagement in recognition of not only the younger generations need for a specialised training system such as this, but also older populations interests in technology who wish to learn to navigate the digital world independently. The SDCP has already made steps towards adapting the program to cater to such individuals and will continue to do so, in order to best serve the community.

## **SDCP's Let's Get Digital Program**

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### **Programs offered under Let's Get Digital**

**Tech Tasters** are often the first activity undertaken by participants, as they are a fun and engaging way to attract participants as well as gain an understanding of what skill levels they currently reside at. They are developed by the SDCP and involve 2-hour workshops where participants use various beginner friendly coding environments to code, for example, their first mobile app, webpage, or video game. As no previous coding experience is required, they are accessible to anyone who would like to participate and provide a pathway for participants to enter the StepIn2Tech program too. Tech Tasters are recommended for those who are curious about or are considering a career in the tech industry.

**StepIn2Tech** is an online and professional role-based training programme in which participants can learn to develop their digital skills. Developed by Microsoft Ireland in partnership with FIT, it aims to help people to become more confident in the digital age and open to door to more employment opportunities. Whilst StepIn2Tech was developed in response to the displacement of thousands of workers due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it continues to adapt to support those who have either recently left school or college or are mid-career and interested in developing their digital skills. It

seeks to bridge the gap within the Irish workforce for those who had not yet had the chance to develop their digital skills. Participants can join modules at any stage and move at their own pace through the online learning programme, offering participants the means to continue further digital training and to become sought-after candidates in the digital job sector. There are no specific age demographics targeted for this program, the StepIn2Tech program is open to all with an interest to learn, both young and old, in or out of employment and regardless of skill level.

- **Microsoft Mentoring Programme** is an additional aspect of StepIn2Tech and allows participants to avail of the 6-week mentoring programme facilitated by the Microsoft Ireland staff. The sessions are one and a half hours a week which aim to prepare participants for the professional world. Each week, the participants and their mentors will cover a different workforce-related topic to ensure that they are as prepared for future interviews and job prospects. Mentors help to guide participants through their learning and career journey pathway by gaining skills and certifications from courses supported by the SDCP.

**Outreach Programme** involves facilitators travelling to different community groups in South Dublin County to engage the public, both young and old, in Tech Taster topics. The outreach program has the potential to strengthen the capacity of individuals in the community by providing engaging educational content to produce positive social and economic change. Examples include working alongside YouthReach, Clondalkin and CARP (Community Addiction Response Program), Tallaght.

**Hi digital**, is a step-by-step course designed for anyone who needs help developing their digital skills for their day-to-day lives, particularly those who have less experience with technology (often 65+ years old). Developed by Vodafone Ireland, the SDCP has partnered with Active Retirement Ireland to provide classes for individuals in the local community. Hi Digital's mission is to provide free access to the essential tools needed to become digitally independent. Increasing levels of digital literacy can have a positive impact on practical life and mental health for older individuals as shown in previous research. The course consists of bite-sized hands-on lessons such as the basics of internet access, facilitators guide participants learning and facilitate small class groups to best accommodate participants.

**Drop In Facility** Let's Get Digital opened a flexible tech space in April 2022 at Rowlagh Community Centre and offers weekly drop-in services and in-person Tech Tasters. This is a great opportunity for potential participants to gain insight into a programme or for any questions they may have. It also offers participants the access to technology, such as laptops or a stable internet connection. This facility is highly supportive of participants learning, and fun activities are arranged to give people a chance to put their new digital skills into practice.

### **Innovation of Delivery:**

The mission of the Let's Get Digital project is to provide free education, training, and skills to individuals from Clondalkin and Tallaght to help improve their digital skills and to lay down the foundation for further education and employment in future. One way which this is achieved is through using innovative methods of delivery for individuals who would typically be difficult to reach and otherwise be unable to take part. Many approaches are used to recruit, teach, and support participants in their learning however the most notable would be travelling to local community groups, making referrals from external or internal programs and the drop in facility available to the public. By creating such facilities, it creates a link between the program and participants who typically would not have access to such classes and resources.

