Promising
Trouble

Affordable, Accessible, and Easy-to-Use

A radically inclusive
approach to building a
better digital society

—

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and Anna Dent

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About this report

The focus of this paper is the relationship between digital inclusion and health and wellbeing. Our hypothesis is that digital inclusion is a super-social determinant of health. To demonstrate this, we have overlaid the impacts of both digital inclusion and exclusion on the World Health Organization's definition of the social determinants of health, analysed the impacts of exclusion on each determinant, and then considered the overall potential impacts of this on individuals and households.

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Methodology

The research shared in this report has been developed through the following methods:

- A literature review, looking at the social determinants of health and digital inclusion/ exclusion overall, and literature relating to each individual determinant and the evidence for the effects of digital access on them. It also looked at research about health justice, disability justice, and digital justice.

- A small-scale diary study carried out in early 2024 with a group of ten households in South London. Each household was asked to respond to a set of questions at the beginning and end of the study, and a series of weekly prompts, to capture their day to day experience of being online and trying to get online, and how this affected their lives. Participants could also capture thoughts and experiences via a handwritten diary, WhatsApp messages, voice notes, and via a weekly phone call, according to what was most convenient for them. All the data captured was analysed to identify key themes, and whether their experiences related to the social determinants as set out in this report.

A radically inclusive approach to building a better digital society

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Introduction

Digital inclusion is now an essential prerequisite for access to health and wellbeing. For the benefits of technology to be equally available to everyone, a whole-of-society approach to innovation is needed; otherwise, the UK risks intensifying inequalities and entrenching existing divides.

This report outlines how, and why, the next government should adopt a radically inclusive approach to building a digital society.

To take advantage of the benefits offered by digital technologies and build a better digital society, the UK must shift to a **"digitally inclusive by design"** approach. As a society, our collective and individual health and wellbeing depend on many factors. Over the last two decades, social, economic, and technological norms have changed how people in the UK are expected to gain access to the building blocks of a good life. From cashless payments and digital challenger banks to WhatsApp groups, dating apps, and "digital-by-default" public services, the assumption of digital inclusion is everywhere, baked into our relationships, our transactions, and our duties as citizens and taxpayers.

The next government must move beyond the current policy sticking plasters[1] and adopt a radically inclusive set of policies that enable everyone to participate in a better digital society. By 2030, digital inclusion should be **affordable, accessible, and easy-to-use** for all adults and households across the UK.

This can be achieved by:

■ Removing economic barriers to inclusion through legislation that **ensures good quality, secure devices and connectivity are affordable** and the **Minimum Digital Living Standards** are accessible to all

■ Developing and enforcing an **Inclusive Service Standard** that:

   ↘ ensures **essential services across the public and private sector are still accessible** for those who are digitally excluded, providing offline alternatives where needed

   ↘ ensures **essential digital services across the public and private sector are easy-to-use** for those with low digital skills and low-levels of digital confidence.

This is essential because, without sufficient access to technology, people can quickly become isolated from society, from opportunities, from public services, and from friends and family. While some argue that digitisation has become too pervasive,[2] **digital inclusion is often assumed by retailers, service providers, educators, and employers to be a near-universal social capability.** For those with the means to take it for granted, digital inclusion can seem as natural as breathing; for people who are excluded, digital technologies are a set of barriers constructed to make it more difficult, or impossible, to confidently access everyday essentials.

As of March 2024, 3.7 million households with children, 40% of all such households, did not meet the Minimum Digital Living Standard.[3] This leads directly to and is a contributing factor in challenges at the household, community, and national level. For individuals, access to healthcare is reduced, economic insecurity worsened, and social connections harmed. Communities are weakened and local services are under increased pressure. As a population, skills development, economic growth, and productivity are held back, and the burden on the NHS increases. With investment in digital inclusion, analysis by Cebr found that savings for the NHS would total £899 million over a ten year period.[4]

Digital inclusion can no longer be considered as an individual or a case-by-case matter; it cannot be solved with charitable handouts, increased individual responsibility, or one-off corporate interventions. This report sets out the ways in which digital inclusion has a bearing on almost every part of life, and introduces our **Social Model of Digital Inclusion**, a framework that considers health and wellbeing not just for individual people but for local communities, and the population as a whole.

Our analysis builds on a number of existing health justice and disability justice frameworks[5] and applies a power analysis to shift responsibility from the personal to the social. As such, our finding is that, **to solve digital exclusion, organisations, businesses, and governments must become digitally inclusive by design.** This will improve individual and collective health and wellbeing, increase social inclusion across communities, and raise productivity across the United Kingdom.

Part One: Definitions

1.1 The social determinants of health

The social determinants of health set out how people's health and wellbeing are affected by factors outside of any medical conditions or healthcare they receive. The World Health Organization (WHO) describe them as:

the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age, and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life. These forces and systems include economic policies and systems, development agendas, social norms, social policies and political systems.[6]

WHO identify ten[7] categories, which we have simplified to seven:

	working life

	education

	inclusion and non-discrimination

	income and social protection

	access to affordable health services of decent quality

	food insecurity

	housing, basic amenities, and the environment

The social determinants of health can negatively or positively impact a person's health and life chances, and can have a greater effect on a person's health outcomes and life expectancy than individual health care or lifestyle choices.[8] They are both interconnected and dynamic, and their importance and interrelation will change throughout a person's life.

Many previous studies have been undertaken to examine the relationship between digital inclusion and health outcomes,[9] with the majority focussed on considering digital inclusion in terms of ability to access telehealth and e-health or Electronic Medical Record (EMR) portals. Research that explores digital access in relation to the social determinants of health also tends to focus specifically on medical outcomes, though there are some that examine the non-medical outcomes beyond telehealth and e-health.[10] Our approach is more expansive and also draws on **social, cultural, political, environmental, and economic quality of life as indicators of health and well-being.**

1.2 Digital inclusion as a super social determinant of health

Over the past few decades, access to and use of the Internet have become heavily integrated into everyday life, emphasised by the UK government's move towards digital delivery of public services. Today, **many life essentials require using the Internet**; from doing homework, applying for jobs, searching for housing, maintaining social relationships, to accessing benefits.

