

Institute for Public Policy Research



ADDRESSING DIGITAL EXCLUSION IN NORTH EAST ENGLAND

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CONTENTS

Introduction	3
1. The complexities of digital exclusion	4
Digital exclusion exists on a sliding scale	4
Defining digital exclusion.....	6
2. What does it look like in the North East?	7
3. The evolving drivers of digital exclusion	10
There are a multitude of reasons why people experience digital exclusion.....	10
Digital exclusion wasn't just an issue during the pandemic.....	11
4. What's being done to address digital exclusion?	13
There is a lack of ownership of the digital inclusion agenda at present which must change	13
We need a better understanding of the scale of the problem	14
5. An emerging strategy for the North East	15
Action area one: Collaboration and integration	15
Action area two: Guidance, support and informal learning opportunities.....	16
Action area three: Minimum standards of access are needed	18
Action area four: A digital safety net to ensure those who are digitally excluded are identified, and that those at risk of digital exclusion are supported.....	19
Action area five: Inclusive service design	20
Action area six: Embed digital skills across all subject areas within formal education.....	22
References	23

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INTRODUCTION

Digital exclusion was a problem long before the Covid-19 pandemic. However, since the pandemic began, there has been increased reliance on access to digital services. Inequalities in access to digital and online resources and activities are closely associated with other dimensions of inequality, and in many cases exacerbate these. Altogether, this suggests a deepening of the impacts and inequalities associated with digital exclusion, and a pressing need for long term public policy solutions.

This document is a summary and proposed regional strategy drawn from a research programme undertaken during 2021. This research sought to explore the extent and nature of digital exclusion in the North East, to identify policy responses, and to outline a strategic framework for addressing digital exclusion in the North East.

In undertaking this work, we conducted a review of literature and policy on digital exclusion, investigating various definitions of digital exclusion, impacts on those experiencing it, its causes and policy solutions. This was supplemented with an extensive series of interviews with organisations and individuals. These interviews sought to identify how digital exclusion manifests itself in the North East, discuss pre-Covid-19 responses and responses during the pandemic, and provide evidence and ideas for developing a strategic, regional approach.

In our work, we also interviewed people within the North East who have lived experience of digital exclusion. These interviews explored experiences of digital exclusion, what support people facing it received or knew to exist, and their ideas for further support. Some of these have been included as case studies,¹ alongside informing our overall research.

Through this evidence-based strategy we seek to define digital exclusion, identify the impacts and some of the main groups who are affected, and look at the causes of digital exclusion, both in the North East where data exists, and nationally. Finally we outline the six key areas of action in more detail including explicit recommendations for change.

Those six key areas of action call on government locally and national, the broader public sector including education providers, the VCSE (voluntary organisations, community groups and social enterprises) sector, employers and businesses to act. They can be summarised as follows.

1. The need for collaboration and integration across different areas of support.
2. Provision of guidance, support and informal learning opportunities.
3. Agreement of a minimum standard of access and provision to ensure that everyone reaches this minimum standard.
4. The need to ensure inclusive service design.
5. The need for digital skills to be embedded across all subject areas within formal education.

¹ In our case studies, some names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

1.

THE COMPLEXITIES OF DIGITAL EXCLUSION

On the face of it, digital exclusion could be perceived as lack of access to the internet, whether due to lack of access to infrastructure such as broadband or mobile connections, or due to lack of access to a suitable device through which to connect. Indeed, initial research into digital exclusion focussed only on the question of access to devices and the internet which often resulted in the discussion being primarily about affordability (Carmi and Yates 2020). However, beyond these barriers are a range of additional and complex challenges relating to digital literacy, accessibility, confidence and safety which shifts understanding from a binary division into a more gradual scale of inclusion. Hargittai (2001 in Carmi and Yates 2020) was one of the earliest proponents of this argument, suggesting that digital inequalities have five dimensions:

- technical apparatus
- autonomy of use
- extent of social support networks
- types of usage
- skill level.

DIGITAL EXCLUSION EXISTS ON A SLIDING SCALE

Increasingly, researchers and academics support this type of definition. For instance, Burgess (2020) supports moving away from a binary inclusion and exclusion argument, and instead thinking about it as ‘a spectrum of digital engagement from internet access, to skills, to really being able to make use of online resources for beneficial outcomes’. Similarly, Sanders (2020) adopts the broad definition of digital exclusion as ‘where a section of the population have continuing unequal access and capacity to use information and communication technologies that are essential to fully participate in society’. He goes on to highlight digital literacy as being essential to digital inclusion since ‘users of the internet can still be digitally excluded because they lack the skills to be able to navigate the digital world’.

The findings of our stakeholder interviews reinforce this. Our discussions recognised digital exclusion as a spectrum of inclusion which cuts across multiple axes, rather than seeing it as a binary category of excluded versus included. Rather, it is about the extent to which people can engage with the modern world. We heard broad statements like ‘being digitally excluded is being excluded from life,’ referring to the omnipresent nature of the internet and descriptions of the blurring of boundaries between digital or virtual lives and people’s daily lives. One interviewee said: “if you cannot get online, you cannot meet your basic needs, especially during a pandemic: prescriptions, looking for jobs, managing universal credit... You’re barred.”

Not only did this highlight the spectral nature of digital exclusion overall, but of the factors that make it up. Our investigations highlighted the idea of digital adaptability, agility, or curiosity – referring to the ability to keep up with technological progress and maintain skills and confidence without support. This is also something emerging in the literature, which had previously overlooked the ability to adapt to technological change as part of digital inclusion (Puckett

2020). Herein, we define digital adaptability as ‘the ability to adapt to technological change’ and consider that it ought to be included in understanding technological competence or skill.

Overall, our research highlighted the extent to which digital exclusion is characterised by often overlapping barriers, namely:

- lack of connectivity, which captures both infrastructure provision and affordability
- lack of access to devices, including appropriate devices for necessary tasks
- lack of skills and confidence, cutting across foundational skills for accessing digital, life skills like making online payments, and workplace skills like drafting documents and attaching them to emails., as well as understanding online safety
- lack of online accessibility, meaning the lack of inclusive online design for people with access needs. For example, where poor service design excludes people with visual impairments using screen readers, leaving them unable to access services.

