

Digital Inclusion APPG

State of the Nation Report 2025

November 2025

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Foreword from Digital Inclusion APPG

Co-Chair Dan Aldridge MP and Officers Lord Clement-Jones and Baroness Verma



Dan Aldridge MP



Lord Clement-Jones



Baroness Verma

Hello, and thank you for taking the time to read this, the fourth annual State of the Nation report from the Digital Inclusion APPG.

It has been just over a year since the APPG was reformed after the 2024 General Election, and in that time, we’ve seen some hugely significant milestones in the digital inclusion space.

In particular, this is the first time in over a decade, and the first time in this APPG’s history, that we’ve been able to refer to an up-to-date Government policy around digital inclusion – thanks to the publication in February of the Government’s Digital Inclusion Action Plan: First Steps.

It has been encouraging to see the new Government take the initiative on digital inclusion, with support from committed parliamentarians across both Houses, and produce a set of tangible aims and commitments.

A plan for digital inclusion has long been the key recommendation from this APPG and its industry and third sector partners. Its publication is a vital step towards implementing the level of national coordination, oversight and leadership that this topic requires.

We’re aware too, however, that the Plan is only that: a set of initial steps on the hugely complex journey towards making the UK a more digitally inclusive place. Now is the time to build on this direction-setting, and the introduction of important new schemes such as the IT Reuse for Good Charter, and the incredible work going on from industry and civil society, to accelerate its delivery.

The Digital Inclusion APPG stands ready to support with this. As a forum in which parliamentarians and policymakers can engage with the top expertise in the country, we have already taken an in-depth

look at many of the Action Plan’s tenets – and you can see the findings later in this report.

Beyond this though, we want to keep connecting – inside and outside of Parliament, with different levels of Government, and with the people who are most affected by the policies we make in Westminster. We want to keep highlighting the areas where digital inclusion policy can support the Government’s agenda, driving equitable economic growth, social cohesion and quality public service delivery. And we want to pinpoint routes through which strategies born in Parliament can make a meaningful difference to constituents around the country.

It’s been a point of huge pride for us to work on the APPG across the last twelve months, and we’ve been privileged to carry on the work of its founder, Darren Jones MP, as well as previous Co-Chairs Baroness Elliott and Matt Warman. We’d also like to take time to thank former co-Chairs Lucy Rigby KC MP and Leigh Ingham MP for their dedication to the APPG and wish them the best of luck in their new roles as Economic Secretary to the Treasury and Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Leader of the House of Commons respectively.

We’d also like to thank everyone who has been involved in the APPG this year, whether that be parliamentary colleagues, partners from industry, civil society, academia and local and regional government, event speakers, attendees, and all those who have kept up with our outputs.

This APPG means nothing without you, and we are hugely grateful for your ongoing commitment to this issue. We look forward to seeing you all soon as we continue to drive forward this critical agenda.

Aims of the Report

The Digital Inclusion APPG exists to identify means in which parliamentarians can support the eradication of digital poverty in the UK.

This report outlines the findings of the APPG’s work across the last year and provides a series of recommendations to Government, to build on the publication of its Digital Inclusion Action Plan.

The Action Plan – which was trailed by then-Minister for Data Protection & Telecomms Chris Bryant MP at last year’s State of the Nation Report Launch in October 2024 - was officially launched by the Department for Science, Innovation & Technology in February 2025. An Action Plan – or national strategy – had been the key recommendation of our previous State of the Nation reports and was widely welcomed by the APPG and its industry partners upon its announcement

The Action Plan said that across the twelve months up to February 2026 the Government would:

- Launch a Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund to support local initiatives.
- Enhance support for the framework that helps people and businesses get essential digital skills.
- Pilot a proof-of-concept multi-department device donation scheme with the Digital Poverty Alliance.
- Make government digital services easier to use with a renewed focus on digital inclusion.
- Measure what works on digital inclusion, identify where the need is greatest, and establish the economic and social value of upskilling adults with digital skills.

These “First Steps” sit alongside four focus areas as the framework for future work.

- Opening up opportunities through skills
- Tackling data and device poverty
- Breaking down barriers to digital services
- Building confidence and supporting local delivery

In July, the Government also published their Summary of Responses¹ to the Call for Evidence which came out alongside the original report.

This report therefore largely aims to add further detail to the implementation of the First Steps document – something which Minister Bryant himself called for prior to his move to the Department for Business and Trade.² It uses the insights from the APPG’s parliamentary members and partners in industry, the third sector, local and regional government, and academia, to build on the Action Plan, identifying areas of strength but also highlighting where the Government can go further, faster, or provide more detail and precision. It also sets out additional proposed solutions to the challenges identified in the Action Plan.

Over the past year and before, it has become clear in meetings of the APPG that significant attention needs to be given to coordination between Parliament and local and regional authorities when it comes to the design and implementation of solutions to digital exclusion. Given this, and the emphasis placed on regional and local collaboration within the Action Plan itself, a section of this report is dedicated to spotlighting localised voices. Within this, the APPG has heard contributions from the Local Government Association, Sunderland City Council, the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and Digital Essex.

More widely, this report contains a number of case studies, from across the private and third sectors, giving an in depth view of some of the ongoing initiatives tackling digital exclusion from across the UK.

Finally, the report concludes with a series of updated recommendations drawn from the Group’s work over the past year – to support parliamentarians from all parties in advancing the cause of digital inclusion in the UK.





Digital Inclusion in Parliament, 2024-25

The mission to take on the issue of digital inclusion has seen considerably progression since the Digital Inclusion APPG published our 2024 State of the Nation Report. A cross-Government commitment to tackling digital exclusion was published in February 2025, with the Government's Digital Inclusion Action Plan: First Steps. The Digital Inclusion Action Plan focused on four key areas: Skills; Data and device poverty; Barriers to digital services; and Confidence. Alongside the creation of the Digital Inclusion Action Committee, the policy paper represented a much-anticipated renewed approach to getting to grips with this crucial issue.

Digital Inclusion has also played a prominent role in the opposition's policymaking. Whilst the Conservatives have welcomed the Plan's introduction - and suggested they would have introduced a similar initiative had they been elected last year at the General Election³ - they have called on it to improve across four areas of its implementation. Firstly, they have called for the Action Plan to build in flexible and evolving goals to recognise the pace of change in the sector. They have also called on the Plan to recognise and absorb the work of existing initiatives such as the Digital Skills Council, the Cyber Explorers Council, and the Computing Skills Taskforce. Finally, they have also called on the Action Plan to act as a vehicle for inducing trust and have called for people who don't want to be online to be prioritised and supported across its rollout.⁴

The Liberal Democrats meanwhile have released a new Science, Innovation and Technology policy paper.⁵ In the paper, the party confirm their commitment to introduce a comprehensive strategy to tackle digital inclusion, expand gigabyte broadband and introduce a new Digital Bill of Rights, to give all citizens essential rights to access public services and digital education as part of their digital citizenship.

Progress against the Recommendations of last year's Digital Inclusion APPG State of the Nation Report

Last year's Digital Inclusion APPG State of the Nation Report laid out several recommendations for the new Labour Government to hit the ground running with rolling back digital exclusion across the UK. The overarching recommendation of the report was to publish an updated digital inclusion strategy to reflect the ever-changing nature of the issue, recommending that the strategy should be cross-departmental to reflect how it underpins each of the Government's priorities and formed in collaboration with local and regional authorities.

Following the State of the Nation Report, the APPG has been pleased to note that the Government has set many of these recommendations into action. The Digital Inclusion Action Plan: First Steps committed the Government to a cross-departmental approach, to investment in digital skills and to create a digital inclusion innovation fund to support local initiatives to increase digital participation. Despite progress with digital and data banks, as well national efforts to boost digital skills, Good Things Foundation's Digital Nation UK Report found that 7.9 million people in the UK lack digital skills and 1.6 million adults do not own a smartphone, tablet or laptop.⁶ The Labour Government have committed to moving beyond the first steps to delivering on their call for fresh impetus behind digital inclusion, with a wholesale action plan expected in late 2025/early 2026.

Recommendation	Progress
Build on the creation of the cross-Ministerial working group on digital inclusion, to ensure digital inclusion policies are embedded across all Departments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 'A cross-government approach: breaking down silos' was a guiding principle of the Digital Inclusion Action Plan.• The Government pledged to establish a new Digital Inclusion and Skills Unit in the Department for Science, Innovation & Technology to coordinate Departments and work closely with the Government Digital Service to ensure that digital inclusion is at the forefront of public service transformation.• The Government established the Digital Inclusion Action Committee, comprised of national and local experts, chaired by Baroness Hilary Armstrong.• The Digital Inclusion Action Plan: First Steps was sponsored by the Department for Science, Innovation & Technology, Department of Health & Social Care, Department for Education, Department for Work & Pensions and Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government.• The Government pledged to embed digital inclusion within all 5 Missions, underpinned by a new ministerial group on digital inclusion, which will meet quarterly. This group is pledged to have membership from across government departments, including the:<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT).• Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).• Department for Education (DfE).• Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).• Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC).• His Majesty's Treasury (HMT).• Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG).
Create a Digital and Social Inclusion Fund.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Government launched a new Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund to support and expand local community initiatives to get people online in August backed by £9.5m of funding.
Develop a national digital inclusion forum with Ofcom.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Government established the Digital Inclusion Action Committee, comprised of national and local experts, chaired by Baroness Hilary Armstrong.
Create a 'one-stop shop' digital inclusion support service for consumers, charities, and government agencies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Government pledged to work with devolved authorities to develop a common framework for upskilling people and businesses with digital skills.
Continue expanding access to social tariffs, data voucher schemes and other affordable internet schemes for those on eligible benefits.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Government supported BT's pledge to continue to offer social tariffs to people on Universal Credit who are eligible for them.