Through their use of drop in facilities, online platforms, and community outreach tech tasters the SDCP ensures that all individuals who have interest in the Let's Get Digital project can explore and learn at their own pace. By creating the space for individuals to approach tech at their

own pace in informal environments, participants can approach their learning on their own terms. Whether it be that they are unable to travel for classes, do not have time or do not feel comfortable in such environments, the Let's Get Digital project has adapted to create spaces where participants can feel more in control of their learning.

## Participation Statistics

From January to December of 2022, the SDCP has continued to gain interest from the community through their outreach programs and collaboration with local companies and charities. The data below details some of the statistics around participation for the last 11 months- whether that be through sampling tech taster topics or programs such as StepIn2Tech or the mentoring program.

**Let's Get Digital worked alongside 18 community groups, 6 local schools and organised 14 Tech Taster Events in the community in 2022.**

Examples of community groups and schools who have taken part include the Clondalkin Access Network, Tallaght Community School, HSE New Horizons, the Killinarden Women's Group, and the Community Addiction Response Program in Killinarden.

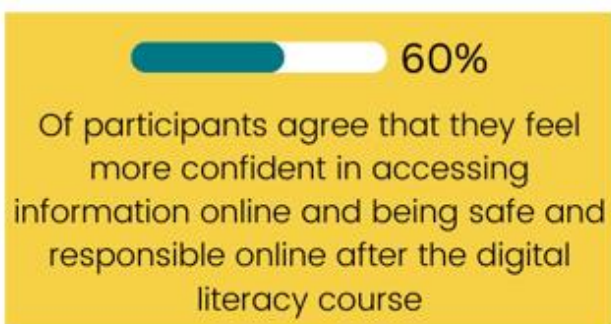
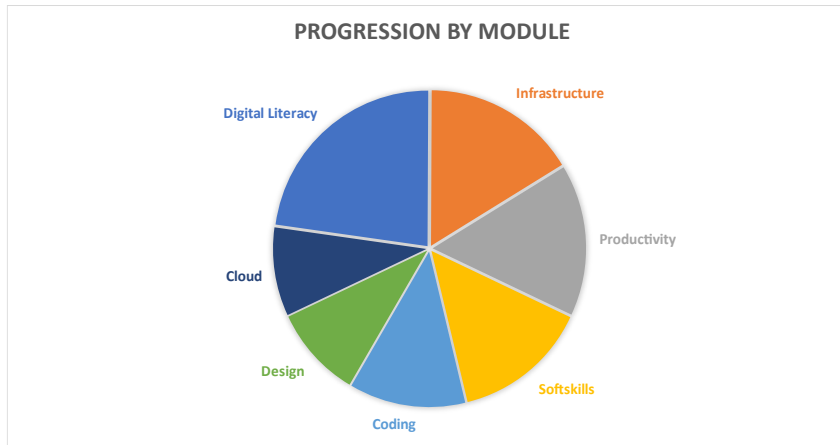
- 48 learners have signed up to the StepIn2Tech online platform to date- 5 have completed the program in its entirety.
- 8 Participants were referred to the Microsoft mentoring program while participating in the StepIn2Tech program.
- In total the Tech Tasters were attended by 154 learners throughout the year, this includes those who attended more than one Tech Taster event.

## Results Section- Quantitative and Qualitative

The purpose of this report is to evaluate the impact the program has had on participants. We wish to understand how they found the classes, the impact the programs have had on their lives and the reach the program has had on members of the community. To evaluate the program, past and current participants have been recruited to take part in interviews with researchers from Maynooth University. Those who completed the Let's Get Digital programs were also surveyed to understand the impact of the program and its modules on participants' use of technology. These results provide a unique perspective into the lives of the participants and the aspects of the program which had the greatest positive impact.