While adopting a broader definition of digital exclusion has the disadvantage of being more difficult to measure, the evidence indicates that it is necessary to incorporate factors such as digital skills and confidence into any assessment of digital literacy, alongside factors that are more readily measurable.

In line with our research, we have found that there is an element of digital exclusion where its impact is mitigated by other circumstances – for example, a wealthy individual may lack digital skills but there is no significant material impact to their life as their wealth and circumstances afford them protection from its impacts and they are therefore disinterested in accessing digital skills. Hence, we consider that digital exclusion is not only a specific form of exclusion for those who want to access the digital world, but it is also a ‘gateway’ exclusion which causes additional exclusions. In our definition, we therefore consider that meeting the characterisations of digital exclusion is necessary but insufficient alone to define digital exclusion, requiring an element of impact, such as on people doing things they want to; accessing services, opportunities, and benefits; or engaging in social, democratic/political, and economic life.

It is also important in considering the above to consider choice. Some of our interviewees highlighted that some people choose not to engage digitally. However, caution must be applied when considering this viewpoint. Choice is complicated and preferences are affected by the experience of one’s life, such as through poverty or negative experiences with the state, and the knowledge available to people – 26 per cent of ‘offline’ people surveyed by Lloyds Bank (2021) did not ‘understand the benefits’ of the internet. Preference formation impacts willingness to engage digitally. Evidence suggests that reasons given for those nominally choosing not to use the Internet are wide-ranging and mutually reinforcing, concerning safety and security, lack of skills, fear of accessing harmful or illegal content, and feeling it is too late in one’s life to learn how to use it (NSC 2021). Our research reinforces this and considers that self-exclusion is not a true free choice in the vast majority of cases. Rather, it is a form of digital exclusion that public policy can address.

We seek to address this by marrying a rights-based approach to digital inclusion, where digital exclusion is defined by the deprivation of the tools needed to be digitally included, with an understanding of the impact of digital exclusion, where equal opportunities to engage in life are denied. Where those tools are provided and the right can be exercised or those impacts are fully mitigated – perhaps a true choice not to engage is possible. But for many who do not have the means to mitigate the impact of digital exclusion and are not furnished with the tools to exercise a right to digital inclusion, there is no real choice.

DEFINING DIGITAL EXCLUSION

In this report, we define digital exclusion as follows.

The lack of access or ability to engage in digital activity, which excludes people from equal opportunities to engage in social, political, and economic life. It is characterised by:

- *a lack of access to connectivity*
- *a lack of access to devices*
- *a lack of skills and confidence*
- *a lack of inclusive digital design which accounts for accessibility needs.*

This definition is imperfect and not sufficiently precise as to be measurable with publicly available data at the time of writing: we cannot for instance use this definition to definitively say how many people in the North East are digitally excluded. It is however a starting point from which a detailed definition shared by policymakers, service providers, and stakeholders across the North East can derive their understanding. A shared understanding of the issue being tackled is necessary to provide for collaboration at different levels and to set out goals and policies to address this issue strategically.

The ongoing work observed through this research among VCSE organisations and other partners in the North East indicates that, while undefined, there is still a good understanding of the challenges that people face around digital exclusion. There is an opportunity for the region to lead by example and adopt a shared definition of digital exclusion, and mission to address it, which incorporates all of the challenges identified and explored in more depth in the following chapter.

2. WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE IN THE NORTH EAST?

As outlined above, the agreed upon definition of digital exclusion within this report means that it is not possible to provide a specific figure on the question of how many people are digitally excluded in the region. This is hampered by the considerable lack of data available at a local or even regional level. There are however a range of sources that suggest that the North East is likely to have higher levels of digital exclusion than the rest of England.

According to the Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index 2021 (Lloyds Bank 2021), an annual study of transactional, behavioural and attitudinal research which also includes measures of digital skills and engagement, the North East had the third highest level of offline (8 per cent of respondents) and second highest level of very low digital engagement (with 32 per cent) – accounting for around two in five people within the North East (ibid). This compared to the average for England of 5 per cent offline and 28 per cent with very low digital engagement – equalling around one in three seeing some level of digital exclusion (ibid).

Greater Manchester Combined Authority's (GMCA) Digital Exclusion Risk Index offers an approximation of potential digital exclusion at an LSOA level by combining factors such as age of local residents, broadband connections, average download speeds and deprivation; all of which are factors that might contribute to digital exclusion as detailed in the following chapter.

Adapting that methodology and combining it with the Consumer Data Research Centre's (CDRC) internet user classification, the figures overleaf indicate high levels of risk in most of the North East's rural areas – which in large part is related to the age and broadband components of the index, while the concentration in urban areas tends to also reflect high score of the deprivation component – and some smaller towns have higher scores across all three components.

These statistics were supported by responses from research participants who described in detail specific factors that made the North East likely to have higher levels of digital exclusion. A common answer was that there are higher number of commonly affected groups – especially related to poverty – in the North East as well as other compounding factors. One interviewee said: “It boils down to the rich interplay with all things the North East suffers with: low skills, low earning, high poverty, high deprivation – everything through to health and co-morbidities. It all works together to impede people's access and capabilities.”