Recommendation	Progress
Increase provision of internet connectivity in public spaces.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Government supported WightFibre’s commitment to providing free or discounted broadband to community groups and charities, including community centres, digital hubs and village halls, on the Isle of Wight.• The Government have also supported the pledge of BT Group and EE to pilot 2 new approaches to extend the use of their network to a larger number of digitally excluded households:<ul style="list-style-type: none">• By providing logins for free WiFi to eligible families through charity and public sector partnerships.• By providing community WiFi services, free at the point of use, at a much larger number of libraries and community centres, including working with government to identify and prioritise connections to 500 community hubs in deprived areas.
Expand the number of zero-rated websites, including all online government services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Government pledged to make UK government digital services easier to use with a renewed focus on digital inclusion, for example by improving the whole experience for users and increasing the number of services that use GOV.UK One Login.• The Government did not, however, take action to make government services zero-rated.
A digital ‘right-of-way’ to public services and other essential services provided through the private sector, starting with the NHS and Universal Credit.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Government pledged to make UK government digital services easier to use with a renewed focus on digital inclusion, for example by improving the whole experience for users and increasing the number of services that use GOV.UK One Login.
Convene regional learnings for a national framework.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Government pledged to work with devolved authorities to develop a common framework for upskilling people and businesses with digital skills.
Donate used Government devices to the National Databank.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Government pledged to partner with the Digital Poverty Alliance to pilot a multi-department device donation scheme to provide re-purposed Government laptops to those that need them.
Review the digital switchover TV to provide digital connectivity to households.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Government are currently internally reviewing the potential benefits of the transition
Invest in Digital Skills Provision.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Google pledged to develop a new partnership with DSIT to deliver intensive digital skills training to support adults with low digital skills.• The Government pledged to establish the economic and social value of upskilling adults with digital skills.• The Government committed to enhancing support for the framework that helps people and businesses get the essential skills they need to get online safely and with confidence.• The Government has embedded digital skills into the Industrial Strategy, Skills England and skills and training funding settlements.



Developments in the Digital Inclusion Landscape

Developments in the Causes of Digital Exclusion

Whilst there has been progress from government in advancing digital inclusion policies in the UK, the issue itself has continued to evolve and in many areas, deepen.

Affordability

The cost-of-living crisis has continued to lead as a cause of digital inclusion. As the cost of essentials including housing, food and heating have continued to rise, digital capabilities have been unaffordable for many households. Although the minimum wage has grown, increased levels of unemployment and falling real wage earnings for the bottom 40% of households have meant that an inability to afford essentials remains persistent in the poorest households across Britain.²

With low income as a restraining factor on digital capabilities, access to devices has remained a prominent concern. Some great strides have been made to increase device donation, including through the Government’s IT Reuse for Good charter, aiming to tackle data collected by the Good Things Foundation which shows that 30% of people are unaware of local access points for device donation or internet connection.³ However, despite these efforts research shows that 1.6 million adults still have no access to a smartphone, laptop or tablet.⁴

Research from Ofcom found that around a quarter of UK households (26%) had difficulty affording communications services in May 2025⁵, which can exacerbate the effects of the cost-of-living crisis for those living in poverty as they struggle more to find social tariffs and contact appropriate aid services. Although the numbers are still unacceptably high, there has been some progress in the past year. For example, last year where 2.4 million of the poorest households could not afford their mobile phone contract, in 2025, the number has fallen to 1.9 million.

Connectivity

Alongside device access, data connectivity remains a prominent issue with 58,000 premises remaining unable to access ‘decent’ broadband.⁷ The issue also reflects regional inequality, as those living in rural areas have broadband speeds 26% slower than those in urban areas, and there continue to be connectivity ‘not spots’ without coverage from all or any mobile networks.⁶ Significant progress has been made, but the areas without data coverage make it impossible for many to access the benefits of digital inclusion and others remain partially digitally excluded and forced to pay more to access digital essentials. In areas with low data coverage, a higher percentage of people have reported that they lack digital skills.

Skills

Many individuals still face digital exclusion due to a lack of digital skills and subsequent consequences for digital confidence. Skills provision has not proved sufficient to assist many in accessing online platforms. As technology advances quickly, the need for digital skills provision becomes ever more essential as the bar for access continues to rise with developments taking place more rapidly than education. According to the Good Things Foundation, 52% of people lack basic work digital skills and 61% of people believe there is not enough support for people that struggle to get online⁸. Research commissioned by the DWP shows that over half of digitally excluded people who are on a disability or health related benefit say a lack of digital skills prevents them from being online and just under half of pensioners cite a lack of digital skills as a reason for being online.⁷ Lack of skills, particularly among older people, mean that their children may also struggle in education as more schoolwork has moved online following the pandemic. A lack of education means not only that adults lack skills, but they also lack confidence and trust. Many in digital education have found that vulnerable people who lack digital skills do not want to use digital services – especially from the public sector – as a lack of understanding has a knock-on effect on a lack of trust, even when assisted to use the platforms.

Confidence

Further, the issue of digital skills persists due to the ever-moving target of digital confidence. Many adults who were once confident with using the internet have had to adapt to a higher number of essential services moving online, including the NHS app. A lack of confidence is particularly compounded by expansions in artificial intelligence and the integration of AI into more parts of everyday life. Artificial intelligence is changing what inclusion means in today’s digital society and economy, as it becomes more deeply entrenched into the workplace. The lack of understanding of AI is also holding back companies and charities. In a recent survey, the giving platform, Neighbourly, found the greatest blocks to small charities and community groups using AI to be: lack of technical skills (56%); lack of understanding AI capabilities (48%).⁸ The quickening pace of technological reform was highlighted by the Government in the Digital Inclusion Action Plan: First steps as they said “Given the rapid pace of technological change and developments in emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), we need to act now to address the barriers to digital inclusion so that everyone can feel the benefits of technology in their everyday lives.”⁹ Research by consultants KPMG and the University of Melbourne has shown that almost three quarters of people in the UK (73%) have had no AI education or training, and 72% are unsure if online content can be trusted. It also found that less than half of the UK population (42%) are willing to trust AI, and only 57% are willing to accept or approve of its use.¹⁰ At an education level, many teachers feel ill-equipped to ingratiate AI into their teaching and unable to ensure young people can gain digital confidence. A survey of teachers suggests that 52% of schools have now officially adopted AI - a rise from 31% in 2024 – but almost half of teachers reported that they had received no support with AI from their schools.¹¹



Developments in the Impacts of Digital Exclusion

The compiled causes of digital exclusion mean that 1 in 4 Britons are facing some form of digital exclusion, from a lack of access to data, devices, education or a lack of confidence.¹² Of those, 2.5 million people have no access to the internet at all.¹³ Although the Government has now taken action to tackle the impacts of digital exclusion with the Digital Inclusion Action Plan: First Steps, alongside a host of industry and charity partners, the consequences are still felt strongly in the UK. The resulting impacts affect the wider UK economy, the progress of companies and communities, and the lives of individuals. As digital exclusion is an interconnected issue, the repercussions can be felt across multiple areas of civic life, from healthcare to social benefits to housing. For many who are in poverty and suffer from a lack of digital access, digital exclusion keeps them in poverty.

Public Sector

The persistence of digital exclusion has a negative effect on the performance of the economy and the public sector. A report from PwC and the BBC has found that between £4.9 – 9.4bn net gains to the exchequer could be unlocked, alongside a £21.2 – 30.8bn potential increase in GVA.¹⁴ Of unemployed people, 6.7% do not use the internet at all or less than several times a week.⁹ As the vast majority of jobs are advertised online, digital exclusion is keeping many people out of finding work, with a compound impact that they are then less qualified to take on jobs that require digital expertise. Lloyd's bank have researched Essential Digital Skills (EDS) for work, finding that 18% lack EDS and only 48% can do all 20 work tasks designated in the study. Increased digital education could increase the earning potential, efficiency and productivity of the UK population.¹⁰ PWC estimate that between 99,000 and 198,000 unemployed people could transition to employment through digital inclusion.¹¹ The Good Things Foundation estimate a total benefit to the economy of almost £9.48 for every £1 invested in training persons to become more digitally able.¹⁵ Increasing digital ability would offer widespread savings for the Government, with £0.8 – 1.5bn potential savings to the exchequer from those currently on Universal Credit becoming employed and not needing further support, £0.5 – 2.8bn potential annual savings to the NHS from conducting more GP appointments virtually and £1.6 – 1.8bn savings to Government from moving to online Government services.¹⁶

Healthcare

The progress of NHS digitisation has also thrown digital inclusion into the spotlight, with many expressing fears that an increased reliance on the NHS app and expansion of NHS online will serve to ostracise the most vulnerable patients. Following the Government's announcement that they will introduce an NHS online hospital, Jacob Lant, CEO, National Voices, sounded a note of caution: "The NHS will need to be live to the risk of digital exclusion, ensuring that people without access to technology or the right skills are supported to get the help they need."¹⁷ A report from Lincolnshire found that there are people who choose or cannot use online healthcare services for a variety of reasons, that access to data/ devices is a barrier for some, confidence, skills and/or trust for others, meaning digital exclusion is affecting healthcare options in the area.¹⁸ However, if digital inclusion was to improve, it could lower pressure on the NHS, ease their online service and cut the number of necessary appointments. Evidence from the Good Things Foundation has found that from a group of individuals digitally upskilled through the NHS Widening Digital Participation programme, 33% of learners reported fewer GP visits, with an average reduction of 4.8 visits per person.¹⁹

Diversity

The impacts of digital exclusion are diverse in their scope, with many marginalised groups likely to face further isolation from community and essential services due to their lack of digital access. A new DCMS Participation Survey data suggests that the unemployed, over-75s, and people with disabilities, are most likely to be digitally excluded.²⁰

The elderly are more likely to rely upon services that are moving online, but also show the lowest rates of digital skills, confidence and will, struggling to keep up with the increasing pace of technological innovation. Age UK have found that 19% of older people have limited use of the internet – using it less than once a month or not at all.²¹ Since the 2020, the gap has increased, as the Centre for Aging Better have found that there is a significant digital divide among 50–70 year olds, exacerbated by the pandemic.²² As many services moved to a primarily online function, older people in particular have lost avenues of signposting and support that they previously relied on.