The social determinants of health show that all of these essential tasks and activities contribute to our overall health and wellbeing. The links, therefore, between digital access and each of the social determinants of health are clear: digital skills and connectivity have such an immense impact on daily life **that digital inclusion has come to be recognised as a "super social determinant of health"**; "super" "because it affects the ability to address all the other [social determinants of health]".[11]

A lack of digital access can limit a person's ability to access economic, social, and cultural resources, which can in turn limit access to digital technologies. Fran Baum, Lareen Newman, and Katherine Biedrzycki refer to the relationship between digital access and the social determinants of health as a "vicious cycle" because

social, cultural and economic capital are all transferable to and impact upon digital capital, that is, in gaining access to and using digital ICTs [information and communication technologies] for their benefit. Those lacking access to these capitals are also either absolutely or relatively excluded from the technologies and benefits they bestow.[12]

For example, as more job postings are advertised online it is increasingly difficult to search for and apply to job opportunities without digital access. This means people who are digitally excluded have fewer job opportunities, which can lead to lower earnings potential and increased financial insecurity. Due to the high costs of broadband,[13] lower levels of income can in turn decrease access to broadband and digital connectivity — hence, a "vicious cycle". Low incomes also contribute to worse health outcomes, which can affect someone's ability to work, thereby adding to the vicious cycle of exclusion, poorer health, and economic insecurity.

Our research has focussed on understanding the interdependent, tangled web of factors between digital inclusion and the social determinants of health, and how each determinant — simultaneously on its own and as part of the whole — both impacts and is impacted by digital exclusion. **This relationship is cyclical and interwoven, manifesting simultaneously at the individual, local, and population level.** For example, broadband access can not only support employment and increased incomes at the individual level, it can also contribute to increased employment and wages at population level, leading to "country-level growth"[14] and potential increased innovation activity.[15]

Who is digitally excluded

Good Things Foundation reports that, in the UK, 1 in 14 households have no Internet access at home and they estimate that without any action, by 2032, 5.8 million people will be digitally excluded.[16]

Whilst there are many reasons why a person might not access the Internet, research shows that there are certain groups of people who are more likely to be offline, including:

■ older people

■ disabled people

■ low-income families

■ people of colour

■ people who are unemployed

■ refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants

■ people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness

■ people who use English as a second language

■ people who experience or are at risk of experiencing social isolation

■ people with fewer education qualifications

■ people who live in rural areas

■ people who live in social housing

■ and people who are navigating issues such as addiction and domestic abuse.[17]

These groups are not mutually exclusive, and many people experience multiple, overlapping barriers to social and economic participation, which, as already described, can both lead to and be compounded by digital exclusion. Many in these groups also experience health inequalities and poorer health outcomes than the general population.

Digital inclusion and exclusion are also not totalities; there are many people who are digitally engaged but for a variety of reasons find it harder and more expensive to do what they need and want to do online.[18] Our **Community Connectivity** programme has been particularly focussed on how **people who are already marginalised are at greater risk of being further marginalised by being digitally excluded**, and how this affects their overall health.

In reviewing existing digital inclusion frameworks,[19] the most commonly described barriers to digital inclusion were a lack of skills or confidence in using technology; a lack of access to equipment and infrastructure to connect; and a lack of motivation to use the Internet or to understand the benefits of digital engagement. Proposed solutions to increase digital inclusion tend towards first-order problem-solving under three broad categories: education — to improve digital skills; investment — to enable new infrastructure projects; and governance — to reform telecoms regulations.

To be effective, these interventions need to be rolled out rapidly and universally, when **in reality each is a complex systemic challenge that will take many years to solve.** This perspective also ignores ongoing research and debate regarding the varied impacts of Internet and smartphone use on mental health and wellbeing[20] and does not acknowledge the potential of increased digitisation to create or exacerbate harm. For example, the expansion of digital public service delivery poses particular risk to asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants who are already under heightened surveillance and policing as a result of the compliant environment framework,[21] more commonly known as the hostile environment.[22] Research also shows that experiences of harassment and abuse on social media platforms impact how people, particularly Black women, queer, and trans people, are able to engage in digital social cultures.[23]

In efforts to scale up quickly with limited resources, prevalent existing digital inclusion frameworks and policy can also result in isolated approaches that are "disconnected from everyday solutions".[24] Such approaches also result in users being required to give mandatory consent or risk not being able to access services, goods, or support, and as a result, **denying people's agency to meaningfully engage technology when and how they choose.**[25] Simply placing digital solutions on top of already existing social structures and expecting individuals, civil society, or "the market" to adapt is an ineffective way to increase digital inclusion at scale. Incorporating an analysis of structural and institutional power alongside justice frameworks would enable a broader, more inclusive analysis and transformative change.

Part Two: The Social Model of Digital Inclusion

2.1 Social determinants of health and digital inclusion

Each social determinant is affected by both digital exclusion and digital inclusion. These individual effects have their own direct consequences for individuals, their families, and households.
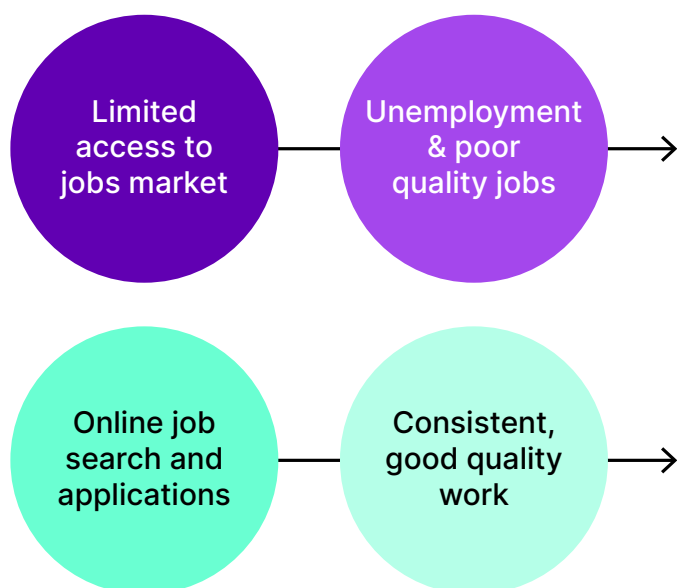
In this section, each determinant is addressed separately, and the impacts of inclusion and exclusion are explored and broken down into the potential positive and negative outcomes that can arise within each determinant.

