

Cities of Learning evaluation

Learning and Work Institute

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About Learning and Work Institute

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1.Executive summary

Introduction

Learning and Work (L&W) were commissioned by the RSA to evaluate the Cities of Learning (CofL) pilots delivered in Brighton and Plymouth between September 2019 and December 2020. CofL is a place-based approach to learning which develops new pathways into learning and employment through a system of digital open badges. Real Ideas Organisation led the pilot in Plymouth, with the support of the City Council and Future Creators led the pilot in Brighton. The CofL pilots were led by the RSA in partnership with developers DigitalMe, and funded by City & Guilds Foundation (C&G) and the UFI Charitable Trust.

The intended outputs and outcomes for the pilots were centred around the development of a suite of digital badges and pathways to enable the following outcomes:

- Learning providers: improved progression routes, reach different learners, and enhanced learner offer
- Employers: endorsement of programme and impact on recruitment
- Young people: more able to articulate skills, greater awareness of new learning opportunities and engagement with CofL
- Wider city: funding applications submitted, engagement with strategic bodies (including Local Authority) and civic engagement.

L&W conducted a light touch evaluation to understand how far the pilots met these initial outcomes and identify key learning points. The evaluation included two waves of interviews with city leads, issuing organisations, and young people as well as a summary of digital badge activity. The evaluation captured data from the pilots between September 2019 and December 2020. The programme continues to run in both cities.

The coronavirus pandemic impacted on pilot activity and created a challenging context for the development of the platform. However, both pilots adapted quickly to respond to these challenges.

Plymouth

Digital badges and pathways

In Plymouth 129 badges were developed and 573 young people claimed one or more badges. From these young people 66% created an account, 69% of badges were claimed, and 48% of young people completed more than one badge. The development of multi-stakeholder pathways were not at the stage anticipated at the outset of the pilots. This was primarily because the complexity of pathway and platform development was not anticipated by project partners. However, a significant outcome of

the project which was underemphasised in the original pilot aims was the development of the badge standards framework.

Learning providers

The evidence collected suggests the **issuing organisations interviewed were, to a greater or lesser extent, able to enhance their learning offer, improve progression routes and reach different learners through their use of digital badges.**

Employability

Significant progress was made around employability and digital badges. While employers were not signed up to endorse badges, the pilot was successful in changing focus to recruit employers as issuing organisations. Real Ideas

Organisation were also starting to use digital badges as part of their role as a gateway organisation for Kickstart.

Young people

The evidence collected suggests that young people were using badges to articulate their skills. The young people interviewed all saw digital badges as something that would help them in the future, had enhanced their learning experience and helped them to demonstrate the skills that they had learnt.

Wider city and learning ecosystem

There was considerable pilot activity around developing networks, influencing strategy and seeking future funding. **However, the city lead identified that the main success of the pilot for them was building a community of issuing organisations rather than seeking top down influence.** In response to this they had developed badge school as a low cost way for organisations to issue digital badges. This was intended as one strand of a three part offer of digital badges, place-based learning and platform pathway development.

Brighton

Digital badges and pathways

In Brighton 68 different digital badges were created and 1005 young people earned one or more badges. Of these young people 59% created an account, 60% of all badges were claimed and 25% of young people completed more than one badge. As with Plymouth, multi-stakeholder pathway development was not at the expected stage, but the development of a badge standards framework was recognised as a core achievement.

Learning providers

The evidence collected suggests the issuing organisations interviewed were, to a greater or lesser extent, able to enhance their learning offer, improve progression routes and reach different learners through their use of digital badges.

Employability

Significant progress was made around employability and digital badges. Most notable were digital badges linked to work experience webinars and the planned use of digital badges within Kickstart provision.

Young people

The evidence collected suggests that young people were using badges to articulate their skills. The young people interviewed were enthusiastic about digital badges and saw them as a way to evidence their home learning during the pandemic. They were also using digital badges to demonstrate their skills in job applications. Beyond this, the young people interviewed felt that digital badges had specifically helped them with the challenges they had faced during the coronavirus pandemic and lockdown.

Wider city and learning ecosystem

There was considerable pilot activity around developing networks, influencing strategy, and seeking future funding. There was clear evidence that FC had successfully engaged with wider bodies in the city to place digital badges on the agenda at city strategy level. As in Plymouth, they identified a three part offer of badge school, place-based learning and pathway platform as a sustainable future model.

Learning points

The shift in external circumstances and in the focus of activities of the pilot mean that not all initial outputs and outcomes have been achieved. However, the limited evidence collected by this evaluation suggests success in key outcomes relating to young people using digital badges to articulate their skills and learning providers using badge to enhance their learning offers. These suggest that digital badges within the context of CofL have the potential to respond to the challenges faced by young people in the difficult years ahead.

1. Real Ideas Organisation and Future Creators brought different strengths to the project. The learning between the two pilots was significant to their success, and their continued involvement in partnership with RSA important for the future of the project.
2. CofL has been ambitious in scope and consolidation is needed as well as further growth. Key partners would be well advised to spend time reconsidering what success looks like in terms of outcomes as well as how it can be measured.
3. The suggested offer of three separate strands of activity; badge school, place-based learning, and a platform for pathway curation presents a useful future direction but more clarity is needed as to how this is executed. We recognise this is in active development and look forward to seeing further progress.
4. Both cities have already shared badge templates across organisations such as schools and colleges. The development of digital badges that are transferable

between similar organisations is a very useful output and should form part of any marketing offer.

5. Clearer messaging is needed around the role of employers in digital badges; it is sensible to recognise their role as issuing organisations, but this needs to be communicated to all stakeholders.
6. More evidence is needed on the impact digital badges have on young people. There is a need to conduct surveys with, and case studies of young people. Both pilots should be able to develop these relatively easily as part of their ongoing work.
7. The credibility of digital badges is important to their future success. This includes recognition by City and Guilds and funding bodies as well as consideration about how badges are administered.
8. The development of a framework of badge standards is a significant output of the project which differentiates CofL from other digital badge schemes in the UK.
9. CofL and digital badges are clearly in a strong position to respond directly to the needs of young people as well as to align with government support programme during the Coronavirus pandemic and economic crisis.