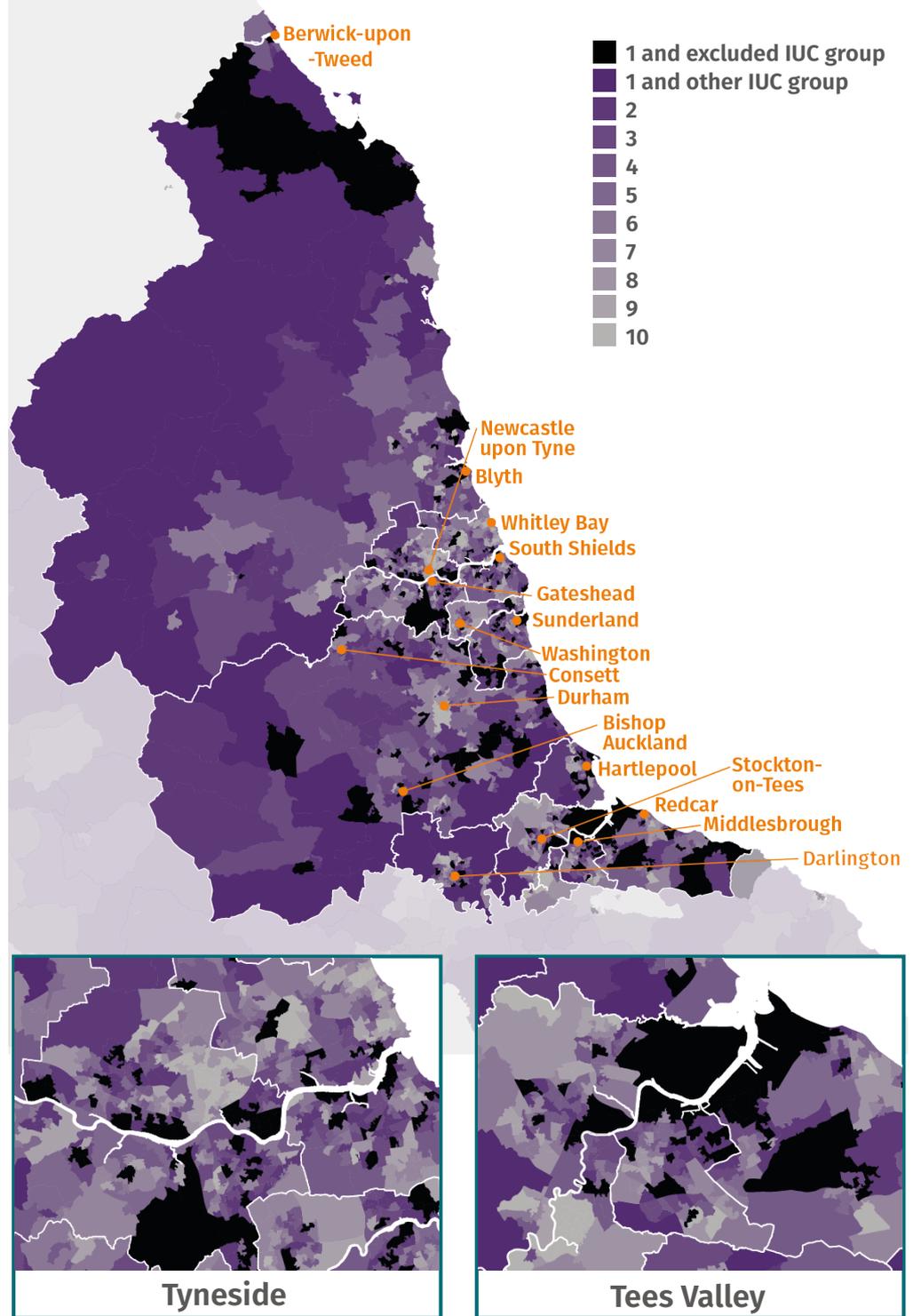
Other specific factors given by interviewees included:

- slower broadband rollout in the North East and large rural areas that continue to have poor connectivity
- the region's economic history meant higher levels of employment in manual labour and heavier industry, which has left a legacy of skills fit for an economy which has transitioned, leaving many out
- general lack of economic opportunity.

Overall, the research highlights significant diversity across the region in terms of rurality, deprivation and population characteristics. These attributes are likely to result in different support needs for different communities facing risk of digital exclusion.

FIGURE 2.1: RISK OF DIGITAL EXCLUSION IS PRESENT ACROSS MUCH OF THE NORTH EAST, WITH HIGH RISK OF DIGITAL EXCLUSION IN MUCH OF THE RURAL NORTH EAST, CONCENTRATIONS IN URBAN AREAS WITH HIGH LEVELS OF DEPRIVATION, AND RISK IN SOME SMALLER TOWNS

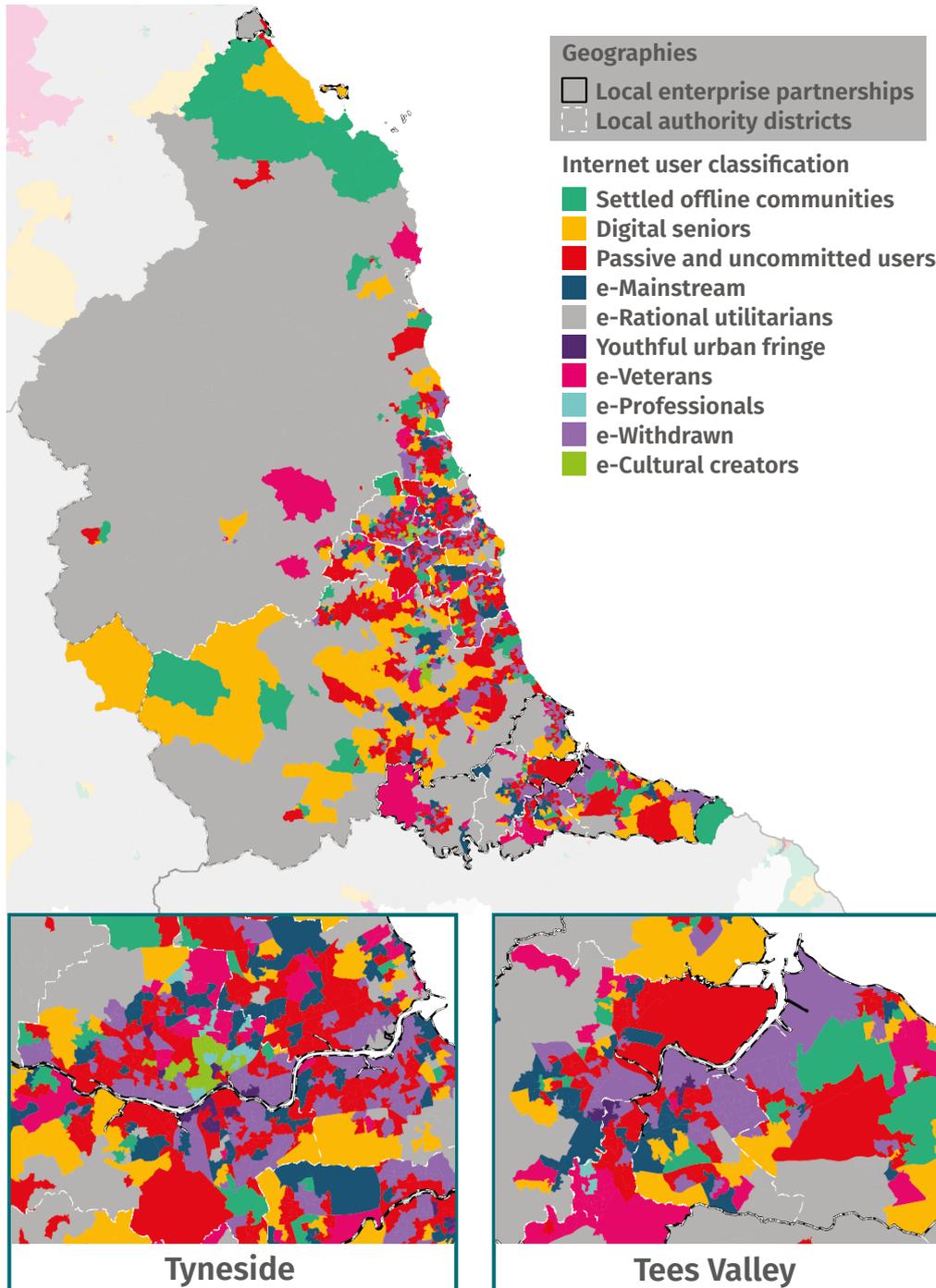
LSOAs in the North East by adapted Digital Exclusion Risk Index decile for England, where 1 is the decile most at risk of digital exclusion