The positive and negative outcomes are colour coded:
green denotes positive outcomes and purple indicates negative.

A diary study with ten households in South London was carried out in early 2024, capturing the everyday experiences of peoples' use of the Internet, and how unreliable and unaffordable internet access affected their ability to carry out tasks, socialise, learn, and conduct other essential activities. Selected quotes provided by participants in the diary study are included in this section.

Working Life

Limited access to jobs market → Unemployment & poor quality jobs →

Online job search and applications → Consistent, good quality work →

Finding and securing employment is hugely reliant on Internet access. Increasing numbers of employers recruit at least partially online, posting jobs on websites, requiring online applications, and holding online interviews. Before the pandemic, 82% of jobs required some kind of digital skill; this has almost certainly risen. Digital access and skills support training, progression and earnings, and workers' ability to organise and build worker power.
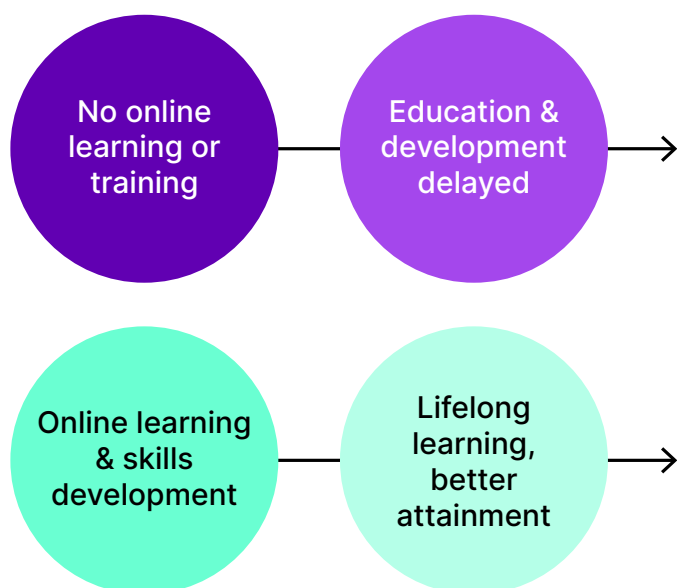
Poor quality work and unemployment are known to contribute to worse health outcomes, both physical and mental health. Children growing up in workless households tend to have worse education outcomes, and young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET) experience long term challenges with health and income.

Participants who took part in the diary study reported using online platforms to apply for work, emphasising how critical Internet access is to navigating the job market:

"Today I used the Internet to apply for work through CV.UK"

- Participant F

Education

No online learning or training → Education & development delayed →

Online learning & skills development → Lifelong learning, better attainment →

Lack of Internet access at home compounds existing educational disadvantages, and makes it harder for children to develop the digital skills essential for formal and informal learning. As well as Internet access, appropriate digital devices are critical for children's education to do things like completing homework. Education can also be impacted by parents' digital exclusion; a lack of skills, confidence, or digital access means parents can't communicate as easily with school staff, or support children with learning.

Educational inequalities have long-term consequences: access to employment, better wages, social mobility, and health outcomes are all affected by experiences and achievements at school.
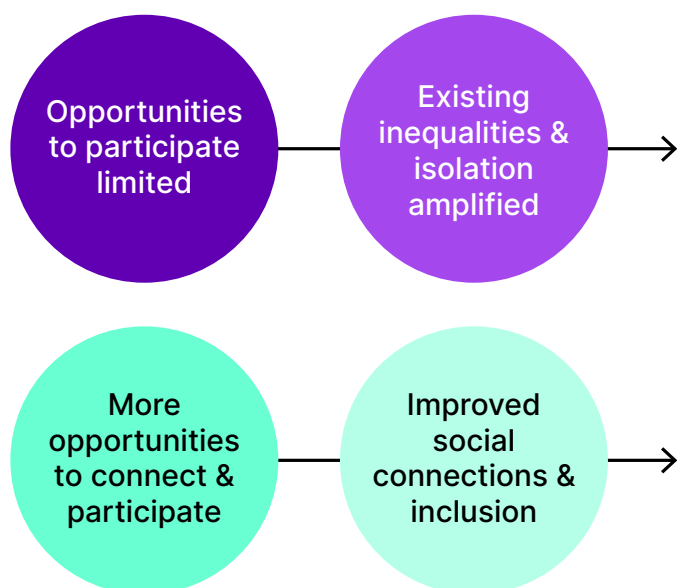
Lack of Internet access affected participants and their families in the diary study:

"... my daughter did not complete her homework when she needed to. She had an after school club, then got home and the Internet was down when she came back, she tried to go to the library but it was closed already. She got detention for not being able to complete the homework — in two different classes."

– Participant F

Inclusion and non-discrimination

Opportunities to participate limited → Existing inequalities & isolation amplified →

More opportunities to connect & participate → Improved social connections & inclusion →

"I joined online prayer every morning, 6am, and it wasn't working. Normally [I] use YouTube to do this."