2. Introduction

RSA commissioned Learning and Work Institute (L&W) to evaluate the Cities of Learning (CofL) pilots delivered in Brighton and Plymouth between September 2019 and December 2020. The CofL pilots were led by the RSA in partnership with developers DigitalMe, and funded by City & Guilds Group (C&G) and the UFI Charitable Trust.

The two pilots evaluated here are part of a continuing programme of work led by the RSA. CofL takes a place-based approach to learning with the aim of addressing social mobility and the skills gap, by increasing young people's access to and participation in learning. The focus is on developing new pathways into learning and employment by connecting and amplifying formal, informal, and in-work learning opportunities through a system of digital open badges. The digital badges are used to help young people articulate their skills, access new learning, and progress along pathways to employment and other opportunities.

The Brighton and Plymouth pilots are the focus of this evaluation. The pilot in Brighton was led by Future Creators (FC) and the Plymouth pilot by Real Ideas Organisation (RIO) in partnership with Plymouth City Council. The intention by the end of the pilot phase was to have a suite of badges and pathways, engaged learners, a network of learning providers and employers, and an influence on city strategies, with a corresponding set of outcomes relating to these stakeholders.

This private report considers how far the initial outcomes of the pilot were met, as well as identifying key learning points from the process evaluation. The findings of the report are, however, limited in scope and particularly dependant on the views of key stakeholders rather than a wider body of evidence.

The report also considers the context of the coronavirus pandemic and subsequent economic crisis, in terms of how these challenges impacted on pilot outcomes, as well as how CofL is placed to support cities and young people through these challenges.

3. Context

The CofL pilots in Brighton and Plymouth were developed over a number of years, with an initial testing stage leading to a competitive tender for funding to implement the full pilot. This evaluation is concerned with the activity of these pilots between September 2019 and December 2020, although these clearly build on the earlier stages of CofL development. Both cities are also continuing to grow their badge and pathway activity and develop the CofL programme. Pilot activity within the evaluation period was constrained by two factors.

Firstly, the coronavirus pandemic, social distancing and subsequent economic challenges affected outputs and outcomes. Some potential partners were no longer able to engage, for example, voluntary organisations furloughed their staff and employers stopped recruiting while others such as schools were having to adapt to new ways of working. Both cities also had plans to issue badges for participation in large scale city events (such as festivals) which were cancelled. This significantly impacted on the number of badges that were issued. Longer term outcomes and impact were also thrown into question particularly those relating to wellbeing and employability. However, in counterpoint to this, the pilots' ability to respond flexibly to the pandemic and the potential of digital badges to support young people has emerged as a strength of the project, particularly when considering the sustainability and reproducibility of the model.

The other constraining factor to the achievement of pilot outcomes was the delay to the development and release of the pathways tool as part of the platform. While intrinsic to the project, platform development is outside the scope of this evaluation and is included here only for context.

The CofL platform has three elements; the badge standards framework endorsed by C&G, the authoring and issuing of digital badges through Credly, and the pathways tool. The pathways tool was delayed in a number of ways by the coronavirus crisis. The initial development of the platform itself was significantly delayed by illness and absence within the development team. The platform was available for use in late July for population with badged content. However, the impossibility of face-to-face testing meant that full roll-out was slower than intended. Based on feedback from the city leads and limited local testing, Navigatr continued to develop platform functionality and user experience through August and September. In October the platform was further tested with young users in Plymouth and Brighton and with the city leads. The feedback provided was not positive enough to persuade learning providers to share more widely with their learners.

Understanding of the platform has also advanced considerably, it is now seen primarily as a tool to be used by issuing organisations rather than by young people directly. There is also an understanding that a new platform requires either a critical mass of content or a critical mass of users from an existing community. For the next phase of the project Navigatr is therefore developing the functionality to embed pathways into third party sites.

4. Evaluation approach

L&W were commissioned to conduct a light-touch evaluation to consider how far the pilots in Brighton and Plymouth were meeting their short term outcomes, as well as identifying key learning points. The evaluation was not intended to be an impact analysis or an in-depth comparison of the two pilots. It is therefore important to recognise the limited scope of the evaluation which is based on the evidence made available to the research team.

A theory of change and a basket of measures to test the initial outcomes were developed in partnership with the cities, the RSA, and C&G in December 2019. This was revisited several times in response to the changing circumstances of the coronavirus pandemic. These changed circumstances meant that some of the planned research activities did not take place. For example, the intended survey of young people did not happen because it was not possible to distribute the survey through the platform. Cities also did not provide additional evidence of case studies of young people or demographic data due to pressures on their time and changes to expected outcomes. The report is therefore based on the evidence collected by L&W.

Data was collected by L&W in two waves. This included the interviews and focus groups tabled below, as well as a summary of data relating to digital badge activity. The interviews were conducted in two waves in June/July and November/December 2020. The interview participants were purposively selected by the city leads to give a full picture of activity in the cities. Table 1 includes details of the interview participants for both cities.

Table [1]: Interview participants

| Interviewee organisation | City | Interview details |
|--|-------------|-------------------|
| Future Creators | Brighton | Wave 1 and 2 |
| Real Ideas Organisation | Plymouth | Wave 1 and 2 |
| Dance charity | Plymouth | Wave 1 |
| Digital community interest company (CIC) | Plymouth | Wave 1 |
| Children's charity | Plymouth | Wave 1 |
| Further Education college | Brighton | Wave 1 |
| Secondary school | Brighton | Wave 1 |
| Funding organisation | Plymouth | Wave 2 |
| Construction company | Plymouth | Wave 2 |
| University | Plymouth | Wave 2 |
| Focus group of young people | Plymouth | Wave 2 |
| Community development organisation | Brighton | Wave 2 |
| Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) | Brighton | Wave 2 |
| Youth mentoring organisation | Brighton | Wave 2 |
| Focus group of young people | Brighton | Wave 2 |
| RSA | Both cities | Wave 2 |

5. Theory of change

Figure 1 is the headline version of the theory of change developed during the initial stage of the pilots. This includes the long term outcomes and intended impact of CofL beyond the pilot stage evaluated in this report.