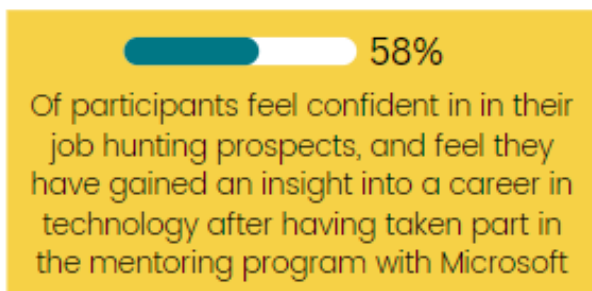
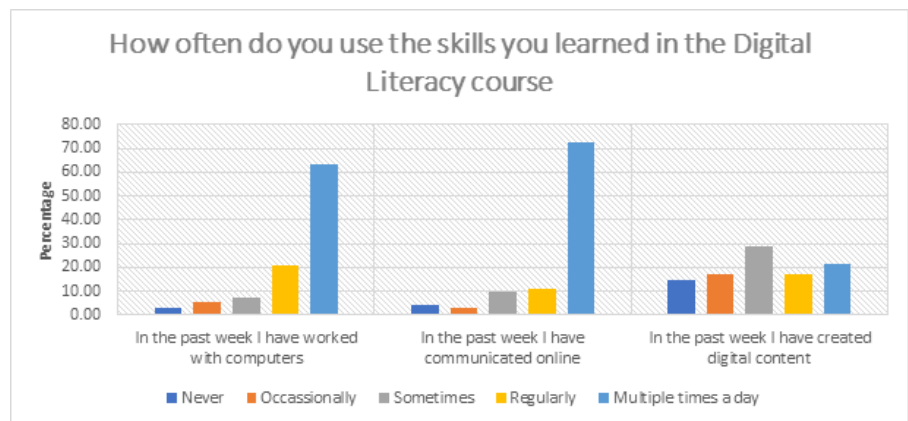
### **Quantitative Data**

Regarding the progress rates of participants who took part in the StepIn2Tech program- the modules with the highest level of progression include the Digital Literacy, Infrastructure and Productivity modules.



Participants confidence was measured and found that 60% of participants agreed/strongly agreed that they felt confident to access information online and that they felt confident being safe and responsible online. The digital literacy courses are one of the modules which participants are advised to take first and results such as this are encouraging as they reflect a generally positive experience of participants.

The impact of the module is clearly seen when observing how often participants now use the skills they have learned. Over 80% of those who took the digital literacy module use computers or communicate online using those skills every day.



The outcome from the mentoring classes is encouraging, participants show greater confidence in their job hunting prospects, and are more aware of the skills needed to pursue a career in technology. By receiving mentoring by individuals in the industry this allows for participants to get a deeper insight into the field and can help to begin the process of working towards their preferred career.

## Qualitative Findings

### Methodology

**Research Design:** A qualitative research design was adopted in the current research. The study consisted of semi-structured interviews with participants to explore their experiences of the Let's Get Digital program. Data were collected in the current research through interviews with participants who volunteered to take part after having taken part in one or more programs in Let's Get Digital. The interview content varied depending on the participants' experiences and the programs they took, however similar themes emerged throughout interviews.

**Participants:** Participants in the present research consist of two males and five females who volunteered themselves to take part in an interview. All participants have taken part in one program or more, whether it be StepIn2Tech, Tech Tasters, Mentoring or Hi Digital. Participants' prior experiences of using technology or work in the area varied, as did the age of participants.

**Data analysis method:** Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data. Themes and patterns within the data were identified and coded according to themes. The resulting themes were discussed in relation to the program and its aims of community outreach, education, and engagement with the public. For example, multiple times throughout interviews participants referenced the modern world and its dependence on technology- how that permeates into one's daily lives, employment, and education. Looking at such themes through the aim of the program provides the opportunity for the researcher to see the impact of the program on participants as well as the potential impact the program could have on a larger scale.

## Thematic Analysis

### Theme 1: Changing World:

The world is filled with fast-moving technological advances being made every day. Adjusting to this new digital era is more difficult than ever, and as a result some are struggling with adapting to the dramatic changes.