– Participant C

Limited access to the Internet at home can mean a person is less able to communicate with friends and family, and to participate in other social connections. This lack of communication can lead to social isolation, and can amplify existing inequalities. This is particularly the case for disabled people, people with chronic illness, older people, people who have migrated from their community, and others who are more likely to be reliant on digital communications to maintain their social relationships.
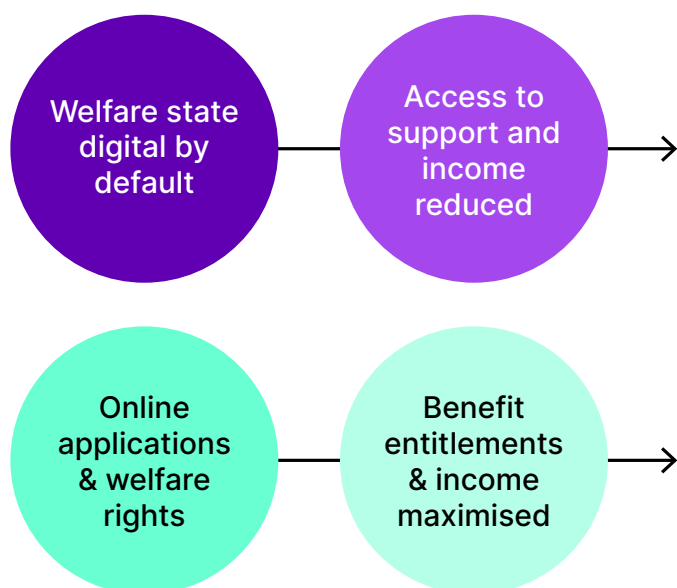
Digital inclusion improves access to support networks and services, as well as access to civic information, which can lead to increased civic engagement, particularly for groups who are marginalised. Also, since many tools, games, and other recreation activities rely on digital access, home access to the Internet also creates more opportunities to develop social skills, play, and try things out. Developing these types of "digital soft skills" is particularly useful for young people.[26]

Diary study participants had a range of challenges participating in social, family, communal, and religious activities as a result of their poor Internet access:

"I'm using the TV and I'm trying to watch a football match [with my children], it has been really terrible... the Internet was very very very slow and it keeps skipping different parts of the match. So I wasn't able to watch the match at all, I was so disappointed."

– Participant E

Income and social protection

Welfare state digital by default → **Access to support and income reduced** →

Online applications & welfare rights → **Benefit entitlements & income maximised** →

The UK Government's digital approach to service delivery means that access to welfare benefits and other social protection is largely dependent on being able to make online applications, manage communication with government agencies through digital methods, and receive electronic payments.
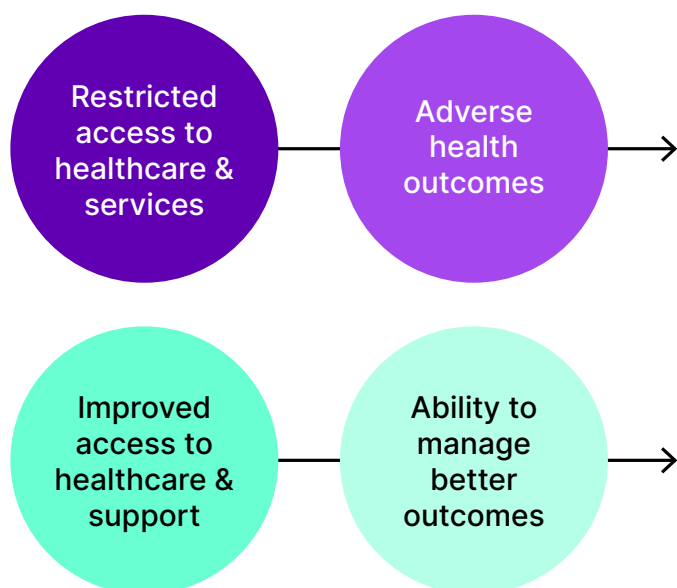
Having digital access also enables people to access welfare rights advice and find other support to help maximise household income. In addition, as described above, access to employment is largely dependent on Internet access. As a result of this dependency, digital inclusion can influence the types of jobs you have access to and, therefore, a person's overall income and earnings potential.[27]

One individual in the diary study reported difficulties using an online calculator they needed to access as part of claiming benefits:

"I had a bit of difficulty, I was trying to do the Better Off calculation that the Job Centre suggested, but everytime we went through the website crashed, but got it done in the end."

– Participant B

Access to affordable health services of decent quality

Restricted access to healthcare & services → Adverse health outcomes →

Improved access to healthcare & support → Ability to manage better outcomes →

Shifts toward digital service delivery, expanded due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, have meant that health services are increasingly digitised. Healthcare providers use digital patient portals more frequently, and if a patient is digitally excluded, it might be more difficult for them to access and monitor their online health records, and limit their ability to communicate online with their doctors.

The inability to communicate online can lead to adverse health outcomes. Digital access can improve communication between a patient and their healthcare providers or other caregivers and, for people with complex health needs, can improve communications between different caregivers to develop appropriate treatment plans. The ability to communicate with and between different care providers can improve intermediate and clinical health outcomes.[28]

The importance of digital access to securing healthcare is highlighted by one of the diary study participants:

"Trying to book an appointment [with] the GP but couldn't access it online. I had to make a call, which was really frustrating. Had to wait on hold for over 30 minutes. The GP called back and arranged a call, which helped."

– Participant E

Food insecurity

No online shopping or price comparison → Good food too expensive →

Online shopping, price comparison → Easy access to affordable, good food →

Digital exclusion can heighten the risk of food insecurity by limiting a person's access to online food shopping or doing online price comparisons between different shops, which can lead to people being priced out of good quality food. As big shops price gouge and then give cheaper prices to loyalty members, people who are unable to sign up to the digital loyalty membership schemes are then forced to pay higher prices for food.