Source: Author's analysis of Alexiou and Singleton (2018), GMCA (2021), ONS (2011, 2020a, 2020b, 2021), Ofcom (2020), MHCLG (2019), and DWP (2021)

FIGURE 2.2: WHILE BEHAVIOURS INDICATING DIGITAL EXCLUSION SHOW A SIMILAR GEOGRAPHICAL PATTERN OF PREVALENCE TO RISK ACROSS THE NORTH EAST, DIFFERENT TYPES OF DIGITAL EXCLUSION ARE PREVALENT IN DIFFERENT PLACES

CDRC 2018 internet user classification by lower super output area in the North East²



Source: Alexiou and Singleton (2018)

² See Alexiou and Singleton (2018) for a full description of the behaviours associated with each classification. In our analysis of this data to understand how digital exclusion manifests in the North East, we have particularly looked at the concentrations of: ‘Settled offline communities’; ‘Passive and uncommitted users’; and ‘e-Withdrawn’ – which we consider to be strongly indicative of digital exclusion. We also note in the figure above where e-Mainstream LSOAs are nearby LSOAs that show signs of digital exclusion, because this is a group we consider likely to contain digitally excluded people alongside those who are not – particularly as a transition neighbourhood.

3.

THE EVOLVING DRIVERS OF DIGITAL EXCLUSION

As digital life has grown to touch on almost all facets of human experience – so too have the impacts of digital exclusion become both deeper and more wide ranging. Digital exclusion is an impactful ‘gateway’ exclusion that prevents excluded people from fully engaging in modern life. It is difficult at the current time to disentangle over a year’s worth of pandemic conditions and the changes that these have wrought from people’s experiences. We have sought to provide commentary around the pandemic specifically, but otherwise have not isolated before and after the pandemic here.

THERE ARE A MULTITUDE OF REASONS WHY PEOPLE EXPERIENCE DIGITAL EXCLUSION

There are a range of different data sources that can be used to better understand the number of people who are actually affected by digital exclusion but there is little evidence to say conclusively how many people in the UK are digitally excluded based on a broad definition which incorporates digital skills and confidence alongside connectivity and access to devices. Our stakeholder interviews – perhaps given that they were largely drawn from VCSE organisations with specific client groups, gave detailed accounts of the different groups and communities that experience digital exclusion. Some felt there were ‘pockets’ and locations where digital exclusion is concentrated and described why they thought this was the case – discussed below. Others linked their response back to previous answers around digital exclusion as a complex, overlapping series of axes or spectra. For example, one said: “It is not a particular group – it’s a range or a spectrum on its impact and severity,” which affect different groups.

The research highlighted that key groups affected by digital exclusion include disabled people, affected due to poor service design or lack of access to specific software or hardware to enable them to access what they need; asylum seekers, who receive insufficient financial support to access devices or a secure connection, and who, due to insecure immigration status are often locked out of things like language support or digital skills support programmes; and those living in rural locations who were more likely to face problems relating to poor connection. Beyond this, our research found that it was difficult to untangle factors such as age, unemployment, education and poverty, indeed often themselves intertwined with the above factors, in how they individually impact on digital exclusion. Poverty is a particularly reinforcing factor, which can be both a cause and an impact, limiting access to suitable devices and connections due to affordability issues which, in turn, can increase the poverty premium by limiting access to online deals, price comparison, and other means to reduce costs. Intersecting with this, unemployment, age and education factors all increase the propensity for digital exclusion. It is essential that a strategic framework to address digital exclusion recognises the diversity of reasons that people may have for needing support and responds to different requirements accordingly.

Ultimately, the research identified that since access to the internet and digital skills is an essential gateway to live in the modern world, a rights-based approach to digital inclusion is required to secure it for all. Some rights are already protected in the UK. For instance, every home and business in the UK has the legal right to request a decent, affordable broadband connection. Those homes that cannot access download speeds of 10Mbit/s or can only access a service which costs more than £46.10 can in most cases request a connection.

As of 2020, all adults aged 19+ with no or low digital skills have a legal entitlement to access essential digital skills qualifications for free. These rights and entitlements are welcome. However, the internet and digital activity has become significantly more important to live a minimally decent life in modern society. Access to the internet is now necessary for conducting daily life, accessing public services, and exercising other rights, including political rights. Access to a reliable connection also has the potential to support other important agendas such as addressing the climate crisis and the challenges of levelling up through the potential for increased remote working, as has been demonstrated throughout the pandemic. These rights and entitlements need to be extended to a right to internet access and digital skills, meaning the following.

- The right to access a minimum 10Mbit/s connection at home regardless of income. Over time, this should increase to the right to high-speed internet connections in every household at an affordable rate. This means including the cost of broadband in social security payments, allowances for asylum seekers, and provision for those in state accommodation. This could also include the expansion of public wi-fi networks which are common in town and city centres.
- The right to essential digital skills – building on the new entitlement and ensuring it is not only access to a single course or qualification, but a right to support until such skills are secured.
- The right to affordable access to devices – providing for a minimum standard of access which could be delivered for example through loan-schemes at libraries, access to facilities within libraries and other public sector facilities, and other policies.

