The Digital Arc

Developmental Evaluation of the Virtual Service in Enable Ireland

March 2024

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SYSTEMS BEING

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Executive Summary

This summary outlines the findings of an evaluation of Enable Ireland's Virtual Services. They indicate widespread support and appreciation of the Virtual Service by *all* those consulted. The Virtual Service is a successful innovation, adding to the suite of services that Enable Ireland offers and has a transformative impact on people's lives, including an enhanced sense of well-being, advocacy and personal agency. The Virtual Service has opened up people's horizons, sense of personal agency and advocacy skills through a significant enhancement of digital skills and the creation of jobs for Virtual Service Support Workers. They have also had a positive benefit for families and staff. The employment of nineteen Support Workers from amongst service owners is a significant innovation and advancement that puts Enable Ireland at the cutting edge of service delivery. These achievements indicate that Virtual Services act as a digital arc of innovation that bridges old and emerging service models.

This puts Enable Ireland at a significant advantage in a rapidly changing environment. Firstly, climate change and political and budgetary uncertainties pose an ongoing risk to the continuity of services. Secondly, rapid digitalisation of public services and health services means that digital skills are needed now more than ever for social inclusion. There are some strategic concerns that need to be addressed. These include budget uncertainty, over-reliance on one donor for technology and IT support, employment conditions for support workers, and staff digital skills. While the Virtual Service does not suit everyone and nor should it be presented as an only option, it is likely that a sizable cohort of people with disabilities, both within and beyond current service owners may benefit from accessing the Virtual Service. This evaluation concludes that it is a significant innovation with the potential to support people with disabilities to exercise an active choice about when and how to access services in line with the UN CRPD.

This evaluation therefore recommends that the Virtual Service should be continued and further extended in the future, for the benefit of existing and future beneficiaries, and to capitalize on the significant investments made which put Enable Ireland in a leading position as a provider.

Summary of recommendations

The following recommendations are presented as either 'operational' or strategic. Operational recommendations can be implemented in the short term to maintain and improve the operations of the Virtual Service, and 'strategic' recommendations need to be tackled in the medium-term, to ensure longer-term sustainability. Both operational and strategic recommendations need to be tackled in parallel.

Operational recommendations	Strategic recommendations
O1: Maintain the operation of Virtual Services at its current level in the immediate term	**S1:** Develop a business plan based on the sound business case developed in this evaluation, including conducting a costing exercise for the full costs of running Virtual Services.
O2: Develop more appropriate spaces and facilities in Day Service hubs to facilitate participation in Virtual Services	**S2:** Explore alternative funding streams both within and beyond the disability sector
O3: All social content should be delivered outside of Adult Day Service hours	**S3:** Scope out potential of expanding services to reach unserved populations
O4: Maximise benefits of the Virtual Service by providing on-demand content	**S4**: Develop equitable employment terms for all Virtual Service employees
O5: Harness already established internal networks (eg: Virtual Service Champions Network) and processes to identify and implement operational improvements	**S5**: Continue to invest in digital skills throughout the organisation
O6: Invest time in reflection as part of ongoing monitoring and evaluation	

The evaluators highly recommend a management-led and inclusive action plan with specified timeframes for further development and delivery of each recommendation.

1. Background and context

1.1 Background to the Virtual Service

Enable Ireland Adult Day Services created a Virtual Service in March 2020. The Virtual Service formed part of the organisation's emergency response to the pandemic. Ireland entered a prolonged lockdown with the UN calling for governments to support disabled people who they recognised would be one of the populations most affected by the pandemic. The National Public Emergency Team (NPHET) directed the immediate closure of Adult Day Services, with the result that the Virtual Service became one of the primary supports for people attending day services. Following an early evaluation in June 2020[1], the Virtual Service continued to be supported beyond the pilot with significant support by Microsoft Ireland to include all adult services across the country.19 Service Owners were employed in part-time roles as co-designers and hosts/presenters in 2021. In late 2022, the HSE issued a document outlining the definition of a day service as an in-person Monday to Friday 9 to 5pm service[2]. Three years on, day and respite/residential services have returned to full capacity. The Virtual Service has continued to be supported by Enable Ireland, including the employment of Virtual Support Workers.

Evaluation

Enable Ireland commissioned an independent evaluation of the current function, value and outcomes of the Virtual Service and its future role as a complement to all other services Enable Ireland provides to adults. This evaluation was conducted between November 2023 and February 2024 by Barbara Schmidt-Abbey (design and field research) and Joan O'Donnell (collaborator and co-author) at www.systemsbeing.com.

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[1] *Enable Ireland / Assistive Technology 2020, Centre Pilot evaluation report, 26 June 2020.*
[2] New Directions Policy - What is an Adult Disability Day Service issued by HSE 5 October 2022

1.2 The digitalised world

We live in an increasingly digitalised world. Many of us now do our banking online, renew our passports online, and access many social services through the internet. We can work and attend college online. The Internet is also the place that we go for much of our information about health issues, travel, and shopping. We increasingly use social media to stay in contact with friends and family. In fact, recent research indicates that Ireland is one of the more digitalised countries in Europe[3]. Digital inclusion is increasingly becoming understood as an integral part of social inclusion. Social inequalities influence the extent to which people are digitally included and digital inclusion influences the extent to which people are socially included. As society changes, they are locked into a reciprocal relationship[4].
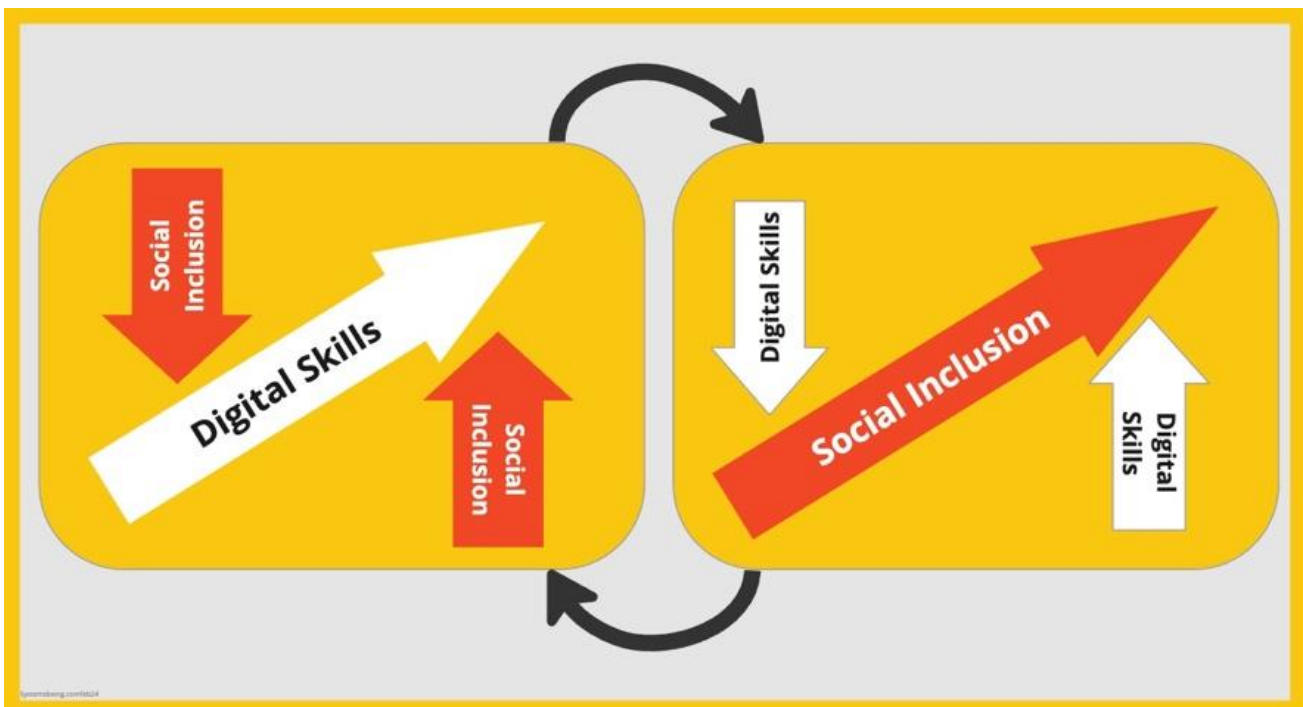
Figure 1. Relationship between digital skills and social inclusion where raising one raised the other

1.3 The Irish disability landscape

A brief look at the statistics indicates that there is a big gap between the number of people with disabilities in Ireland and those who are supported by the disability sector. The number of

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[3] https://www.thinkbusiness.ie/articles/irish-business-digital-leaders-europe-bearingpoint/

[4] Chadwick, D (2023) Digital Inclusion and people with learning disabilities, Editorial, British Journal of Learning Disabilities ,1-6.

people with disabilities recorded by the two most recent censuses indicate an increase from 643,000 in 2017 to 1.1 million in 2023. 22% of Ireland's population – amounting to over 1.1 million people out of a total 5.1 million report experiencing at least one long-lasting disabling condition[5]. At the same time, HSE statistics indicate that 80,000 people are supported by disability services including 18,000 adults who attend day services spread over 1000 locations[6] . This is a considerable gap between the number of people with disabling conditions and those accessing services, which may indicate that many people are getting on with their lives, accessing online services for information and support on health conditions and conducting day-to-day online activity as they need to, and others who may have no interest in the digital world. However, it also suggests that there are many people who receive no active service, but who may benefit from it, if it were available.

1.4 The disability policy landscape

There is strong international support for digital inclusion. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UN CRPD) grants people the right to equal access to information and communication technologies and systems under Article 9. People with disabilities also need to be included in all aspects of social and cultural life under Article 30 and enjoy equal access to health and wellbeing under Article 25. There is also provision for access to assistive technologies (or reasonable accommodations which implies some assistive technology use (Article 24), equality in work (Article 27) and education (Article 24). National policies to embed the commitments Ireland made when we ratified the UN CRPD include the National Disability Inclusion Strategy (2017-2022). This strategy has come to an end and work is commencing on the development of a successor strategy that will be rooted in UNCRPD.

The HSE's approach to day services in Ireland is laid out in the 12 supports that should be available to people with disabilities using Day Services under New Directions. It proposes that day services should take the form of individualised outcome-focused supports to allow adults using those services to live a life of their choosing following their own wishes, needs and aspirations.

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[5] https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpp4/census2022profile4-disabilityhealthandcarers/disability.

[6] HSE. 2020. Framework for the resumption of Adult Disability Day Services. Dublin: Health Service Executive

1.5 Irish Digital Policy landscape

Ireland is investing in the digitalisation of Irish society and the economy on three fronts: digital skills, infrastructure and public services. The following policies are of direct relevance both for Enable Ireland as an employer and service provider:

1.5.1 Digital Skills:

There is a growing focus on upskilling everyone living and working in Ireland as the following policies outline:

National Adult Literacy Strategy (2022):

Promoting digital skills across Irish society.

HSE People Strategy:

Emphasises need to enhance digital skills amongst staff. For example, staff learning around New Directions is conducted through eLearning[7]

Regulation of Social Care Workers:

Social Care workers are now required to register with CORU and exhibit competencies including digital skill development.