For a person who lives in an area with very limited local food shops, being able to access the Internet means they can access food delivery or find information about other opportunities to access better food options. Digital access can also mean more opportunities to find information about local food provision, food banks, and other food support options such as NHS Health Start.[29]

While shopping, cooking and eating might seem simple, everyday activities, being able to use the Internet to improve access to food and diversify what we eat is part of living a full life:
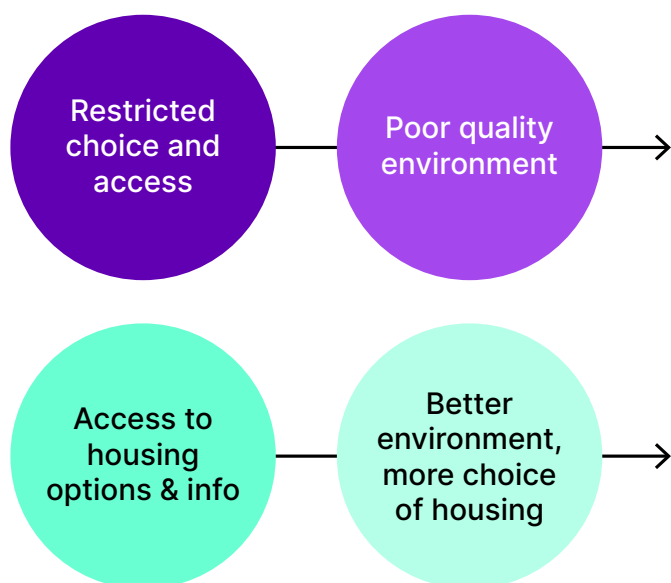
> *"I used the Internet today to go on Google Maps and find a good, local restaurant."*
>
> – Son of Participant F

> *"Today I used the Internet to apply for jobs, pay my council tax online, and to buy some groceries online, and check my emails."*
>
> – Participant F

Housing, basic amenities, and the environment

As mentioned above, the shift towards digital service delivery has meant that applications to and management of welfare benefits are increasingly done online, including support for housing costs. A lack of digital access can also restrict choice and access to housing options, which can limit the ability to secure housing or can lead to poor quality living environments. This particularly impacts people who are homeless, people who are living in unstable accommodations, people living in housing not recognised by the post office, people living in poverty, and people living in social housing.

Being digitally included can increase access to housing options and information, which can lead to more choice of housing and an overall better quality living environment.[30]

Diary study participants reported problems in accessing housing options platforms due to their unreliable Internet connections:

"Having trouble to go on [the council] website when I was trying to do my bidding, Internet problems. Lately been happening a lot, there's so much trouble every time searching for things — it's a very big struggle. Internet is playing up quite a lot lately."

– Participant B

"I have to use my place of work's wifi for anything important, sending a message to my housing officer was the main one this week. It makes me feel bad, because it would take 5 minutes at home and I'd like to do it there, but [I] have to go into work unnecessarily and waste my time."

– Participant C

2.2 Visualising Digital Inclusion

The individual social determinants do not exist in isolation. Every person's life is affected by each determinant in different ways at different times, and they interact with each other, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively.

In the same way that the social determinants of health are interconnected and their impacts compound and exacerbate each other, the negative impacts of digital exclusion on any one social determinant are compounded and exacerbated by negative impacts of digital exclusion on another social determinant. These negative outcomes risk harming a person's quality of life and overall health. **Experiencing digital exclusion puts people at greater risk of experiencing poorer health and wellbeing outcomes as a direct result of that exclusion.**

The first visualisation provides an illustration of how digital exclusion acts on the social determinants. The outer layer gives examples of the direct implications of being digitally excluded; for example, being excluded makes it harder to look for jobs online, fill in applications, and prepare for and participate in interviews. The inner layer extrapolates the immediate impacts; if exclusion is experienced regularly and for prolonged periods, the negative impacts stack up and cause long-lasting harm to health and wellbeing.

Figure 1: The negative impacts of digital inclusion on social determinants of health
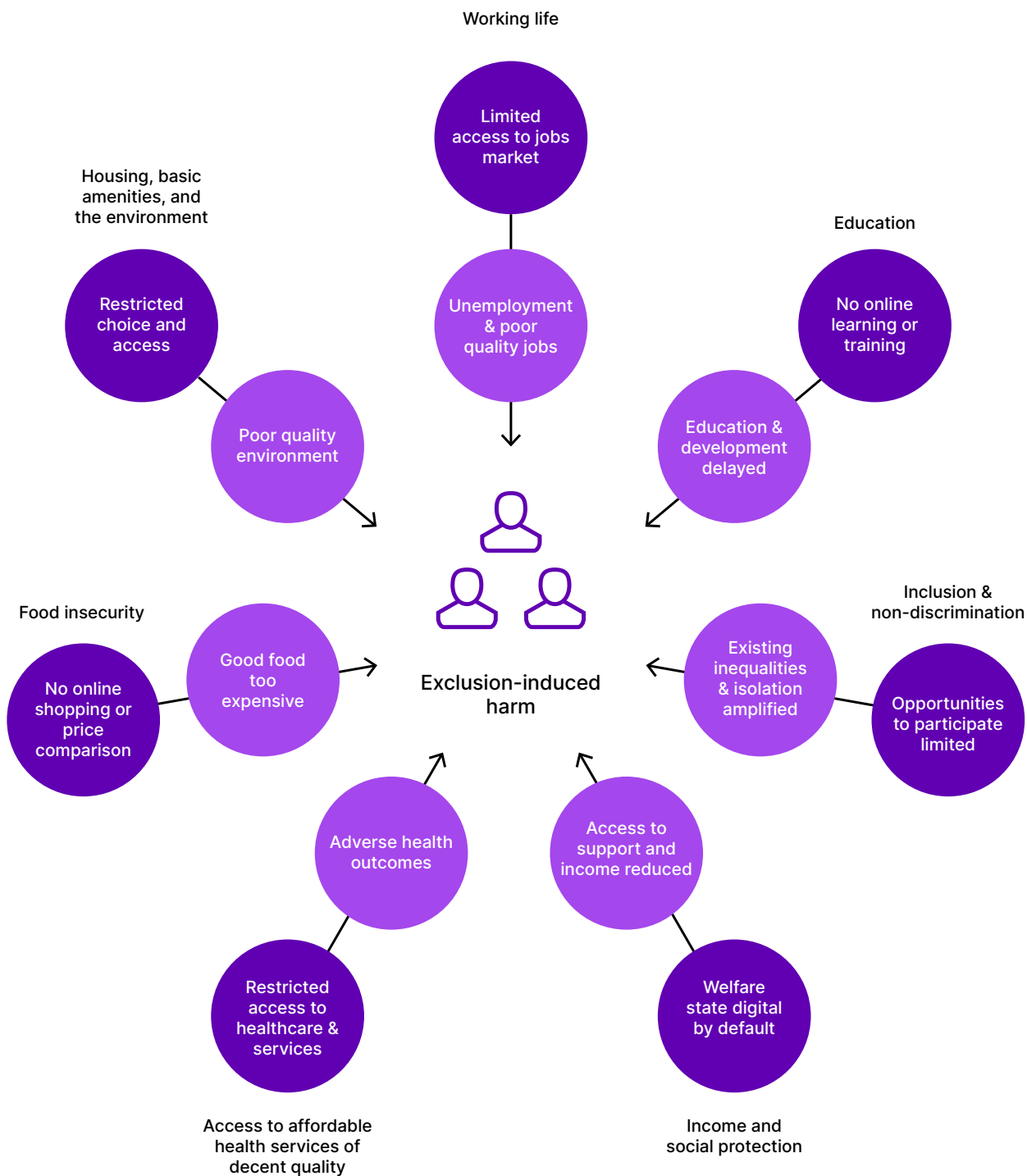
Conversely, consistent, good quality, reliable, and affordable access to the Internet supports better outcomes across the social determinants of health. From education to housing, **the benefits of digital access are clear, and amplify each other.**