People with disabilities and those facing one of more impairments are also left more vulnerable and more likely to face digital exclusion that impacts their ability to access essential care. Lloyds Bank have found that those with one or more impairments are 2.2 times more likely to have difficulty interacting with charities providing support online.²³ People in receipt of benefits are a group far more likely to be offline too. Of those receiving disability-related benefits, 34% of Personal Independence Payment (PIP) recipients and 33% of Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) recipients cited the high cost of devices as a key factor limiting their digital engagement and over half of digitally excluded people who are on a disability or health related benefit say a lack of digital skills prevents them from being online.²⁴ As they are prevented from being online, the cost of living only increases further, as they struggle more to access essential health, Government and benefits services.

Furthermore, immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees that are new to this country often struggle the most with digital exclusion, and a lack of Wi-Fi in temporary accommodation can make it harder for people to access support, bid for permanent housing, learn English, assimilate and feel connected to their loved ones. At a roundtable this year, we heard from Jangala who found that providing internet to people living in temporary accommodation improved their mental health, fostered independence and allowed them to access Universal Credit, online banking, and keep in contact with key services, like mental health teams and police.²⁵



Industry Member Case Studies

Good Things Foundation

Two cousins, Irene and Linda, attend Riverside Learning and Education Centre in Liverpool - their local digital inclusion hub. When Linda first arrived, she admitted: *"I had no skills whatsoever. I was very nervous and thought I won't be able to do this."* A hub member reassured her, *"Right, you can't break anything. So don't worry"* and introduced her to [Learn My Way](#). That encouragement marked the beginning of her digital journey.

As well as developing digital skills, Irene and Linda were also provided with a laptop from Good Things Foundation's [National Device Bank](#) and data from the [National Databank](#) through Riverside. Reflecting on her progress, Irene shared, *"I never thought I'd learn to use a computer. I never thought I'd have an email address. [...] And when you ask family, they show you it once and think you know it, but you don't always know it straight away."* Beyond capability, connectivity, and kit, Riverside has also provided a vital social space. *"You're learning to talk to other people as well, because I found that I was very isolated at one time."* Linda explained, *"But I'm not now."*

Riverside Learning and Education Centre is one of over 7,000 UK hubs that comprise the [National Digital Inclusion Network](#). Their work illustrates the comprehensive, locally-driven support that the Government's Digital Inclusion Action Plan seeks to champion nationwide: skills, access, confidence, and collaboration. With funding, evidence gathering, business pledges, and partnerships already underway, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology has laid the foundations for long-term, targeted change. But their next steps are critical.

We need a government that remains action-oriented and future-focused, baking in - not bolting on - digital inclusion:

- This means **leading with a bold, future-focused vision** for a digitally inclusive UK in the age of AI. Digital inclusion must underpin departments, Missions, and remain central to harnessing the potential of Artificial Intelligence and emerging technologies.
- It means **delivering online public services that work for everyone** - embedding digital inclusion into the transformation of Government services.
- It means **tackling persistent geographical and societal inequalities** by co-investing into the National Digital Inclusion Network, ending the postcode lottery so hubs like Riverside can expand their reach.
- It means **seizing big moments for big impact** as opportunities for digital inclusion - such as the potential transition to IPTV, driving cross-sector collaboration to deliver impact at scale.
- And it means **embracing innovative economic mechanisms**, from Social Value procurement to the Digital Services Tax and Social Impact Bonds, to secure the long-term resourcing needed for systemic change.

If taken, these next steps will ensure that digital inclusion is not only sustained but placed at the centre of a fairer, more forward-looking society. Without them, people like Irene and Linda risk being left behind. But with them, they and millions of others can participate fully in our modern, digital world.



Nominet

How Good Things Foundation and Nominet are tackling data poverty in the UK

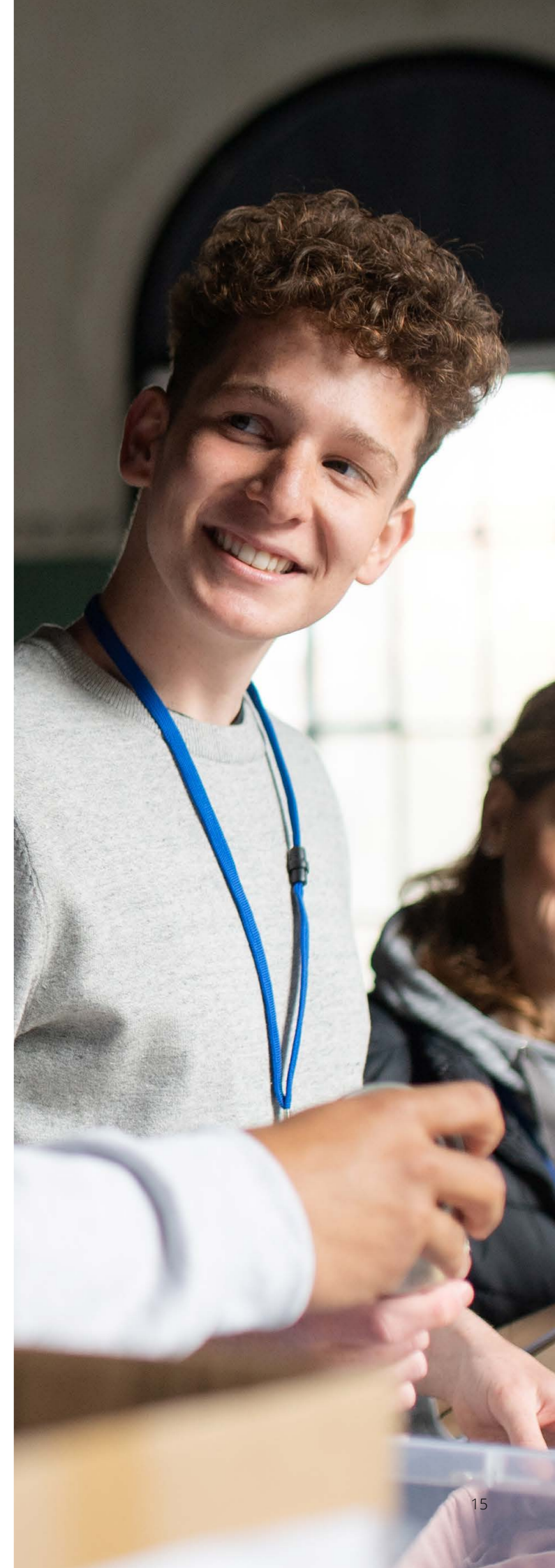
As AI accelerates and the digital divide deepens, addressing data poverty has never been as urgent. In 2021 Nominet - as the guardians of .UK - created the Data Poverty Lab with Good Things Foundation, an advocacy, research and innovation initiative grounded in [people's lived experiences of data poverty](#). Since its founding, the Data Poverty Lab has generated innovative ideas, explored knotty challenges, and as part of the [What Works? Co-Lab](#) addressed the systemic change needed to tackle data poverty across the UK.

By building on the years of impactful innovation and collaboration in internet connectivity and infrastructure, [the latest Data Poverty Lab research](#) explores how models like the National Databank, broadband social tariffs, mesh networks, and zero-rated websites can be scaled and deepened.

Co-author Dr Sarah Knowles conducted 22 expert interviews, engaged with partners such as Digital Inclusion Alliance Wales and APLE Collective, and reviewed over 40 written documents to produce findings around four data poverty solutions. Alongside Dr Emma Stone, the possibilities of both incremental and radical changes to the way we address data poverty in the UK were explored. The report invites policymakers, technologists, engineers, innovators, and social thinkers to consider provocations, such as:

- What if the Government set up a **'Connected Homes Discount'** scheme - a voucher or payment for eligible households to use with their provider and product of choice?
- What if every organisation with a touchpoint with citizens in crisis, and a requirement for customers to use their services online, **embedded the National Databank** in their offer?
- What if NHS WiFi, GovWiFi, Eduroam and other WiFi networks joined to create a **super federated network** across the UK, providing safe, seamless WiFi access for all?
- What if Ofcom mandated a **basic (broadband) connectivity package for all customers**, improving customer protection and preventing disconnection?
- What if a **new public domain was created**, with no data charges to people using it, so people could safely and freely access public services and educational content online?

The Data Poverty Lab also explores **rebalancing responsibilities**, including who pays for solutions, integrating innovations into local strategies, government investing into evaluation of costs/benefits and critically, a recognition that internet access is essential. With innovation and collaboration, we can go further to eradicate data poverty - for good.



