

Learning from lockdown

12 steps to eliminate digital exclusion



Time to act on digital exclusion

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, the scale of digital exclusion in the UK has been exposed and exacerbated beyond previous understanding. In response, new initiatives have been rapidly developed and delivered. These new initiatives have substantially accelerated progress towards ensuring that those in all corners of the UK have the digital device, internet connectivity and skills to access all of the essential connections that digital provides.

These interventions have been of huge value – but there remains so much more to do. Ofcom research shows that 11% of the UK population still do not have access to the internet at home at all; in addition there are those who do not have the appropriate device, quality of connection or required skills in order to make use of the digital potential.¹ Digital exclusion has existed for many years – the current crisis has simply highlighted the depth and breadth of the challenge and demonstrated why tackling it is so urgent. As restrictions change there is an opportunity to build on all that has been learnt, and set a powerful new ambition to eliminate digital exclusion in the UK – so that a crisis response is never required again.

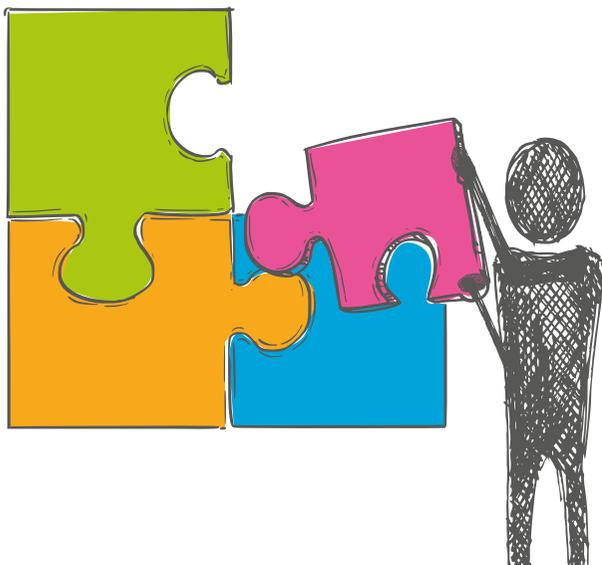


¹ Ofcom Technology Tracker 2020, released 30 April 2020, <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/data/statistics/stats20/QE2>. Do you or does anyone in your household have access to the internet at HOME (via any device, e.g. PC, mobile phone etc)?

12 recommendations for action

1. Commit to digital inclusion strategies

We are calling for the UK government and each of the devolved governments to publish revised digital inclusion strategies, setting out how they will build on what has already been achieved in their jurisdiction. These strategies should build on the interventions deployed prior to and in response to Covid-19. They should set out clear commitments and time horizons for eliminating digital exclusion. Annual updates on progress should be published.



2. Prioritise co-production

The new digital inclusion strategies produced by the UK government and the devolved governments should be co-produced with those who have lived experience of digital exclusion. Strategies must incorporate tailored approaches for meeting the needs of different groups including: children and young people; people who face additional barriers related to disability and lack of accessible content or assistive technology; and those with low literacy or English language skills. These approaches should build on the good practice already established by organisations working with these groups, and be delivered through these organisations wherever possible and appropriate.

3. Collect quality digital data

A systematic review of the available national statistics on digital inclusion should be carried out, to ensure that robust, high quality data is provided regularly across a range of key measures, broken down by jurisdiction and by demographic group.



Recommendations for action

4. Establish a robust baseline

A new Minimum Digital Living Standard should be established to create a deeper, more comprehensive, universally recognised baseline for what it means to be digitally included in the UK. This Standard should be informed by in-depth consultation with the public, including those with lived experience of digital exclusion.

5. Embed across public services

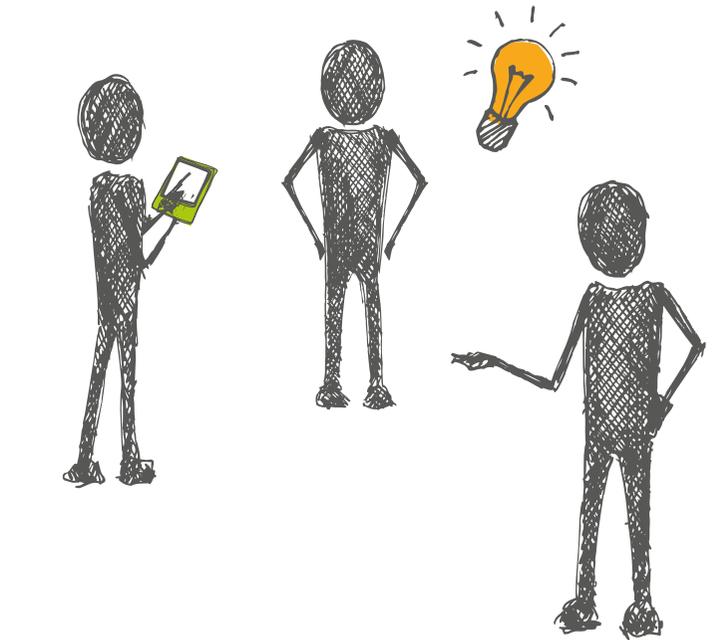
All public services including health, education, energy and social care should build an increased focus on tackling digital inclusion into their work to support individuals and communities, particularly those experiencing disadvantage. Public service providers should assess how this increased focus might support them to achieve their wider public policy goals.