Figure 2: The positive impacts of digital inclusion on social determinants of health
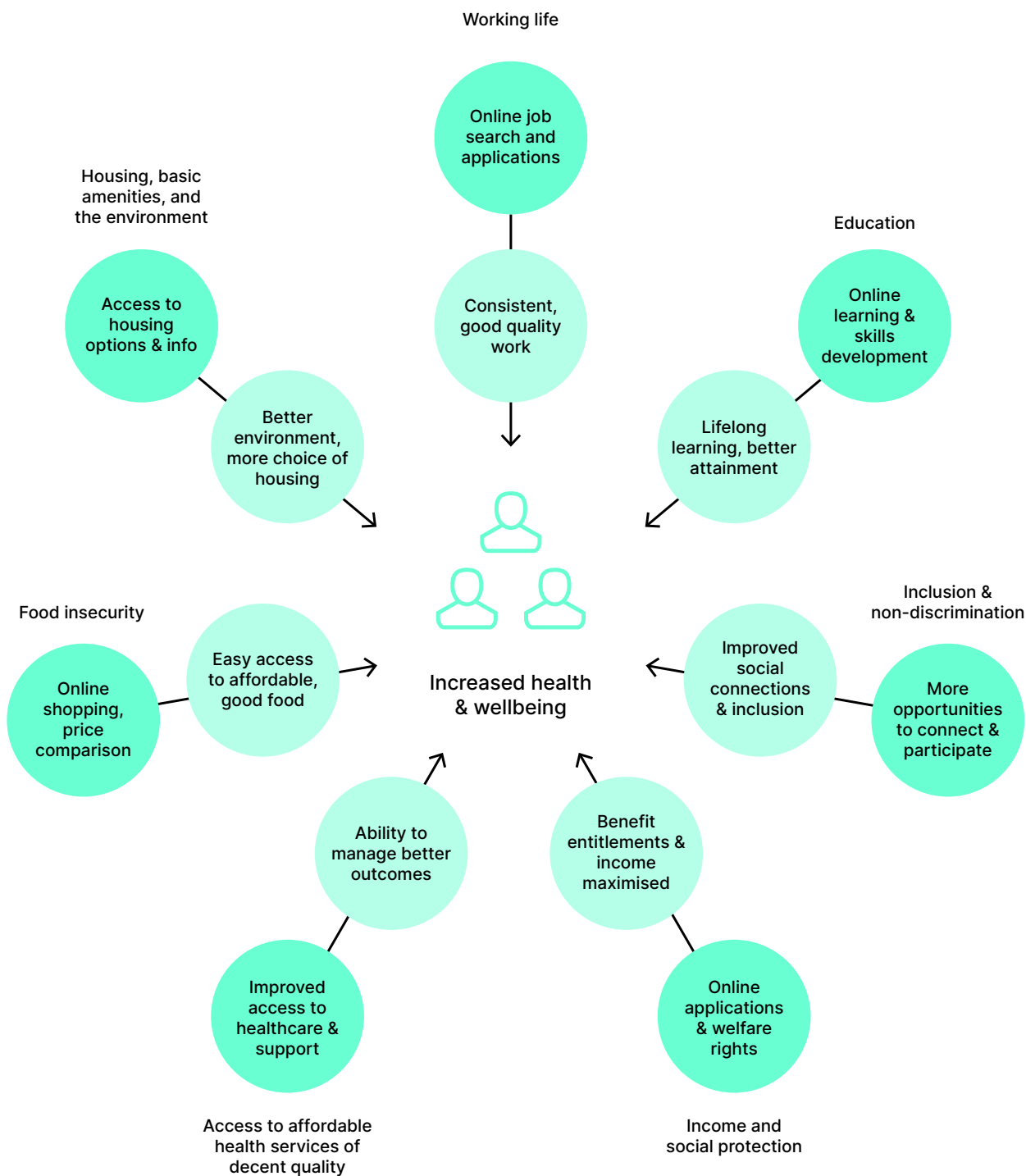
2.3 The Social Model of Digital Inclusion

Digital exclusion and inclusion have pervasive, interconnected, and complex impacts on everyday life. Each of the social determinants of health simultaneously impact and are impacted by digital exclusion and digital inclusion: they are all interconnected, and their impacts compound and exacerbate each other. Depending on the impacts, this can lead to negative or positive outcomes on a person's quality of life and overall health.

