

Briefing: Digital exclusion and poverty: how local government around the world are tackling the challenge

Published: 13 August, 2024

Author: Kerry Ferguson, LGIU Associate

Location(s): Global

Topics: Communities and society, Technology, Welfare and equalities

Summary

Digital exclusion means a lack of access, capability or confidence needed to engage with devices or digital services that help people participate in society. The evidence shows that digital exclusion intersects with – and can exacerbate – other forms of inequality and disadvantage. As digital technology increasingly shapes many facets of everyday life, those without access to digital devices or lacking essential digital skills face exclusion from critical services and opportunities.

To tackle this, state, regional and local governments are implementing initiatives to bridge the digital divide, with the aim of empowering their residents with the tools and skills needed to grasp the opportunities that digital technologies bring.

This briefing discusses digital exclusion and its relationship with wider socio-economic poverty. It highlights innovative examples of how local governments are

[Members only briefing from https://lgiu.org](https://lgiu.org)

tackling digital exclusion around the world and points to key lessons for those in local government who are seeking to achieve digital inclusion. It is aimed at councillors and officers working on a wide range of areas including digital transformation, skills and employment, economic development/regeneration, poverty and social exclusion.

Briefing in full

Context

The Covid-19 pandemic saw a step-change in the advancement of digital technology and its possibilities as businesses, public services and citizens responded to lockdowns. At the same time, the experience of the pandemic laid bare the digital divide between those who have access to and are competent users of digital technology, and those who are not. Globally, the pandemic highlighted disparities both between and within countries.

According to a [Pew Research Centre study](#), while internet use is nearly ubiquitous in many countries, not everyone is online. Divides still exist in technology usage both within and between different people in advanced economies and emerging economies. Most adults in the 27 countries surveyed by Pew Research Centre own smartphones and use social media. Internet usage ranges from 99% in South Korea (the highest) to 95% in the USA, to 93% in the UK to 56% in India (the lowest). There are divides within countries on internet use, smartphone ownership and social media use based on demographic factors such as age, education and income. The divide between the digital 'have' and 'have nots' is wider in emerging economies than in advanced economies. In nearly all the countries surveyed, younger people (18-39 year-olds) and those with more education and higher incomes are more likely to be online, own a smartphone and use social media than older, less educated and lower income people.

The nature of digital exclusion

There are three types of digital exclusion:

- Access and coverage, including devices and connectivity
- Usage and skills
- Outcomes – the ability to realise the benefits of digital technology

This three-fold distinction is useful because in many countries, there has been significant public investment in digital infrastructure, but a sizeable minority of

people are still offline even where infrastructure is in place. Affordability is a key barrier. For example, [Rockefeller Institute of Government](#) report that, amongst American households who do not have broadband despite it being available in their area, around 50% do not subscribe because they cannot afford it. Meanwhile, the [Australian Digital Inclusion Index](#) found that 14% of Australians would need to pay more than 10% of their household income to obtain quality, reliable connectivity. Other obstacles include lack of awareness of the benefits of digital services, unfamiliarity with digital devices, and insufficient digital skills/competency. Cyber safety concerns are a barrier for some people; this is a well-founded concern as people with limited digital skills and confidence are more likely to fall victim to scams.

Issues caused by poverty-related digital exclusion

Digital disadvantage is linked to other forms of socio-economic disadvantage. Digital exclusion is concentrated in vulnerable groups and tends to compound existing inequalities related to gender, race, age and language. Furthermore, social exclusion and economic disadvantage are strong determinants of digital disengagement. Poverty can lead to digital exclusion, for example, if people are unable to afford devices or broadband connections. Meanwhile, digital exclusion can contribute to poverty through reduced educational attainment, limited job opportunities, worse access to public services and the 'poverty premium', which often sees households paying more for products and services if they cannot access them online.

Working or learning from home, accessing financial services, health services, participating in court proceedings and maintaining social connection all require reliable phone and internet access. Those who are unable to use digital technology are effectively disempowered from public services and businesses that use a predominantly online self-service model. People who are offline may find it harder to claim rights and entitlements such as welfare benefits. In addition, they are more likely to be socially isolated.

Why local government has a critical role to play

Many local and state/provincial governments around the globe have programmes to provide affordable access to digital technology and digital skills training for low-income or other socially excluded communities.