The theory of change shows how the different stakeholders experience outcomes and impact. In this way learning providers develop digital badges and pathways, issue badges to their learners and participate in networks. As a result of these activities, they are able to improve progression routes, widen participation and improve quality leading to a stronger organisation. Employers are involved in the development of badges and pathways and accept badges as part of their recruitment processes. This leads to more diverse recruitment, a more skilled workforce and a strengthened organisation. Young people claim digital badges and progress along pathways, and so are more able to articulate their skills and access new learning opportunities. In the longer term this leads to improved confidence and skills, meaning that young people have improved wellbeing and employment. At a city level, the development of pathways and networks means that CofL has an influence at a strategic level, this leads to a more cohesive learning system and a closing of the attainment gap resulting in a more agile and resilient city.

Figure [1]: Theory of change

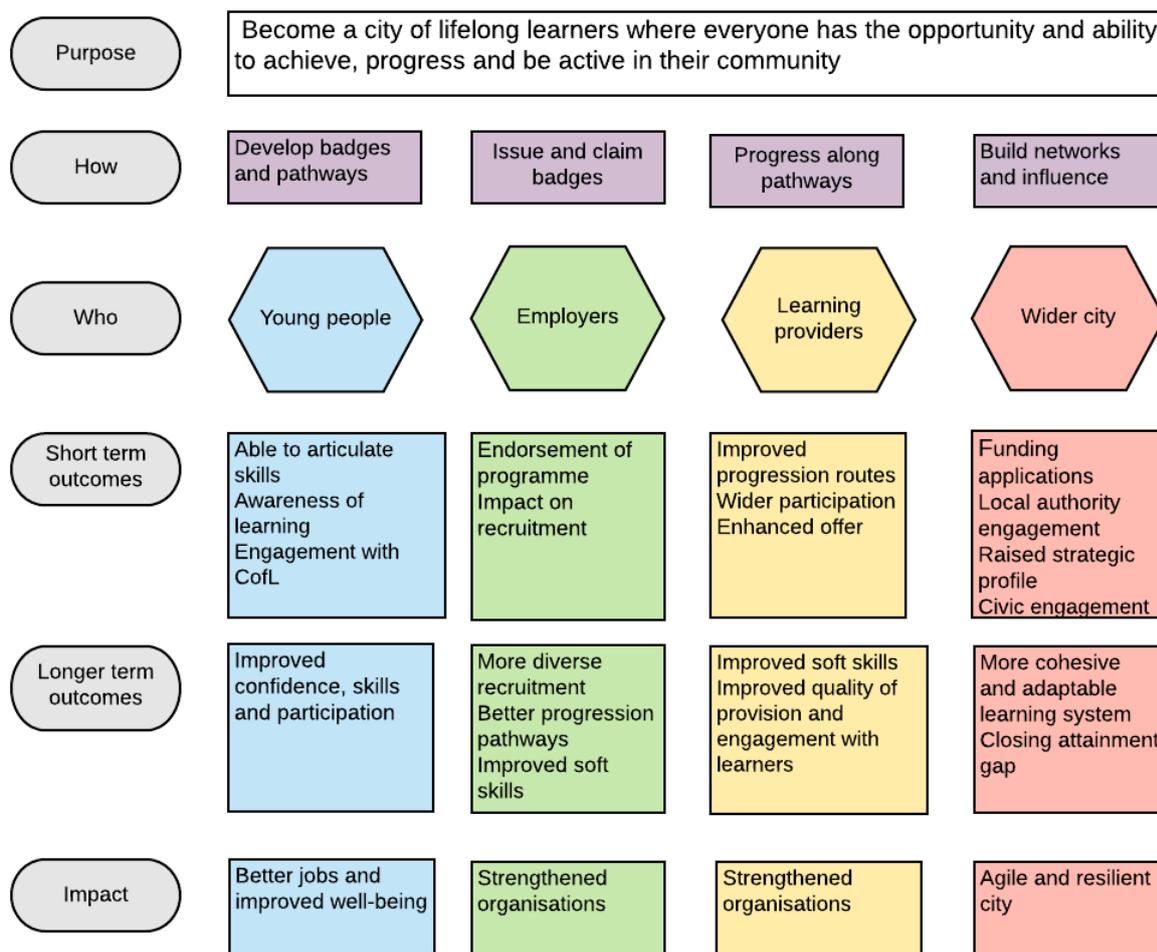


Table 2 provides more detail on the short term outputs and outcomes evaluated within this report. The outcomes from the theory of change are explained in greater detail in this table.

Alongside these outcomes, three performance indicators were also included to understand the sustainability of the CoFL platform.

- Download rate: 60%+ download rate of issued badges.
- Monthly growth in users: an organic monthly increase in users between 10% and 20% is considered industry average for a sustainable product.
- Progress in app: 20% of registered users to move beyond one badge download.

The next two sections of the report consider how far these outputs, outcomes and performance indicators were met in Plymouth and Brighton.

Table [2]: Outputs and outcomes

| Participants | Outputs | Pilot outcomes |
|--------------------|--|---|
| Learners | 5000 badges issued 50 new badged opportunities 3 city pathways developed | <p>Visibility of skills: Learners use badges to articulate and share learning not captured by formal qualifications</p> <p>Discovery of opportunities: Learners have improved awareness of the range of learning opportunities in their city.</p> <p>Engagement with programme / app: Learners engage with the CoL programme beyond initial interest</p> |
| Learning Providers | 15 fully engaged issuers Network of 30-50 organisations 50 new badged opportunities 3 city pathways developed | <p>Improved routes to employment / further education: Schools and colleges use badge pathways to connect student academic progress to employment / further learning opportunities</p> <p>Wider participation in learning opportunities: Learning providers raise profile and gain new students and learners that they usually find harder to reach.</p> <p>Enhanced learner offer: Learning providers use badging to add value to their courses / learning opportunities. (e.g. by recognising uncaptured skills and linking learners to onward opportunities)</p> |
| Employers | Network of 30-50 organisations 50 new badged opportunities 3 city pathways developed | <p>Endorsement of programme: Employers promote that they will accept badges as a qualification.</p> <p>Impact on recruitment: Employers receive applications with badges in CV</p> |
| Learning Ecosystem | Network of 30-50 engaged organisations 3 city pathways developed | <p>Funding applications: CoL is included in funding bids for wider programmes around the city as a means of public benefit and engagement.</p> <p>Local Authority engagement: Information from CoL pilot informs LA strategy on learning provision</p> |
| Wider city | Key organisations write CofL approach into their strategic priorities | <p>Civic engagement: CoL engages young people with civic opportunities to benefit the community.</p> <p>Strategic profile: CoL becomes part of the strategic development plans of industry bodies, city wide boards and sectoral groups (e.g. employment skills boards, LEPS, city management groups)</p> |

