



BRIEFING | 014 | 04 OCTOBER 2021

OFFLINE, NO ONE CAN HEAR YOU SCREAM

Achieving Digital Equality in the 21st Century

digital poverty alliance



60 SECOND SUMMARY

- 1 The last eighteen months has already begun to define all of our online futures, and many of the changes implemented are unlikely to be rolled back. As such, we must work to achieve a future with digital inclusion for all that is adaptable, flexible and meets the needs of all of those who will interact with it.
- 2 We have identified a number of recommendations that need to be explored further and implemented. The recommendations should not be viewed in isolation but sit in a connected network of wider inequalities that digital exclusion can exacerbate, and as such addressing digital inequality should be approached as part of a wider system approach.
- 3 The recommendations for dealing with Digital Inequality broadly fall into five categories: Hearts and Minds, Digital Enablement Accessibility, Backing and Buy-In and finally a holistic approach.
- 4 Underpinning these recommendations is a recognition that there are actions that will be at the micro, meso and macro levels and all need to be implemented and effective to achieve future change.

BACKGROUND

Over a period of weeks in Spring 2020 we all moved. Not only into our own homes but online. Rapidly and at pace appointments with GPs, office meeting, teaching in schools, colleges, and universities, work out classes, socialising with friends, weddings and funerals all moved online. During a workshop (online) whilst researching our [Reimagining the Future of Health and Social Care report](#), one of the attendees (who is a GP) said they had been discussing moving to online and telephone consultations for years and within a week it was done. This rapid move online was impressive and meant that key areas of life were able to continue to function. But inequalities that had existed for years were rapidly exacerbated by this move and huge numbers of people became affected.

Dave Donaghy FRSA highlighted this in his blog [Digital Poverty and Digital Capital](#) in 2020; the challenges of digital poverty are not about solely lacking access but about being fully able to interact with the digital world. In April last year to reduce my mum's potential isolation, my sister and I attempted to get her onto Skype – anyone who has attempted to explain changing a password over the telephone to someone who is not digitally confident will recognise the pain and challenge of these conversations. This is one small (and slightly silly) example but multiply this to people who have no digital access, struggle to pay for ongoing connectivity, only use a tablet or smartphone to check the weather or listen to the radio from overseas, or suddenly are at home with one smartphone and three children who need lessons online. You begin to see the complexity and challenge that a mass move online presented to many. It is important to recognise here that we are talking about digital



inequality with all of its complex facets from the extremes of digital poverty to literacy, connectivity, access and comprehension.

An outcome of our Reimagining the Future of Health and Social Care report was a concern that digital inequality presented a threat to individual wellbeing, this combined with the Digital Poverty and Digital Capital blog, The RSA felt that we needed to look further.

It has become clear that achieving digital equity needs to be approached as a complex issue; merely dishing out donated laptops will not address underlying fundamental issues that are closely connected with wider inequalities. This includes how we think about connectivity; [ONS data from 2020](#) reports that households with under 16's have 100% internet connectivity – but this includes connectivity using mobile data. This difference is an important one, as this highlights the challenges of the last year laid bare – if everything is online mobile data from one phone will not support a whole family's needs.

In partnership with the [Digital Poverty Alliance](#), we held a round table bringing together stakeholders from the UK representing local and national government, education, those in the tech and engineering industries as well as community representatives. We were acutely aware of the irony of this session being held online and the exclusionary nature this created for those who are experiencing digital poverty, it is important that spaces for ongoing conversations are inclusive. The ambition of the round table was to identify key issues that the last year had highlighted and to focus on the steps that need to be taken to achieve digital equity by 2030. Using a [foresighting exercise](#), which enables participants to think of solutions as opposed to only focus on the current challenge, we asked participants to consider a near future where full digital equity had been achieved; from there we asked them to explore what needed to happen to achieve this.

KEY FINDINGS

1. We need to obtain backing and buy-in from local and national government.

To reach a future with digital equity, this can only be achieved individually or even locally with national and strategic action and support. There needs to be a micro, meso, macro approach to ensure all relevant stakeholders support the initiative and are bought in.

Key recommendations to reach this end are:

- The role of national government is key in developing a future-focused strategy that leaves no one behind and is bold in its ambition to achieve digital equity. It is crucial that government develops and implements a strategy for digital equity that is future-focused and meets the needs of our changing population.



- Explore incentives to enable businesses to consistently and effectively donate equipment, creating local closed loop systems which will not only reduce landfill, but enable businesses to develop clear corporate responsibility strategies with their communities. Working in partnership with local communities (including trusted community organisations) to understand their needs and work collaboratively to meet them.

2. Boosting accessibility of digital tools remains a key factor in the digital divide

The challenge for many who experience digital inequity is accessibility, whether this be appropriate equipment, not having fit for purpose broadband in their area, not having access to the necessary amount of broadband, not having the data capacity they require to engage with the online world appropriately or due to disability. Whilst the discussion regarding universal free broadband continues there are some recommendations that can be enacted in the meantime that will still make steps towards a digitally equitable future.