DIGITAL EXCLUSION WASN'T JUST AN ISSUE DURING THE PANDEMIC

The pandemic has brought the necessity of digital access into sharp focus, from the need for devices and reliable connection to work and study from home, through to shopping and communicating with loved ones. Not only did the pandemic speed up the already existing move to digitising some public services; it also brought about shifts in areas where digital-only support had previously not been considered, from crisis support to school parents' evenings. While we are all hoping to return to a version of 'normality', it is already evident that some of the shifts to digital are here to stay. As such, the digital exclusion that was exposed during the pandemic, but which has been a problem since long before, will continue to exist even as we emerge back into a world with more face-to-face interaction, and there is a risk that this may even be exacerbated as a result of some services making their online shift permanent.

Of course, some of the shifts that we have seen have been innovative and could result in huge efficiencies, but it cannot be assumed that all of them will result in efficiencies being realised; if, for example, someone is receiving online crisis support that is not as effective for them as face-to-face support, then otherwise avoidable costs may fall to courts, police, or the health service due to crisis escalation.

It is also important to consider that support offered to digitally excluded people throughout the pandemic may now be withdrawn – something which is indeed already occurring – despite the need to continue working online. School children in particular may face challenges since homework is an increasingly online activity, but for those children who no longer have access to devices provided to them during lockdown periods, this reconstructs yet another barrier for them to overcome.

As we see an end to the conditions brought in by the pandemic, we are unlikely to see a reduction in the barriers that contribute to digital exclusion. The VCSE sector must continue to lobby local and national government, advocating for digital exclusion to remain a priority and ensure the eye of policymakers does not turn elsewhere as we emerge from the pandemic.

Overall, digital exclusion is deeply intertwined with inequalities and deprivation, meaning that those who are impacted are often marginalised in other ways too and face wider challenges of exclusion. Both specific support needs to be given to groups to target the specific forms of exclusion they face--such as low income groups needing support with affordability of access--alongside wider initiatives to ensure and promote equal access.

4.

WHAT'S BEING DONE TO ADDRESS DIGITAL EXCLUSION?

The research indicates that prior to the pandemic, while there were few concrete interventions to speak of, some examples of good practice were identified. These include the digital skills training coordinated by North of Tyne Combined Authority, Newcastle Futures' Tyne Online programme that aims to help people become digitally literate, and the Elders Council which, in partnership with Northumbria University, offers digital drop ins where people can bring their devices and troubleshoot any issues. Silver Surfers, a support group which also offers social interaction, was also mentioned as were international examples such as rural hubs in France and digital access to health services such as those offered in Denmark and Estonia during our research interviews.

THERE IS A LACK OF OWNERSHIP OF THE DIGITAL INCLUSION AGENDA AT PRESENT WHICH MUST CHANGE

Investigating digital exclusion in the North East has shown a lack of ownership and coordination at national, regional and local levels when it comes to tackling digital exclusion. It is essential that appropriate organisations take on collective responsibility to lead these initiatives. Organisational leadership, ownership and responsibility should be clearly outlined, alongside the parameters of partnership working, and agreed by all parties from the outset. Participants in this research indicated that local government would likely be best placed to coordinate initiatives, working collaboratively with the local VCSE sector and mutual aid groups to provide long-term support to communities. Local government has lost significant capacity during the austerity period and many authorities now face Covid-related shortfalls. Meanwhile, much of the VCSE sector has worked considerably overcapacity for over a year in responding to the pandemic on top of longstanding funding pressures. Therefore, action and leadership at a local level must be underpinned by support at a national level. A single government department – with capacity for interdepartmental working – should take responsibility for this beneath an accountable Minister to aid collaboration at local and regional levels and providing resources to support efforts. The Department for Digital, Media, Culture, and Sport or the Ministry for Housing Communities and local government are potential candidates, with a clear need for collaboration with the Department for Work and Pensions in particular.

Digital access is not simply an IT issue; it is an issue of social policy. Better Connected NE has created a model motion for North East local authorities to adopt, which commits to promoting and supporting efforts to address digital inclusion, prioritising digital exclusion across departments and policies, and working with local groups to improve digital inclusion in relation to the design and delivery of services (Better CONNEcted 2020). The motion coheres with this theme of our emerging strategy.

It is crucial that digital inclusion does not therefore sit within IT teams; it must be recognised and supported across all services. Further, support should be coordinated across different service areas so that the most vulnerable within our society receive a holistic package of support that delivers specialist support from various organisations as required by each individual. At a more strategic level, incorporating digital exclusion into poverty reduction plans and economic strategies would further bring this challenge to the fore, and strategies to alleviate it would (hopefully) be designed with an appreciation that organisations must take responsibility for and ownership of delivery.

WE NEED A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

Our research has clarified the data challenges; using a broad definition of digital exclusion which incorporates digital skills, online safety and confidence as well as connectivity and issues relating to affordability makes it almost impossible to assess the number of people who are digitally excluded. Local authorities face this same challenge too in understanding their local context. In operationalising a digital inclusion strategy, it would be essential to take a data driven approach which would aim to map digital exclusion and the relevant service provision already in existence. This would not only enable a shared understanding of who needs support, it would also measure the impact of different initiatives. There are indications from the data that does exist, that digital exclusion is more prevalent in the North East than other parts of the country. This is likely to impact on a range of areas such as productivity rates, mental health and educational attainment in the region. It would therefore be valuable to gain a better understanding of the situation at a regional and national level in order to distribute resources appropriately.

Gaining a better understanding of digital exclusion through existing models would help to contextualise the problem and highlight correlation with other challenges. As part of its work on the Poverty Truth Commission, the North of Tyne combined authority could explore digital exclusion and its impacts, while incorporating digital access and skills levels into future Indices of Multiple Deprivation could provide a clearer understand things on a national level. Further, we need to learn our lessons from recent experiences too, and any future inquiry into the pandemic should explore the lockdowns and includes the experience of the digitally excluded.

Overall, the research highlighted pockets of activity across the region where work is being done to address issues relating to digital exclusion, but a more coordinated effort is needed both locally and nationally in order to ensure that the appropriate support reaches those who need it. Underpinning this is the need to better understand the scale of digital exclusion across the region which would in turn enable providers to implement targeted support which addresses specific challenges faced by communities.

5.