6. Plymouth

This section first looks at the role of the lead organisation and then considers how far initial outputs as well as softer outcomes relating to learning providers, employers, young people and the wider city were met. It also contextualises this by considering where pilot activities and priorities have changed.

Lead organisation activity

The Real Ideas Organisation (RIO) led the pilot with support from Plymouth City Council. RIO work across Plymouth and Cornwall providing business support, leading cultural education, and delivering learning opportunities for young people. RIO identified the key strengths of their organisation that they felt placed them in a good position to deliver CofL.

'I think our business activity as an organisation has meant that we are very, very fortunate in terms of what we can bring to this as a city lead. So, the fact that we offer business support, the fact that we are strategically networked, the fact that we work directly face-to-face with young people means that we were in a good position to be driving and testing things. We were able to get badges on the platform ourselves, to issue to young people at quite early stages.' (Plymouth City Lead)

The fact that RIO were able to issue badges for their own programmes was significant. It allowed them to demonstrate the value of badges in a practical way by issuing them at an early stage of the pilot, as well as to continue issuing badges through the coronavirus pandemic.

RIO were also well placed in terms of networks. The involvement of the City Council meant that CofL could connect to wider city strategies as well as with RIO's contacts in Plymouth and Cornwall. These networks meant that RIO were well positioned to respond to the challenges of the pandemic.

'We did a bit of action planning around this when lockdown happened. Who are the people who are going to be trying to work out whether or not they're going to survive this? Who are the people that are going to be sent home... There are going to be people who are needing to [create new activities] in order to maintain a contact with their caseload.' (Plymouth City Lead)

Digital badges and pathways

Table [3]: Summary of digital badge activity in Plymouth

| Digital badge activity | Total |
|--|-------|
| Unique issuers | 14 |
| Unique badges | 129 |
| Unique badge earners | 573 |
| Earners accounts created | 380 |
| Earners completing more than one badge | 277 |
| Badges issued | 1498 |
| Badges claimed | 1042 |
| Badges shared (all mediums) | 144 |

Table 3 summarises badge activity in Plymouth from the start of the pilot until mid-December 2020. It shows that while the total number of badges issued did not meet the intended output of 5000, other significant performance indicators were met. Notably, 66% of young people who earned at least one badge created an account, 69% of badges were claimed, and 48% of young people completed more than one badge. However, the young people who completed more than one badge did this within the same organisation. This provides evidence of continued engagement but not greater awareness of, or access to learning opportunities.

The number of badges shared via LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter or WhatsApp is comparatively low with LinkedIn the most used platform for sharing. This seems likely to be due, at least in part, to the limited saliency of some of these platforms. Some of the young people were a long way from work or further education, either because of age or their circumstances and this meant these platforms were remote from their experience or immediate needs.

'Most of them are under sixteen so when they start applying to go to sixth form college, then they'll be using them. When I said to them, look, there may not be a place for you to place your digital badge-, if you're on LinkedIn you can, but how many of them are on LinkedIn at the moment, probably not very many. But you can cut and paste, if you want to say what you do at [organisation], don't scratch your head, cut and paste this.' (Dance charity)

The number of badges issued per month fluctuated with an expected dip in the summer months. However, November 2020 did see the highest number of badges issued (December was incomplete so could not be included).

RIO were successful in building a network of 35 digital badge issuers, including formal and informal learning providers such as schools, universities, colleges, charities and youth

organisations. The 14 issuers included in this table are those who have issued badges to young people; the remaining organisations are in the process of badge development and issuing. RIO issued 1072 of the 1498 badges issued in Plymouth showing the importance of their role as a provider as well as a connector and leader.

A wide range of badges (129 in total) were developed. Most of these were created by organisations to recognise their existing activities. This meant that the majority of badges were accessed by young people who had already enrolled within a particular organisation, rather than being open learning opportunities.

The development of multi-stakeholder pathways was not at the stage anticipated at the outset of the pilots. This was primarily because the complexity of pathway and platform development was not anticipated by project partners. However, a significant outcome of the project which was underemphasised in the original pilot was the development of the standards framework with four layers for badges (engage, participate, demonstrate and lead). The demonstrate and lead levels are endorsed by C&G. This achievement was particularly valued by formal learning providers.

'Yes, and I think particularly in a scheme which is backed by somebody like City & Guilds. I think being able to say that our badge was at a demonstrate level, City & Guilds backed-up, that had credibility with our audience straight away. I think likewise in the internal recruitment side of things, that would be the case.' (University)

Learning providers

The learning providers interviewed for this report included a dance charity, a digital community interest company (CIC), a children's charity and a university as well as a funding organisation. The evidence collected suggests these issuing organisations were, to a greater or lesser extent, able to enhance their learning offer, improve progression routes and reach different learners through their use of digital badges

Enhance learning offer

The organisations interviewed primarily used digital badges to recognise skills developed as part of their existing activity. For the children's charity, developing and issuing badges meant they were able to add value to their offer by recognising skills developed as part of volunteering. The university felt that awarding badges significantly enhanced their offer to placement students.

'They're getting this quite transformative experience anyway but what else could we do to enhance their CV, give them that bit more credibility? That was where the conversation came in with RIO and the team there, to look at how digital badging and Cities of Learning might work with that.' (University)

The Digital CIC also identified how using badges was helping them to further develop their activities by responding to the needs of young people at university or college who were unable to start work or internships due to coronavirus.

