Careful Trouble

Digital inclusion: from sticking plasters to sustainable progress

Three quick fixes for the first year of a new government

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February 2024

Recommended citation

Careful Trouble, 2024, Digital inclusion: from sticking plasters to sustainable progress, Three quick fixes for the first year of a new government

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Executive Summary

Being able to get online is one of the foundations for a better, healthier life. But having access to a secure, reliable Internet connection at home, a suitable device and the necessary skills is by no means a given – and it is not cheap.

In 2024 digital inclusion is still informed by a charitable approach that does not address the market and government failures that cause digital exclusion and poverty. Instead, digitally excluded people are expected to rely on equipment that businesses can no longer use and one-off donations of data to perform essential tasks and participate effectively in society.

This approach is not sustainable, and reliance on the current model risks entrenching services that quite simply should not have to exist. Just as foodbanks are a sign of policy failure, the presence of databanks indicates that broadband provision in the UK has gone very wrong. Despite these failures, the policy landscape is piecemeal and lacks any real momentum to bring about more systemic change.

This briefing sets out three quick fixes that a new government can implement to improve digital inclusion outcomes in the UK.

These are:

Fix 1:

Gathering better data:

replacing the outdated ONS definition of digital inclusion with a new, more holistic and up-to-date approach

Fix 2:

A modern, community and person-centric approach to skills:

focusing on outcomes and consistent support, rather than tickboxes and fast delivery

Fix 3:

Declaring Internet access an essential utility:

learning from international partners to protect consumers

These quick fixes will help break down barriers to opportunity and create a solid starting place for a future-facing approach to digital inclusion that will connect and include more people in a healthy, growing economy.

Background

Structural barriers to progress

Over the last decade, digital inclusion policy has been delivered by:

- increasing Internet access (through the roll-out of fibre broadband and 4G/5G)
- ensuring access to devices (through donation schemes)
- digital skills provision (initially through the Department for Education, but increasingly through 'bootcamps' and short courses)

This approach has been beneficial, but it has delivered incremental improvements rather than structural change. For Britain to be a truly inclusive nation in the age of AI, digital inclusion must be a building block of our economy, not a goodwill initiative that relies on voluntary capacity and charitable donations.

Our analysis in Table 1 offers a non-exhaustive summary of how current approaches embed inequality.

Table 1:
Structural barriers to digital inclusion progress

Funding	Government	Language	Market	Effort
Voluntary, charity, and local authority funding stretched.	Roll-out of digital-by-default services (e.g. Universal Credit) without sufficient accompanying support or alternatives.	Confusing terms like 'social tariffs' and 'zero-rating.'	Poor marketing of social tariffs and low take up.	Voluntary time is not free; resources are over-stretched.
Funding growth has not kept pace with inflation.	Government has not stayed true to the aims of its 2014 strategy.	Support is limited to English.	Lack of genuinely affordable products for low income households.	Support services take time to identify and access.
Competitive, short-term pots, leading to unsustainable services.	Cabinet churn has delayed progress (across all areas).	Dependent on voluntary capacity to translate services.	Contributing to short-term, 'sticking plaster' solutions rather than systemic change.	Voluntary and charitable time split between competing priorities.