We welcome the Government's Digital Inclusion Action Plan. Too many people are still offline, with negative consequences for their employability, health and education, and ability to access public services. This is not just a personal issue - it has society-wide implications.

We agree with Government that digital inclusion is a shared responsibility, and we are proud to play our part. As set out in the Action Plan, we have committed to:

- Continuing to offer social tariffs to eligible recipients, including options for zero-income customers;
- Providing digital skills training to older people and children, as well as participating in device access initiatives; and
- Piloting ways to extend our Wi-Fi network to more digitally excluded individuals.



To help deliver the positive interventions proposed in the Action Plan, the Government still needs to consider the following issues:

- Developing a longer term strategy to address digital exclusion: The proposals set out in the Action Plan will help to better coordinate Government activity and make progress on addressing digital exclusion. However, we believe that a longer term strategy is still required to build on these strong foundations.
- Securing additional funding to address digital exclusion: Government has recognised that the telecoms sector has done a lot to address digital exclusion. MobileUK has estimated that the sector has spent £320m over the past four years to support low income families through social tariffs - with BT continuing to offer the significant majority of social tariffs. It is positive that the Government has committed £9.5m to a new Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund. This will help to identify best practices and new ways of supporting digital inclusion initiatives, but will need to be scaled further to drive national improvements.
- Exploring motivational barriers: Our previous research has added to the existing evidence base that shows that motivational barriers are the primary hurdle to getting online. Our evidence found that many offline consumers have previously been online during their working lives, so have made what they see as an active and positive choice to be offline. Identifying ways to challenge this assumption will be critical to the success of the other interventions proposed in the Action Plan. Online harms such as scams and exposure to harmful content also generate anxiety about going online.

We want to be champions for digital inclusion, and are supporting this through a number of different measures.

Providing access to the internet:

We are investing to improve connectivity across the UK, maximising everyone's chances to be online. Our full fibre broadband already passes 20 million homes and businesses, including over 5 million in rural locations. We now deliver 4G coverage to 99% of the population, and our 5G network reaches over 85% of the population. We have committed to reach 90% UK population coverage by 2027 with 5G.

Addressing affordability:

Even as the average cost of most broadband and mobile services has declined in real terms since 2019, we have continued to support low-income families and vulnerable groups who face ongoing cost of living challenges. BT is still the market leader for low-cost social tariffs – giving over 900,000 customers affordable fibre broadband and calls. Our Home Essentials social tariff also includes a lower £16 tariff for 'zero income' households, and we will continue to offer these tariffs to millions of people who are eligible for them.



Skills and motivation:

The greatest obstacle to digital inclusion is a circular lack of skills and motivation especially within older aged groups. Our digital skills training helps more people benefit from being online – particularly more vulnerable groups like children and the over 65s.

- This year we helped a further 280,000 UK people and businesses improve their digital skills. Since FY15, we've helped a total of 23.3 million people, as part of our ambition to reach 25m by the end of FY26.
- We are also helping young people prepare for their future and inspire them to work in tech, digital and data. This year, more than 1,000 young people have benefited from our Work Ready days at our UK workplaces, or schools. We are developing Work Ready content for teachers, including free, curriculum linked lesson plans. This will help students improve their work ready digital skills and boost teachers' industry knowledge when giving careers advice.
- Last year, with partner AbilityNet, we supported over 3,000 older people to develop their digital skills, improve their confidence and help them to stay safe online. We are now building on that success, by expanding our programme and reach to a further 7,000 people. This year, we have supported over 5,000 learners through one-to-one learning, repeated small group sessions and webinars.
- We are also partnering with Keyring to directly provide devices, data and skills support to hundreds of disabled adults across the UK during 2025.
- We are also a signatory to the "What is the IT Reuse for Good Charter" to increase reuse of digital devices to promote digital inclusion.
- We protect our customer from online harms by providing free parental control tools to customers to block harmful content and have deployed a range of new technologies, for example our anti SMS scam filter to block huge numbers of scams on our networks. The deployment of these technologies has allowed us to block more than 183 million international scam calls that use a UK phone number as a disguise and more than 418 million scam SMSs.

We look forward to working with Government and partners to deliver the ambitions of the Digital Inclusion Action Plan - and to build a more connected, inclusive UK.

Jisc reaction to the digital inclusion action plan

Jisc welcomes the Government's proactive and collaborative approach through the Digital Inclusion Action Plan. With digital playing a central role in tackling wider societal and economic challenges, it is vital that a 'people-first' approach underpins its implementation. This ensures the benefits of digital inclusion are felt by all, especially those already disadvantaged or excluded. As the plan progresses, we hope to see not only the adoption of innovative technologies, but also meaningful engagement and support that empowers individuals to understand the need for digital skills to enable them to reap the benefits they bring.

The next steps the Government needs to take around digital inclusion and implementing the Plan

The solutions for digital inclusion are not just in the provision of technology and devices, but in building the infrastructure to support those most in need of essential services.

The need to broaden connectivity in supporting engagement

Connectivity is the foundation of digital inclusion. Without reliable internet access, individuals cannot participate in education, employment, or civic life. Yet many communities, especially for rural areas, low-income households, and shared accommodation, still face poor or unaffordable connectivity.

Government must invest in affordable, high-quality broadband and mobile infrastructure, especially in underserved regions. This includes expanding public Wi-Fi in libraries, community centres, and healthcare settings, and supporting roaming services like govroam, which enable seamless access across public buildings.

Kent and Medway have become the leading example of how eduroam can be deployed beyond traditional education settings to support digital inclusion. Through a coordinated regional effort, eduroam has been made available across over 500 public sector sites including council offices, fire stations, hospitals and libraries.

Connectivity must be designed with people in mind, ensuring mobile data packages are affordable, especially for students and jobseekers, working with telecom providers to offer subsidised or zero-rated access to essential services.

Connectivity should not be a barrier to engagement, it should be an enabler.

AI Literacy and Privacy

AI is rapidly transforming how people engage with education, employment, and public services. As it becomes an increasing part of all we do, access to AI must be accompanied by literacy and privacy protections to ensure it empowers rather than excludes.

To enable the benefits of AI, we must acknowledge a growing gap is emerging in access to paid and free versions of the software. Without access that enables users to confidently and securely use AI tools, their ability to develop skills that are becoming a core part of employment, education and life are undermined. Those who can't experiment and input using paid models are often those with less resource to be able to participate in digital already but would benefit greatly from use of tools like AI.

Privacy is a key component to this. Where users cannot access paid models of AI, they often trade personal data for access, which is then used to train future models. For individuals to feel confident enough to fully engage with these tools, they must have agency over how their data is used. This confidence has a direct impact on the outcomes of those using the tools, as the less confidently and freely they use these tools, the less it can be shaped for their needs and context. This further impacts how they engage in education and employment, where AI is increasingly used in personalised learning, assessments and recruitment.

Embedding AI literacy and privacy into the UK's digital inclusion strategy is essential. It supports the development of critical digital skills, enables informed participation in the digital economy, and ensures that AI is a tool for equity, not exclusion.

An opportunity for inclusive innovation

Prioritising accessibility in its broadest sense creates optimal experiences for everyone, smoothing the path to participation for those who face the greatest barriers. Digital accessibility can drive the application of technology in ways that centre human goals and potential. As regulation across the globe moves towards a harmonised requirement for accessible products (e.g. the European Accessibility Act), now is the time for the UK to lead the way in developing world-leading talent and exports.

The benefits of accessible, humancentric tech provision can be seen in Jisc's Digital Experience Insights reports, where, for example, video captioning, transcripts, and assistive software are noted as being vital for day-to-day study, not only for learners with access requirements, but also for large numbers of international students, and others who regularly use these tools to boost their engagement and productivity.

What are we doing already as Jisc?

At Jisc, we're proud to support digital inclusion across education and beyond. Our AI and accessibility communities of practice shape the advice, guidance and resources we offer on digital, data and technology. We also celebrate wider industry efforts, such as the Good Things Foundation's National Databank and Device Bank, improving access to connectivity and hardware. Additionally, the IT Reuse for Good charter, led by DSIT and partners, offers a strong model for public and private sector commitment to digital inclusion through sustainable tech reuse.

Conclusion

As the Government implements the Digital Inclusion Action Plan, we would highlight consideration of two areas. First, the gap between free and paid AI tools. Free tiers often trade privacy for access, risking a two-tier system of AI literacy. Learners with paid access can explore confidently; others face limited functionality and surveillance. This deepens existing inequalities. Second, we advocate for an 'accessible by design' approach to emerging technologies. By incentivising industry to embed diverse user needs early in development, we can ensure inclusive digital spaces across government, industry, and education, supporting better digital inclusion for all users, regardless of background or ability.





Virgin Media O2

It's been a significant year for the Digital Inclusion movement, and the work of the APPG has never been more important. Virgin Media O2 welcome the Government's introduction of their Digital Inclusion Action Plan: First Steps and are encouraged by the supporting Committee that has been set up under Baroness Armstrong. We are also proud to have helped shape the IT Reuse for Good Charter and be amongst its first signatories.

In repeatedly calling for leadership from government over the last few years the impact of this APPG and its members should not be understated. We remain supportive of this group and the Government as they develop their plans for digital inclusion.

Growing the Movement – Responsible Inclusion

Every day, millions of people rely on Virgin Media O2 to stay connected to their families, their work and their passions. With that privilege comes great responsibility, not just to use our scale to power connections, but to make them meaningful. This year marks the end of our first responsible business strategy which covered the first four years since the merger of Virgin Media and O2. From January you'll hear about our new strategy – which we can't wait to share.