1.5.2   Digital Infrastructure

On a broader level, *Harnessing Digital - the Digital Ireland Framework strategy* aims to transform our digital infrastructure and ensure that Ireland becomes:

> *"a digital leader at the heart of European and global digital developments, building on the progress and adaptability demonstrated across society during the pandemic. This will require us to promote the digital agenda effectively and coherently across all areas of Government policy and service delivery, working closely with stakeholders".*

This includes the ambition to ensure that businesses are digitalised, all households have internet access by 2030, 80% of adults have digital skills and 90% of public services are online (See fig 2).

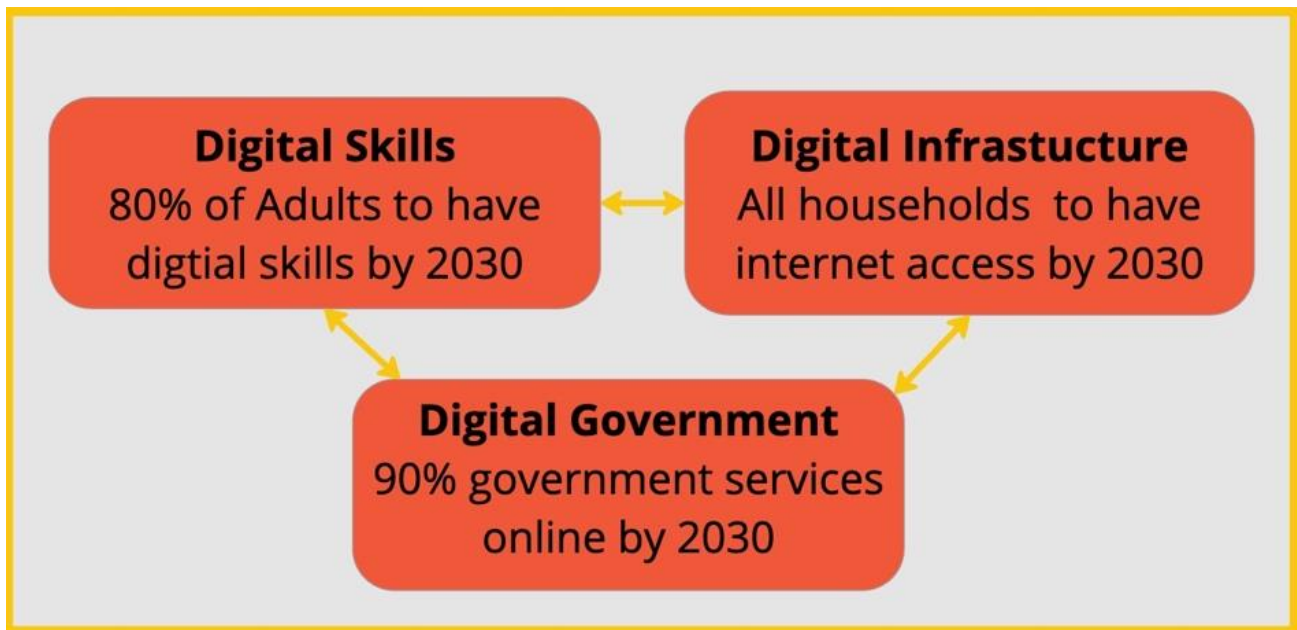[7] https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/disability/newdirections/elearning-module-for-new-directions.html

Digital Skills
80% of Adults to have digtial skills by 2030

Digital Infrastucture
All households to have internet access by 2030

Digital Government
90% government services online by 2030

Figure 2 Digitalisation of Irish society (from Harnessing Digital- the Digital Ireland Framework)

Digital Government:

Connecting Government 2030[8] is the Digital and ICT Strategy for Ireland's Public Service. It sets out an approach to deliver digital government for all, benefitting both society and the broader economy. It aims to change how people, businesses, and policymakers interact, ensuring interoperability across all levels of government and public services taking a "user first" and "business first" approach.

1.6 Literature Review

This literature review largely focuses on research conducted in Ireland and Europe where internet access and disability service types can be more easily compared with Irish disability services. It must be noted, however, that the context in which services operate is subject to globally felt risks. These risks include climate change which is already leading to unpredictable weather patterns in Ireland. 88% of the Irish population now accept that climate change is affecting the weather here[9]. We have so far been protected from the most extreme weather events but as we are now witnessing, war and other global uncertainties impact hugely on Irish political and economic stability. The increased cost of living means that it costs more money to

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[8] https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/136b9-connecting-government-2030-a-digital-and-ict-strategy-for-irelands-public-service/.

[9] https://www.epa.ie/publications/monitoring--assessment/climate-change/climate-change-in-the-irish-mind-wave-2-report-1.php.

put petrol in the car, to heat a home adequately, and to remain resilient in the face of "system-wide risks that have not yet materialised"[10] The risk of future pandemics continues to be a global concern[11]. With these factors in mind, it is worth considering the value that being digitally connected brings as some form of 'protection' against future short as well as long-term risks.

1.6.1 Online engagement prior to the pandemic

Online communities have been around as long as we have had widespread access to the internet. They provide a beneficial option for people facing physical or mental health barriers to accessing in-person services[1]. Barriers include geographical isolation, transport difficulties, communication constraints or other limited opportunities for social engagement [3]. Online communities were found to impact positively on relationships, they gave people an opportunity to share stories about their lives and reduced social isolation [4]. It also gave people the opportunity to step outside of disabled or non-disabled binary identities at times, if they chose [5]. Social media also offered a way to enhance friendships, expand social identity and build self-esteem [5]. It was predicted that we would need online support workers who could facilitate online engagements to support people with specific medical conditions, offer peer support and mental health support over 30 years ago [1]. Accessing technology however has been an ongoing issue. People with disabilities who live alone, are older or do not have adequate access to the financial resources needed to go online are less likely to have internet access than others [6]. Even though most other adults had smart phones, their potential as a window into a wider world was overlooked for people with disabilities [7]. It has taken a pandemic to begin to realise the potential of online engagement as a tool for exercising the human right to be included in society.

1.6.2 Research during the pandemic

Research on online disability supports during the pandemic are largely positive. They point to the degree to which relationships and connection could be sustained online[8]. Online contact mitigated loneliness, isolation and mental health issues during a very stressful time and both staff and people participating in online developed digital skills because they had a solid

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[10] https://www.centralbank.ie/publication/financial-stability-review/financial-stability-review-2023-ii

[11] https://static1.squarespace.com/static/62cec364267f831da371f2b2/t/6552230e7c9c6f48acc183fa/1699881818 16836/231113+Layout.pdf.

rationale for doing so [9]. The benefits and barriers are documented in both Irish[12][8, 10] and international research [11] and laid out in Table 1.

Table 1:Online disability supports: benefits and barriers identified in research

> **Benefits include**:
>
> 1. A sense of enhanced connection and belonging and overall wellbeing.
> 2. They greatly enhance digital capabilities, which makes it part of the social inclusion agenda
> 3. They enhance agency which is a change that comes from the inside-out
> 4. They offer an efficient way of providing a service from a service provider perspective.
>
> **Barriers include:**
>
> 1. Lack of access to hardware, software, broadband and lack of accessible technology including AT
> 2. Lack of financial means
> 3. Poor digital skills
> 4. Staff attitudes, family attitudes and organisational culture
> 5. Organisational concerns around safeguarding.

Research indicates that staff innovation from the ground-up was key to developing online supports that were a lifeline during the pandemic [10]. The development of services was characterised by strong self-organising capabilities, an openness to learn and to evolve something new [10]. Research also shows that staff attitudes and organisational culture were key factors in supporting digital participation[12]. Staff are most often gatekeepers to online access in different ways [11]. Where staff thought that people would not be able to participate online, because they lacked the capacity, or because of family preferences, they have been found to make decisions for, rather than with people with disabilities [9, 13] . However, when staff have a strong rationale for why online contact is important, they take action, and upskill themselves in order to do so [10,13].

1.6.3 Research post pandemic

The reopening of day services came as a great relief to many. Advocates for greater access to technology had hoped that the pandemic would support more people to cross the digital divide which exists between those who have access to the online world and those who do not [14].

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[12] Fortune, J., M. Manikandan, S. Harrington, O. Hensey, C. Kerr, S. Koppe, T. Kroll et al. "Understanding the use of digital technologies to provide disability services remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic; a multiple case study design." (2024). – under embargo at time of writing

The digital divide continues to be a real concern as many services have returned to in-person services only and the learning from the pandemic is being lost [14,15].

The issues that human rights, technology and accessibility raise for organisations will not disappear with the pandemic. Organisations that were risk-averse now need to reconsider their position [16, 17]. There is no doubt that online services pose some complex questions that require engagement and reflection, including developing clarity around the value of both in-person and online connections, and when either option is in the best interests of the person with a disability, and ensuring that organisational policies are consistent for staff and people with disabilities. There can sometimes be an assumption that virtual connections are "less real" than in-person connections [18]. This assumption is made by those who are both in favour of and against online connections. Research indicates that it is possible to have "we-experiences" online as much as offline, and people are entitled to make an active choice of which suits them best at a particular time.

Virtual supports were a vital lifeline for people with disabilities during the pandemic and continue to offer a substantial opportunity for meaningful connection, advocacy and agency via an innovative service design. Access to technology is a human right in line with the UN CRPD and increasingly a strong indicator of social inclusion. This poses ethical and moral dilemmas for organisations that need to reflect and take action on the basis that Irish government policy, including health policy is embracing digitalisation and external volatility may pose future risks for services.

2. Evaluation approach and methodology

Evaluation design

The evaluation was designed based on an understanding of the background and context. It comprised of three activities which informed each other, starting with a literature and internal document review, a programme of interviews, and then a workshop (See fig.3). The findings from these activities were used to develop recommendations. For more information on the design see Appendix 2.

Develop evaluation questions

The following evaluation questions were developed and chosen to address the scope described in the tender document. They come in two parts: the first part is a retrospective review of the Virtual Service to date, and the second part looks to future potential pathways to develop the Virtual Service in the short, medium and longer term.

Part 1: Review to date

The main evaluation criterion here is concerned with *Effectiveness* - the degree to which the Virtual Service was successful in producing the desired results, that served the needs of service owners, and all stakeholders involved and affected.

A.   To what extent have the objectives been achieved? [13]

B.   To what extent has the service delivery model contributed to changes in the lives and experiences of service owners? What differences have they made: on whom, in what ways?

C.   What contribution has the development of the Virtual Service made to the development of competencies amongst different stakeholder groups?

D.   Does the Virtual Service represent a model of service which should be continued? What would be the likely consequences if the Virtual Service would no longer exist?

Part 2: Looking to the Future

E.   What are potential future online service delivery models in the medium-term?

F.   What are potential future funding models to sustain online services in the short/medium and longer term?

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[13] Objectives refer to those set out in the mission statement for VS.

The main evaluation criterion here is concerned with considering how longer-term feasibility of the Virtual Service can be achieved in the most efficient and cost-effective way.