'Some graduates have become interested in the badges as they have lost opportunities, the badges have enabled them to get published and given them something to work towards, rather than sit at home bored.' (Digital CIC)

In addition, an interview with a funding organisation suggested the potential of digital badges for grant funded organisations to demonstrate the value of their provision. The funding organisation accepted digital badges awarded by RIO as evidence that soft outcomes had been met.

Improve progression routes

Improved progression routes were at an earlier stage of development. The children's charity were developing new links with employers that they hoped to connect with through digital badges. For the dance charity, digital badges were a first step towards them being able to support their young people's progression.

'[Digital badges have] given us a reason to talk about their future, more than just the next dance session... So, our talk of the future was normally to next week or maybe in April/May we were talking about a summer show in July, if you see what I mean. And, that's as far ahead as it went. So, yes, I think it has changed that and I can actually see it changing what the charity does, to an extent.' (Dance Charity)

For the digital CIC, digital badges meant they could work with young people to hone their skills and create industry standard creative work. This then provided the young people with evidence to present to employers. However, the currently restricted labour market meant that young people were not yet progressing by this route.

Reach different learners

Organisations felt that digital badges offered a way to engage with young people who were further from education or the labour market. The funding organisation saw digital badges as invaluable in evidencing soft outcomes for those young people who were too far away from employment or education to achieve a hard outcome.

However, some organisations also felt that digital badges offered a way to promote their service and reach new young people in the future.

'There's no referral into our service, it's more a word of mouth so the badges, if people say they worked on this project, got awarded a badge and put it on their CV, hopefully it will be something they want to get involved with.' (Children's charity)

The move to remote learning or activities meant that it was more difficult for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to claim and use badges as they often needed additional support in terms of technology and guidance to access badges

Employability

Significant progress was made around employability and digital badges, even though engagement with employers was different to the original intentions of the pilot. The young

people interviewed had used digital badges on their CVs and job applications, but too small a number were interviewed for this to be evidence of the outcome that employers were receiving CVs with digital badges.

The later than planned release of the platform meant that engagement with employers was initially delayed.

'We didn't want to do a hard launch of the project actually, in the city to employers, until we had the Navigator app. It may be that that was a mistake and we should have gone for something, but we all agreed that actually we wanted something to show employers.'
(Plymouth City Lead)

The coronavirus pandemic also had a significant impact. For example, badged work experience opportunities in the hospitality and tourism sectors had a delayed start and reduced take up.

While employers were not signed up to endorse badges, the pilot was successful in changing focus to recruit employers as issuing organisations. This change in focus was due to learning more about what employers want from digital badges.

"I think the idea of whether employers accept badges or not is a complete and total red herring. It's the wrong question. There's a couple of things. First is that if the question is, 'How do you get employers interested in badges?', the first thing is super simple. They're an awesome tool for employers. What we've learnt is that employers get really excited about badges when they think they can issue them." (Plymouth City Lead)

RIO were planning to use digital badges within their role as a Kickstart gateway provider. A national construction company were also using digital badges to develop their future workforce.

'I've spoken internally to the most senior people in the company, they can see the benefit in it, and we do want to take this across the company. I'm hoping to take it nationally, that's the first thing I want to do. We can really see the potential and what this could offer, so full support of the digital badges and we certainly will be looking to sign up to the annual fees and stuff like that.' (Construction company)

This was clearly a promising development and represents a chance to raise the profile of digital badges with employers.

'Especially now because of COVID we're looking at-, and it's what I keep saying, it's qualities over qualifications. We do need people with qualifications for obvious reasons, like any employer does, but you're now looking at hotel managers who could become great site managers, but actually they don't have the qualification, but they've got all the right qualities. We could then look at getting these digital badges to show, 'Well, yes, this person's demonstrated X, Y and Z, those qualities.' (Construction company)

RIO also shifted their thinking towards seeing badges as a tool for young people to articulate their skills, rather than as an object to be recognised by employers. However, this shift in understanding had not been widely communicated to issuing organisations who were concerned that digital badges did not yet have recognition with employers and were keen to see this embedded in the future.

Young people

The evidence collected suggests that young people were using badges to articulate their skills. The other outcomes for young people were dependant on the availability of the platform and so were not achieved within the pilot phase.

The young people interviewed all saw digital badges as something that would help them in the future and that had enhanced their learning experience.

'I got introduced to them through Game Changer, because Game Changer helped me to link to RIO. I signed up to RIO and RIO had all the information about what the digital natives course provides, and it said, 'At the end of this course you will be given digital badges if you've improved on progress.' That was a nice touch because you've actually gained something out of the course and have proof of that.' (Plymouth focus group participant)

They were overwhelmingly positive about digital badges and seemed to have a clear understanding of their value.

'I first heard of them at my dance group when I became a trustee and director. When I first heard of these I thought they were absolutely incredible. I thought, 'Wow.' I think they're absolutely amazing...In the future if I wanted to go to any dance school or university I could show them my digital badges and it might give it a boost-up. I think that's an incredible opportunity, to get a digital badge.' (Plymouth focus group participant)

There was also evidence that digital badges helped them to demonstrate the skills that they had learnt.

'Yes, because if you can quantify things a bit easier, rather than just saying, 'I did this thing,' you can say, 'Here are the things I've got which prove I can do these things,' rather than just saying I can... I used them to update my CV and I'm going for a tech job in a school middle of next week.' (Plymouth focus group participant)

Wider city and learning ecosystem

There was considerable pilot activity around developing networks, influencing strategy and seeking future funding. RIO were effective in using existing networks to promote digital badges across Plymouth as well as finding ways to sustain digital badging beyond the funded pilot. There is clear evidence that digital badges had currency across Plymouth and Cornwall. The project was also extending into Southampton.

'I think I counted 12 strategic bodies across Plymouth and Cornwall that we have connected with, or some influence on around this. It has gone down better in some than others.' (Plymouth City Lead)

However, the city lead identified that the main success of the pilot for them was building a community of issuing organisations rather than seeking top down influence. They contrasted their work in Cornwall where their focus was on their own role as an issuing organisation to their role in Plymouth where they concentrated more energy on engaging at strategic level.