Our analysis builds on **health justice** frameworks, which identify the social and economic contexts in which households and communities live as directly affecting health and wellbeing, both in terms of the potential negative impacts and as a way to imagine and implement more holistic health reforms.[31]

Similarly, the **Social Model of Disability** recognises that people are "disabled by barriers in society, not by [their] impairment or difference. If modern life was set up in a way that was accessible for Disabled people, then [they] would not be excluded or restricted".[32]

The health justice and disability justice frameworks emphasise the social aspects of health and disability respectively. They suggest that responsibility for ill health or disability does not lie solely with the individual, but it is **created and shaped by the contexts in which we live.**

Inspired by the structural analysis that these framings offer, **we suggest a Social Model of Digital Inclusion.** Through this framework we can understand that digital exclusion is a "product of the distribution of power in society";[33] it happens on a structural level, through decisions that have societal, community, and individual impacts. Thus, digital inclusion requires a redistribution of power in society and radically different decisions at the structural level.

By reframing digital inclusion towards a social model, it shifts from being an individual responsibility where the onus is placed on individuals to include themselves, to a **societal responsibility that requires systemic solutions.** Organisations, businesses, and governments must take into consideration the need for a holistic, structural approach to digital inclusion to ensure all those who want to be are digitally included.

Part Three: Digital Inclusion by Design

To tackle **digital exclusion**, organisations, businesses, and governments must become **digitally inclusive by design.** This entails moving beyond the current policy approach of "sticking plasters"[34] and becoming radically inclusive, to enable everyone to participate in a better digital society.

By 2030, digital access should be **affordable, accessible, and easy-to-use** for all adults and households across the UK. This process can begin by:

1. Removing economic barriers to inclusion through legislation

Economic barriers are entrenched by market dynamics. Removing these barriers is one of the things only government can do, and we recommend putting in place legislation that **ensures good quality, secure devices and connectivity are affordable** and the Minimum Digital Living Standards are accessible to all.

Broadband should be designated as an **essential utility**, and an "Essential Utilities Guarantee" implemented. This would ensure that all essential utilities including broadband would be required to provide mandatory social tariff provision across all providers, and consumers would benefit from upgraded Universal Service Obligations, fairer pricing, and clear regulatory powers.

Via a strengthened and updated **Universal Service Obligation (USO)**, consumers would have access to much stronger price guarantees. We recommend the USO be updated to set a maximum price of £30/ month for minimum speeds of 100Mb per second, which is the minimum speed designated in the U.S. The USO should also remove the cost to a household to have an affordable connection installed, rather than a provider being able to pass on the cost — which can run to thousands of pounds — to the household, as is now the case. Instead, this

cost should be borne by providers, and to spread the responsibility for this, more large providers should be designated as universal service operators. **Access to affordable, good quality broadband, as stated by the USO, must be a right that is easy and affordable for consumers to implement,** not one that exists in legislation only. In addition, in-contract price rises and above inflation price rises should be banned.

Social tariffs should be reviewed and revised. The maximum price of a social tariff should be set at a price that reflects no greater percentage of the lowest income households' disposable income than that of the median household, rather than a much higher percentage as is now the case.[35] There should also be less price variation between different social tariffs; currently, they range from under £15/ month to £25/ month. Social tariffs should not be profit-making for providers; they should never cost more than the genuine cost price of delivery. The potential for limited government subsidy towards the cost of social tariffs should be explored through a reformed Building Digital UK, which would have responsibility for not just gigabit and rural provision but for working with Ofcom to make the USO a meaningful and exercisable right.

Building on the **Get Help with Technology** initiative, which was set up in the pandemic to ensure all children had access to a device for online learning, an **entitlement to a device for everyone of school age for educational purposes** should be introduced. Administered by the Department for Education and delivered via schools (or local authorities for alternative provision and home-schooled children), it would provide a route for children and young people to access a device for learning purposes at home and in schools. This could be at least partly funded by funnelling a proportion of existing environmental, social, and governance (ESG) funds from communications providers into a shared pot.

For unemployed adults, an interest free, government backed loan scheme should be set up to enable them to lease or purchase equipment. This could also be made available to lower waged workers through a scheme modelled on **Cycle to Work**, to enable them to spread the cost and pay no interest on the loan.

2. Developing and enforcing an "Inclusive by Design" Service Standard

Existing digital inclusion policies lead to isolated implementation that is disconnected from the problems users actually want to solve. To expand digital inclusion for more people, **an "Inclusive by Design" Service Standard should be introduced.** This standard would build on the Government Digital Service's Service Standard,[36] which is a useful starting point for developing and running successful services. An Inclusive by Design Service Standard should prioritise understanding users' needs and take a comprehensive approach to addressing needs in the round, rather than in separate, isolated pieces. It also means meeting users' needs across a variety of channels, including online and face-to-face, and developing services that are easy-to-use and accessible.

Once developed, policymakers can support service providers to adopt an Inclusive by Design Service Standard by initially allowing public and private providers to voluntarily opt-in to using the Standard, deliver support through a public-private government task force, and provide incentives to do so. To be effective, **an Inclusive by Design Service Standard must also have mechanisms for meaningful redress built in** from the start. This could include the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) adopting responsibility for the standard and ensuring its consistent application. The wider context of technological change and AI adoption means that any future government must commit to significant growth and reform of UK digital regulatory capabilities; just as Ofcom and other members of the Digital Regulatory Cooperation Forum have recently expanded their digital capabilities, investment in the EHRC is essential if the digital society is to grow in a rights-respecting, equitable, and inclusive way.