Choose methods

The approach chosen for this evaluation is Developmental Evaluation which is underpinned by Appreciative Inquiry principles. It assesses the effectiveness of the Virtual Services and extent to which the Virtual Service has met its objectives and service owners' needs to date and the impacts it achieved and aims to support decision-makers in their decisions about the Virtual Service into the future, in a way that takes what is both feasible and desirable into account. For further information on this approach see Appendix 2.
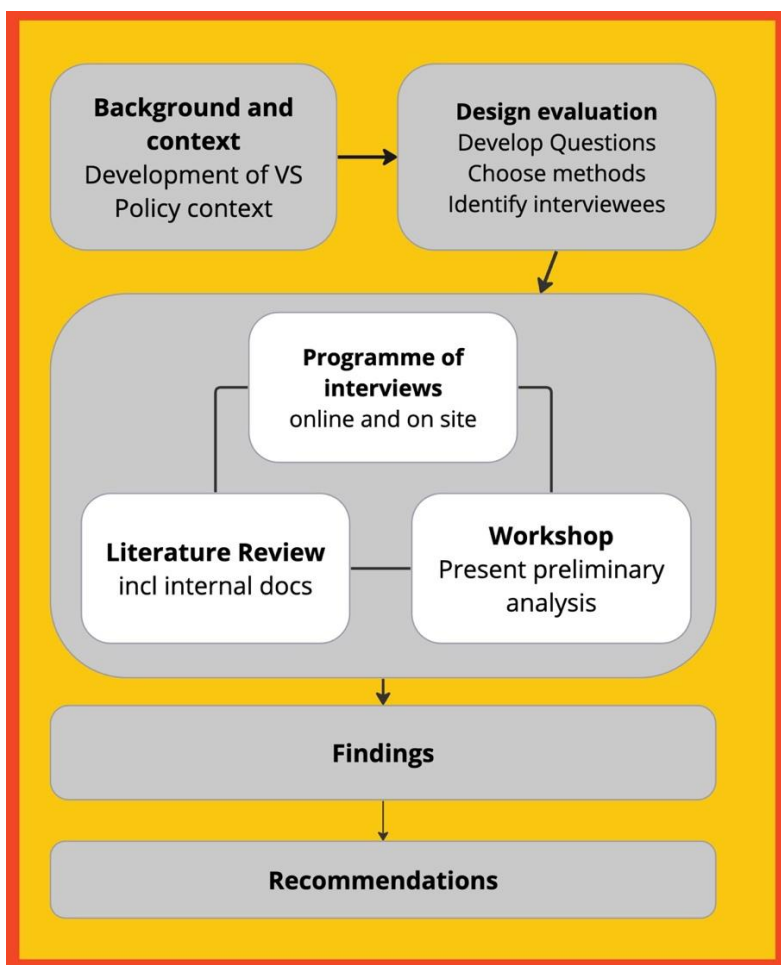

Figure 3: Evaluation design

Identify Interviewees

A stakeholder map was developed by the Virtual Services team, which depicts the key stakeholders (See Fig 4). This map was used to develop an extensive interview programme

which included identification of key informants, who were invited and agreed to participate. Detail on participants can be found in Appendix 3.
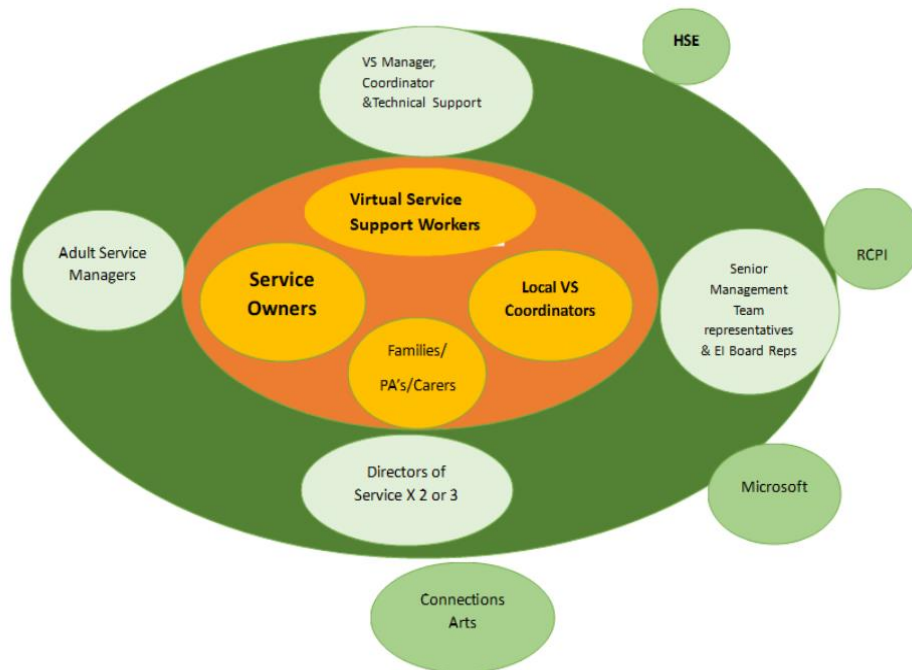

Figure 4: Stakeholder map

Conduct Interviews

The interview programme covered 63 stakeholders in total across a mix of online and in person interviews between December 2023 and January 2024 and include the following:

> 33 persons interviewed through online interviews (individual, and group interviews)
>
> 30 people interviewed through onsite in-group person interviews across three Adult Day Service sites (Sandyford, Dublin, Castleconnell, and Quinn's Cross, Limerick).

Stakeholder workshop: with selected stakeholder representatives largely from within Enable Ireland main stakeholder groups; to collect feedback and gain validation on preliminary findings; test draft intervention logic models[14]; and conduct initial feasibility assessments of the

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[14] An intervention logic model is a graphical representation of the theory of how an intervention produces its outcomes. It represents, in a simplified way, a hypothesis or 'theory of change' about how an intervention works. An intervention logic model helps think through and plan an intervention and its evaluation, clarify objectives and expectations, and support efficient resource allocation. It helps to clarify the connection between an intervention (in this case, Virtual Service and adult day services respectively) and their desired outcomes.

three developed scenarios which informed the two proposed business cases. This workshop was held on 15 February 2024.

Together the interview programme, workshop and literature review provided three strands of evidence and the data from each of these streams have been triangulated and synthesized to form the findings presented in the next section.

Quote from Service owner

"I'm from a rural area, so I like to log in online. And I access my service through Virtual from home. So, I don't have to travel to [location of nearest ADS hub 1.5-hour drive away] every day, I will access the service through Virtual...I do it from home, from the centre, whenever...Well, it's great because...we've all bonded as a group and then we've all made friends."

Quote from Service owner family member

If the Virtual Service no longer was available, [name of service owner] would be gutted and it would leave a huge void in her life. The Virtual Service has widened her world and given her access to people and ideas and activities. Without it, her world rapidly becomes small and more limited again. Her social circle would constrict again to her family members. All the personal advances that [name of service owner] has made would regress through not practicing them as much if the Virtual Service was gone. She would be lonely and sad without it. Her confidence and self-esteem would also deplete. In short, her quality of life would disimprove without the Virtual Service.

3. Findings

Overall, the findings from the fieldwork are very positive. There is widespread support and appreciation of the Virtual Service by *all* interviewees and those consulted, and no significant negative findings were reported or emerged during the evaluation. If the Virtual Service would no longer exist, it would leave a huge void for many of the service owners who benefit from it over the last four years. There is a large cohort of potential users who are currently not being served and might potentially benefit from the Virtual Service in the future. Enable Ireland can be seen as a leader in the digitalisation of services, and has overcome the barriers listed in the literature review.

It should however be acknowledged that the current content provided by the Virtual Service does not meet the needs of all service owners, and that to do so would require an expansion of options to meet the diverse needs of service owners across all sites. It is worth noting that the Virtual Service is a successful innovation, adding to the suite of services that Enable Ireland offers and has a transformative impact on people's lives, including some significant ripple effects. Enable Ireland's Virtual Service was shortlisted in the Irish Healthcare Awards 2023 in the category '*Best use of Information Technolog*y' as an 'innovative approach to building sustainable services with enhanced reach which acts as external validation to this effect[15]. Creating the new job roles for Service Owners to support the Virtual Service as support workers was a unique accomplishment by Enable Ireland - something comparable was not done by any other organisation that runs similar services.

The findings are presented in two parts, the first reviews what has happened to date, and the second part looks to the future.

3.1 Part One: Review to date

The story of the evolution of Enable Ireland's Virtual Service is presented first, followed by a comparison between the Virtual Service and the Adult Day Services, leading to overarching findings that review what has happened to date.

3.1.1 The Story of Enable Ireland's Virtual Service

The following section describes Enable Ireland's Virtual Service development and delivery in three phases, which helps to capture the evolution of this service over time, and its distinctive

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[15] https://www.irishhealthcareawards.ie/irishhealthcareawards2023/en/page/2023-shortlist .

characteristics. The development and implementation of Enable Ireland's Virtual Service can be usefully conceptualised in three distinct phases, each of which is considered in turn.

Figure 5: Timeline diagram: key milestones of Enable Ireland's Virtual Service 2020-2024.

Phase 1 (March 2020 to December 2020)

The initial set-up period was prompted by the onset of Covid-19 in March 2020 when Enable Ireland's Virtual Service was created under a very rapid time pressure and under conditions of great uncertainty and anxiety as a result of the global pandemic. The initial priority was to provide a substitute for the Adult Day Services as service owners and staff needed to socially distance. When centres were forced to close due to Covid-19-induced lockdown orders in March 2020, service owners were initially left without any services whatsoever. Enable Ireland identified a way to develop and deliver a form of online service very rapidly and with extensive support from its partner, Microsoft and implemented the first phase of the Virtual Service in very short timeframe to provide an alternative service to those normally offered in ADS centres. Enable Ireland was able to offer the Virtual Service to service owners as an alternative, to meet each other online and participate in an increasingly expanded range of online content. This was initially seen as 'better than nothing' and kept service owners engaged and supported on this alternative medium.

Enable Ireland with active support from Microsoft equipped service owners with the necessary technology (laptops, assistive technology, etc), and actively helped each service owner to be able to access the service, under the difficult conditions of lockdown and social distancing rules. Staff and Microsoft volunteers worked intense shifts and out-of-hours to support service owners and travelled to service owners' homes to support them to set up the equipment and train them how to use it whilst observing social distancing.

For many service owners, the Virtual Service has been described as 'lifesaving' during this particularly difficult period characterised by isolation, fear, loneliness, boredom and lack of

attention. The Virtual Service provided a safety net and continuity of service and attention that would otherwise not have been able to be met. The Virtual Service offered in this phase was largely emulating the kind of services normally offered by Adult Day Services.

Phase 2 (2021-2022)

This phase saw the further consolidation and nationwide roll-out of the Virtual Service, still during pandemic conditions, but during this time period, Adult Day Services centres were gradually reopening. During this phase, the Virtual Service was substantially further developed and continued to form a vital part of Enable Ireland services. A new part time job role for Virtual Service Support Workers was created. These roles were targeted at service owners and active users of the Virtual Service and were advertised as Enable Ireland job vacancies. Interested applicants underwent interviews with an interview panel, following standard recruitment and employment processes by Enable Ireland. (Job profiles for Virtual Service Support Workers in Appendix 4).