Local governments are well-placed to tackle digital divides, because they:

- Are closer to residents and have a better understanding of their specific needs, challenges and local context; this means they can tailor digital inclusion

initiatives effectively.

- Have detailed knowledge of local demographics, including groups that are disproportionately digitally excluded (such as the elderly, low-income families and rural residents). This helps in targeting interventions.
- Often have established relationships with the voluntary sector, non-profit organisations and local businesses; they can convene partnerships and collaborations to address digital exclusion.
- Control or have influence over public assets such as libraries, community centres and schools, which can provide internet access, training and digital devices to those in need.
- Can allocate funding and resources for digital inclusion programmes; they can also influence local policies to support access to digital services.
- Can typically respond more quickly and flexibly to the needs of their communities than national governments.
- Can coordinate horizontally (linking up digital inclusion activities across an area) and vertically (linking local communities with state/regional programmes).
- Have a track record of engaging with residents through town hall meetings, surveys and public forums, so they can ensure the voices of digitally excluded people are considered in policy making.
- Can integrate digital inclusion efforts with other local services, such as healthcare and education, creating an holistic approach to tackling exclusion.

The most common types of digital inclusion initiatives in which local governments are involved are:

- Capacity building including working with local/community organisations, building partnerships and coordinating responses.
- Digital navigator programmes providing individualised, ongoing support.
- Digital skills training for target populations either in the classroom or remotely.
- Device distribution schemes, often refurbishing or reusing pre-owned devices.
- Infrastructure improvements such as free public Wi-Fi.
- Affordability initiatives for low-income populations, including help with internet service bills or low-cost tariffs, often working with internet service providers.

Case studies

Denver, USA

The City of Denver launched its [Digital Equity Plan 2023-26](#) last year to address the lack of digital connectivity, resources and education that continues to be a

barrier for many of Denver's most vulnerable residents. The plan's starting point is that digital connectivity is essential in modern life and has a strong emphasis on partnership working and collaboration across the city. One strand is the digital navigator scheme run by Denver Library Service. One digital navigator works out of the mobile library and three more work in neighbourhood libraries. They work with communities who are disconnected, typically in north and west Denver where there are many low-income households, people of colour, older people and the immigrant/refugee communities. The library service provides appointments for ongoing support from a digital navigator across nine of its libraries in the priority neighbourhoods. The scheme provides individuals with support with connectivity, devices and skills.

Further examples of local US digital inclusion projects are included in this manual for [**State Digital Equity Implementation**](#) from the National Digital Inclusion Alliance.

Leipzig, Germany

Leipzig has created a [**Digital Agenda**](#) to put people and their needs at the centre of digital transformation. The plan has six fields of action:

- Developing and managing the city sustainably with data.
- Network expansion (including 5G, broadband and WiFi).
- Offering digital services while remaining personally accessible.
- Digitalisation of the economy and developing Leipzig as a tech location
- Shaping democracy and strengthening citizens' participation through digital channels ranging from submitting petitions to participating in city council meetings live online.
- Promoting digital media education and digital infrastructure in schools.

The city supports a volunteer association that distributes donated hardware. Since 2020, they have distributed over 3000 devices. The city partners with public bodies, academic institutions and civil society organisations to equip individuals with the digital skills they need. In addition, Leipzig's Digital City Unit collaborates with business owners and other organisations to establish WiFi clusters around the city.

More examples of digital inclusion in European cities are included in this Eurocities [**publication**](#).

Queensland, Australia

Queensland's [**Deadly Digital Communities**](#) programme is an initiative of the State Library of Queensland and telecommunications company Telstra, in partnership with

[**Members only briefing from https://lgiu.org**](https://lgiu.org)

local governments through their Indigenous Knowledge Centres and public library services. Deadly Digital is a community-based digital technology skills training programme for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities across Queensland, with the objective of opening up opportunities through digital skills.

The programme takes a 'whole-of-community' approach where generations come together to share culture, knowledge and learn digital skills in a strengths-based way. The programme's content is tailored to the specific communities. Key skills taught include using email and social media to stay connected; accessing government services online; and utilising technology to record oral histories and significant cultural events. The programme demonstrates the value of co-design with communities, respect for different learning styles and using local partnerships.

This [paper](#) from the Australian Federal Government contains further examples of digital inclusion projects from across Australia.

Leeds, UK

The [100% Digital Leeds](#) team within the city council strengthen the digital inclusion infrastructure across the city. They use inclusive growth principles to build digital inclusion capacity and confidence within organisations across sectors.