No direction for a decade: the Government's Digital Inclusion Strategy

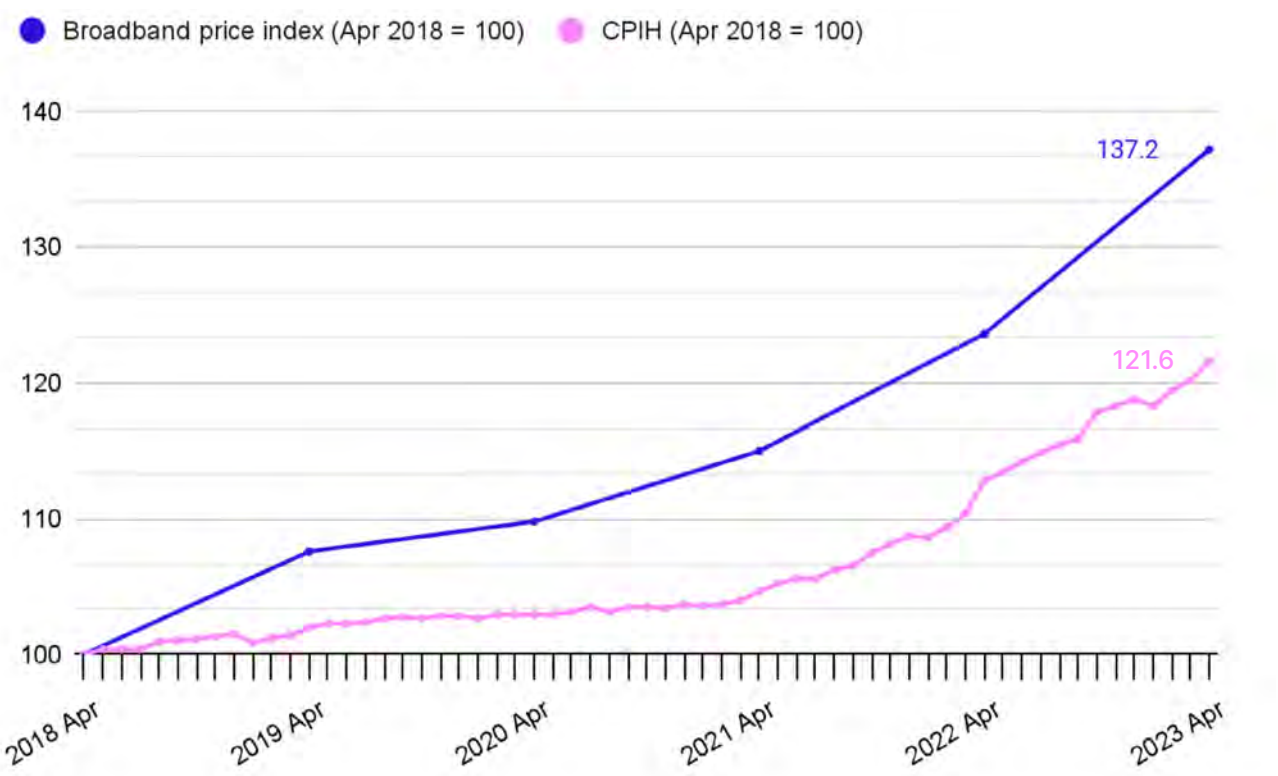
The Government's Digital Inclusion Strategy is a decade old and has not adapted to match changes in technology, the market, and consumer behaviour. Many delivery organisations have closed since 2014 and digital society is more complex, more interwoven with everyday life than could have been anticipated.

Looking ahead, the future impacts of AI and data-driven decision-making will create new challenges, and connecting everyone, everywhere is foundational to building an inclusive digital Britain. To get there, we need to overcome the new obstacles created by Covid and the Cost of Living Crisis; while "basic online skills" were a priority for the Coalition government, affordability and deepening social exclusion are top of the list in 2024.

Affordability of access and connectivity

The poorest households in Britain spend proportionally almost 12 times (11.75) more of their disposable income on broadband than the richest; as such, 7% of households are not online, and a further 9% are struggling to afford mobile phone bills.

Broadband prices versus inflation (CPIH, consumer price index including housing costs) over time



Numerous policy interventions have emerged to tackle increasingly unaffordable Internet access, but few tackle the underlying structural problems. Rather, they act as sticking plaster solutions, dependent on charitable donations from businesses, and often providing time-limited support. Similarly, new industry projects have failed to reach enough households while the market for broadband social tariffs is complicated and confusing, with little consistency between products.[1]

Our research, in partnership with Impact on Urban Health, indicates that digital participation is now a super-social determinant of health. (See Figures 1 and 2 in the Annex). This means it is no longer a nice-to-have but a building block for access to both health and care services and for social and economic participation.

If prevention and self-management is needed to secure the future of the NHS, then it is essential that everyone has access to the good things the Internet makes possible. Without it, there is significant risk of further excluding those who are not and cannot afford to be online.

Job hunting, school work, finding news and information, sourcing affordable goods, social relationships, and being entertained all require Internet access in 2024. For some families, not being able to do homework and pay bills at home might turn into more trips to shopping centres or fast-food restaurants to access free, but insecure, wifi; for many others it will mean missing out altogether.

Whilst free wifi in such places can be useful in the very short term, they are inconvenient, offer limited data allowances, and lack both physical and digital privacy. Those with more secure systems, such as libraries, limit access to one or two hours per day, and increasingly have limited opening hours – cutting people off when they may need ongoing support.

1 Ofcom, "Half of low income families in the dark over social tariffs", April 2023 https://www.ofcom.org.uk/news-centre/2023/half-of-low-income-households-in-dark-over-broadband-social-tariffs

Multiplying exclusion

Being digitally excluded can also push people into other kinds of exclusion – for instance, not having a smartphone to pay for parking, let alone the right kind of app, can limit how often an older person feels confident to leave the house. And in a world where even managing the milkman requires being online, many of the 40% of adults over 75 who have never used the Internet are struggling to complete basic tasks.