Nineteen service owners were subsequently employed as Virtual Service support workers. Virtual Service support workers take responsibility for co-designing, preparing, deploying and facilitating Virtual Service sessions for and with Service owners. For the majority of support workers, being employed as Virtual Service support workers is their first proper paid employment. The role gives them a new and valued identity, as well as an income. Virtual Service support workers acquired pension entitlements, contributing to their family's expenses, as well as gaining a significant boost in confidence and self-image, confirmation through professional recognition for their work and ongoing learning and development 'on the job' – and for many, being employed as Virtual Service support workers means getting paid for doing what they love.

Phase 3 (2023-2024)

Phase 2 shifted into phase 3 when Adult Day Services opened up again completely and resumed their pre-pandemic 'business as usual'. In this current phase, Adult Day Services and the Virtual Service now run concurrently, in what might be described as a 'hybrid' model. During Phase 3, the current predicament of the Virtual Service running in parallel with Adult Day Services has become increasingly clear.

Whilst Adult Day Services have quickly returned to their 'normal business', the Virtual Service continues to be available for service owners who can access it from home, from the day

service or from wherever they are. The remote access facilitates people in a range of situations where they are not attending the hub on a particular day: for example, when someone is sick, in hospital, on respite, or in a residential setting such as a nursing home, or in other situations such as self-isolating, not having transport on a particular day, when weather conditions make travel impossible/unsafe, etc.

In many adult day centres, service owners can also participate in Virtual Service sessions nationwide while being in their hub. This typically involves a group of service owners gathered in a multipurpose room with access to a computer and TV screen and audio-visual facilities. This gives people dual access to services: they can participate in the Virtual Service and in the services and activities at the Adult Day Services.

However, the take-up of the Virtual Service has changed compared to Covid-19 times during Phase 1 and Phase 2: some service owners who have returned to their day service do not participate in the Virtual Service any longer as a result.

In most cases, this is by service owners' own choice: they are happy with the local day service and now prefer them to the Virtual Service, which they consider has been useful during Covid-19. Others are happy to flexibly choose between activities in the day service as well as continuing to participate in the Virtual Service for any content that they are interested in. Interviews pointed to a number of reported cases of very considerable travel challenges experienced by people living in very remote rural areas, ranging from insufficient public transport connectivity, reliance on individual private transport by car and lifts from family, and high transport costs including an inability to access loans for specialised vehicles. This is in addition to the prolonged impact and exhaustion of long and often uncomfortable journeys.

Adult Day Services staff appear to have mixed attitudes to the continued use of the Virtual Service: whilst some are very enthusiastic supporters, others express the view that the Virtual Service was 'grand during Covid-19', whilst now everything was 'back to normal'.

3.2 A comparison between the Virtual Service and Adult Day Services

A key question that arose in this evaluation was the extent to which the Virtual Service can be considered to be the same and/or different from Adult Day Services. It starts with a look at the guiding documents for each:

Mission Statement for the Virtual Service

The mission statement for the Virtual Service is published on Enable Ireland's Intranet as follows:

> *"The Virtual Service is an online platform that connects service owners and promotes advocacy, independence, choice and inclusion in their communities. Our goal is to complement existing Adult Day Services by providing an online space which facilitates discussion and action by and with service owners. The Virtual Service is committed to empowering service owners, facilitating positive change and offering an inclusive community for all."*

Goal for Adult Day Services

The goal for Adult Day Services can be summarized as a way of meeting the Person-centered outcomes as per HSE "New Directions" through the provision of Adult Day Services (in line with the HSE guideline for day services).

Two draft intervention logic models (definition see footnote 13) were then drawn up and the participants at the stakeholder workshop were invited to provide feedback on each. The purpose of an intervention logic model is to help think through and plan an intervention and its evaluation, clarify objectives and expectations, and support efficient resource allocation. It helps to clarify the connection between an intervention (in this case, the Virtual Service Adult Day Services respectively) and their desired outcomes, by providing a structured format for communicating the rationale behind the intervention and its anticipated outcomes and impacts[16].

Both services' intervention logics are complementary to each other in terms of their overall objectives (desired outcomes and impacts), but differ in how services are implemented through their very different activities and outputs, which makes them quite distinct from each other in detail (For further details, see Appendix 5):

Both are clearly aligned to the overall policy objectives as outlined in New Directions, enabling service owners to meet the desired person-centred outcomes. The shared goal for both services is therefore that service owners are active and valued citizens who can live

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[16] Irish Government (2021) Frameworks for Policy Planning and Evaluation, prepared by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth / research & Evaluation Unit). https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/5a620-frameworks-for-policy-planning-and-evaluation-evidence-into-policy-guidance-note-7/

independently, are included in the community and able to fully actualise their personal potential. Adult day services operate on the logic that the desired outcomes are met through the provision of services in the local Adult Day Service hubs within the local communities. Service owners attend their nearest day service centre during working day hours (9-5), and services are delivered through dedicated staff working in these centres. Activities are carried out around person-centred planning and key working and various on-site supports. Outputs include implemented Person-Centred Plans for service owners attending centres.

The *Virtual Service* originated from within Adult Services in 2020 as an emergency response to COVID-19 lockdowns. The Virtual Service operates on a logic that activities are delivered online, which overcomes geographical constraints and the time constraints of 9 to 5pm. A range of bespoke virtual activities are co-designed, co-developed and co-delivered by Support Workers to meet evolving needs, resulting in a range of outcomes that are unique to the Virtual Service. Outcomes include digital literacy skills, presentation skills, cross-country connection and peer support and self-and group advocacy. Not all CHOs currently participate in the Virtual Service, and current participation is not equal across participating regions.

There are some observations arising from the stakeholder workshop that add to this discussion:

The first observation is that the rationales for *both* Adult Day Services and the Virtual Service conform to high-level policy objectives at a national level, particularly New Directions. However, they implement this through very different and distinct ways, as summarized above.

The second observation is that perceived differences amongst stakeholders lead to different views about whether the two service models should be integrated and to what extent, or if they should be considered as different services entirely. One perspective suggests that the Virtual Service ought to be seen as integrated into Adult Services. This makes sense from the perspective of the origins of the Virtual Service arising out of Adult Day Services, and from a business perspective as the Virtual Service is currently financed by Adult Day Services which leads to the current unsustainable situation, ongoing resource competition and results in uncertainty for service owners and staff regarding continued employment beyond their current short-term contract period. However, others expressed reservations about treating them as the same. The Virtual Service is not taken up in all locations across the country equally, and therefore there are very distinct differences in the models, as was highlighted through the workshop exercise.

To resolve this divergence, it is therefore advisable to further clarify and conceptualize the Virtual Service as a distinct service model separate to, but complementary to Adult Services, in line with the expressed mission statement above. As diagram 3.1 suggests, the initial positioning of the Virtual Service, is that they started within Adult Days Services, but they have now grown to be a distinct inter-related offering which is distinct and that extends outside of the organisation's usual boundaries.
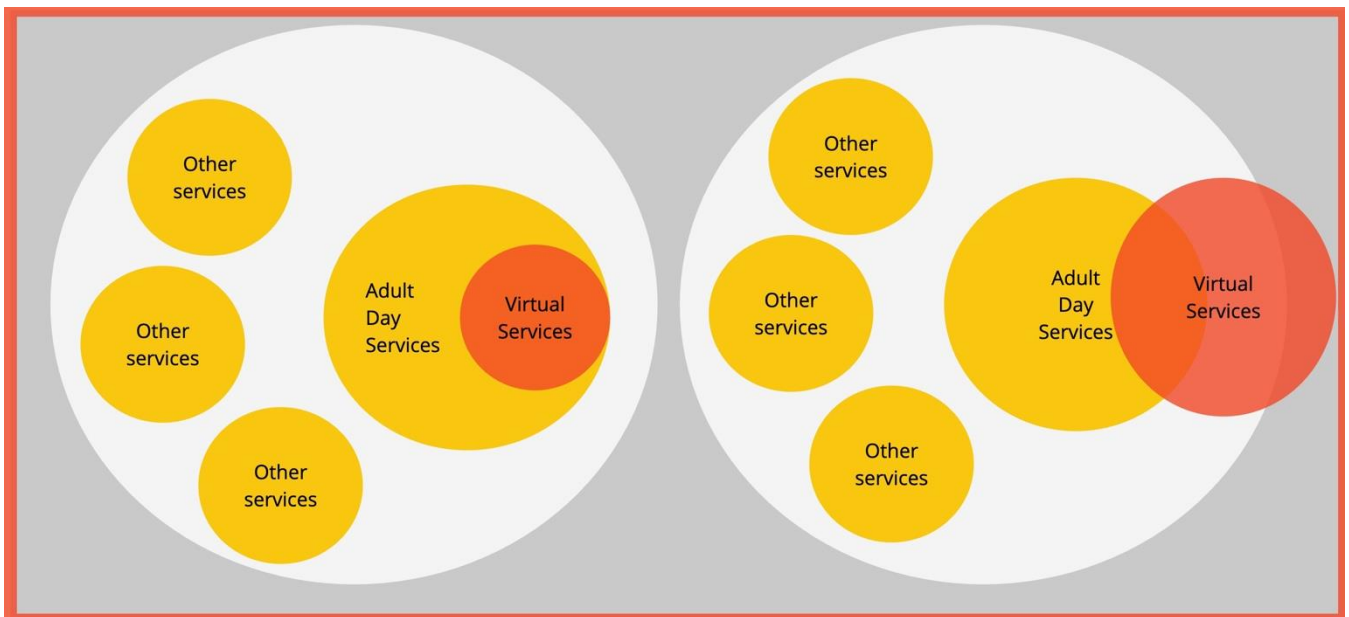
Fig. 3.1: Initial and current positioning of Enable Ireland's Virtual Service(on left) and proposed positioning as it matures

3.3 Overarching review findings

The objectives for the Virtual Service were fully achieved in Phase 1 and exceeded in Phase 2 of their development, due to the incremental further enhancement and ongoing improvement co-designed and developed by service owners themselves in close collaboration with a dedicated Virtual Service team, and the recruitment of 19 Virtual Service support workers from amongst service owners. The Virtual Service has proven to be *transformational* for many of the service owners who used the services, along several different impact pathways. The following transformational impacts are divided into three sections:

Firstly, looking at the impact for service owners and support workers, then the ripple effect on others and concluding with consideration of digital skills. There are also some significant strategic concerns which are also presented here.

3.3.1. Transformational impacts for service owners / Virtual Service Support workers:

The Virtual Service enhances well-being: Being part of the Virtual Service community brings service owners joy, a sense of belonging and happiness. enhances sense of self and personal competencies. Participants report greater self-confidence, positive self-image, new mastery of skills, and experience greater independence in their lives. enhances advocacy skills and personal agency. Dedicated Virtual Service advocacy activities on issues that impact on people's lives, give people a voice, promote active citizenship, personal autonomy and agency. This includes taking part in public consultations and hosting workshops on issues that affect them.