*"It just feels like change is coming in... and I think it's time to consider that we have to move on to the new world that we're all living in"* **Hi Digital Participant**

### Employment:

Participants frequently stressed the importance of digital skills in relation to employment, with many worried about their unemployment status because of a lack of technical skills or the pressure of attempting to adapt to digitisation in the workplace. This is particularly true for older individuals whose training previously was based on older models of devices and outdated technology. *"It's a new world that we're all living in... There are zero methods of actually helping people to refocus their lives from an employment perspective and from a knowledge perspective...they need to be guided and to be guided is superb"* - **Tech Tasters participant.**

They also acknowledged the value of programs such as Let's Get Digital to help bring individuals up to speed on skills needed for recruitment and employment. Some participants noted that they had not had the opportunity to learn certain skills like CV writing before taking part- particularly for younger participants. *'I am trying to find a better job than what I had before... there were good opportunities for me to learn here- like before I wasn't able to write a proper CV...'* - **StepIn2Tech Participant.**

For some, the classes helped to push them into new employment opportunities by building their skillsets; *"It was very helpful for me- I found out how to write a professional e-mail. It was very interesting to hear the stories of other participants and leaders, it gave me more self-confidence.*



*Now I know that I should not take it personally if I did not get a job. I also found out that I should ask for feedback after an interview, even if it went wrong”- Stepln2Tech and Microsoft mentoring participant.*

The overall emphasis from participants is that the program provides access to vital information to improve digital skills, and employment opportunities. It has given people a chance to rebuild their lives in a new and positive direction.

### **Independence/Empowerment:**

With how integrated technology currently is in today’s world many participants, particularly those of the older generation, wanted to take part in the program in order to learn how to use technology and not need to rely on their family or friends, *“learn how to use technology and not have to depend on other people”-Hi Digital Participant.* For those who did not grow up with technology or who have had little exposure to it, the program provided the opportunity not only to get up to date with existing technology but also to learn how to navigate sites and devices to continue their learning after the program ended.

Individuals described how *“everything you have to do is online”* nowadays, and for many of the younger generation this is something they have grown up around and believe themselves to be competent in. However more specific skills around coding and software development are not as common and as a result the Tech Tasters provided the perfect opportunity for individuals from every generation to learn and connect in a fun and engaging environment.

*“I liked that it was something I thought I wouldn’t ever enjoy but I really did enjoy it, I got to go home and say to my son ‘I made a little arcade game today’ which he was very impressed by!”- Tech Tasters participant.*

This is a fitting example of the impact of such programs, not only are the participants themselves being educated but the information they learn can be passed on through family and friends. Working from the individual outwards in this case has a long-lasting impact and encourages progression of one’s skills.

### **Theme 2: Self-belief:**

#### **Confidence/lack thereof:**

Another key theme among participants was that they wished to become more confident in their abilities. Many spoke of how difficult they anticipated the process to be as a result of their lack of self-confidence. *“I was kind of panicky the first kind of day because... we didn’t really know much and there’s lots more I know we have to know- we’re much slower”- Hi Digital Participant.*

To strive to improve literacy individuals must first believe that they have the capability to start the process. It can be difficult to embark on a learning journey such as this but as reflected in the comments from participants, the structure and support provided by the program facilitators helped to guide participants.

*“The (Tech Taster Activity) was user-friendly and the visual aspect made engaging with it much easier as a tech novice in order to build my own game. Taking part in the activity was both fun and interactive too. My teenagers were so impressed by what I achieved.... I really enjoyed the activitys, and it has encouraged me to perhaps dabble in tech some more in the future”- Tech Tasters Participant.*

As the program continued, interviewees described their increasing confidence not only in the skills that they were gaining but also in the applicability of those skills. When attempting to navigate technology independently participants reported that it took time and perseverance to keep pushing themselves to learn. *“It took me two days to actually have the patience and confidence and to keep going back into it”- Hi Digital Participant.*

Participants found great reward and enjoyment in accomplishing their goals and learning along the way *“Creating a game was so much fun! Learning about how a game is built and being able*

to click and see how each element interacted with each other was so interesting, as well as being able to actually see and play my game as I built it.”- **Tech Tasters Participant.**

### **Theme 3: The Learning Experience:**

#### **Teaching:**

Participants in the program praised the teachers and the overall teaching experience. Participants complimented the program facilitator’s ability to ease them into the programs and help them feel at ease. *“They made it so simple... they were so easy to get on with.”* Having support from encouraging and friendly facilitators provides the foundation for learning- its only once participants feel comfortable and confident can they make the most of the opportunity they have.