It is of increasing importance that digital wellbeing forms part of everything we do online. This could be one of the defining challenges of our time. As screens, AI, and always-on connectivity shape how we live and work, the question isn't just whether people can get online, it's how they take control of their digital lives. Industry needs to start by designing networks and services with inclusion and wellbeing in mind to drive digital trust across society.

Fundamentally, it remains an individual's choice how they engage with the online world, but we can do more to support them to have the best possible experience which will, in turn, encourage healthy participation and drive inclusive growth.

We look forward to continuing our work with government in this area and to really start realising the benefits that a responsible inclusion agenda can bring to the UK. To achieve this, we need to see continued leadership from the Government as they deliver on their Digital Inclusion Action plan bringing further funding and resource to support the digital inclusion movement.

Virgin Media O2 has continued to support digitally excluded people with many significant achievements this year.

2025 Highlights

Virgin Media O2 has continued to support digitally excluded people with many significant achievements this year.

Equitable access:

Through initiatives like the National Databank, Community Calling, and our social tariffs, we're helping people who are at risk of being left behind. More than half a million people have been connected through our programmes since 2022.

- Virgin Media O2 launched Community Calling in partnership with environmental charity, Hubbub, to rehome unused smartphones with people who need them. Since its launch in 2020, more than 24,000 devices have been distributed with people in need of emergency connectivity, such as those experiencing homelessness, asylum seekers or women fleeing domestic abuse. This is helping people to get online, access essential services such as online medical appointments and stay in touch with loved ones.
- Virgin Media O2 has boosted its commitment to Community Calling by pledging to donate up to 12,000 devices in 2025. These devices are sourced through Virgin Media O2's own supply chain.
- Community Calling was recently recognised for *"making large-scale device reuse a permanent feature of its operations and setting a benchmark for industry leadership"* at the Digital Poverty Alliances first UK Digital Inclusion Awards.
- Our Time After Time Fund has now provided £1m to 18 community organisations working across device reuse, e-waste prevention and the development of repair skills. We have recently expanded this through partnership with Hubbub and Coventry City Council's Digital Inclusion team. The #CovConnects programme will rehome more unused devices with people who need them across the city.
- The National Databank, which provides free O2 mobile data, texts and calls to people who need it, is now supporting over 25,000 people each month.

In addition to this, we launched two community connectivity programmes in 2025:

- Building on our Get Box partnership with Jangala, that has distributed 5000 boxes providing portable Wi-Fi for large groups and communities, we have supported the development of their Big Box programme which can supply even more people with rapidly deployable easily accessible Wi-Fi.
- We are working in partnership with nexfibre and UK Youth to connect youth centres across the UK.

All of these programmes are complemented by free O2 Public WiFi provision open to customers and non-customers in thousands of locations around the country.

Digital literacy:

- We continue our support for Internet Matters and The Good Things Foundation's Learn My Way who both do incredible work.
- We have stepped up our focus on scams and fraud prevention in 2025. This is an essential area to ensure that people feel safe and confident online.
 - In May, we launched a report in partnership with the Police Foundation. It calls for greater government support for policing scams and fraud.
 - We have seen our AI Granny Daisy causing havoc with scammers.
 - We also recently employed an ethical hacker to highlight the vulnerability of passwords and provide tips for people to ensure they are safe online.



Virgin Money

The last twelve months have been significant for digital inclusion, most notably with the publication of the Government's Digital Inclusion Action Plan and the establishment of an independently chaired Digital Inclusion Committee. If the Plan can be built on and delivered at pace, steered and challenged by an expert Committee, there is an opportunity to significantly reduce the number of people who are currently excluded.

Virgin Money is a UK-based bank serving over 6.7m retail and business customers. Since October 2024, it has been part of the Nationwide Building Society Group.

In March 2025, Nationwide and Virgin Money's joint Blueprint for a modern mutual was launched centred around a common purpose – 'Banking – but fairer, more rewarding, and for the good of society'.

Virgin Money recognise the intrinsic link between digital and financial inclusion and is dedicated to ensuring that both current and future customers have the tools, knowledge and confidence to thrive in an increasingly digital world. Through the Virgin Money Foundation, strategic partnerships and collaborations, the bank drives positive social change as part of its progressive ESG agenda.

Virgin Money is the first and only UK bank to participate in Good Things Foundation's National Databank initiative. This has seen the bank transform all 91 branches into 'Databanks', whereby anyone in data poverty can receive a free SIM card loaded with 25GB of data a month for up to twelve months. So far, Virgin Money has distributed over 4,000 SIM cards to help get people online.

The bank also supports customers to develop digital skills through Learn My Way, a free platform that helps build basic online skills, from setting up an email address to re-ordering a prescription, enabling customers to get more out of being online.

Additionally, since September 2024, the Virgin Money Foundation has provided £1.4m in grants to help tackle digital inclusion. This includes funding to support the delivery of bespoke and accessible digital skills training for hard-to-reach groups in the North East of England and Glasgow - two areas experiencing high levels of digital poverty. In the last twelve months, the Foundation has also trained 270 Virgin Money colleagues as Digital Champions, providing skills training within their communities, and has issued 124 grants through its Volunteer and Connect Fund to help schools across the UK improve digital inclusion where colleagues volunteer.

In May, Virgin Money, in collaboration with policy consultants WPI Economics, published new research on the link between digital and financial inclusion.

The report showcased the £16.9bn wellbeing impact of digital exclusion¹, and the importance of ensuring that younger generations are given more support.

The report found that despite Gen-Z adults having higher levels of confidence in spotting scams, believing it was a problem for the older generations, they were more than twice as likely to be caught out. 29% of those surveyed admitted to being scammed, compared to just 13% of older generations.²

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While particularly prominent with younger generations, the report also indicated that a mixture of both digital and financial exclusion across all generations could be leading to an additional £568m stolen from consumers by scams every year.

The report calls for the Government to create a Financial and Digital Inclusion Taskforce. This taskforce, made up of policy makers, industry and the third sector, would oversee the seamless delivery of the new Financial Inclusion Strategy and Digital Inclusion Action Plan in support of the Government's growth mission.

The report also underlines the need to ensure a 'channel of choice' for customers. It calls for the proposed taskforce to work with the financial services industry to create a charter to underpin this so that customers can access the support they need online and offline.

These recommendations complement the Government's existing activity in this space, including the establishment this year of a digital inclusion and banking access sub-committee within the Financial Inclusion Committee.

Going further, there are areas that the Government need to address as part of its Digital Inclusion Action Plan, these include:

- More specific measurable objectives for individual Government departments to ensure the strategy is truly cross-governmental.
- Ensure that tackling fraud is a strong focus to increase trust with those who may be opting out of digital through a fear of being scammed.
- Utilise existing funding bodies, such as Virgin Money Foundation, that have established relationships with community groups, to deliver support to some of the hardest to reach demographics.

The Government has made a good start, but this is a once in a generation opportunity to deliver universal digital inclusion that will create better outcomes for individuals, their communities and the overall economy.

Virgin Money looks forward to continuing to work closely with the Government on its work to promote both digital and financial inclusion.





VodafoneThree

VodafoneThree welcomes the UK Government's Digital Inclusion Action Plan and in particular the steps taken to elevate digital inclusion up the policy agenda. As the UK's largest mobile network operator, we recognise the critical role that connectivity, access to devices, and digital skills play in enabling individuals and communities to thrive in an increasingly digital society.

The Action Plan provides us with a blueprint to establish long-term interventions, embed digital inclusion across policy thinking in Whitehall, and to close the digital divide for good. However, in order for this to be a success, this needs to be a priority for all of industry, all affected Government departments, and the third sector – not just communications providers.

Next steps for Government

While the Action Plan marks a significant step forward, its success will depend on effective implementation and continued leadership from Government. We urge the Government to consider:

- **Sustainable funding and policy alignment** – tackling digital exclusion requires long-term investment and must include funding for digital connectivity. Government should commit to multi-year funding for digital inclusion programmes and align this with broader strategies such as the Industrial Strategy and the NHS Digital Strategy. Digital inclusion needs to be a consideration, from the outset, in every major policy initiative from education and employment to health and housing – not as a bolt-on after decisions are made.
- **Strengthening public-private partnerships** – we recognise that as a telecoms provider we have a vital role to play but cannot solve this issue alone. Government must continue to convene and support partnerships that leverage the expertise and resources of industry and the third sector. Government should consider co-designing programmes and sharing data to target this support most effectively.
- **Accelerating local delivery and innovation** – the Action Plan rightly identifies the importance of locally tailored interventions. Government should extend the Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund to support councils and community organisations to develop and scale innovative solutions over a multi-year period. This must be backed by frameworks that measure impact and allow for the sharing of best practice.
- **Raising awareness of digital inclusion support** - Government should consider how it can utilise its own channels and relationships to deliver awareness to what is already available. For example, the DWP has a direct relationship with benefit recipients through channels such as job centres and we'd be keen to work with them on how we could highlight our products specifically available to benefit claimants.

VodafoneThree's Commitment to a digitally inclusive UK

Connectivity is essential and everyone should have access to the benefits it provides. VodafoneThree is building a network that will leave no one behind. The roll out of 5G Standalone (5GSA), made possible following the merger of Vodafone and Three, means millions more people will have access to a network of a quality that has, until now, been reserved for major cities. The merger will deliver the Government's ambition to bring 5GSA to all populated areas by 2030. It will also be vital in supporting the Government's ambition to unlock economic growth. Indeed, analysis that was previously commissioned by the Government estimated that, if adopted at scale, 5G could enable productivity gains that add £159bn in cumulative GVA by 2035.