It has opened up people's world and horizons: Social connectivity with others is greatly expanded beyond local networks of contacts, both to service owners in different geographical parts of the country and sometimes internationally. The connections made are not only wide-ranging, but also deep, including many new friendships and regular contact outside the Virtual Service.

It enhances digital skills: The development of advanced digital skills is a key competency and a transferable skill that enhances social inclusion beyond the Virtual Service.

It allows people who cannot access adult day services an opportunity to stay connected: Participation through the Virtual Service is liberating for those service owners living in remote rural areas and individuals suffering from severe physical constraints as it removes the necessity to travel long distances to the nearest service centre to benefit from services and increases choice.

It creates jobs: The Virtual Service has created jobs for 19 service owners to work as Support Workers. This is a first step into paid work for many and leads to the development of highly relevant personal and professional transferable skills and competencies. As a first job for some, the role offers a new and valued identity and an opportunity for getting paid for doing what they love. The Virtual Service support workers are more financially independent and are acquiring pension entitlements.

3.3.2. The ripple effect:

The Virtual Service has a ripple effect on families, as well as a digital and positivity effect that goes beyond the running of the service.

The family ripple: The personal transformations that have occurred for individual service owners have a positive ripple effect on families and personal networks: they experience joy and relief in observing their family member's positive development and higher independence, which in turn frees them up to focus on other activities themselves.

The digital ripple: Staff in Adult Day Services benefit from exposure and learning with and from service owners' and Support Workers' significantly enhanced digital skills developed through their work on the Virtual Service.   These digital skills often exceed the skill level found amongst staff members providing conventional services, which helps to raise the overall level of digital skills of the organisation in the organisation (although also exposing a digital skills gap amongst many staff in the organisation which ought to be addressed).

The positivity ripple: The positivity of everyone involved in Virtual Services and the power of transformation that is observed also has a significant motivational effect on external partners who work with those in the Virtual Service context (for example technical and content providers, as well as government agencies), which in turn sustains and further increases the commitment of these partners to support the Virtual Service and Enable Ireland.

3.3.3 Staff Skill development

It should be noted that the Virtual Service Support Workers have developed the following skills to a very high standard, which allow the provision of an increasingly diverse and highly professional delivery of Virtual Service sessions. These competencies may be developed further through further and/or higher education.

Specialised skills for running the Virtual Service include:

- advanced digital skills to produce content in a variety of digital media (for the design and production of podcasts, videos, radio etc)
- soft skills (such as organisational and project management, team coordination)
- online moderation and community management skills.

Technology: Enable Ireland has significant in-house IT capacity with their well-equipped and supportive It department and supportive Virtual Service Team, providing very proactive and flexible user support capability and expertise to support service owners and their significant IT and digital literacy support needs. This is a very important organisational asset rarely found in comparable organisations/service providers and needs to be recognized as such. Additional IT equipment, software and expertise has been provided by Enable Ireland's partner Microsoft. This partnership is long-standing, and has contributed positively beyond technical support,

making a significant contribution to giving the Virtual Service an edge during the pandemic. The relationship raises the capability of the organisation to innovate, and there appears to be continued commitment for the future.

3.4. Strategic concerns

Notwithstanding the considerable and overwhelmingly positive findings from this evaluation, there are several strategic concerns with the current way of operating the service that inform recommendations in the next section.

3.4.1 Budget uncertainty:

A major risk factor is that no independent budget exists to fund the Virtual Service and staff costs (Virtual Service team and Support Workers): funding now comes from contributions from the allocated HSE budgets in each CHO region. Whilst this made sense during Covid-19 lockdowns, it leads to underfunding, resource competition and lack of planning certainty in the current hybrid model. It also creates uncertainty and anxiety for Virtual Service staff. This funding gap puts the Virtual Service at risk of immediate unsustainability.

3.4.2 Technology hardware and IT supports:

As already noted, Microsoft's support is invaluable to Enable Ireland and the strong relationship between both organisations is commendable and has far reaching impact. However, it also puts Enable Ireland in a position of dependency on one single commercial donor entity, as well as resulting in a technological lock-in situation. In the medium-term, current IT equipment will need to be replaced at end-of-life lifecycle and upgraded for newer functionalities that require a long-term IT strategy and resourcing and support capacity.

3.4.3 Employment conditions for Virtual Service Support workers:

The employment of Virtual Service Support Workers marks a significant shift in the culture of the organisation, but it raises the issue of employment policies and perceptions within the organisation that unwittingly lead to undesirable cultural norms. There is a risk of running an organisation with two different employment standards, which is unsustainable. There is a concern that the Support Worker role continues to be seen as different from other roles in the organisation, and there may be an assumption that people "should" move out into the open labour market or pursue further education. Like all staff, Virtual Service support workers have employment rights and can choose to stay or progress in line with discussions with their line

manager. This requires a shift in perceptual thinking and culture across the organisation and mainstreaming of HR policies to include all staff equally.

3.4.4 Staff Digital Skills:

The digital skills of Virtual Service staff stand in contrast to a sizable cohort of other staff in the organisation. Many staff in other roles lack digital skills - and sometimes lack of interest, believing that it is '*not for them*'. This gap has several implications. Firstly, it creates a difficulty for staff supporting participation in the Virtual Service.

 But it also points to a bigger issue. As society becomes increasingly digitalised, digital literacy is a core competency in any workforce. It is particularly important in disability organisations concerned with human rights and social inclusion. Research indicates that staff often act as gatekeepers to digital access amongst people with disabilities. Poor staff attitudes, lack of digital literacy and organisational culture have a significant impact on participation rates of people with disabilities in the digital world, and this is exacerbated by high organisational turnover. While this is true for staff working directly with service owners, it equally applies to those in other roles, particularly if they are supervising or managing those staff, where their understanding of the potential role of technology has an even greater impact than someone directly supporting individuals. There is a risk that poor digital skills amongst staff will not only impact on their social inclusion, but this poses a serious risk for the social inclusion of service owners across the organisation in line with the UN CRPD. Given the expectation of digital competencies in the workforce set out in HSE and CORU documents referenced in Section 1, Enable Ireland needs to consider digital competencies across all staff categories, in order to attract and retain high-calibre staff.

3.4.5 Organisational culture:

An issue threaded through the last two points made here relates to organisational culture. There can be an unquestioned assumption amongst some day service staff that in-person supports are better than digital supports. This tendency is also found in the literature and to be expected where there is a divide between digital adopters, and those with poor literacy skills. It is also likely that there is a generational divide between those for whom digitalisation involves a steep learning curve and digital natives who have grown up with technology.

3.4.6 Virtual Service take-up levels:

Just as there is no one "size fits all" service model, equally the Virtual Service does not suit everyone and nor should it be presented as an only option. People are entitled to choice around when, where and how they access supports and the Virtual Service offers a different kind of service to Adult Day Services (See section above). Whilst the Virtual Service continues being offered alongside Adult Day Services, some service owners stopped using the Virtual Service when Adult Day Services opened again, in preference to the onsite services, by choice. Whilst the Virtual Service continued to be offered to service owners also whilst attending Day Services, the uptake of this varies considerably across the country. Some centres are not well set up to cater for the Virtual Service on site.

There is likely to be a sizable cohort of people with disabilities, both within and beyond current service owners who are currently not service and could benefit from accessing the Virtual Service, but little is known about this potential and untapped 'market' for the Virtual Service.

3.4.7 Should Virtual services be continued?

Interviewees were asked about their views what would happen if the Virtual Service would no longer exist. The responses were overwhelmingly indicating that service owners would miss it very much, and the absence of this service would leave a big void in their lives, with the foreseeable consequence of losing the personal growth they were able to accomplish, and regression of skills and competencies they have developed using the Virtual Service. Many service owners' social interactions would be reduced to their immediate family and household again, losing their social connectivity and independence, with negative consequences also for their carers and family. Support workers would lose their employment with little or no alternatives to them. Self- and group advocacy would be significantly curtailed without the Virtual Service. In short, the absence of the Virtual Service would leave many current beneficiaries without an equivalent service, loss of independence and choice, and attrition of the positive developmental benefits which were achieved to date.

It is therefore recommended that the Virtual Service should be continued and further extended in the future, for the benefit of existing and future beneficiaries, and to capitalize on the significant investments made which put Enable Ireland in a leading position as a provider of the Virtual Service.

Quotes from Service owner

"Coming from COVID, the Virtual was the best thing that came from it."

Quotes from Virtual Service Support Workers
"It's not just a job, but a family, because we are all together in one group, it's like family"

"I found it very hard to get an actual job. So I decided to apply for the [Virtual Service support worker] job because it's very hard to get jobs in the rural area. "

Quote from Family member of a Virtual Support Worker

"So Virtual has opened this interaction with people elsewhere, which is huge, back during COVID. And then after COVID when she got her job, it was absolutely great. We take it for granted that we maybe get a job here, but for them, sometimes it is really very difficult to get a job. So, this was a huge confidence boost for her to be able to go to her friends and say "I'm going to work today. I'm not just floating about, I have work."

Quotes from Virtual Service Team members
"Because it evolved over the last year it has seen massive change for the better in the Virtual Service. Moving it from that kind of leisure-based emergency response to something that is trying to integrate with the day service priorities around New Directions, which is around self-determination, advocacy, access to education and employment to some degree, I think that's an interesting area. "

"I think there's a lot of people who just did not realize what people were capable of. We see how service owners, same as Virtual Service Support Workers, have grown in terms of their competencies. It is a pity that not that many staff from adult services sit in on our sessions, I think they could be missing out on some of these big wins because when you see how the support workers are thriving and so professional and very well supported by [names of team members], I think some of that gets lost, especially not realizing what people are doing, and just how impactful their activities are.

Quote from External stakeholder

"I would always worry about Adult Service centres sitting outside of mainstream society, which means that we, people who are able bodied, miss out on the opportunity to connect. It's the idea behind the Virtual Service that the world is opening up for everyone and how great would it be if in your community you suddenly have a bigger network of people to get to know and you have a variety of different people to lean on."

3.2 Part Two: Future alternative scenarios

The first part of this evaluation finds that there are enormous rewards to be gained from the continuation of Virtual Service. The second part is concerned with looking forward towards future need and the feasibility of developing a sustainable model for the continuation of the Virtual Service. Interviewees were invited to express their dreams and wishes for the future of the Virtual Service. Their responses led to the development of the following three possible future scenarios. These are presented in Table 3.2. These scenarios are 'thought experiments' how different alternative ways of providing the Virtual Service might be conceived in the future. The desirability and feasibility of these possible alternative models were explored in groups during the stakeholder workshop and presented to the wider group for further discussion and endorsement by everyone present. Each group also completed the feasibility assessment grid, reproduced in Appendix 5.

The following three scenarios were developed and assessed:

Scenario 1: Maintain the current model, securing longer-term sustainable funding

Maintain and secure: Enable Ireland remains as the flagship owner of the Virtual Service but finds additional new sources of funding, and additional partners. This involves the possibility of partnering with other disability service organisations and finding other partners, and new and sustainable funding sources for the Virtual Service.