3. Ensure essential services are accessible for those who are digitally excluded

Essential services are the services necessary for the good health and functioning of a population; they usually refer to services concerning health, housing, education, employment, safety, and rights. The most prevalent existing digital inclusion frameworks attempt to expand digital inclusion at scale by prioritising digital service delivery over phone, face-to-face, or paper service delivery. By over-prioritising digital service delivery, such approaches limit opportunities for users to access services through other channels. Fewer non-digital options to access services means that people who are digitally excluded are at risk of losing access to essential services, and that **people's legitimate preferences for communicating and accessing services in different ways are being overlooked.**

An inclusive by design approach to digital inclusion would ensure the development and maintenance of services across all channels, including digital, face-to-face, paper, and phone. This approach is in line with and builds on the guidelines set out in the Government Digital Service's Service Standard, which specifies that **service designers should provide users with a connected experience across all channels.** Adapting a digitally inclusive by design framework would mean that people who are digitally excluded — for whatever reason that may be — are able to access and experience high quality services.

4. Ensure essential digital services across the public and private sector are easy-to-use

The digital by design approaches to service delivery that are most prevalent today are often not intuitive and can be complicated to use. This can lead to negative user experiences and the **risk that users are not able to access the essential services they need.** Over time, this can result in all kinds of negative outcomes such as poorer health, financial insecurity, or rights not being upheld, as well as decreased trust in the service or in government more generally.

Both public and private essential services should adopt an inclusive by design approach as the governing principle for the development and implementation of digital service delivery. An inclusive by design approach would mean that digital services consider the needs of all existing and potential users, including being **simple, intuitive, and easy-to-use for people at all levels of digital skills.** Implementing this framework would mean that all users are able to have their needs met and problems solved when accessing essential services digitally, and would increase user trust in government.

Conclusion

The importance of digital inclusion to health and wellbeing, in their broadest sense, is clear. The sheer range of tasks, services, and activities that take place online carry an assumption that everyone has affordable, reliable digital access. Digital inclusion supports all aspects of our health and wellbeing, at the individual, community, and national level: it helps us to access healthcare, find better work, connect with our communities, and study and learn. But **current digital inclusion policy and practice is not making sufficient progress;** it is patching up a broken system rather than making systemic change. Millions of households still do not meet a basic level of digital inclusion.

A new, radical approach is needed that recognises the causes of digital exclusion as complex, interconnected, and rooted in society rather than the individual. It should have inclusion baked in, and recognise the importance of looking beyond charitable handouts, increased individual responsibility, or one-off corporate interventions.

To solve digital exclusion, organisations, businesses, and governments must become digitally inclusive by design. By 2030, digital access should be **affordable, accessible, and easy-to-use** for all adults and households across the UK.

This can be achieved by:

- Removing economic barriers to inclusion through legislation that **ensures good quality, secure devices and connectivity are affordable** and the **Minimum Digital Living Standards** are accessible to all

- Developing and enforcing an **Inclusive Service Standard** that:

  ↘ ensures **essential services across the public and private sector are still accessible** for those who are digitally excluded, providing offline alternatives where needed

  ↘ ensures **essential digital services across the public and private sector are easy-to-use** for those with low digital skills and low-levels of digital confidence.

Although the roots of digital exclusion spread far and wide, **the UK has an opportunity to work collectively across sectors and organisations to tackle them,** and to realise the benefits of digital inclusion for the whole of society. There is no need for us to settle for the status quo; a good digital society is possible for everyone.

Notes

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Appendix —
Further Reading

The resources listed below were particularly informative in shaping our analysis of the relationship between digital inclusion and health.

F. Baum, L. Newman, and K. Biedrzycki, **'Vicious Cycles: Digital Technologies and Determinants of Health in Australia',** Health Promotion International 29, no. 2 (1 June 2014): 355	Looks at how social, cultural, and economic capital interact to reinforce and reproduce structural inequities and how this capital shapes their experiences with using digital technologies, creating a cyclical effect that reinforces and reproduces existing inequities.
Hannah Holmes and Gemma Burgess, **'Digital Exclusion and Poverty in the UK: How Structural Inequality Shapes Experiences of Getting Online',** Digital Geography and Society 3 (2022): 100041,	Explores the relationship between digital inclusion and poverty and how experiences of poverty can shape experiences of digital exclusion, ultimately emphasising how offline experiences of inequity influences digital experiences.
Lindsay F. Wiley et al., **'INTRODUCTION: What Is Health Justice?',** Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics 50, no. 4 (2022): 636, emphasis in original.	Introduction to health justice as a powerbuilding and community-oriented framework that repositions health within the a context of social ethic of care.
Parent Zone, **'Digital Poverty: What Still Needs to Happen'** (Parent Zone, June 2021),	Examines the impacts of digital exclusion on families, particularly on young people's experiences, at the height of the pandemic, and makes an argument for the importance of play and experimentation in young people's digital skills development.

Ruqaiijah Yearby, **'The Social Determinants of Health, Health Disparities, and Health Justice'**, Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics 50, no. 4 (2022): 642	Delves into health justice as a community-driven framework to understand the impacts of structural discrimination on health inequities, seek redress, and implement structural change.
Amy Sheon, **'Conference Report: Digital Skills: A Hidden "Super" Social Determinant of Health – IAPHS – Interdisciplinary Association for Population Health Science'**, Interdisciplinary Association for Population Health Science (blog), 2018	A brief overview explaining why digital inclusion is considered a super social determinant of health.
'What Is the Social Model of Disability?', Shape Arts, 1 July 2017	An overview explaining the social model of disability as reframing how disability is understood.

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About Promising Trouble

Promising Trouble is a research studio and a social enterprise, working alongside our sister company Careful Industries. Our mission is to make technology work for 8 billion people, not just 8 billionaires.

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