We are proud to support the Government through our own commitments to provide connectivity to those that need it most, co-designing the IT Reuse for Good Charter. We will continue to close the digital divide, re-using and rehoming devices to those in need, while keeping social tariffs in both mobile and broadband for those on universal credit. Through working with organisations such as Good Things Foundation, Enterprise Nation, Samaritans and Trussell, we make connectivity accessible, affordable and dependable for those who are most in need.

Vodafone UK has a commitment to help four million people and businesses cross the digital divide by the end of 2025 through its everyone.connected campaign, while Three UK is committed to enabling connections between people, places and ideas, wherever they are most needed.

VodafoneThree stands ready to support the Government in delivering the Digital Inclusion Action Plan and ensuring that no one is left behind in the digital age. Together, we can build a more connected, equitable, and prosperous UK.



Industry Case Studies

Television informs, educates and entertains – but above all, it connects. As viewing shifts online, television can help carry people into the digital world.

Today, 85% (23 million) of the UK’s TV homes are connected, meaning some or all their viewing is online. Almost 7 million UK homes now watch TV exclusively via the internet. This is only expected to increase, with analysis by 3Reasons estimating that over 50% of homes will watch TV exclusively online, while 97% will be watching some form of TV over the internet (IPTV) in 2034.

But without policy maker intervention some households will remain unconnected and rely on Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT). However minor a group this is, they share the same characteristics as digitally excluded groups – typically users more likely to have a disability, be older or from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This overlap prompted us to consider how a managed switchover from DTT to IPTV-only could promote digital participation amongst excluded audiences.

PwC analysis found that full digital inclusion could generate as much as:

- £21.2-£30.8 billion in annual Gross Value Added (VA) from increased productivity and employment.
- £4.9-£9.4 billion in net gains to the Exchequer through higher tax revenues and reduced welfare spending.
- £26.6-31.3 billion in non-market wellbeing benefits, including improved life satisfaction and access to services.
- Up to £2.8 billion in annual NH5 savings from virtual GP appointments.
- Up to £848 million in user savings from digital government services.

In partnership with Everyone TV, we commissioned PwC to assess the potential socioeconomic value of achieving full digital inclusion, using HM Treasury’s Magenta Book methods. The study concluded that a managed transition to IPTV – if designed to support digital inclusion – could help unlock billions to the UK economy. [TEXTBOX]

The UK has managed a successful transition before. When the analogue-to-digital TV switchover was first announced in 2006, roughly 65% of households had digital TV. Once government set a timetable and agreed a £600m help scheme fund, the UK fully migrated to digital TV, with £340m returned to the exchequer.

Today, the BBC is working to make IPTV accessible and user-friendly, including through the PSB-led free streaming TV platform Freely which offers a linear EPG. We are also exploring a ‘plug-in’ device, aimed at those underserved by digital services.

A similar support programme, coupled with product innovations, could turn a DTT switch-off into a key moment for a national digital transition.

Digital Poverty Alliance

Having campaigned for a new digital inclusion strategy, the DPA warmly welcomed the DSIT Digital Inclusion Action Plan (DIAP), which shows a commitment to digital inclusion through coordinated effort across central and local government, third sector and industry. The DPA supports the next steps as set out in the Digital Inclusion Action Plan, including their commitment to work with the Digital Poverty Alliance on the groundbreaking multi-department device donation scheme to provide re-purposed government laptops to those in need.

Whilst the DPA praises the Government’s major step in the direction of ending digital poverty through the steps as outlined in the DIAP , this was always intended as a short term set of initial actions, and the concern for the DPA is that there is a need to maintain the momentum with a full strategy to address the systemic barriers that are needed to overcome the issue.

As digital poverty is intrinsically linked with poverty as a whole, it is important to address these fundamental barriers to ensure long-term solutions. Digital inclusion is no longer a luxury, but a right, and the Government must treat the issue as such. Digital inclusion therefore requires systemic change, national leadership with funding at local level, to avoid the ongoing postcode lottery of piecemeal support.

The immediate next steps the Government needs to take around digital inclusion and implementing the Plan

- Ensure that all projects promising R&D in tech include a requirement for a digital inclusion assessment
- Provide a framework for consistent and transferable ways for local authorities and other local organisations to gather and organise data about digital poverty at street level
- Mandate that every local authority must have a digital inclusion function with a dedicated team member, and that it must be built into a Cabinet portfolio – covering access, affordability, skills and accessibility, with responsibility for bringing together VCSE provision within the local area.
- Work with a charity such as the DPA to develop and fund a comprehensive investment case building on the Socio-Economic Case to encourage wider investment in digital inclusion.
- Acknowledge and declare safe, adequate internet access as a basic right.
- Protect key services that support those who are excluded – including telephone helplines for services such as HMRC, and the national broadcast TV signal, so the divide is not made bigger.
- Scale up public sector device redistribution – so that no public sector laptop ends up in landfill.
- Embed digital skills within the school curriculum, with support for parents and families, and, critically, training teachers in digital, media, AI and algorithmic literacy with a consistent approach across the country.

How DPA are supporting the move to a more digitally inclusive UK

The Digital Poverty Alliance remains committed to ending digital poverty in all forms across the UK. The DPA works across industry, the third sector and government to ensure that digital inclusion is seen as a basic right, not a luxury. The DPA partners with DSIT – and a range of companies – to provide recycled devices to those in need throughout the UK alongside a multitude of delivery programmes in which provide support to those most in need.

Furthermore, the DPA is a leading voice in advocacy of digital inclusion which encapsulates online safety, digital skills and access to suitable technology.



APPLE Collective

APPLE is a national collective of individuals and organisations with lived experience of poverty. As a network, we promote the voices of those with lived experience of poverty and we work collaboratively with others to influence change.

Charity Number: 1210699

Digital Inclusion Action Plan

We welcome the recognition of the intersectionality and complexity of the issue of digital exclusion detailed within the Action Plan and support the importance of the need for partnership working across the public, private and community sectors to address digital exclusion.

The Digital Inclusion Action Plan must recognise and foreground the vital importance of listening to lived experience. People with lived experience of digital exclusion know what this feels like and are a vital part of finding solutions to build comprehensive and experiential approaches to digital inclusion. APPLE Collective:

- Highlight disabled people as a group who either is more reliant online for support and services. This may result in furthering isolation and alienation as people are not seen in the real world because to face-to-face services are being reduced due to funding challenges.
- Query the use of the term ‘hard to reach’ within the Action Plan and signpost to ATD Fourth World’s work on [Seldom Heard](#) groups.
- Query the link between ‘hard to reach digitally excluded groups’ and the Get Britain Working White Paper – not all or even most people who are digitally excluded are out of work / able to work.
- Highlight the impact of Digital Exclusion in rural areas and especially spotlight the impact of rural communities being migrated away from 2G and 3G services.
- Are intrigued by the lack of research into people not interested in being online. APPLE advise in-depth participatory research with people who have lived experience.

Steps the Government Need to Take

The APPLE Collective is concerned that people experiencing poverty will be excluded further digitally because of increased costs of energy and food. We need a system that pulls families out of hard times and that creates opportunities.

In the short term, we believe that steps can be taken to tackle this digital divide by:

- Encouraging the telecommunications industry to lift the data caps on a pay-as-you-go and rolling pay monthly tariff.
- Making mobile ‘hot spots’ available free of use and accessible to all.

In the longer term, we ask for participation, voice and connection.

- We ask for free Wi-Fi for Low-Income Groups.
- The opportunity to discuss how people with lived experience of socioeconomic disadvantage and who directly face this challenge of digital division are able to ensure support packages to build skills, knowledge and confidence are designed to the best effect.



How are APPLE Collective supporting a Digitally Inclusive UK?

Over the last few years, the APPLE Collective Campaign to address the digital divide has gained traction and has taken action in various settings to amplify the voices of people with lived experiences of poverty.

APPLE Campaigning on the Digital Divide has involved writing to MPs, meeting online with MPs and linking with key partners such as [The Good Things Foundation](#), [Operation WiFi](#) and [Local Trust](#) to amplify the voices of people with lived experience of poverty within wider campaigning on the digital divide and liaising with APPGs alongside presenting at a wide range of conferences. Our work was recognised by the [UK Parliament Awards](#), as Digital Campaigner of the Year 2021.

Age UK

How digitalisation is affecting older people

2.4 million (19%) older people in the UK are digitally excluded - using the internet less than once a month or not at all.

The result is that in an increasingly digital world, everyday tasks are becoming really challenging and at times, impossible. At Age UK, we often hear of particular challenges with older people accessing healthcare, council services, financial support and banking services – often with devastating consequences.

Many older people are keen to learn more digital skills and should be supported to do so. At the same time, there will always be some people who will never be online, and these people must be able to access the services they rely on to live well.

How Age UK is combating digital exclusion

After calling for a digital inclusion strategy for some time, Age UK was delighted to welcome the publication of the Digital Inclusion Action Plan earlier this year.

Caroline Abrahams, Age UK’s Charity Director, was appointed to the Digital Inclusion Action Committee and co-chairs the Inclusive Digital Services Sub-committee. The group will advise DSIT on how all core services can become digitally inclusive, looking at existing standards and best practice. It will also support government’s understanding of the needs of the UK’s digitally excluded population.

We will continue to work with government to ensure that older people are meaningfully involved and supported as public services digitalise.