Scenario 2: Extend the service model for the benefit of new user groups

Extend to new users*:* Extend the Virtual Service, to open it up for the benefit of new user groups. This scenario recognises the potential value for currently unserved groups, beyond current service owners. These groups may include other cohorts of people with disabilities, or chronic conditions, people with injuries who are temporarily restricted in mobility, as well as older people, and/or people suffering from social isolation and loneliness. These new groups - as well as a large number of currently still unserved people with disabilities in Ireland who are not receiving any type of service, could greatly benefit from a Virtual Service in future. There is no known significant stakeholder in the sector currently offering such a service. At the same time commercial telehealth providers are moving into a growing market, offering Telehealth options for older people living alone who need to monitor medical conditions or may be at risk

of falls. This scenario requires extending to develop new partnerships, possibly with organisations on a similar journey towards digitalisation.

Scenario 3: Commercialize to become a social enterprise offering the Virtual Service as an on-demand, subscription-based service for paying customers

Social Enterprise for on-demand Virtual Service: In this scenario, the Virtual Service would be maintained for now but developed as an independent social enterprise over time. In this scenario, Enable Ireland would 'let go' of ownership of the Virtual Service. It would require a new organisational structure and operating model, that maintains the mission of a social and civil common good, rather than profit-making. This requires business and entrepreneurship acumen: new skills and competencies not currently available within Enable Ireland and a new legal form. Alternative ways would need to be found to 'charge' for the service, as it could no longer be financed through the current financing streams. Possible financing models could include Pay-as-you-go, and 'on-demand' service models similar to 'Netflix' or 'Hertz' models. (for details see Appendix 5).

3.2.1 Result of exploration process

Senior management are committed to continuing the Virtual Service, which has become one of Enable Ireland Unique Selling Propositions (USPs) (albeit in the absence of a clear funding stream to support it). This makes sound business and organisational development sense: it is important to support innovative practice and to capitalise on the organisational capability built up over the last four years at this point. To lose the benefit of the investment in time, resources and capacity raising at this point would be a great loss and it would take considerable time to build up the same level of social capital and digital skills amongst service owners and support workers again. The outcome of this initial feasibility assessment of the proposed 3 scenarios at the in-person workshop was a joint agreement by participants to advance Scenario 1 as a priority in the short term and to merge the common elements of Scenarios 2 and 3 as a longer-term process. Commercialisation as proposed in Scenario 3 is not considered feasible or desirable at this point, however it should be kept in mind as a possible future trajectory should circumstances change or opportunities arise.

The conclusion of this initial feasibility assessment developed by the stakeholders present at the workshop is that Enable Ireland to proceed with further development work to implement the following two business cases[17]:

Business case 1: Maintain the Virtual Service and develop longer-term sustainable funding

Business case 2: Extend the Virtual Service model for the benefit of new user groups and find new partners and funding streams for 'on-demand' virtual services. Develop a roadmap for extending services to new service users, finding new partnerships and funding streams, and building internal capacity.

Recommendations are developed based on these agreements.

3.3   Conclusions

The headline finding from this evaluation is that the development of the Virtual Service in Enable Ireland represents a substantial and successful innovation. Virtual Services represent a forward-looking service model that places Enable Ireland as a key innovator and adapter in the disability space in Ireland. There are some other examples of where pandemic innovations are continuing, but none have taken the initiative of employing former service owners in key roles as Support Workers as Enable Ireland has done.[18] This is a commendable achievement and enhances the social capital of the organisation, including a strong loyalty to Enable Ireland amongst service owners, Virtual Service support staff and external partners supporting Enable Ireland's Virtual Service. The development of advanced digital skills is also notable and is a key organisational asset that will serve Enable Ireland well in terms of future sustainability. It creates a digital arc of innovation that sets Enable Ireland up as a leader in this space. The service has developed over three phases to be operationally mature and robust. It has a transformative effect on people's lives. Service owners' enhanced capacity to advocate for themselves has also been transformative in terms of expanding personal agency and citizenship. Creating a safe space within the Virtual Service holds that potential. There is a

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[17] Business case 1 corresponds to scenario 1, and business case 2 is the merger of the common elements of scenarios 2 and 3 as result from the group feasibility assessments at the workshop. Commercialisation is not considered as a feasible option at this point and therefore not proposed as a business case to be further developed.

[18] Whilst the evaluators have not found another comparable example in Ireland or the literature, this is not to say they may not exist elsewhere.

danger in treating it as a transitional space/source of employment, where people are expected to move on or enter the open labour market. This is certainly a possibility for new and younger entrants into services but should not be framed as such: Virtual Service support staff should be treated the same as other staff or service owners. It adds a significant complementary component to Adult Day Services and enhances rather than replaces other services.

At a strategic level, however, it is vulnerable to external and internal risks. Continuation of the Virtual Service plays a key strategic role for Enable Ireland: the Virtual Service not only helps to protect the organisation from future external risk due to climate change and political and budgetary uncertainty, it also leads the way towards greater social inclusion and realisation of the ambitions set out in the UN CRPD, and for the organisation and service owners to participate equally in Irish society. The Virtual Service enhances individual choice about how to access services, extends accessibility to those who cannot attend in person for different reasons, and acts as a catalyst for advocacy at a new and creative level. For these reasons, the findings confirm that the continued development of the Virtual Service is both strategically and operationally vital to the future sustainability of the organisation. The Virtual Service can be said to act as a "Digital Ark" bridging the old and the new, and as a safe haven for those not able to attend physical day services.

These conclusions are demonstrated through interviews conducted throughout this evaluation and supplemented with findings from exploration of the wider societal landscape, and several research studies that have all come to very similar findings, despite different research rationales, designs, and methodologies being used. This means that the findings are triangulated and can therefore be considered to be reliable and robust.

4. Recommendations

This section contains some high-level strategic recommendations based on the overall findings from this evaluation that take a short and longer-term perspective. The strategic recommendations need a timed action plan, while shorter-term operational recommendations can be actioned immediately. It must be emphasised that both sets of recommendations must be taken on board in tandem. Sustaining the 'Digital Arc' of innovation in disability services is about more than preserving a legacy offering. It enhances people's right to choice and self-determination under the UN CRPD and is a significant tool for the development of digital skills, employment and therefore social inclusion. It also protects the organisation against future risk of continuity to services, due to global uncertainty and climate change risk, war or future pandemics. They are dependent upon each other. This evaluation demonstrates that there is a sound business case for continuing and developing the Virtual Service. Taking action now will ensure that the Virtual Service can continue to evolve to Phase 4 and thrive.

4.1 Strategic roadmap for longer-term sustainability

These recommendations offer a starting point for medium-to-longer-term development. They are developed from the conclusion of the workshop to progress Business Case 2 to extend the service model for the benefit of new user groups and find new partners and new funding streams for 'on-demand' services.

Recommendation S 1: Develop a business plan based on the sound business case developed in this evaluation, including conducting a costing exercise for the full costs of running the Virtual Service.

This evaluation outlines both the desirability of continuing to support the Virtual Service and the potential value of doing so in the long term. It provides some of the groundwork for developing a business plan that can be presented to potential funders and used for funding applications as they arise. An important step towards developing a sound business plan is to conduct a comprehensive costing exercise to determine the full costs of running Virtual Services. At present, the running costs are integrated with Adult Day Service costs, which means that the actual running costs are unclear. It is important to adequately account for all the direct and indirect costs that may currently be diffused throughout the organisation or externalised beyond the organisation in the case of volunteer time and supply of technology, in order to source funding for a viable service long term.

<u>Recommendation S 2:</u> Explore alternative funding streams both within and beyond the disability sector.

There are a number of funding options that require further investigation and may lead to long terms sustainable funding. All of these need to be comprehensively explored as part of the business plan.

- As a priority, pursue funding through the HSE as a complement to the current Adult Day Services model either within the current Service Agreement with the HSE or through a dedicated funding stream, leveraging already established links with the HSE.
- Pursue funding through other government departments and agencies such as the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth; the Department of Social Protection (eg. Community Employment Schemes etc); Department for Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, and other governmental agencies such as Pobal, Education and Training Boards.
- Pursue funding through proactive engagement of philanthropic organisations such as ReThink Ireland, Business in the Community, and others operating outside the disability space including the Environmental Protection Agency (mitigation against climate change measures)
- Pursue funding for digitalisation, eg. Enterprise Ireland Digital Transition fund[19], European funding for Digital skills[20]
- Partner with academic institution/DSP/POBAL to support further research (see recommendation 5).
- Seek funding for infrastructure in Hubs to create digitally enabled spaces.
- Develop relationships and explore potential partnerships and resource sharing with other disability organisations operating in this space and those who are continuing to provide virtual options such as St Michaels House.

Exploring these and other potential funding options requires business development skills and allocated time.

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[19] Digital transition fund set at €85m: https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/what-we-do/supports-for-smes/digital-transition-fund/
[20] https://digital-skills-jobs.europa.eu/en/latest/news/digital-europe-programme-apply-now-advanced-digital-skills-call-proposals

Recommendation S3: Scope out potential of expanding services to reach unserved populations

Developing a growth strategy for the future of the Virtual Service calls for further investigation into the potential extending the service to a much larger cohort of potential beneficiaries. Enable Ireland's own leading-edge expertise and experience puts the organisation at an advantage compared to other organisations who may seek to enter this currently untapped market. This may include current or potential service owners living in remote rural areas, where there can be very considerable travel and effort involved to reach their nearest Adult Day Service hub, or those who need to self-isolate for health reasons or are temporarily unwell. Developing a research agenda to support this, could also form part of the advocacy work of service owners.

Recommendation S 4: Develop equitable employment terms for all employees

Mainstreaming the employment conditions for Virtual Service Support Workers should be a priority (eg. all HR and management processes; clarification of reporting and staff management lines and responsibilities including induction, working conditions, working time, pension entitlements) so that they are recognised and treated equitably within Enable Ireland. This must be costed into funding applications and actioned once sustainable funding is secured. This also includes provision for further skills development and the development of Virtual Service staff progression routes across all areas of the organisation.

Recommendation S 5: Continue to invest in digital skills throughout the organisation

Enable Ireland must strive to mirror societal developments and ensure that both staff and service owners develop digital competencies. Digital skills are key in both HSE and CORU competencies for working in this sector. Investing now will support future integration of service owners into wider society, but it also supports succession planning for Virtual Service Support Workers. It can be argued that no staff member or service owner in the organisation can be 'left behind' in the area of digital skills and should be able to operate at least at a level to be comfortable navigating through the world of the Virtual Service.

4.2 Operational Recommendations

Recommendation O 1: Maintain the operation of Virtual Services at its current level in the immediate term

The investments already made in developing organisational capacity and competencies must be maintained at their current level in order to maintain adequate service provision in the future. As a first priority, Enable Ireland should continue to fund Virtual Services until sustainable external funding can be secured, in line with the agreement at the workshop conducted as part of the evaluation. Regions not yet involved may also wish to participate in and need to be given the option.