Some of the achievements over the last 12 months include:

- £817,355 funding secured for third sector organisations from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, National Lottery, Leeds Digital Inclusion Fund, Awards for All, West Yorkshire Combined Authority and others.
- 2451 subscribers to the 100% Digital Leeds Newsletter.
- 1800 people attending 100% Digital Leeds events.
- 519 staff from the council, third sector, health and care and the private sector attending Digital Inclusion Awareness workshops.
- 247 teams, services and organisations engaged across all sectors.

The 100% Digital Leeds team has secured over £3m of external funding over the last three years. Almost all has gone to community organisations to increase their capacity to deliver digital inclusion activities. A key feature of the 100% Digital Leeds model is to support third sector organisations to appoint digital inclusion officers to work with specific communities for example, promoting online safety through Leeds Older People's Forum, improving the functional numeracy of adults through the Multiply scheme, and providing smartphone data and SIMs to people in need.

[Members only briefing from https://lgiu.org](https://lgiu.org)

In the coming year the programme will increase its focus on digital inclusion and digital skills for council staff. This will help the council respond to its financial challenges by developing a more digitally skilled and confident workforce.

Key lessons and insights

The discussion and examples above suggest the following lessons for local/regional policy makers:

- Approaches to digital inclusion can benefit from being embedded in wider strategies to reduce social advantage, rather than an end in themselves. Initiatives to tackle digital poverty need to work alongside other actions to improve the lives of individuals and communities, for instance, widening digital access is one facet of improving access to health services, employment prospects and social interaction.
- Digital inclusion programmes benefit from taking place-based approaches that are tailored to local contexts. The best schemes are also people-centred and grounded in good data and insight into the nature of local digital inclusion gaps.
- Longer-term and less prescriptive funding arrangements can enable delivery partners to provide sustainable support that meets people's specific digital inclusion needs, for example, building cross-sector digital inclusion networks.
- Co-designing initiatives with trusted local organisations and digitally excluded people themselves can boost their success. The most effective digital inclusion programmes tap into individuals' motivations for acquiring digital skills, which will vary from person to person. Their aspirations might be to learn how to share photos and stories with friends and family, to use digital tools in everyday life, to help children with their homework, or to gain skills for a promotion or career change. This will help ensure that programmes are relevant and meaningful for the target population.
- Local assets and resources can play an important role. It is no coincidence that libraries feature in nearly all the case studies as vital places for digital inclusion. The modern public library provides digital services (access to e-books, e-catalogues, databases and digital resources), and supports people to use the digital services of other institutions (health services, e-government portals and banking). Some public libraries have digital skills labs and creative spaces where people can try out the latest technologies such as 3D printers and virtual reality equipment.

Comment

Digital inclusion facilitates access to services that impact positively on health, employment, education, and housing. It also helps address the inequitable situation whereby people who are not online find it more difficult to manage their affairs and pay a poverty premium because they are excluded from the best prices and deals. Being able to access digital services is no longer a luxury but a necessity.

Local governments are well-placed to contribute to the digital inclusion agenda because they have local knowledge and insight on digitally excluded communities; they own or run relevant assets/services such as libraries and adult education programmes; they can convene partnerships and joint working across sectors. By leveraging these resources, local governments can play a crucial role in bridging the digital divide and ensuring that all residents have access to the opportunities provided by the digital world.

At LGIU, we're always looking to showcase the work of local government to inspire others! If you want to share an example of your own local digital inclusion projects and best practice, submit it [here](#).

Related briefings

- [Bridging the digital divide: Wicklow County Council's One-to-One Digital project](#)
- [Digital poverty and rural broadband – Global Local newsletter](#)
- [Digital Poverty in the UK – Evidence Review 2022](#)
- [Minding the gap: the role of councils in tackling digital exclusion](#)
- [Digital infrastructure is key to meeting future housing and care needs](#)
- [Using data to support digital and financial inclusion](#)
- [Digital inclusion – Global Local newsletter](#)
- [Understanding the value of digital transformation for local government](#)
- [Digital skills gap – Learning and Work Institute survey](#)
- [Insights from Scotland: digital progress by local government](#)
- [The Tech Council – Using digital technologies to put citizens first in 2030](#)
- [Small and connected: innovation as the Faroe Islands lead the way with digital services](#)
- [12 steps for digital inclusion](#)