- Incentivise local businesses, community organisations, community hubs and meeting places to provide free and accessible Wi-Fi to local residents. So that people can go somewhere to undertake the activity they need without the worry of time limits and cost.
- As well as easily accessible Wi-Fi, providing advice and support to people to enable them to get online safely.
- Access to online services should be provided in places that people already interact with, such as community centres, libraries, local shopping centres, job centres etc.
- As well as work required offline there is work to be done online, organisations and services should seek to make access as easy and straightforward as possible; exploring options in relation to the need for passwords, log ins, user mechanisms etc. However, it is important that access should be multi-channel and not restricted to solely online.

3. We need to explore the mental and emotional barriers of digital exclusion

As well as the need to address infrastructure and systemic challenges that create digital inequality there is a need to explore individual barriers that may prevent people from engaging with the online world in a useful way.

To improve people's understanding, trust and engagement with the online world, we would recommend the following actions:

- A clear communication campaign (supported by behavioural science), supported by training opportunities, to show the value of getting online for individuals, enabling them to recognise and see the value for them to access the online world. A comparison is enabling people to recognise online access in the same way they view other essential household utilities.



- Apply the same principles as we do to people entering other public spaces by ensuring a set of safety standards, that organisations existing in the space commit to do no harm and that individuals understand the dangers and risks that exist in any public space. The recent government consultation highlights this as a key element.

4. We can advance digital enablement throughout society with appropriate IT skills training

Many everyday services are moving online and inherent in this is the assumption that those in receipt have the knowledge and online access required to move with them. For example, there was significant criticism of the Department of Work and Pensions for making Universal Credit only applicable online. If you have not used basic information technology and engaged with the online world regularly you may struggle to navigate online forms, meetings, and online tools. It is crucial we give everyone the skills to engage with the online world safely and confidently.

The following recommendations will enable a future of safe, useful, and engaged digital equity:

- Integrate digital skills into the education system, predicting citizen need and use will be vital to enabling future generations to understand and engage with the online world in a purposeful way as well as recognise the value for them individually. Embedding digital skills into a dynamic system – that goes beyond teaching specific IT skills – and embeds skills to enable future generations.
- There is also work to be done in relation to lifelong learning with an ever changing digital world and skills and understanding becoming rapidly out of date.
- Design skills training appropriate to need, linking training to specific needs and opportunities is an opportunity to gain population buy-in. This sort of training can be woven through the education system. The Covid Recovery plan or the “levelling up” agenda presents an opportunity to provide resources to skill communities up.

5. We need a holistic approach to digital inequality

Digital inequity doesn't exist in isolation and is closely aligned to other areas of inequality; so those experiencing extreme digital poverty are likely experiencing deprivation in other aspects of their life. It is therefore important to build a response to digital inequality that positions it in the wider landscape of wellbeing inequality – whether that is housing, food, financial or health.

As such we make the following recommendations:

- Undertake research that is able to demonstrate the variety of ways digital inequity is impacting people and with clear data on those impacted with alignment with other areas of inequity they are experiencing.



- Local, regional, and national strategy needs to ensure it takes a holistic approach to addressing digital inequality and is able to respond to demographic variations. Digital inclusion must be considered at the earliest point and not as a reactive afterthought.

NEXT STEPS

To reach a future with digital equity, this can only be achieved individually or even locally with national and strategic action and support. There needs to be a micro, meso, macro approach to ensure all relevant stakeholders support the initiative and are bought in.

Key recommendations to reach this end are:

1. The role of national government is key in developing a future-focused strategy that leaves no one behind and is bold in its ambition to achieve digital equity. It is crucial that government develops and implements a strategy for digital equity that is future-focused and meets the needs of our changing population.
2. Explore incentives to enable businesses to consistently and effectively donate equipment, creating local closed loop systems which will not only reduce landfill, but enable businesses to develop clear corporate responsibility strategies with their communities. Working in partnership with local communities (including trusted community organisations) to understand their needs and work collaboratively to meet them.

If you would like to know about The RSA's work, please contact: Ruth Hannan or Hannah Webster who are leading this work: ruth.hannan@rsa.org.uk or Hannah.webster@rsa.org.uk

If you are interested in supporting digital equity you can find out more at [The Digital Poverty Alliance](#).



We are the RSA. The royal society for arts, manufactures and commerce. We're committed to a future that works for everyone. A future where we can all participate in its creation.

The RSA has been at the forefront of significant social impact for over 260 years. Our proven change process, rigorous research, innovative ideas platforms and diverse global community of over 30,000 problem solvers, deliver solutions for lasting change.

We invite you to be part of this change. Join our community. Together, we'll unite people and ideas to resolve the challenges of our time.

Find out more at thersa.org

Legally, the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce ('RSA') is a Royal Charter Company and registered charity in England and Wales (charity number 212424) and in Scotland (charity number SC037784).