People who are digitally excluded also risk not being reflected in essential data sets that inform policy decisions. For instance, at the height of the pandemic, mobility data from Google and Apple was used by governments around the world to determine public footfall – but this critical data set did not reflect the movements of people without smartphones.

Increased reliance on data-driven policymaking and the roll-out of more digitised and automated services risks compounding this exclusion, while also limiting the applicability of universal policymaking.

Three quick fixes

Fix 1: Gathering better data

Fix 2: Modern skills

Fix 3: Internet as an essential utility

Fix 1: Gathering better data

The current ONS definition of "Internet usage" serves as a proxy for measuring levels of digital inclusion. Currently, being digitally included is defined as having accessed the Internet in the past three months.

This definition may have been appropriate in 2004: before broadband access was widespread, and when mobile Internet access was sluggish and cumbersome. It is certainly not appropriate in 2024, when access to digital healthcare services is a core strategic goal for the NHS, and where streaming services have eclipsed traditional TV networks. For those who are truly digitally connected, a more accurate measure might be whether they have been online in the last three hours.

Academic and civil society researchers are developing a compelling, alternative measure of digital access, and what represents a decent standard. The Minimum Digital Living Standard project is seeking to develop a more up-to-date definition that covers skills, access, connectivity, and confidence. The project has been developed by the same team who created the Minimum Income Standard and the Real Living Wage. The research team have co-designed the definition with families across the UK to ensure that they reflect what households believe to be a minimum acceptable level of digital access. This should be adopted by an incoming government and regularly refreshed.

Fix 2: Modern skills

The Digital Skills Framework was last updated in 2019 and is based on behaviours and expectations that were outdated even then. Meanwhile, the Government's digital inclusion strategy will soon celebrate its tenth birthday. The strategy makes reference to organisations which no longer exist, and websites which have since been sold off.

Digital skills should not be thought of as a qualification or training course, but as a means to participate actively in society[2]. Much like how we stop for a chat with a friend in a café before heading out shopping, or take a detour through a park on the way home while we chat to a friend on the phone, our digital 'journeys' are complicated and non-linear. We might spend time on social media whilst also booking a GP appointment, or watch Netflix whilst doing our banking online. To claim benefits we need an email address, and to get one we probably also need a smartphone. As such, the goals and methods for how we interacted with the internet in 2014 are not the same as those that will emerge in 2024.

2 Kira Allmann and Grant Blank, 'Rethinking Digital Skills in the Era of Compulsory Computing: Methods, Measurement, Policy and Theory', Information, Communication & Society 24, no. 5 (4 April 2021): 637, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1874475

Instead of a universal checklist of skills, a new government should focus on ensuring everyone can achieve in ways that work for them. This also means taking responsibility for real-world alternatives where necessary and simplifying digital routes to essential services, so that everyone has access to banking, education, and healthcare, whether or not they choose to do so online.

Fix 3: Internet as an essential utility

With the phase-out of copper services, by 2025 even landline telephone calls will be conducted over the internet. Communication access is critical – particularly during emergencies and disasters, which are increasing in severity due to climate change, and which often impact access to the Internet. Internet access must be recognised as an essential utility to ensure nobody is cut off.

Our medium-term recommendation is that a new government should focus on policies that address market failures in the broadband and mobile markets. However, this must not come at the expense of short-term change. A useful first step would be to establish a benchmark and common definition of a "social tariff" and to work with civil society to ensure these products are easy to access and understand.

However, social tariffs only offer incremental improvement. If Internet access is a precondition of managing one's healthcare and maintaining social and economic participation, then it should be reclassified as an essential utility. Indeed, the Government Office for Science has recommended that internet access should be an essential utility to improve health outcomes.

At present, being statutorily designated as a utility, like electricity, provides some protections for consumers, such as from disconnection, compared to a non-utility service such as broadband. It does not automatically lead to protection from price rises – a situation we have sadly seen emerge during the cost-of-living and energy crises. But it does put consumer protection on a stronger footing, and could support a broadband market that better meets the needs of lower income households.

Under a new government, we recommend implementing an 'Essential Utilities Guarantee.' This would ensure that all essential utilities, including broadband, would be required to provide:

- Mandatory social tariff provision across all providers;
- Upgraded Universal Service Obligations;[3]
- Fairer pricing (e.g. scrapping mid-term price hikes);
- Clear regulatory powers.