What Age UK would like to see:

- **All public services should offer and promote an affordable, easy-to-access, offline way of reaching and using them.** This could include in-person options and greater use of assisted digital services.
- **More support to enable people who would like to get online to do so**, including by funding voluntary sector initiatives.
- **The Government to develop the Digital Inclusion Action Plan into a fully funded strategy** with meaningful actions to protect access to offline services.
- **The NHS 10-year Plan’s** shift from ‘analogue to digital’ must factor in the needs of older people who are not online and ensure they can continue to access NHS services.
- **The Government to protect access to cash and banking.**

Quotes from Older People

“When you’re trying to access services, you’re told it’s only online, even the doctors. It makes you feel almost resentful. That you haven’t got options. And you see how far your children are from you and they can’t pop over to do that for you. But still the only thing that [services] are concerned about is “go online, go online, go online.”

– Older person

“It is very difficult to get a medical appointment now and my surgery is pushing more and more services online. It has got to the point where access is so difficult, I don’t seek advice and just hope minor conditions just go away.”

– Older person

“It makes you feel inferior, having to rely on someone else to do for you. Trying to do some over the telephone is almost impossible - the wait time plus all the automated options, then to be told to call back later as all operatives are busy!”

– Older person

Citizens Advice

In Citizens Advice centres, we see people every day who need help filling out forms to access housing, bills relief and debt support. Last year, Citizens Advice supported 2.68 million people and our webpages had over 67 million views.

Digital skills are vital; these are now necessary to access public services and to live daily lives. It is therefore welcome to see several skills-related measures in the Action Plan. We also welcome the Plan’s collaborative approach, highlighting the roles of government, local and combined authorities, industry and communities.

Digital inclusion is inextricably linked to social inclusion and we encourage a focus on equity of access. We are pleased with early indications that certain vulnerable groups will receive focused support. We encourage analysis on how social inequalities interact with digital inequalities.

However, what receives less attention in the Plan is the market dynamics that drive many affordability challenges in the telecoms sector. Mid-contract price rises, loyalty penalties, haggling for hidden deals and mis-selling practices decrease trust in the market and lead to many people we help paying over the odds.

- 1 in 4 people claiming Universal Credit - and 1 in 10 of those in work - are struggling with their broadband costs.¹
- 1 in 4 people have taken some form of action to pay for broadband, such as cutting back, going without essentials, falling behind on other bills or borrowing money.²
- Citizens Advice helped approximately 35,500 people with telecoms issues in 2024. This has more than doubled in the past 5 years.

Although databanks and device donation have a role in tackling affordability questions, addressing causes rather than symptoms means looking at practices now built into many telecoms markets.

We believe a statutory consumer advocate with responsibility for providing advice, collecting data and offering an early warning system for new problems would help to identify the market issues that stand between people and digital inclusion. This idea [has been surfaced by previous governments before](#); a statutory advocate could work collaboratively with the government, Ofcom and communications providers to find solutions. Now is the time to take this forward.

Local Citizens Advice: Digital Inclusion in Action

- Citizens Advice Sheffield have installed touchscreen ‘[Community Access Points](#)’ so locals can access expert advice without a device or data. These also enable the use of British Sign Language over video calls.
- Citizens Advice Doncaster offer [1-1 Digital Advice Appointments](#), skills sessions and access to devices and data.
- Advisors use a resource centre to give out tailored digital money advice, such as safe shopping online and budgeting.





Lightning Reach

Lightning Reach's Reaction to the Digital Inclusion Action Plan

Lightning Reach welcomes the Digital Inclusion Action Plan as an important milestone to address digital exclusion. [The plan rightly highlights that digital exclusion causes severe harm: people who lack online access tend to have worse health outcomes, higher living costs, and are over five times more likely to be unemployed.](#) We applaud the plan's focus on tackling "data and device poverty" and its initial steps, such as the Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund to support and expand community initiatives to get people online. This renewed cross-departmental approach, including a new Action Committee of industry, charity, and local leaders, shows policymakers recognise digital inclusion as essential for a fairer, more resilient society.

Next Steps for Government

Successful implementation of the Plan is where the impact lies. Awareness and uptake of affordable connectivity must improve. [Today only around 5% of eligible low-income households are using discounted broadband social tariffs.](#) Government should require all internet providers to offer social tariffs and actively promote them through channels that reach vulnerable groups (such as platforms like Lightning Reach). Ensuring people have devices is critical: beyond the new donation schemes, we urge piloting direct grant programs for digital devices that individuals can apply for, complementing community initiatives. Finally, continued investment in digital skills training and local support hubs will be vital so that new users gain the confidence and skills to thrive online.

Lightning Reach: Supporting a More Digitally Inclusive UK

Lightning Reach is already helping drive a more digitally inclusive UK by bridging financial and digital divides. Through our online portal, people can discreetly find and apply for over 2,500 sources of assistance - including grants, benefits, help with bills, social tariffs, and digital skills programmes. We've reached over 200,000 people and facilitated over £20 million in support.

Importantly, our platform is designed to include those who are not digitally confident. Over 3,000 people have successfully signed up with the help of support workers using our "apply on behalf" feature. This ensures that offline individuals are not excluded from vital help. In addition, £50,000 of investment in digital devices has been facilitated through the portal, putting practical tools into the hands of those who need them most to get online and stay connected.

By combining financial access with digital inclusion, Lightning Reach is supporting a fairer, more resilient UK where no one is left behind.

Tech UK

Digital exclusion is an issue that really matters if we want to harness the benefits of digital as a society and economy. Digitisation has great potential to improve the delivery of public services, empowering the most vulnerable people in our society. However, vulnerable people are also the most likely to be digitally excluded and to require non-digital, face-to-face support. If we want our public services to best serve those in greatest need, we must ensure that people are empowered to be able to use digital technologies to their full potential. We must also ensure that where digital solutions aren't appropriate, that those who need it can find human support that is well-resourced and easily accessible.

In short, we must ensure that nobody is left behind.

techUK members are already working hard to tackle digital exclusion. From our telecoms members' participation in schemes such as the [National Data Bank](#), providing over 250,000 data packages to people, to members such as [Reed in Partnership](#) and [Jisc](#) providing essential skills support for those without them; this is an issue techUK members truly care about. However, to truly end digital exclusion for good, we and our members need partnership not only with the Government,

but also with the organisations that work most closely and directly with the people who need help and support to fully participate, safely and with confidence, in the digital world.

For example, we know that access to affordable devices is an issue: in 2024, [Good Things Foundation](#) found that around 1.5 million people do not have a smartphone, tablet, or laptop. We believe it is possible to scale up device donation and reuse, and we are looking at this as a top priority issue. It is, of course, only a part of tackling digital exclusion, a complex and multifaceted problem, but it is one where the tech sector, with its supply-side knowledge, should be able to make a real difference by working together.

techUK is proud to be a member of the UK Government's Digital Inclusion Action Committee (DIAC) and to be working with our members, including through our Digital Inclusion Working Group, as well as other organisations with deep knowledge and insights into these challenges.

We are confident that, by working together, we can end digital exclusion and ensure all will benefit from digital technology.



Regional & Local Case Studies

Foreword by Mayor of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Andy Burnham

As Mayor of Greater Manchester, I welcome the UK Government’s recognition that building a stronger and fairer country means tackling digital exclusion. Digital inclusion is not just about technology, it is about ensuring every resident can fully participate in our economy, access public services, and thrive in an increasingly digital society.

The launch of the Digital Inclusion Action Plan: First Steps is a vital acknowledgment that local and regional leaders play a central role in delivering practical, place-based solutions.

In Greater Manchester, we view digital access as a basic right. Whether it’s finding work, accessing healthcare, staying connected to family, or engaging in education, being online is essential. Yet too many people are still excluded. That is why our own Digital Inclusion Agenda for Change underpins our wider digital ambitions and directly supports the new Greater Manchester Strategy which sets out our collective vision for a fairer, greener, and more prosperous city-region where everyone can thrive.

Over the past five years, in partnership with local authorities, the voluntary sector, and industry, thousands of residents have gained access to devices, connectivity, and essential digital skills.

We are delivering world-class infrastructure through initiatives such as the UK’s largest Local Full Fibre Network Programme whilst recognising that affordability remains a major barrier. Despite the existence of social tariffs, too many households cannot afford basic connectivity. In response, Greater Manchester hosts over 10% of the Good Things Foundation’s national databanks, distributing more than 78,500 SIM cards in the past two years.

Our programmes across Greater Manchester are making a difference - bringing digital support within 15 minutes of where people live and enabling over 6,800 disadvantaged pupils to access a device and learn online. Yet challenges remain. To create lasting change, we need long-term national commitment, coordinated investment, and policy that empowers regions to act.

Together, with government, industry, and communities, Greater Manchester can lead the way, ensuring no one is left behind.

Andy Burnham
Mayor of Greater Manchester



Essex County Council – Digital Essex

Digital Essex is proud to be leading a county-wide initiative to tackle digital exclusion and improve access to online services for all. Through the creation of Community DigiHubs, we’re helping people across Essex gain the confidence and skills they need to thrive in an increasingly digital world.

Since the programme launched in 2023, ten hubs have opened across the region, with more planned in the coming months. Over 300 free training sessions have already been delivered, supporting residents with a wide range of digital tasks—from applying for jobs and booking GP appointments, to using online banking, staying in touch with family, and even launching small businesses.

These hubs are designed to be welcoming, inclusive spaces where people can get one-to-one support from trained Digital Champions - volunteers who give their time to help others build digital confidence. As one volunteer, Laura Cheng, shared:

“It’s been a rewarding experience to both improve my own digital knowledge and enjoy helping others at the same time.”