'So, one of the things we've learnt, which is just fantastic and, I think, really exciting, is that the Cities of Learning as a movement has to come and be driven from issuers. It has to be driven from organisations who see and value recognising what individuals get up to outside of formal work and formal learning.' (Plymouth City Lead)

In response to this, Plymouth developed the concept of badge school or badge nation where organisations could pay a small fee to register as badge issuers. This was at a very early stage of development so its effectiveness cannot be evaluated here but it suggests a path forward instead of seeking larger scale funding.

'It's evolving, really. Some of the terminology around it is evolving, even quite quickly. We're now talking about Badge Nation. Badge School is part of that. Badge School is the bit which shows people how to use badging. But Badge Nation is the movement. Badge Nation is the thing that people will log onto. It's sort of simple, really, in that it is about developing a community of organisations who want to use Cities of Learning, digital badges, to recognise what individuals get up to outside of formal, accredited work. The work we've done around that is that we've-, so, Real Ideas and Future Creators as the two lead issuing organisations in the pilot.' (Plymouth City Lead)

The development of badge school is intended to run as one strand of a three part offer of digital badges, place-based learning and platform pathway development. It was notable that digital badges had far more salience among interviewees than CofL suggesting this was the core concept and the most useful to focus on, at least in the short term.

7. Brighton

This section first looks at the role of the lead organisation and then considers how far initial outputs as well as softer outcomes relating to learning providers, employers, young people and the wider city were met. It also contextualises this by considering where pilot activities and priorities have changed.

Lead organisation activity

Future Creators (FC) are a networking organisation based around a collaboration of creative industries, local businesses, youth groups, schools, arts and heritage, health and social services in Brighton and the surrounding area. Their focus is on developing young people's skills and creativity. FC used their existing connections to build engagement in CofL across the city. The city team felt their existing networks placed them in a strong position at the start of the pilot and that having two dedicated (part-time) members of staff was invaluable as they had time to dedicate to the project.

The initial set up stages had been time consuming and slower than expected. However, the development of standards framework with four layers for badges (engage, participate, demonstrate and lead) was recognised as a significant undertaking as well as a worthwhile achievement.

The pandemic impacted on Brighton just as they were ready to start extending their networks. However, as in Plymouth they were able to rapidly adapt to changing circumstances.

'What's gone well is how we've managed to respond to the changes in such an agile and rapid manner. I think a lot of that has been down to the relationships we have with our existing organisations that are already signed up to Cities of Learning. I think once we have a good relationship with them and open dialogue, we were open to immediately swing in and say, 'How can we best support you and what are your struggles?' (Brighton City Lead)

Digital badges and pathways

Table [4]: Summary of digital badge activity

| Digital badge activity | Total |
|--|-------|
| Unique issuers | 12 |
| Unique badges | 68 |
| Unique badge earners | 1005 |
| Earners accounts created | 594 |
| Earners completing more than one badge | 255 |
| Badges issued | 1441 |
| Badges claimed | 871 |
| Badges shared (any medium) | 40 |

Table 4 summarises digital badge activity for Brighton from the start of the pilot until mid-December 2020. As with Plymouth, it shows that while the total number of badges issued did not meet the intended output of 5000, other performance indicators were met. In particular, 59% of young people who earned at least one badge created an account, 60% of all badges were claimed and 25% of young people completed more than one badge. However, the young people who completed more than one badge did this within the same organisation. This provides evidence of continued engagement but not greater awareness of, or access to learning opportunities. The number of badges shared was low, with LinkedIn the most commonly used platform.

FC effectively used their existing links to build a network of digital badge issuers, including formal and informal learning providers such as schools, colleges, charities and youth organisations. The 12 issuers included in this data are those who have issued badges to young people, as with Plymouth, there was a wider network of organisations who were in the process of developing and issuing badges not represented here. FC only issued 75 badges themselves, a significant difference in approach than undertaken by the lead partner in Plymouth. The high number of individual badge earners (1005) is also significant, showing that FC were successful in reaching a large number of young people. The number of badges issued per month were highest in March and April and then again in the Autumn.¹

Within Brighton 68 unique badges had been developed (again this only includes those which have been issued to young people). This included badges that were developed in one school and picked up by others in the local area. There is obvious potential for some

¹ Some issuing dates were not reliable for Brighton data, so it was not possible to report monthly increase accurately.

of these badges such as covid responder, independent researcher and career investigator/explorer to be used at a national level.

Learning providers

The learning providers interviewed for this research included a secondary school, a further education college, a community development organisation and a youth mentoring organisation. The evidence collected suggests that these issuing organisations were, to a greater or lesser extent, able to enhance their learning offer, improve progression routes and reach different learners through their use of digital badges

Enhance learning offer

Issuing organisations were primarily using badges to capture skills and experiences that were not formally accredited, but were part of their existing provision. However, the move to remote learning saw schools use digital badges to support their young people's home learning. This was seen as improving their learning experience.

'Then it was when we were putting together our timetable and offer for students at home that I really thought, 'Actually, we could really use the digital badges more than ever and to create some different digital badges.' I came up with the idea of a research badge where our Year 11's that suddenly didn't have any work to do could still be working towards something.' (Secondary school)

One informal learning provider also felt that digital badges were helping them develop and improve their programmes.

'It's helping us to also evaluate what they've been doing and look more closely at what we're offering them. I think the way that it's broken down into various sections like the work experience or insight into creative industries. There's an engagement badge, the participation and demonstration. That's really helped us build and develop our programme across the year, to link in with what fall into these categories.' (Mentoring organisation)

However, another perspective was that digital badges were valuable because they offered a way to evidence development of skills without changing activities.

'I think it was more a useful way to articulate what we were doing with young people, but I'd say that that's a really good thing.. [There is] some really interesting research on how the way that we demonstrate impact and measure difference in the youth world can have an effect that corrupts the activity. I don't think that the digital badge will have any such corrupting effects. I think that was a really positive point. It was very versatile in that.' (Youth charity)

The Plymouth funding organisation's support for digital badges has saliency in Brighton as recognition by funders was a key concern for this charity. It seems likely that recognition by funding organisations would add significant value to badges for grant funded organisations.