AN EMERGING STRATEGY FOR THE NORTH EAST

This research points to the need for significant intervention to support individuals who are digitally excluded. There are a wealth of enthusiastic and committed individuals working across the North East to support those who need it and the infrastructure therefore exists to address digital exclusion. However, lack of ownership means that until now, no one has been driving this agenda. Over the following pages we offer a number of recommendations which form the basis of a coordinated strategy to address digital exclusion in the North East.

The following recommendations aim to address the five key challenges faced by individuals facing digital exclusion:

- access to devices
- connectivity
- digital skills and confidence in navigating the digital landscape
- online safety
- inclusive design

All of these challenges must be addressed holistically to successfully combat digital exclusion.

ACTION AREA ONE: COLLABORATION AND INTEGRATION

As detailed in the previous chapter, ownership of the digital inclusion agenda must be agreed upon at a national, regional and local level. However, this shouldn't mean that whichever organisations assume ownership should be wholly responsible for delivery of initiatives. Partnership across public, private and VCSE sector organisations is essential to the successful delivery of initiatives. Given the intersectionality and compounding of digital exclusion, it is necessary to consider digital inclusion initiatives as part of wider policy around poverty reduction. Existing networks and partnerships should be utilised and extended to aid long-term sustainability of collaboration and integration on this agenda.

Local and combined authorities should do the following.

- Consider digital inclusion as a core part of poverty reduction and inclusive economy policies and strategies.
- Work to develop stronger links with national government departments regarding digital inclusion, with a view to greater collaboration between national and local level and to learn from and share best practice.
- Ensure that policies that centre on or include digital inclusion are co-produced with a range of individuals who have had experience of digital exclusion, so as to ensure local authorities understand what the issues are across different communities, alongside the local public, private, and VCSE sectors.
- Consider the potential for digital inclusion initiatives as part of bids to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. A particular focus for the fund is skills, including the development of digital skills for digitally excluded individuals, especially where digital exclusion presents a barrier to employment.

VCSE organisations should do the following.

- Work with public and private sector organisations with a view to being the primary delivery organisations for digital inclusion initiatives. With their strong links and understanding to local communities, they are best placed to understand the real needs of the people they support and deliver initiatives in accordance with this need.
- Draw upon national initiatives such as the Online Centres Network both with a view to national collaboration but also to learn and share best practice.

Local enterprise partnerships (LEPs) should do the following.

- Work with local and combined authorities as well as VCSE organisations to offer a link to the business community in order to promote digital inclusion initiatives within the private sector.
- Offer a link in to local tech companies to ensure that unused or surplus devices can be appropriately redistributed.

All organisations involved should do the following.

- Agree a minimum digital standard, aligned with a broad definition of digital exclusion, which everyone is working towards. The establishment of a minimum standard would be the first step in helping to identify the scale of the issue and identifying suitable measures through which to assess progress. National initiatives such as the work of the Data Poverty Lab could inform agreement of this minimum standard.

ACTION AREA TWO: GUIDANCE, SUPPORT AND INFORMAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Barriers such as skills, confidence and concerns over online safety could be resolved through the provision of enhanced support for those who need it. Research suggests that classroom-based formal provision may not be the optimal way to support individuals who lack digital skills; instead, support should be made available within the community, with support offers being delivered, ideally, by others within the community on a peer-to-peer basis. However, without consideration this could simply increase responsibility for VCSE organisations who are likely to have existing links with communities. It is important to note that this report does not advocate that it should be the role of VCSE organisations to take on this support provision; responsibility should lie with local, regional, and national government to ensure people can exercise their right to digital inclusion. However, in practice, a partnership approach between the state and the VCSE sector is likely to deliver the best service to really reach those who need it.

Underpinning all of the recommendations is the need for anyone providing support to have a clear understanding of data protection and cybersecurity to ensure that staff, volunteers and client groups are protected and good practice is followed.

Local authorities should do the following.

- Take the lead in offering physical digital hubs for people to access online services with the co-location of support services and the provision of privacy for those who need it, would enable access to services, employment opportunities, training, healthcare and other information, and so on. These digital physical hubs should be located within the community, ideally in established hubs such as libraries or community centres. If these centres do not already exist, empty units could be utilised for this purpose.
- Offer a single point of contact for support by co-ordinating cross-sectoral provision of support. Given the breadth of challenges that someone new to the digital environment might face, a single 'front door' for digital support would

be a highly valued asset, as would the use of a buddy network model. Both of these propositions would help to remove the fear of not knowing where to start when encountering a problem.

Employers should do the following.

- Support their employees with digital skills development, regardless of their role. While the above recommendations are community focussed and would likely rely on local government, the VCSE sector and existing community networks for implementation, businesses and national government also have a role to play. For those in employment, there should be a duty on all employers, as good corporate citizens, to ensure all their employees meet a basic level of digital skills. Even though not all roles require digital skills, the provision of digital skills training would ensure that the workforce is prepared for future industrial transition, and equipped to access all that the digital world has to offer in non-working life. Offering digital skills to workers even if they are not essential to their roles would tie in well with initiatives centred on offering better quality employment that have been especially championed by combined authorities, including the North East Chamber of Commerce and Children North East pilot project which aims to address in work poverty.

The Department for Work and Pensions should do the following.

- Through Jobcentres, offer enhanced support for those in need of basic digital support, in addition to the existing digital courses that can be accessed online, which offer more holistic support and do not just focus on workplace digital skills.

Case study: John

John has never used a computer in his life. He does not have a smart TV, smartphone or even a bank account. Lack of access causes him problems as he has to rely on others and in the past he's fallen into trouble because he's not been able to respond to 'official' letters from the Council or regarding his benefits.

The reasons for John's digital exclusion are complex. Primarily, he indicates that it's about cost; he couldn't afford the connection or the device. But there's more to it than just cost. He indicates that he's not interested in learning how to use a computer, but upon talking to him it's evident that the social anxiety he suffers in unfamiliar or crowded places would be exacerbated in the online world, one that he sees as being full of danger and problems such as online gambling and everyone knowing everyone else's business through social media.

There isn't only one John, there are others who have similar concerns. If getting them online is possible, it won't be easy, but it will need to be done sensitively with outreach teams who understand the complex needs of their students. Support will need to be offered in a private place and it might need to be done 'covertly' by offering support for specific tasks which can be undertaken online, rather than being advertised explicitly as digital training.