*“Loved every minute of the Tech Taster. The time went by so quickly as I was absorbed in and fascinated with everything about app building... I had an excellent instructor and so patient. I continued on with the MIT app inventor site after our time was up and surprised myself with how much I learned in a short space of time... Don't hesitate to sign up and give it a go, you'll enjoy it!”* -

#### **Tech Tasters Participant**

They also ensured that participants learned to problem solve- *“They would introduce a topic but not give you the answer straight away, instead they let you work through the process- work it out and find your own solution”*- **StepIn2Tech Participant**, which aided students in understanding the topic at hand.

Participants noted that they were in control of how they learned as much as they wished and had the opportunity to reach out for as much or as little help as need be. Participants found they could *“learn as quickly as you want- go fast, but you can slow it down if you wish”*, remaining aware that, if necessary, they could *“stop and slow down and go back over it”* if needed, this was made particularly flexible for StepIn2Tech Participants who had access to the online platform. This was extremely helpful for those who could not commit themselves to a set schedule *“it’s just so great for the people like me who are minding kids or staying at home... I was using the platform when my baby was taking a nap, so that was so great for me to do the classes at any time”*- **StepIn2Tech Participant.**

Such programs that exist at the community level benefit from the relationships that form between participants and facilitators, feeling as though they belong and being comfortable in their environment is an important aspect of beginning the learning process.

*“I really enjoyed the experience from start to finish, as a taster it has done enough to make me take an interest in learning more about coding and such services available locally, I’m currently looking forward to learning more via this program.”*- **Tech Tasters Participant.**

### **Plans for future/ Conclusion/ Lessons Learned**

From the time of its conception during the COVID-19 pandemic the program has shifted and adapted with the current climate and plans to continue to do so- when listening to participants feedback this flexibility and determination to adapt with the current needs of the community is greatly appreciated.

We know from the qualitative data gathered that not only do individuals feel increased confidence, independence, and ability around their digital skills- the themes of support and adaptability are also key. Taking note of such data the SDCP plans to continue their dedication to the community and its members, providing high class skills training and interpersonal support to participants. The program will continue to adapt more multifaceted in its outreach and engagement in recognition of not only the younger generations need for a specialised training system such as this, but also older populations interests in technology who wish to learn to navigate the digital world independently.

Building from the data found and the experiences of participants is key to any successful company, to navigate the future, one must be able to look on the past successes and failures of the company and build upon the demand of the public. Initially it was the target demographic for such a program was 18-late 20's- individuals who could benefit from the training provided. And while this remains hugely important, we see a demand arising from parents of young children, individuals who left long term employment and wish to upskill, and older individuals who wish to gain independence and empowerment from the education provided. By recognising such a pattern, the program is able to consistently adapt and reframe to continue its work and embrace all members of the community. The SDCP has already made steps in towards adapting the program to cater to such individuals and will continue to do so, to best serve the community.

### **Conclusion**

While reflecting upon the need for highly trained digitally skilled individuals in the current job market, the impact of the SDCP's Let's Get Digital program cannot be understated. Utilising outreach programs, drop-in centres, and innovative delivery methods, it provides the opportunity for individuals both young and old to re-enter training and employment. The SDCP is committed to proactively encouraging, facilitating, and supporting the delivery of locally focused and tailored educational and social resources to communities in the area. The SDCP believes that equal opportunity for education and training should be available to anyone with a willingness to learn- particularly those from underserved communities.