Recommendation O 2: Develop more appropriate spaces and facilities in Day Service hubs to facilitate participation in Virtual Services

EI should provide additional space and facilities to support service owners and virtual service support workers to fully engage in the Virtual Service as and when they wish to within the Hub environment. Currently, participation in Virtual Services can inconvenience other activities and reduce the quality of experience of participating online. Given the digitalisation of public services and moves to enhance digital literacy across the population, it would be useful to look at the model for co-worker spaces to accommodate multiple modalities of accessing services.

Recommendation O 3: All social content should be delivered <u>outside</u> of Adult Day Service hours

The current Virtual Service model provides for 4 hours of extra-curricular content in the form of evening social activities, hosted by VS Support Workers. This should be continued but consideration should be given to whether or not it can be funded in the short term, given the constraints and challenges which the Virtual Services currently faces.

Recommendation O 4: Maximise benefits of Virtual Services by providing on-demand content

There is already a significant body of recorded session content (that could be made available as 'packages' for 'on-demand' users that can avail of viewing of such recorded sessions. This could potentially benefit:

- service owners who wish to review content, missed a session, socially or geographically isolated or self-isolating for health reasons

- those whose cognitive processing is aided by repetition eg, people with intellectual / learning disabilities, autism.

Recommendation O 5: Harness already established internal networks (eg: Virtual Service Champions Network) and processes to identify and implement operational improvements

Harness capacity in the **Virtual Service Champions Network** to create a systematic process for taking action on operational improvements that link the Virtual Service team to Adult Day Services and the wider organisation. Service owners and support staff know their services and their evolving needs best and are therefore key to identifying and implementing relevant operational improvements. Staff in Adult Day Services, the Virtual Service team, and management can also contribute to the continued development of the Virtual Service and bring ideas, and local opportunities to the attention of the Virtual Service. They can also articulate the needs of service owners in day services, refer service owners to the Virtual Service and give guidance on how to make it more accessible and relevant.

Recommendation O 6: Invest time in reflection as part of ongoing monitoring and evaluation of work

Evolving in an uncertain and volatile world demands strong reflective skills and a strong culture of trust and "can do" [21]. Enable Ireland could usefully capitalise on the strong commitment and creativity of current staff, by carving out further spaces for reflection. Throughout this evaluation it has become clear that there is a strong interest in taking more time out from daily front-line activity, to reflect and think through how next to evolve services. This should be embedded within an ongoing monitoring and evaluation framework.

The evaluators recommend that management an action plan with specified timeframes to action these recommendations.

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[21] https://www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/systems-practice-toolkit/relexive-practice-model/.

Appendix 1: National Policy Frameworks

National Disability Inclusion Strategy (2017-2022): This strategy has come to an end and work is commencing on the development of a successor strategy that will be rooted in UNCRPD.

New Directions: In late 2022, the HSE issued direction to organisations that clarified "What is a day service?" which excluded online engagement in preference to face-to-face services.

National Adult Literacy Strategy (2022): Promoting digital skills across Irish society.
HSE People Strategy: Emphasises need to enhance digital skills amongst staff. For example, staff learning around New Directions is conducted through eLearning[22]

Regulation of Social Care Workers: Social Care workers are now required to register with CORU and exhibit competencies including digital skill development.

Harnessing Digital - the Digital Ireland Framework: This strategy aims to transform Ireland's digital infrastructure and ensure that:

> businesses are increasingly digitalised (including access to an 85 million Digital Transition fund[23])
> all households have internet access by 2030,
> 80% of adults have digital skills and
> 90% of public services are online.

The introduction sets out the following ambition:
> *"Our goal is to be a digital leader at the heart of European and global digital developments, building on the progress and adaptability demonstrated across society during the pandemic. This will require us to promote the digital agenda effectively and coherently across all areas of Government policy and service delivery, working closely with stakeholders".*

Connecting Government 2030[24] A Digital and ICT Strategy for Ireland's Public Service: sets out an approach to deliver digital government for all, benefitting both society and the broader economy. It harnesses digitalisation to drive a step-change in how people, businesses, and policy makers interact, ensuring interoperability across all levels of government and across public services taking a "user first" and "business first" approa

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[22] https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/disability/newdirections/elearning-module-for-new-directions.html

[23] https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/what-we-do/supports-for-smes/digital-transition-fund/

[24] https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/136b9-connecting-government-2030-a-digital-and-ict-strategy-for-irelands-public-service/.

Appendix 2: Developmental Evaluation based on Appreciative Inquiry

The overall approach chosen for this evaluation is one of Developmental Evaluation[25]. Developmental evaluation supports development of innovation and adaptation in dynamic environments. DE is based on utilisation-focused principles for evaluation which are motivated to support the development of projects in a future-oriented way, that should meet the needs of the diverse stakeholders and reconcile different stakes in feasible ways in a short-, medium- and longer-term perspective. Additionally, the principles of an Appreciative Inquiry[26] approach were integrated into the chosen methodology for this evaluation.

 The chosen approach assesses the effectiveness of the Virtual Services and extent to which the Virtual Service has met its objectives and service owners' needs to date and the impacts it achieved to date, and aims to support decision-makers in their decisions about the Virtual Service into the future, in a way that takes what is both feasible and desirable into account.

 The following process stages were embedded in the evaluation tools used (interviews, site visits, and workshop):

> **Definition:** defining the focus of the inquiry by clarifying the main concerns
> **Discovery:** asking 'what gives life' to this project as it is and appreciating the 'best of what is'. (All interviews included a 'counterfactual' question to gauge the consequences of the service not being in place any longer ('what if').
> **Dream:** envisioning 'what might be', and what 'the world is calling for' in relation to the services concerned (all interviews concluded with a question eliciting interviewees wishes for the future of – what their 'dream' for it looks like).
> **Design:** jointly co-constructing together 'what should be' in ideal circumstances in the future (whilst acknowledging constraints).

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[25] Patton, M. (2010). Developmental evaluation applying complexity concepts to enhance innovation and use. New York, NY: Guilford Press. https://www.guilford.com/books/Developmental-Evaluation/Michael-Quinn-Patton/9781606238721
[26] Cooperrider, D., Barrett, F., & Srivastva, S. (1995). appreciative inquiry: A journey in organizational theory.

Destiny: this final phase is based on learning 'how to empower, learn and adjust / improvise' – how to create the future of the Virtual Service? – for which participants in the stakeholder workshop worked together on a feasibility assessment of initially 3 possible scenarios for the future of the Virtual Service.
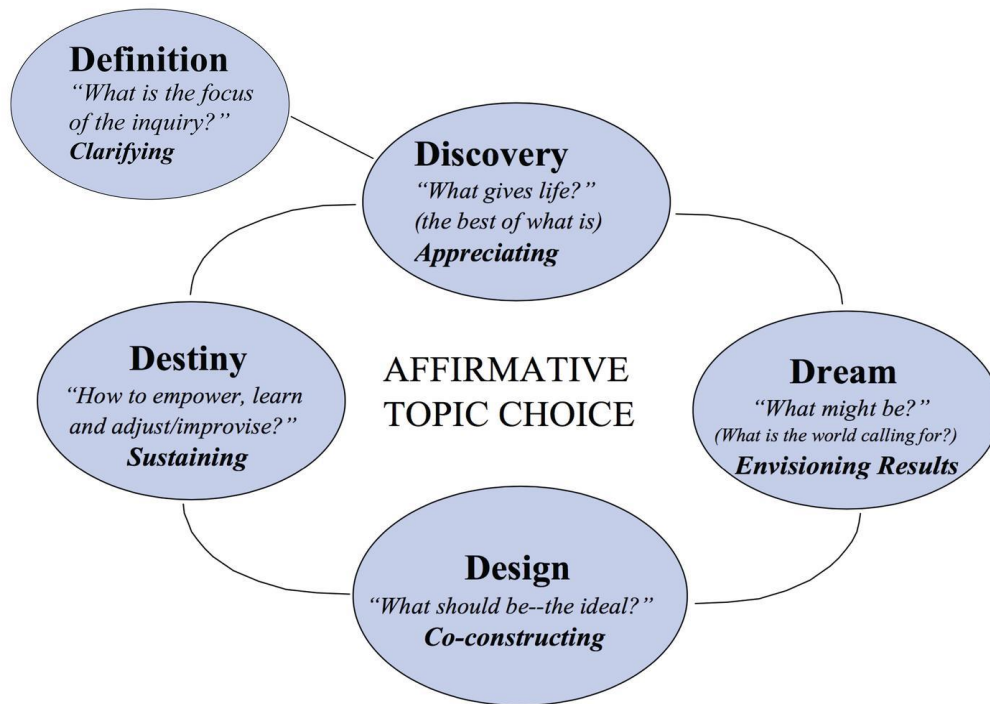

Figure 1:Illustration of Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change: Appreciative Inquiry (2005) by David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney

Appendix 3: List of interviewed stakeholder groups

Stakeholder	Stake in the Virtual Service	Role in evaluation	Purpose of interaction with this stakeholder group for the evaluation
Direct beneficiaries and staff			
Service owners (total number – ca 300 adults, nationwide)	Direct users and beneficiaries of the Virtual Service Regular participants = 100 approx. (estimated average)	Group interviews / focus groups 3 on site)	Explore direct experiences and impacts of the Virtual Service on its users (positive, negative & unexpected). Satisfaction with services, Capacities developed. 'Most significant change' on their lives. Wishes for the future.
Sub-set of service owners employed on part-time basis (19)	Beneficiaries in terms of having gained employment opportunities not previously available	Interviews (personal experience and perceived benefits from participation)	As above Plus: which employable skills have they developed, and what role the Virtual Service played in this skill development?
Staff in Adult Day Services	Providing support for use of the Virtual Service by service owners hubs	Group interviews during site visits (3)	Perception of SO's use of the Virtual Service, competencies developed; how they support the Virtual Service in hubs
Secondary beneficiaries from s being available for service owners			
Families / carers of service owners	Impact / implications of the Virtual Service on family members (positive / negative)	interviews	Families' perception of benefit / impact the Virtual Service has on the service owners. How in turn these impacts on them themselves as family members (co-living with service users) Their wishes for the future.

Stakeholder	Stake in the Virtual Service	Role in evaluation	Purpose of interaction with this stakeholder group for the evaluation
Adult Service delivery: actors involved in services delivery, facilitation, mediation etc			
Centres (Coordinators / managers)	Adult service delivery (separate to the Virtual Service)	Interview	Their perception of the Virtual Service, and impact on service owners, and those supporting / enabling / delivering the service. Their perception / attitude towards medium- and longer-term availability of the Virtual Service: impact on Adult Service delivery and sustainability in short/medium/longer term? Impact on their own roles. Their wishes for the future.
Community hubs (Coordinators / managers)	Adult service delivery	Interview	As above
Technical service intermediaries for	Enablers of access to AT (to support participation in the Virtual Service)	Interview	As above Plus, perception of service users' skills capacities and evolution over time.
Other stakeholders / partners			
Microsoft	Microsoft Philanthropy	Interview	Perspective of a key technological partner and donor, mentoring.
Educational content provider	Content provider / external partner	Interview	Perspective of close external partner, providing training and accessible content services
HSE (National Office for Human Rights and Equality Policy)	Training and education	Interview	Perspective of external national policymaker, from involvement of SOs in service design)
Academia	Research on virtual services in disability sector in Ireland	Interview	Cross-referencing with other research conducted on the Virtual Service; academic corroboration.