“I think one of the critical things for us is whether or not funders value digital badging because if they value it, then we value it. But crudely from a managerial perspective and beyond how I've already explained that young people value it and I value it on principle, but in monetary terms it needs to carry weight with some of the big grant funders in the sector and our local authorities.” (Youth charity)

Improve progression routes

There was some evidence that organisations were using digital badges to improve young people's progression routes. The identification that digital badges align with Gatsby Benchmarks was valuable in showing how badges can be used within schools

‘We did talk about the Gatsby Benchmarks and I think that has been, and funnily enough today, I looked at them and actually you could talk about 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 of the Gatsby Benchmarks which are supported by digital badges. Benchmark 3 is about addressing the needs of every pupil. Digital badges allow and give you a currency, particularly for those youngsters who may struggle academically to give them something which demonstrates the skills they've acquired’ (Brighton City Lead)

Schools were starting to use digital badges as part of progression routes, for example within college applications. However, this was not evidenced within the current evaluation because young people had not yet submitted their college or university applications.

‘We're doing the same for Year 10 and it's going to be part of our rite of passage that everyone's expected to do a badge for their college application and to be able to talk about it. I think it will be more built into tutor time and built into their extended learning programme, going forward. Yes, I see us really moving forward with it next year.’ (Secondary School)

Reach different learners

Issuing organisations felt that using badges helped them to engage better with their existing students who were further from educational achievement.

‘Especially the Covid responder badges and the community badges, for those students that might not be as academic, they're within reach for lots of the students that might, ordinarily, not do a research badge or something that might put them off. I do think that we've got a range of badges that provide for all students across the school.’ (Secondary School)

The college interviewed equally saw the value of badges for the disadvantaged young people within their cohorts. However, there was no evidence they were being used as a tool to recruit new or different types of learners.

‘Badges are ideal for some of our demographic who are often disengaged with education, it's a way of accrediting learning that is outside of the mainstream which is really important’ (College)

Employability

Significant progress was made around employability and digital badges, even though engagement with employers was different to the original intentions of the pilot. The young people interviewed had used digital badges on their CVs and job applications, but too small a number were interviewed for this to be evidence of the outcome that employers were receiving CVs with digital badges.

City anchors recognised that the initial delays in launching the full platform and the impact of coronavirus meant that outcomes related to employment had not been fully met.

'What became apparent was that we couldn't progress those conversations in a meaningful way until we have... until the platform is launched. So, you know, that's been another delay as that's... that employer engagement...It doesn't mean to say we haven't got employers warmed up, which we have and, where appropriate, we've started the conversation, but we haven't got a call to action for them yet'. (Brighton City Lead)

However, there was evidence that digital badges were enabling connections between young people and employers. Digital badges linked to work experience webinars were an important part of this and a model developed by Brighton and adopted in Plymouth.

'[We have started] opening up in young peoples' minds the opportunities available to them, and I think the webinars in the last week is an amazing example of that, having business leaders, artists, school leaders, you know, talking to young people about their journeys and aspirations.' (Brighton City Lead)

There was, however, a concern amongst interview participants that digital badges were not recognised by employers and this was seen as an important step for the success of the pilot.

'Eventually we hope to get to the point where they will be saying, "Okay, if young people step forward with these badges, we're going to be really interested in them. They'll go to the top of the pile," and that's where the app comes in, and when we can start to feed all of that through into that framework.' (Secondary School)

City leads in Brighton were still focused on putting digital badges onto employers' agendas. Their use of digital badges for their coordination of Kickstart was a significant development in this journey. Their role as a gateway provider meant they were able to engage with local employers in the creative industries. Digital badges were seen as a valuable way of recognising the skills gained during Kickstart.

'So, digital badging and Kickstart, they're quite a convenient partnership in a way because it's just ideal there to be able to go, 'Well, actually, this person's done this, this and this and here's the badge to prove it.' So, anyone asking any questions about what that young person's learnt, easily demonstrated. In less formal situations where you're looking at

employment more generally, I think it's more about the employers recognising the value of that. Recognising the value of it in kickstart because they've got to prove it.' (DWP)

DWP could only support the concept of digital badges rather than any particular commercial model but they adopted the same stance as Plymouth in suggesting that badges are an enabler for young people to articulate their skills, not a tool for employers.

'What I would say is concentrate on the value to the young person themselves and don't underestimate that because if that means that young person is going out there more confident, more able to sell themselves, it almost doesn't matter whether they've got those badges or not for the employer, it's what they've given that young person themselves in terms of that self-confidence, self-belief, that resilience to keep going. And that will be the thing that actually gets them towards their end goal. Not the actual badge, if you know what I mean?'(DWP)

Young people

The evidence collected suggests that young people were using badges to articulate their skills. The other outcomes for young people were dependant on the availability of the platform and so were not achieved within the pilot phase. The city leads felt that this had not impacted on the experience of young people.

'I don't feel anything's been diluted in the value of the badges and what they can do for young people. We haven't been able to follow it through with the place-based, look at everything else that's going on in your city part of it.' (Brighton City Lead)

The young people interviewed were enthusiastic about digital badges and saw them as a way to evidence their home learning during the pandemic.

'I wasn't just taking photographs, and even though I was off school I worked with media that I'd never worked with before, so I could keep up my skills, and I got a badge to show that.' (Brighton focus group participant)

They were also using digital badges to demonstrate their skills in job applications.

'We don't really start our uni applications until a little bit later on but I have got it on my CV. I am applying for jobs, so they can see that.. Not [been successful] at the moment because it is quite difficult to get a job, especially with the corona but I'm still trying.' (Brighton focus group participant)

Beyond this, the young people interviewed felt that digital badges had specifically helped them with the challenges they had faced during the coronavirus pandemic and lockdown.

I think the pandemic has been very challenging on young people, and I know that myself and many other people have just been staying at home, but through badges and having a creative outlet, I found that... very therapeutic, especially if I've earned something from it

too. I enjoy doing it but the fact that I have this representation of the badges, I think it's really helped me. (Brighton focus group participant)

Wider city and learning ecosystem

There was considerable pilot activity around developing networks, influencing strategy and seeking future funding. There was clear evidence that FC had successfully engaged with wider bodies in the city to place digital badges on the agenda at city strategy level.