ACTION AREA THREE: MINIMUM STANDARDS OF ACCESS ARE NEEDED

Although skills provision is essential, if individuals do not have regular opportunities to use these skills then they will inevitably fade. Given that digital access is increasingly an essential facet of modern life, all individuals must be equipped with sufficient devices and connection to enable them to access digital resources. Recommendations for minimum standards of access do not just relate to issues of infrastructure but also, arguably the bigger issue of affordability.

There has been a national push in recent years to ensure that the infrastructure is in place for people to connect to the internet. While the vast majority (96 per cent) of household now have access, the provision of broadband, significant monthly costs and long term contracts make broadband connection unattainable for many.

National government should do the following.

- Work with broadband providers so that a basic minimum standard connection can be offered as a universal service for anyone who needs it to access social security and other services. Similar offers in other countries such as Spain demonstrate that it is feasible to offer this minimum standard without disrupting the competitive market significantly.
- Work with telecommunications providers, in lieu of a minimum standard universal digital access offer, to ensure that low-cost broadband plans are available across the country to anyone who needs them, regardless of their connection type or geography, as backed by Ofcom.
- Give consideration to the provision of a digital support benefit, given the necessity for people to use the internet for a range of services relating to social security. This could include a scheme similar to housing benefit or adding the cost of accessing digital services across data and devices to existing social security. As housing benefit and general social security benefits do not support one of the groups most impacted by digital exclusion, the asylum seeker and refugee community, it is recommended that a digital support scheme should be open to all who need it, including those with no recourse to public funds. There has been limited availability of low cost schemes for certain eligible customers in the past but these have not been well publicised, meaning that many who may have been eligible may have missed out. The impact of digital exclusion on refugees and asylum seekers highlights the need for a wider review of policies relating to limited support for this vulnerable group and also with 'no recourse to public funds', with the recommendation that this policy be replaced with essential support for individuals in such situations. Policy of this kind would align with a rights-based approach to accessing digital services, as advocated for in the findings of this research.
- Ensure that every child has access to an appropriate device at home in order to do their homework. Failure to do this adds another level of inequality to educational provision.

Internet providers should do the following.

- Offer competitively priced pay as you go mobile data services and super-strength wi-fi hotspots, akin to those offered in many town and city centres, but in residential areas so as to support numerous households. On the latter suggestion about residential wi-fi hotspots, further exploration would need to be undertaken to explore possible funders for this and a cost-benefit analysis would need to explore non-direct benefits such as potential increase in productivity rates, and the impact on demand of other public services.
- Instigate 'data banks' whereby individuals can 'gift' their excess data to those at risk of digital exclusion. A version of this is already available in the UK through EE, whereby individuals can gift their excess data to family members provided their plans are linked. To take this one step further, customers could

opt in to transferring their excess (but paid for) data into a data bank, and those at risk of digital exclusion could in turn apply for excess data top-ups. Since the data has already been paid for, aside from administrative costs, this would be likely to be low cost but highly impactful for those benefiting from this kind of scheme.

Local or combined authorities should do the following.

- Facilitate re-distribution of unused devices for those who need them. Just as connection to the internet is unaffordable for some, so too are devices with which to connect. While some smart phones are increasingly affordable, they do not have the same functionality as tablets or laptop or desktop computers, meaning that those who only access the internet through their smartphone are likely to be locked out of many functions or services that would be available to them through a different device. The pandemic has initiated a number of programmes seeking to repurpose unused devices and redistribute them to those who needed them, particularly children faced with the prospect of studying at home without a computer. This is something that could be rolled out on a much larger scale, especially if there was an incentive for office-based businesses to engage in this. It could be valuable to explore whether this could be done in collaboration with higher education providers offering computer hardware and programming courses, who could potentially undertake the ‘fixing up’ as a practical element to their courses.

Case study: Myra

Myra is studying at college. She has two children and during the first months of the pandemic she had just two smartphones to keep her, her husband and her two children connected. Access to an old laptop improved the situation slightly but the biggest challenge was the connection limitations. With no outside private space, the internet was the only way to keep connected with friends and family during the lockdowns, but her data allowance meant that she had to limit video calls.

Prior to the pandemic Myra had used the public library to complete her college work. This resource was useful, but with a two hour limit and a 45 minute walk each way, even this had severe limitations. She indicated that life would be much improved if she had a broadband connection and a fully operational laptop that the whole family could use. It would enable her to do her college work and allow the children to do their homework, as well as accessing key resources like music which her oldest daughter, who is autistic and has epilepsy, finds calming.

ACTION AREA FOUR: A DIGITAL SAFETY NET TO ENSURE THOSE WHO ARE DIGITALLY EXCLUDED ARE IDENTIFIED, AND THAT THOSE AT RISK OF DIGITAL EXCLUSION ARE SUPPORTED

Given the challenges faced by people who are digitally excluded, support initiatives must lift people out of digital exclusion and offer a comprehensive safety net for those at risk of being digitally excluded.

Local authorities should do the following.

- Ensure that digital provision is offered or signposted at any touchpoint with residents who may need it. For those who are already digitally excluded, opportunities of ‘contact’ with public services should be seized upon to highlight the support available and, if necessary refer people to support services. A referral service could incorporate engagement with local authority, voluntary sector organisations such as food banks, and the Department for Work and Pensions through applications for universal credit.

National government should do the following.

- Ensure that broadband costs are incorporated into living costs for individuals with no recourse to public funds. This would ensure that the support received actually covers the necessary costs.
- Offer signposting support to individuals they engage with through universal credit support or JobCentre+, that is joined up with the local offer. For individuals at risk of digital exclusion, contact with public services could offer a lifeline to ensure that they don't actually become digitally excluded. Signposting or referral to relevant local support programmes as outlined above could avoid this, as could support with finances.

Ofcom should do the following.

- Continue to push, as they have been doing, for cheaper tariffs for individuals on low incomes, such as the new tariff offered by BT for individuals on certain benefits. Ofcom could work with telecommunications companies to develop a scheme similar to WaterSure, which ensures that those who need to use more water who are also in receipt of benefits have a price cap applied to their account which does not affect their usage, meaning they do not pay more than the average household cost. The pandemic has highlighted the challenges faced by families with multiple children in particular as children have needed to spend significant periods online. While face to face teaching has now returned, it is likely that online learning will continue, especially in the short term as children catch up on missed learning. This kind of support would therefore be valuable to many families on low or no income.