Spotlight on Ingatestone: A model of community collaboration

One of the most inspiring examples of community involvement is the DigiHub at Ingatestone and Fryerning Community Centre, open every Tuesday afternoon. This hub is supported by students from the Anglo European School, who volunteer as Digital Champions. Their contribution has been transformative - not only for the residents they support, but for the students themselves.

Assistant Headteacher Stephanie Nichols said:

“The students have really enjoyed it and want to keep going next year. It’s been great to see them grow in confidence.”

“I helped someone use the basic functions on their iPhone. They left feeling much more confident.”

Beyond technical support, the hub has become a place of connection and companionship. As Nichols noted:

“People come back not just for tech support, but to have a chat with someone young. It gets them out of the house and gives them a reason to smile.”

Looking ahead: Expanding the network

As part of its ongoing commitment to digital inclusion, Digital Essex is working to expand the network of Community DigiHubs across the county. The goal is to ensure that every resident- regardless of age, background, or ability- has access to the support they need to participate fully in the digital world.

We’re actively seeking new volunteers and community partners to help grow this initiative.

Together, we’re building a more connected, confident, and inclusive Essex- one hub at a time.



Sunderland City Council

Sunderland City Council serves 280,000 people, with 1 in 5 at risk of digital exclusion. This disproportionately affects older people, disabled residents, those with no qualifications, low-income households, and young people.

In response to the 2024 Digital Inclusion APPG recommendations, Sunderland took strategic action:

Digital Inclusion Network

Sunderland's council-led, cross-sector network of 400+ members drives digital inclusion, aligning with the City Plan while empowering communities to shape and deliver locally responsive solutions.

Targeted Funding

£385,500 in external grants has been distributed to 30 VCSE organisations to establish digital inclusion hubs in the heart of communities.

Links for Life Platform

A one-stop digital directory connects residents to local support, simplifying access to digital help and resources.

Social Tariff Campaign

Over 30,000 tailored letters were sent to eligible households, explaining the benefits of being online, how to access social tariffs, and where to get offline help. Reported savings reached up to £50 per month.

Public Connectivity

Free Wi-Fi is now available across the City Centre, the seafront and 30 neighbourhoods, with 65,000+ monthly logins. Council buildings also promote Gov Wi-Fi access.

Workforce Digital Skills

Using the Future.Now roadmap, Sunderland supported 900 offline staff to become digitally confident. Many progressed into better-paid roles. The model now informs corporate induction and is extending to elected members.

Digital Switchover

In partnership with BT Digital Voice, Sunderland hosted citywide events, workshops, toolkits, and community talks to raise awareness and protect residents from switchover-related scams.

Skills Delivery Network

Working with the North-East Combined Authority, Sunderland's Learning and Skills Provider Network delivers trusted, tailored digital skills support citywide.

These efforts have fostered a stronger digital inclusion culture, improved engagement, and demonstrated inclusive digital practices citywide, contributing meaningfully to the national landscape. Sunderland's approach shows how strong local leadership, investment, and collaboration can drive meaningful change.

Despite progress, more action is required. Digital access is a lifeline for many, yet remains out of reach due to limited skills, low confidence, affordability and narrow frameworks. Small organisations, vital to communities, often lack the resources to embrace digital tools, affecting their sustainability. Digital exclusion is not just technical, it's deeply social. Gaps in confidence, safety, and support create silent barriers. Without investment and coordinated, evidence-based action, digital inclusion risks being sidelined. Tackling this challenge requires compassionate, co-designed approaches and adaptive, systemic solutions, driven by the council and led by the community.



Liverpool City Region Combined Authority

The Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) serves 1.6 million residents across six local authorities, with a vision to build a digitally inclusive region where no one is left behind. Our goal is to ensure every resident can access the opportunities, services and support needed to thrive in a modern digital world.

LCRCA welcomes the Government's Digital Inclusion Action Plan and its recognition of digital inclusion as a national priority. The Combined Authority supports the Plan's focus on tackling data and device poverty, digital skills, confidence and access to services, and welcomes the first Government investment in over a decade through the Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund.

To fully realise the Plan's ambitions, Government should recognise the critical role of local and combined authorities in delivering solutions. As authorities, we are closest to our communities and best placed to design and implement tailored, cross-sector interventions that reflect local needs and priorities.

LCRCA has taken a strategic, partnership-led approach locally. The Liverpool City Region Digital Inclusion Network, established by the CA, brings together over 250 organisations from local authorities, the voluntary and community sector, and businesses to co-develop and deliver digital inclusion activity.

Through this network, the CA delivered the Digital Inclusion Initiative, a public-private partnership with Lloyds Banking Group, Vodafone, Assurant and over 100 delivery organisations. The programme supported over 5,400 residents with a free device, connectivity and in-person digital skills training, with more than 1.3 million gigabytes of data donated.

The CA has invested £1.4 million via the UK Shared Prosperity Fund into the Digital Connectivity Grants Programme, improving infrastructure in over 170 voluntary sector inclusion hubs. It has also donated over 800 retired devices to the National Devicebank and signed the Government's IT Reuse for Good Charter.

Digital inclusion has been embedded into frontline programmes including households into Work, Housing First, and the Careers Hub, supporting those furthest from the labour market, impacted by homelessness, or eligible for free school meals.

Going forward, we urge the Government to embed digital inclusion meaningfully across government departments, ensuring they work more closely together on this issue, integrating it into policy design. Cross-departmental coordination is essential to ensure digital inclusion is treated as a shared responsibility, with aligned strategies, funding models and accountability. Without this joined-up approach, efforts risk remaining fragmented and we could miss the opportunity to deliver lasting change.



Recommendations

1. Digital inclusion to be a centrally led and co-ordinated programme.

Whilst DSIT's Digital Inclusion Action Plan: First Steps, was widely welcomed, a longer-term strategy should ensure that digital inclusion is embedded meaningfully across **government Departments, ensuring Departments work more closely together** on the issue and integrate it into current and future policy design from the get-go.

This approach would see the introduction of specific measurable objectives for individual Government Departments.

Specific policy programmes and objectives where this recommendation could be put into action include:

- Ensuring the NHS 10-year Plan's strategic objective of shifting from 'analogue to digital', embeds digital inclusion considerations throughout, as should the Neighbourhood Health programme.
- Ensuring the Government's consultation and implementation of digital IDs and the continued digital transformation of public services includes digital inclusion.
- Using the transition to IPTV as the catalyst for government and industry to ensure that users can access and use services important to them confidently
- Centring digital inclusion as a standard consideration in public support programmes and priorities such as Connect to Work or future job centres.
- Entrenching digital skills within the school and post-16 curriculum and training teachers in digital, media, AI and algorithmic literacy.
- Coordinating with the AI Opportunities Action plan team to ensure AI and digital inclusion, literacy and privacy sit at the forefront.
- Scaling up public sector device donation, ensuring alignment with the Government's upcoming Circular Economy Strategy and through active promotion of the IT Reuse for Good Charter.
- Implementing legislative and organisational overlap between the existing Digital Inclusion Action Committee and the Financial Inclusion Committees, for example by setting up a joint working group between the two committees or establishing a new Financial and Digital Inclusion Taskforce.

2. Design a sustainable funding model for digital inclusion by innovating funding across Government and alongside industry.

This should align with the broader strategic objectives of Government Departments set out in Recommendation.

An appropriate funding model will allow the implementation of digital inclusion to unlock up to £30.8bn GVA of gains to the UK economy.

The model could include:

- A Treasury review into additional funding mechanisms, from Social Value procurement to the Digital Services Tax and Social Impact Bonds
- The development of a comprehensive investment case for digital inclusion, building on the Socio-Economic Case to encourage wider investment in digital inclusion

- This should include match-funding with businesses and others, and deepening cooperation with industry and third sector organisations in the co-design and delivery of digital inclusion programmes.
- The Government working alongside regional and local authorities to explore routes for co-investment into the National Digital Inclusion Network, ending the digital inclusion postcode lottery
- Scaling up the Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund by increasing funding, opening it up to a wider range of organisations, and extending it to the full-term of the Parliament to bring together the full wealth of expertise in industry and government.

3. Accelerate investment in affordable, high-quality broadband and mobile infrastructure.

Broadband and mobile infrastructure should be available to everyone in all communities. This needs to reach underserved regions and be offered at affordable prices for people on low incomes.

The Government should explore supportive policies that open up and further investment from the Telecoms sector and through government funded subsidy schemes to address areas of market failure.

Beyond this, it should review innovative options for affordability, and enable crisis support, such as the National Databank, to be sustained where alternatives are not possible, and integrated into local services.

4. Design a local digital inclusion framework

The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology should work with local and regional authorities to design a framework through which authorities can design and deliver local digital inclusion programmes, and collect and share digital inclusion data centrally.

5. Raise awareness and offer clear signposting

As part of a Government-wide approach to digital inclusion, Departments should consider how they can use existing channels to raise awareness of digital inclusion initiatives in national and place-based approaches. For example, the Department for Work and Pensions could ensure signposting or integration of digital inclusion support is present at all job centres.

The Government should also consider approaches to raise awareness on the public-wide benefits and affordances of being 'digitally connected'. For example, being digitally included results in better access to government services such as GPs and accelerates administrative processes including paying bills.

6. Expand the number of zero-rated websites, including all online government services

The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology should conduct a financial review into the cost of zero-rating all government estates, and work with service providers to assess the feasibility of zero rating further website including certified educational services and debt advice websites.