6. Align with anti-poverty efforts

All national and local anti-poverty strategies should include a commitment to improving digital inclusion, and set out interventions to enhance digital inclusion, demonstrating how this will contribute to anti-poverty targets. Ownership of the digital inclusion agenda needs to be shared across government at all levels, while businesses and charities also have vital roles to play.

7. Measure programme impacts

National and large-scale digital inclusion programmes should regularly publish and promote their impact and outcomes data, to support shared learning and contribute to better longitudinal tracking and understanding of progress.



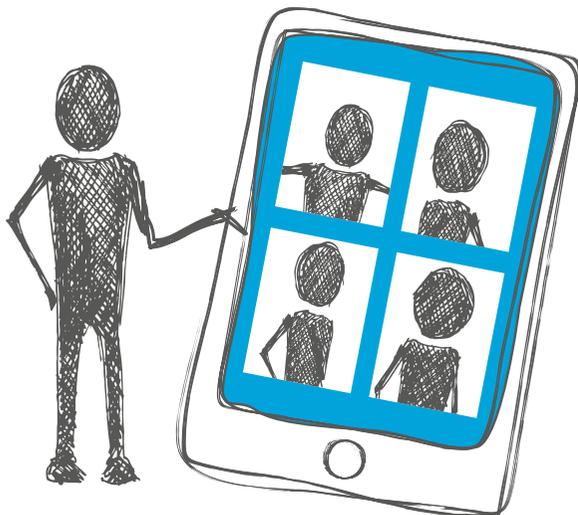
8. Regulate for online harms

The UK government should deliver on its commitment to establish world-leading, effective online harms regulation, based on a duty of care model, backed by an independent regulator. Such an approach would tackle online harms at a system design level, reducing individuals' exposure to harm as well as societal harms while promoting a safer online environment for all users.

Recommendations for action

9. Invest and build capacity

Further support, resources and incentives should be provided for public, charity and community organisations delivering digital inclusion interventions, locally and nationally, to undertake the activities but also to invest in their own digital capabilities. Local networks should be established to ensure joined-up approaches to design and delivery, effective collaboration and best use of community assets.



10. Champion the role of business

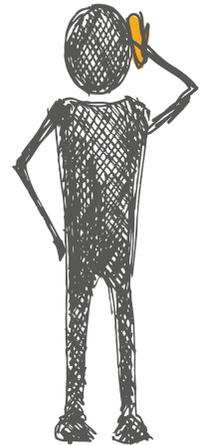
The significant contribution from businesses to donate or refurbish devices for digital inclusion initiatives should be recognised and further encouraged. Businesses in all sectors should also be encouraged to invest in the digital capabilities of their employees, to develop a more skilled and confident workforce.

11. Innovate for inclusion

Governments, technology providers and civil society organisations should continue to work together to explore market innovations that reduce the cost of digital access and enhance protection for those on low incomes. This might include building on initiatives such as data donation, zero-rating, expanded social tariffs and public WiFi; or by establishing home internet as an essential utility and giving vulnerable customers the right to greater protections, similar to the gas and electricity markets.

12. Ensure a public safety-net

Public provision of digital access through libraries, health and welfare services and community organisations should continue to be made available. This will provide a vital digital safety net to those who need it.



These recommendations have been developed by the Carnegie UK Trust following our work on digital inclusion over 10 years, and particularly drawing on learning and reflections from the coronavirus outbreak and lockdown period. Further context is available below, and for our previous reports and digital inclusion blog series, please visit:

carnegieuktrust.org.uk

Why digital exclusion matters

While digital exclusion is a long-standing problem, it has often struggled for attention and resources in recent years in a crowded public policy landscape.

We have a relatively poor comprehension of the impact that digital exclusion has, compared to other aspects of social and economic life. This is partly due to a historic lack of coherent, consistent national statistics on digital access and skills, combined with challenges of linking between this data and other administrative and health data.

However, the current crisis has re-emphasised both our increasing reliance on technology as a society, as communities and as individuals; and the significant disadvantage experienced by those who are not sufficiently digitally connected.

The negative impacts of digital exclusion are felt in all areas of life, from our ability to access work and resulting impacts on income, quality of education, availability of healthcare, costs of goods or services, and even the ability to connect with loved ones during incredibly challenging times.

Digitally excluded individuals risk losing their voice and visibility as government services and democratic engagement are increasingly moved online and digital exclusion impinges on children's rights to education, information and participation.

Building on crisis response

Responses to the Covid-19 crisis have shown what can be done to help overcome deeply entrenched barriers to digital inclusion for some groups.

New initiatives have sprung into action providing devices, connectivity and skills support. The work of many public, voluntary and commercial organisations during this time should be recognised and commended. But interventions are not yet sufficient to meet the scale of the challenge. Only a small proportion of those digitally excluded have been reached, some jurisdictions and geographic areas have responded better than others, and there has often been a reliance on a few very committed individuals.

