Digital inclusion

Covid-19 briefing note: July 2020

This series of briefings address significant issues that are emerging in the UK as a result of Covid-19 that impact on the work of community investment. In each one, we have brought together available evidence to help you think about and plan future strategies and how resources can be directed. This briefing covers digital inclusion.

The current situation

Digital inclusion covers: **digital skills** (including key skills for life such as banking and shopping as well as foundational skills such as turning on a device); **connectivity** (access to the internet through broadband, wifi and mobile data); and **accessibility** (services/devices to meet users' needs).

Across the UK, the percentage of household with internet access has risen over the past decade to 93% in 2019.[1] Last year, 87% of all adults reported using the internet daily or almost every day.

3.6 million people in the UK were almost completely offline before lockdown, stating a lack of skills and privacy or security concerns as factors in their reluctance to go online.[2]

UK-wide, 84% of people are able to demonstrate basic digital skills. Before lockdown, however, around 11.7 million people still lacked the digital skills needed for everyday life.[3]

Yet since the pandemic one in three people have boosted their digital skills, 37% are using technology more for health and wellbeing reasons, and almost a third have upskilled for work.[4]

During the pandemic 80% of people said that technology has been a vital support for them. There has been a significant increase in social media use, as well as internet banking and shopping.[5]

Deepening the digital divide

Issues people face from digital exclusion include:

- less able to connect with friends/colleagues or access news as quickly;
- unable to find the cheapest deals;
- difficulty applying for jobs, accessing benefits or manage their finances;
- restricted from using online health services, assessing illness symptoms or joining support groups.[6]

Social housing and digital inclusion

Of those who are likely to be digitally excluded in the UK, 37% are social housing residents.[7]

Those on low wages, or unemployed, as well as those with disabilities, and offenders and ex-offenders are included in those figures.

Benefit claimants also have lower digital engagement compared to the UK average (40% compared to 33%).[8]

44% of people without basic digital skills are on lower wages or are unemployed, while 33% of people with registered disabilities have never used the internet.[9]

Areas with large concentrations of social housing are particularly vulnerable to a lack of infrastructure to support internet access.[10]

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Lockdown means that access to free public wifi in cafes and fast food restaurants and community spaces, such as libraries, has been restricted.[11]

Children in low-income households also risk being left behind during this period, with pupils missing out on home schooling because of poor connection or no access to the internet.[12]

Digital exclusion during Covid-19 is therefore likely to be exacerbating financial and social exclusion.

Age

Age continues to be the leading characteristic of low digital engagement, with over three quarters of over 70s having very low digital engagement.[13]

For those who lack digital skills, over 53% are aged over 65, compared to 6% of 15 to 24-year-olds. Only 7% of over 70s are likely to have the capability to shop and manage their money online.

During lockdown, however, three times more 70-year-olds have registered for online banking. Amongst this age group (70-79), 50% have also been using the internet for learning in 2020, compared to just to just 32% last year.

Conversely, around half of 18-24 year-olds and 25-34 year-olds have assisted others with digital skills during the course of the pandemic.[14]

Rural vs. urban

In some rural areas in the UK, many households still lack internet access or have poor service since it is often not deemed commercially viable to supply connectivity there.[15]

23% of people in Scotland unable to use a device by themselves compared to 16% in the rest of the UK.[16]

Poverty premium

47% of low-income households still find the cost of broadband packages a barrier to getting online.[17] For unemployed people or those on low incomes, committing to such a long-term contract is also a risk.[18]

The importance of understanding the social impacts of digital inclusion

Digital inclusion (access to superfast broadband) is associated with an increase in wellbeing per household.

The Social Value Bank reveals that digital inclusion can boost wellbeing by:

- providing greater educational opportunities;
- greater entertainment options;
- reducing isolation and loneliness;
- improving access to the community;
- increasing choice in consumption and lower prices;
- increases leisure time

An improvement in Essential Digital Skills is associated with an increase in wellbeing in excess of £1,000 per year.[19]

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Tens of millions of people in the UK are still reliant on pay-as-you-go services to make phone calls or access healthcare services, education and benefits online.[20]

The poverty premium adds an average of £490 a year onto the living costs of residents on benefits or a low income. However, getting online is worth £1,064 a year to individuals and increases each year.[21] This is due to:

- more efficient services - channel shift of service delivery saves working days and money
- better health outcomes - physical/mental wellbeing and prevention[22]

New trends

Because of the pandemic, employees across many sectors are working from home. Teleworking offers economic and environmental savings because of decreased travel time and associated expenses.

The increasing reliance on digital devices during the pandemic has led to increased fraud online, particularly email and financial scams.[23]

What does this mean for social housing?

There are key groups of people for whom digital interaction is increasingly a necessity. For instance nearly 1 million people applied for Universal Credit in March, and UC uptake has continued to increase.[24] Challenges such as these make it clear that social housing organisations would benefit hugely from improving thier digital inclusion offers.

Many large social housing providers have already upgraded their infrastructure, installing free WiFi to enable access for residents.[25] Others have provided subsidised connections at affordable rates.

Housing providers have boosted the digital skills of their residents through digital inclusion training. Working with organisations like the Digital Champion's Network has built the digital capacity and confidence of the wider community in a sustainable longer-term way.[26]

By providing free devices, such as phones and tablets, to residents during lockdown certain housing providers have also enabled greater digital accessibility and taken steps towards tackling the poverty premium.

Community Insight datasets

There are numerous datasets in Community Insight that can be used to inform strategies aroud digital inclusion:

- Broadband data usage
- Broadband speed
- Internet user classification: Digital seniors
- Internet user classification: Passive and uncommitted uers
- Internet user classification: Settled Offline Communities

Book a demo or find out more

Further reading:

The Good Things Foundation

WeAreDigital

6G

Hyperoptic

Digital Unite

Citizens Online

The Digital Champion's Network

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