Appendix 4: Intervention logic models

These intervention logic models were developed for the Virtual Service and Adult Day Services, in context of the evaluation. The following diagram shows the service model as a process where the rationale for having a virtual services (why) leads to the development of objectives. Objectives guide the inputs and inputs consist of activities that lead to outputs and outcomes which then have an impact. Inputs and outputs are linked by measuring efficiency and effectiveness is measured by looking at the objectives and the outcomes.
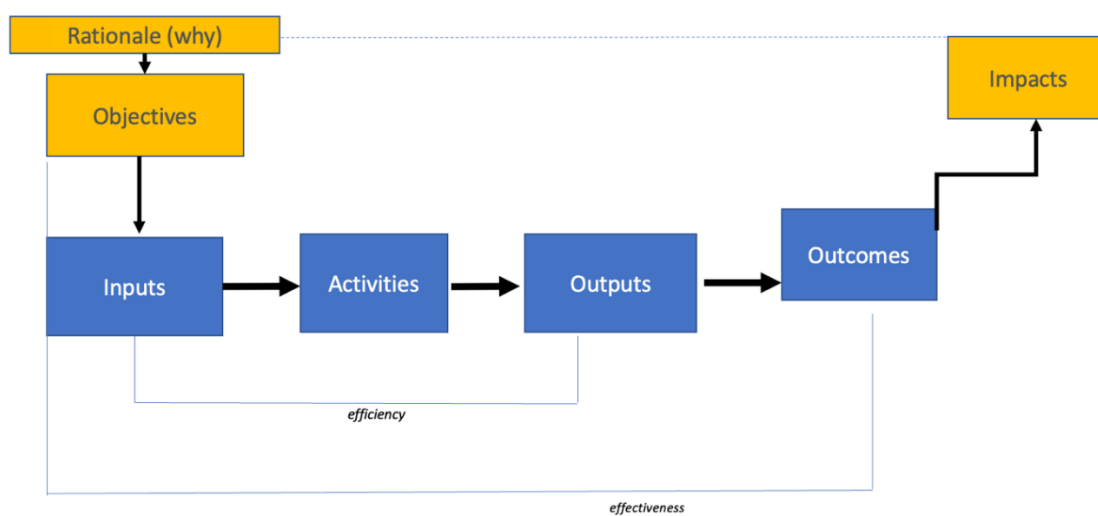

Figure 2: Intervention logic

Virtual Service Intervention Logic

Inputs:

- Money/funding
- Technology, IT and AT equipment
- Skilled users
- Access to tech support
- Development and training
- External links and partnerships.

Activities:

This box includes a graphic image from EI's Intranet representing the different layers of the Virtual Service including service delivery, employment, technology, skills development and training, and links to external organisations.
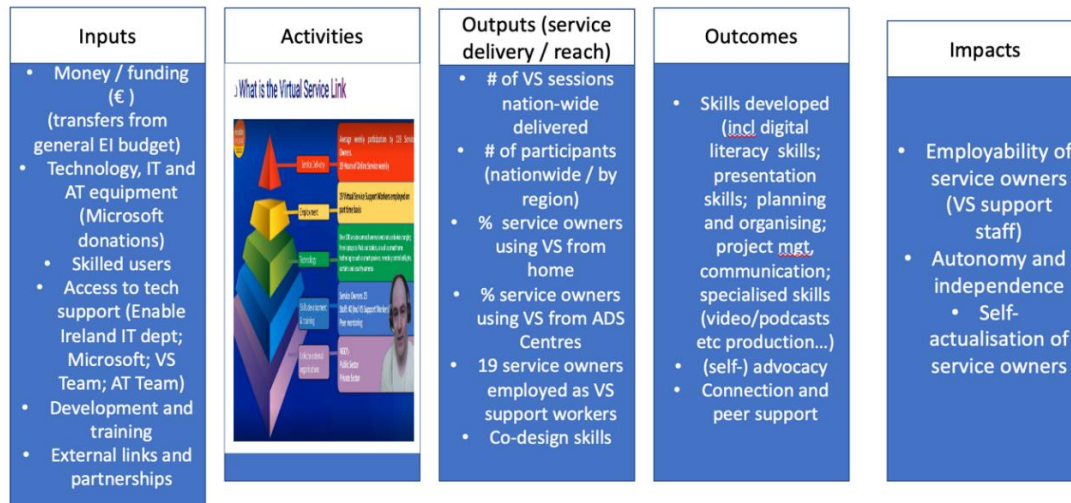
Figure 3: Description of intervention logic model for Virtual Service

Outputs/Service delivery/reach:

- Number of VS sessions delivered nationwide
- Number of participants
  Percentage of service owners accessing Virtual Service from home
- Percentage of service owners accessing Virtual Service from Adult Day Centres
- 19 service owners employed as VS support workers
- Co-design skills

Outcomes:

- Skills developed (incl digital literacy skills; presentation skills; planning and organising; project management, communication; specialised skills (video-/podcast etc production skills
- Self-advocacy skills
- Connection and peer support.

Impacts:

- Employability of service owners (VS support staff)
- Autonomy and independence of service owners
- Self-actualisation of service owners.

Adult Service Intervention Logic

Inputs:

- Money/funding
- Skilled staff employed in Adult Service Centres
- Transport and mobility arrangements for service owners to travel from/to Adult Day Centres
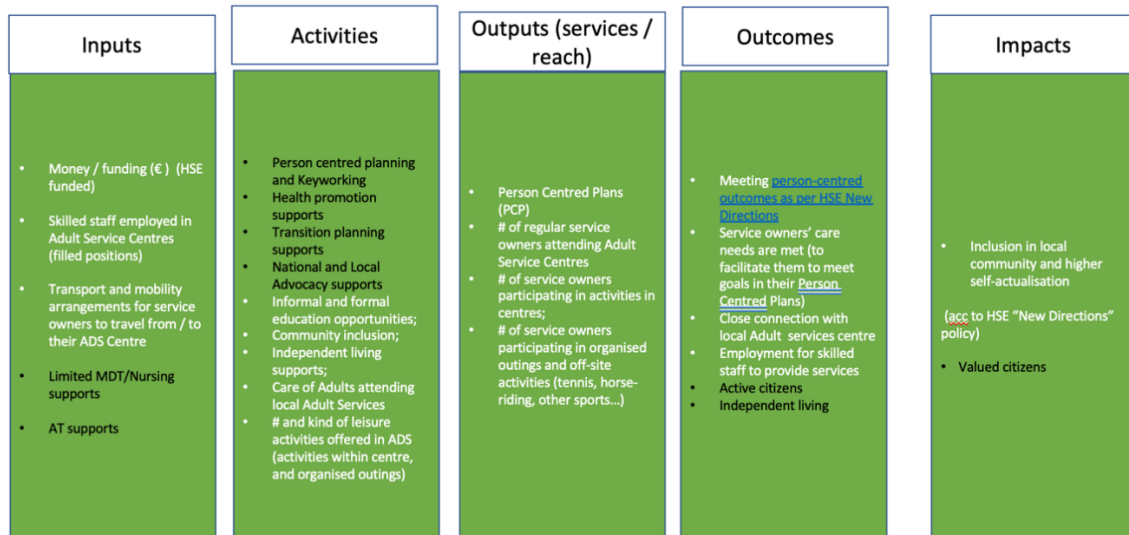- Unlimited MDT / Nursing supports
- AT supports.

Figure 4: intervention logic model for Adult Services

Activities:

- Person-centred planning and key-working
- Health promotion supports
- Transition planning supports
- National and local advocacy supports
- Informal and formal education opportunities
- Community inclusion;
- Independent living supports;
- Care of adults attending local Adult Services;
  Number and kind of leisure activities offered in Adult Day Centres (activities within centre, and organised outings).

Outputs (Service/reach):

- Person-Centred Plans
- Number of regular service owners attending Adult Service Centres
- Number of service owners participating in activities in Adult Service Centres
- Number of service owners participating in organised outings and off-site activities (tennis, horse-riding, other sports…)

Outcomes

- Meeting person-centred outcomes as per HSE "New Directions"
- Service owners' care needs are met (to facilitate them to meet goals in their Person-Centred Plans)
- Close connection with local Adult Day Service Centre
- Employment for skilled staff to provide services
- Active citizens
- Independent living.

Impacts

- Inclusion in local community and higher self-actualisation (according to HSE "New Directions" policy)
- Valued citizens

Appendix 5: Outcome of Workshop: feasibility assessments of the three scenarios

Feasibility assessments of three scenarios at workshop 15 February 2024 (attended by 15 stakeholders) (1 hour exercise)

Scenario 1: **Maintain the current model, with more longer-term sustainable funding.**

Possible beneficiaries	Existing capacities	New capacities needed	Potential new partners / resources	Possible risks
EI Service Owners SOs from other services Service owners who have no services Possible losers: Other care services	Skilled workers, experience, IT AT	Induction training Building it into individual funding Profiles change: right mindset New lens! -> explore new funding holders outside HSE eg. other gov departments New business model	IT companies Strategic partnership Win-Win for HSE: frees up space in some ADS (FTE) (purchased by others!) Upstream funding! % of ADS proportional	Reputational damage Failure Credibility Sustainability?

Scenario 2: **Extend the service model for benefit of new user groups**

Possible beneficiaries	Existing capacities	New capacities needed	Potential new partners / resources	Possible risks
Nursing homes, hospitals, stroke / rehab units. Residential services, Addiction services. Womens' refuges. Men sheds. Mental health services, Young adult groups (18-25); Supported living _____ "Rights-based approach" "Inclusive approach"	IT skills; Experience of set-up; Platform in place; Training staff	Weekend hours / evenings Content development. Someone good at completing grant funding applications. Possible research partnerships	Microsoft Leadership County Councils Rural funding as facilitators Arts and Sports ETBs Social Enterprises	Negative impact on existing SOs? Take on more than we can deliver Funding shortfall – safeguarding (potential) Loss of brand and identity Dilution

Scenario 3: **Commercialize to become a social enterprise.**

Possible beneficiaries	Existing capacities	New capacities needed	Potential new partners / resources	Possible risks
Existing users. Elderly people. Other people – isolation and loneliness. Post-recovery. 16-18 cohort -or lower depending on content-specific age Fully inclusive service model. (St. Michael's House model) *Non-beneficiaries:* Cost – those who can't afford it	Expertise in delivery of . Size of organisation. National expertise. IT skills. IT AT support and knowledge. Access. Innovative workforce	Business thinking approach. Networking Working hours (see scenario 2)	Social enterprises. Advertisers. Big corporations	Taking away the essence of the service Personal feel of the service Business model: money making machine Added pressure of making it viable Not looking at individual side If only 6 people attend session Takes away EI identity and ethos: we focus on the service delivery and person-centred approach Lose: EI visibility; virtual hub; advocacy tool

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