While many initiatives have been open to learn from one another in a way we have rarely seen before, there has also been duplication of effort with limited time and space for sharing best practice or lessons learned.

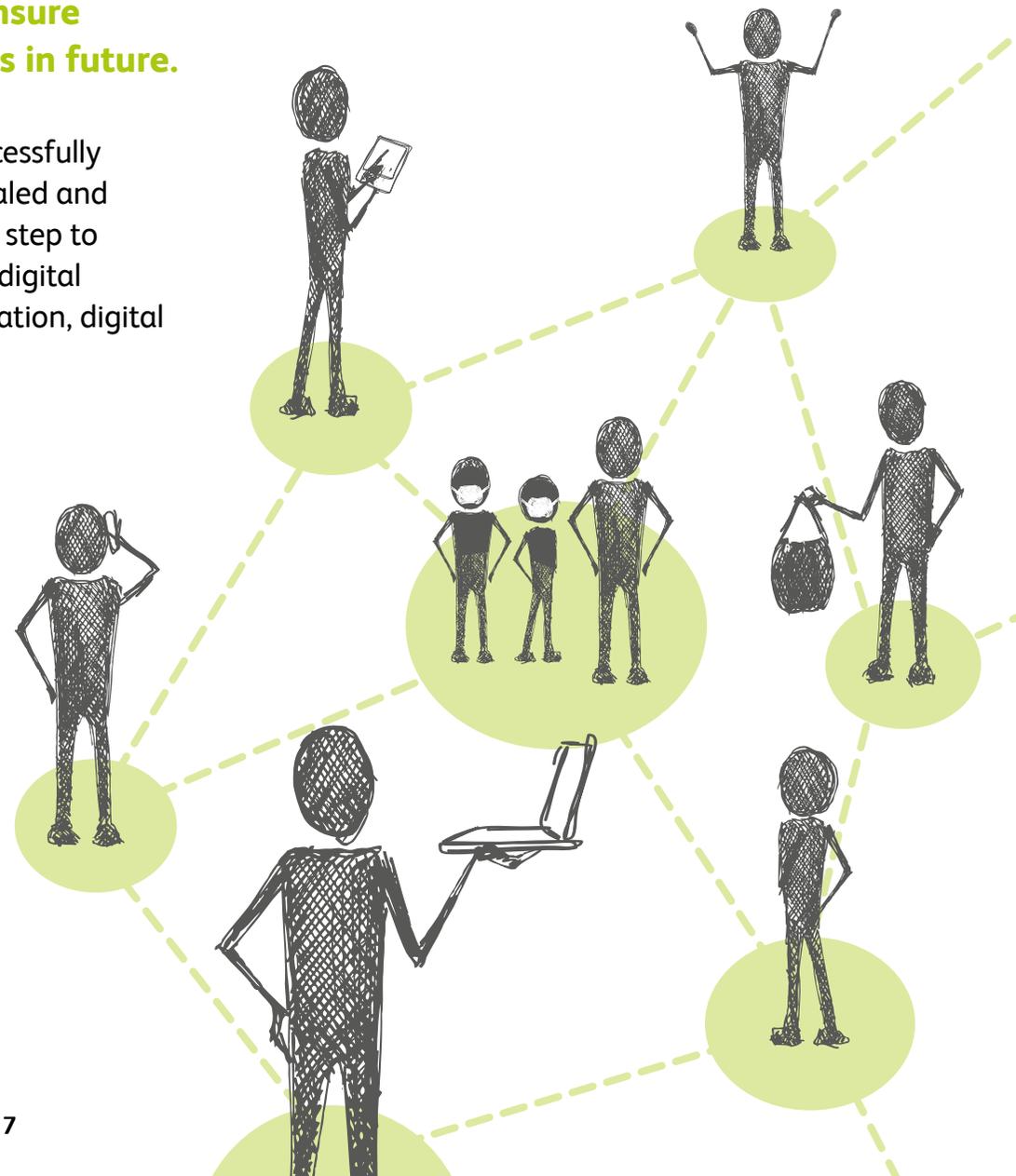
Eradicating digital exclusion

We have to act now to eliminate digital exclusion and ensure that we remove the need to rely on emergency responses in future.

We need to learn from the interventions that have been deployed successfully and put in place resources to enable these to be improved, tailored, scaled and extended to reach all digitally excluded individuals. This is an essential step to ensure that existing inequalities are not further compounded through digital exclusion. Whether you are an adult looking for work or a child in education, digital is now a basic necessity, and must be made available to everyone.

Ownership of the digital inclusion agenda needs to be shared across government at all levels, while businesses and charities also have vital roles to play.

What it means to be truly digitally included will shift over time. We need ambition and recognition that tackling digital exclusion needs sustained intervention, resourcing and attention. The UK is up to this task. Digital inclusion is a crucial element in ensuring a fair and equal society, and should be a central plank in our collective recovery and success in the years ahead.



The Carnegie UK Trust works to improve the lives of people throughout the UK and Ireland, by changing minds through influencing policy, and by changing lives through innovative practice and partnership work. The Carnegie UK Trust was established by Scots-American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie in 1913.

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