For example, in Adur & Worthing which is one of the district councils in West Sussex, they had released what they call a good work policy or strategy document and digital badges are part of that as evidencing employability skills for those 19 plus, plus older people. In the West Sussex I was in a seminar last week or webinar with West Sussex and there were FE colleges across the piece, the district councils, the mid-Sussex Crawley Council and digital badges were part of the way of evidencing. What it's enabled is for us to embed it in conversations around skills. (Brighton City Lead)

As in Plymouth, issuing organisations were keen to emphasise the value of FC in supporting CofL. There was evidence that this had moved beyond supporting with badge development to creating wider community of learning.

'They've just helped make it happen. I think what's been really good is they've helped connect us with different people. I don't know if that's happened because of the situation we're in or whether that would've ordinarily happened, but I think just being connected with other organisations and employers, it's helped us reach out to our families. A lot of our parents were involved in the webinars. It's just offered different opportunities.' (Secondary School)

The pilot's success in networking had not led to success in any funding applications. As in Plymouth, they identified badge school as the path forward to building a sustainable model, alongside work by the RSA and DigitalMe to develop the place-based learning and the platform respectively.

8. Learning points

This section of the report outlines the key learning points from the evaluation. The shift in external circumstances and in the focus of activities of the pilot mean that not all initial outputs and outcomes have been achieved. However, the limited evidence collected by this evaluation suggests success in key outcomes. Young people are using digital badges to articulate their skills and to progress towards new learning or employment opportunities. Learning providers are also using the badges to enhance their offers and engage more effectively with young people from disadvantaged groups. These are key indicators of success and mean that when considered with the learning points below, digital badges within the context of CofL have the potential to respond to the challenges faced by young people in the difficult years ahead.

1. It is difficult to fully evidence the impact of the differences between Future Creators and the Real Ideas Organisation as lead organisations, but these were significant to the development of CofL. As a learning provider, RIO were able to issue a substantial number of badges themselves, potentially offering a more sustainable model. FC's role in Kickstart delivery mean they can start to replicate this. Both lead organisations had strong networks that determined the course of the pilot in their city. FC's connections with schools and colleges were particularly important for the development of the pilot. It was clearly very useful to have two pilots as there was strong evidence of cross pollination. The continued involvement of both lead organisations in partnership with the RSA seems important to future success.
2. Key stakeholders agreed that the pilot plans were ambitious and project activity has shifted significantly since the initial planning stages. The original outcomes now seem less relevant and need to be revisited. This is not unusual for a pilot and it is evident that considerable learning has taken place. Digital badges and CofL now seem to be entering an exciting period of growth and expansion. However, consolidation is needed as well as evolution. Key partners would be well advised to spend time reconsidering what success looks like in terms of outcomes as well as how it can be measured.
3. The suggested offer of three separate strands of activity; badge school, place-based learning, and a platform for pathway curation presents a useful future direction. However, more clarity is needed on how this offer is marketed and branded, as well as how the interaction of national and local actors are managed. It is not within the scope of this evaluation to fully assess the validity of these future plans, however, badge school in particular seems to offer a way forward. We recognise that this is under active development and look forward to further progress.

'Certainly, the way I'm thinking of it and we've been talking, is as a 3-party partnership going forward. There's the RSA looking at local leadership models around learning, badge school doing the badge design, potentially Navigator providing a platform for pathways curation going forward.' (RSA)

4. The development of digital badges that have a national rather than local reach is useful to the further promotion of the business models outlined above. While badges were created in a local context, some have already been transferred to similar organisations in other areas. The wider promotion of badges particular to certain organisations such as schools or colleges should be a part of future marketing.
5. Clearer messaging is needed around the role of employers in digital badges. The shift from involving employers as recruiters to involving them as issuing organisations is useful and realistic. Equally, emphasising badges as a tool for young people to articulate their skills rather than for employers to recognise them is a practical interim goal. However, if this approach is adopted, it needs to be clearly communicated and agreed with all stakeholders.
6. Reorienting from badges being recognised by employers to badges helping young person articulate what they have done is a practical interim step. However, this needs to come with much more substantial evidence of how digital badges are impacting on young people. This evaluation included the views of a very limited number of young people. There is a need to conduct surveys with, and create case studies of young people. Both RIO and FC should be able to develop these relatively easily as part of their ongoing work.
7. The credibility of digital badges is important to their future success. Part of this is managing the balance between rigour versus administration costs in the development and awarding of badges. One formal learning provider expressed concern that badges not be given for “turning up”, while informal learning providers found the process of badge development challenging. The credibility of badges with external agencies is the other important strand. The involvement of City and Guilds differentiates CofL from other digital badge models and was welcomed by interview participants. Recognition with funders is also important for grant funded organisations. A wider take up by Building Better Opportunities funded organisations beyond RIO could be a useful step towards this and should be promoted and developed.
8. It is evident that the development of multi-stakeholder pathways was not achievable within the life of the pilot. However as both pilots recognise the development of the badging standards framework particularly with two layers endorsed by C&G is a significant output of the project. It can be used flexibly, allows built in progression, has currency with formal learning providers, and provides a framework for organisations not as experienced in recognising skills. The understanding around

pathways is clearly still evolving but it is important that the framework is marketed as a core achievement which differentiates CofL from other digital badge schemes in the UK.

9. The long term impacts of better jobs and improved wellbeing for young people are now more difficult to achieve due to the Coronavirus pandemic. However, the pilots are clearly in a strong position to respond directly to the needs of young people as well as to government support programme through their use of digital badges. There is good evidence that badges targeted at young people helped them in the first stages of the pandemic. Digital badges were also starting to support the range of employment support interventions targeted at young people. This is particularly useful to see in relation to Kickstart, where there has been no clear way to recognise learning and development.² There is a clear potential for digital badges to be used more widely to support young people through the pandemic.

² Learning and Work (2020) Making Sure Kickstart works <https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/making-sure-kickstart-works/>