3 "The broadband Universal Service Obligation (USO) was launched in March 2020 and provides premises with the legal right to request a decent broadband service of at least 10 Megabits per second download and 1 Megabits per second upload subject to meeting certain eligibility criteria." (DSIT, 2023) The USO does not, however, ensure that everyone has access to affordable broadband, with the current maximum price threshold for a 10 Mbps service exceeding £50 per month. Universal Service Obligations also exist for the postal service, whilst similar provision obligations exist for energy and water.

Some of these provisions already exist, but are not yet codified. Formalising these positions will improve protections for consumers, and help to reduce digital exclusion. A similar approach is being taken in the US, where the FCC has recently set out its intention to classify broadband access as an essential telecommunications service.

However, it is important to highlight that, while Internet access should be recognised as an essential utility, people should still be able to choose to opt out. Many people will always feel more comfortable and confident interacting with services, such as banking, in person. The next government should ensure that everyone has choice, and that easy access to services is maintained, regardless of whether that access is digital or physical.

Annex

Fig. 1: Showing the negative impacts of digital exclusion

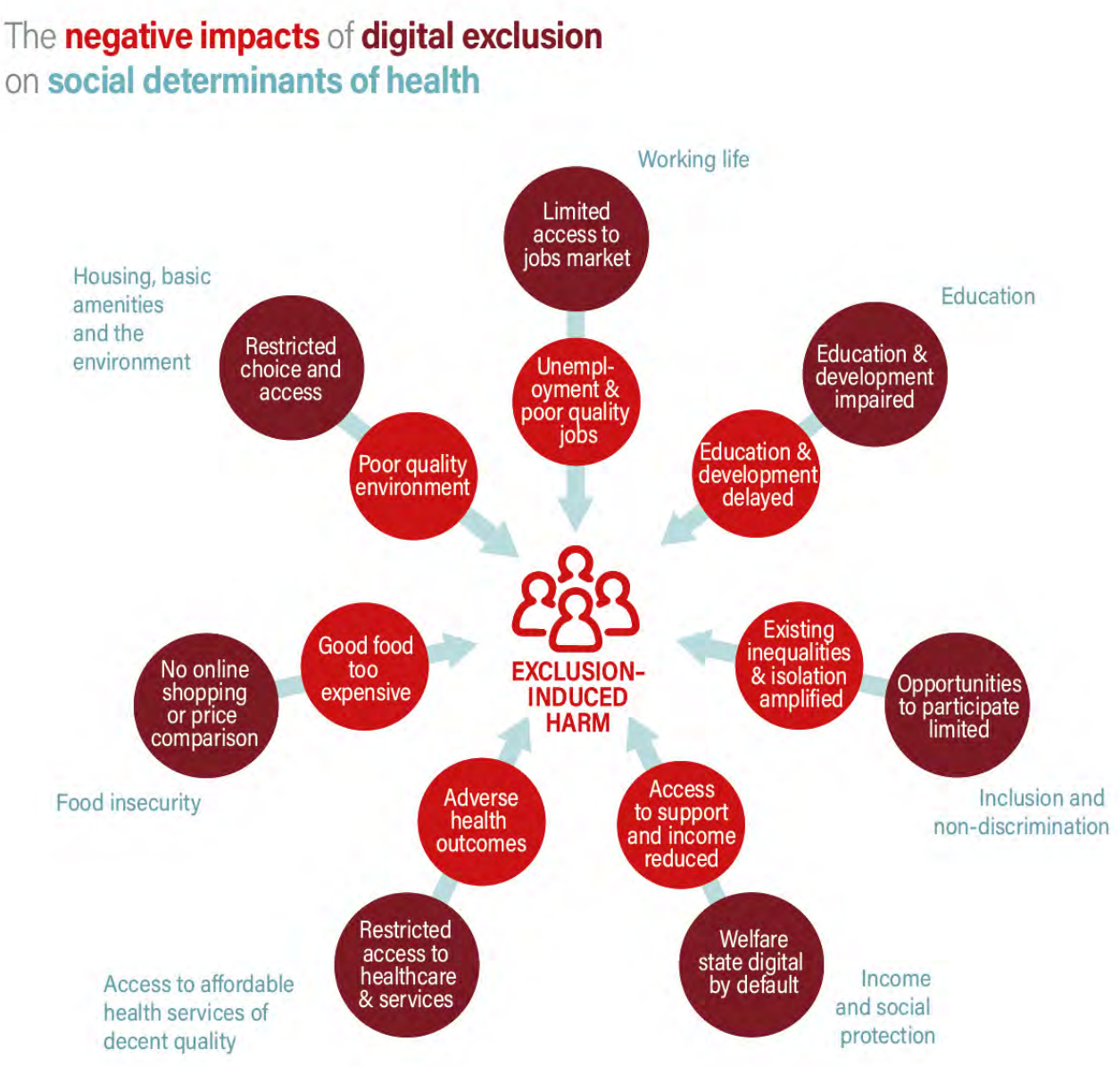
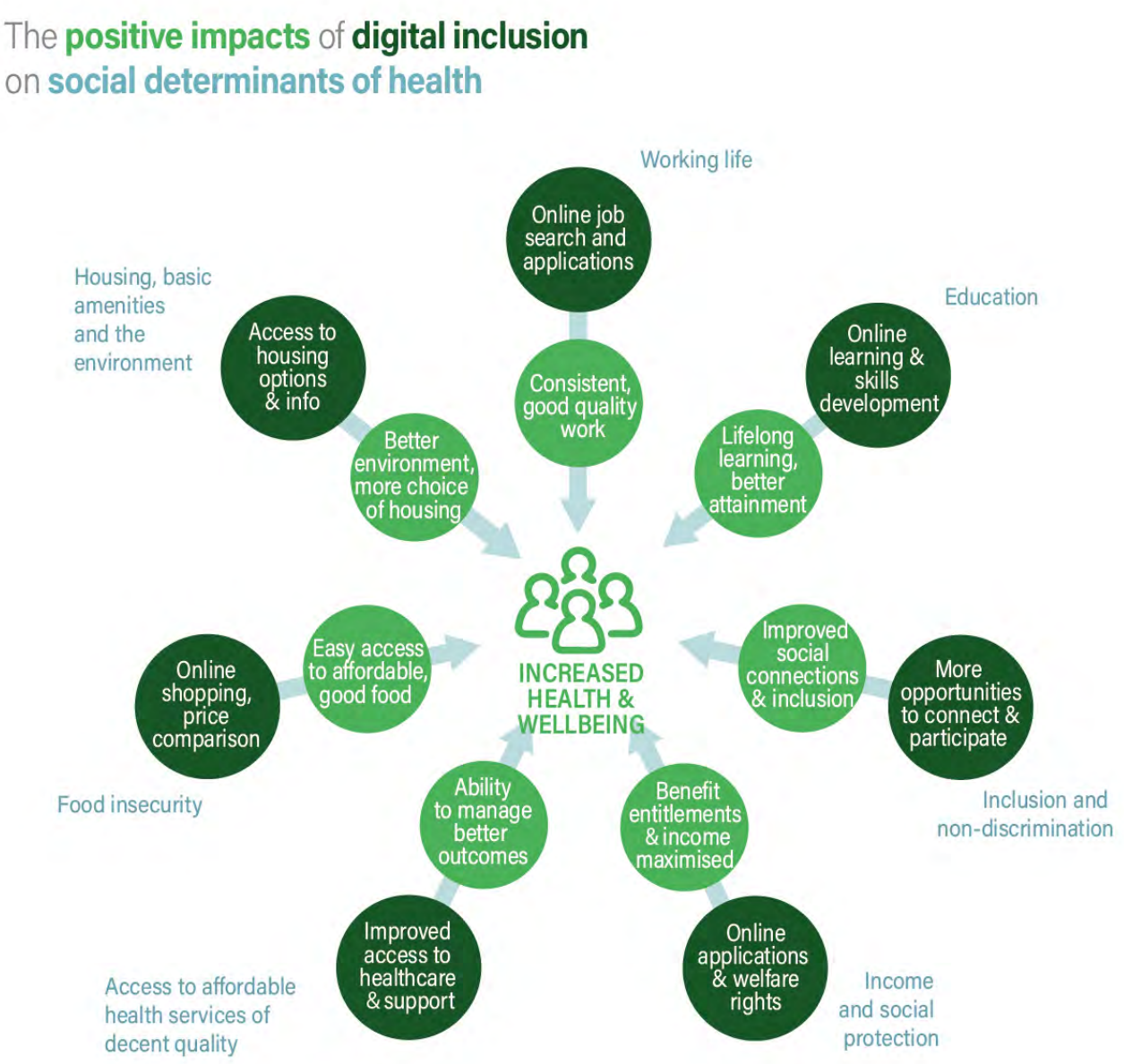


Fig. 2: Showing the positive impacts of digital inclusion



Further information

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About Careful Trouble

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