Case study: Shams

Shams began using his technical expertise to re-build and re-purpose unwanted devices during lockdown. Distributing them first to those in need within the community of people seeking sanctuary (including refugees and asylum seekers), he soon identified a need outside of this community.

He identifies the internet as being a necessity, not a luxury, in the modern world, whether through keeping in touch and maintaining their mental health throughout the pandemic through to children doing their homework. The main challenge that he identifies as being faced by the people he's been supporting is the financial barrier, not only of purchasing a device but of keeping up the regular costs of an internet connection. Even the most basic contracts are unaffordable for some. He suggests that those living in poverty should receive support to help them to stay connected.

ACTION AREA FIVE: INCLUSIVE SERVICE DESIGN

As a large proportion of the digitally excluded population, individuals with physical and mental disabilities face more barriers than many in getting online. Inclusive service design must be built in as standard to any initiatives that are developed and alternative routes of access should be considered. The design and implementation of accessible services online and training should ensure the public sector, third sector, and the private sector meets a minimum standard of accessibility, including simple and accessible information relating to privacy policies and terms and conditions.

Businesses and website designers should do the following.

- Address language barriers on websites. Aside from those with physical and mental disabilities, inclusive service design should also address other challenges that might limit users, such as language barriers. The suggestion that help and support programmes are run within the community may help to overcome these barriers, but it is essential to consider how to make sure language does not become a barrier for the delivery of digital support services.

Digital skills providers should do the following.

- Incorporate sensible online safety elements into all training and support offers, including offering support for parents who are supervising children. While adults are likely to be the main recipients of digital support programmes offered outside of formal education, as the pandemic has demonstrated, everyone can benefit from digital access, including children. Concerns about safety were highlighted as important for overcoming digital exclusion, and this is particularly important for parents of children who are using digital services. Parents must be supported to ensure that they understand what parental restrictions can be set on devices, and children must be educated from an early age about the potential dangers to them in an online environment. Programmes that cover these aspects of online safety would be hugely beneficial given that in some families it may be likely that children are more computer literate than their parents.

All public service providers should do the following.

- Ensure that digital isn't the only option. The final aspect of inclusive service design with regards to digital provision is the need to offer a suitable offline alternative for anyone who is unable to access digital service for any reason. Digital by default services often do not offer sufficient offline support, meaning that users or customers become very frustrated and often can't get what they need. In the case of public services, it is essential that equivalent services are offered offline for the minority of people who need them. In private sector services, interview participants in this research highlighted that offline help and support was particularly difficult to come by when dealing with fuel companies. In setting a 'gold standard' with public services this should encourage private companies to work towards similar ambitions.

Case study: Sunderland People's First

Throughout the pandemic, the members of Sunderland People's First have kept in touch with each other through Zoom and Whatsapp. It's been a lifeline for them, to maintain the social connection and, on occasion, try new things like a cook-along. They've helped each other and, with the support of CIC MediaSavvy, they've produced YouTube videos to help others with online functions.

While this has been a lifeline, the members of Sunderland People's First haven't attempted things like shopping or other online tasks. For many of their members, people with a learning disability, autistic people and their families, online tasks can be difficult and exclusionary.

ACTION AREA SIX: EMBED DIGITAL SKILLS ACROSS ALL SUBJECT AREAS WITHIN FORMAL EDUCATION

The final area of recommendations relates to formal education in primary, secondary and higher education level. While information technology is taught in schools, research suggests that children do not consistently complete their education with key 'life skills', including digital skills. Digital skills should be embedded across the whole curriculum from primary school up in every subject, to enable children in an increasingly digitalised world in all workplaces and facets of life. These digital skills should not just be focussed on workplace requirements, such as writing a professional email, but should also cover tasks that might be required outside of the professional environment, such as where to get support for health, how to find details about local council services etc. These skills are inevitably intertwined with other key learning areas such as political literacy including understanding how to detect fake news, fact checking and online and offline communication skills.

National government should do the following.

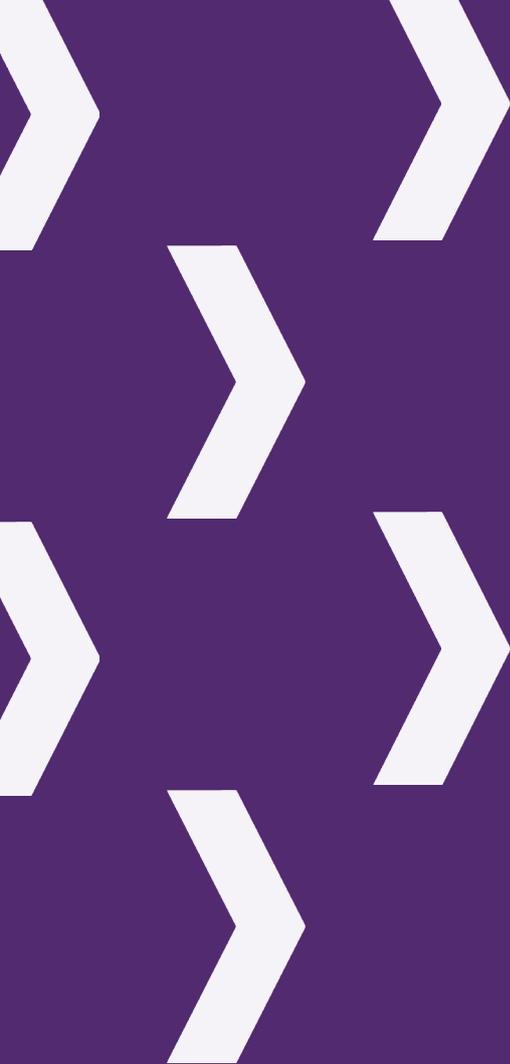
- Play a role in defining a 'digital life skills approach' which sets out the necessary digital skills for modern life. As indicated, these would not be just work focused but about accessing services like banking, applying for universal credit, and engaging in social and democratic life online. This could then support government interventions around adult learning, support the creation of a digital inclusion safety net set on a common but sufficiently broad definition of minimum skills, and to influence the design of education and schooling for young people to furnish them with the right skills for life, equipping them with the knowledge to undertake a range of tasks in the real world and the skills to adapt as necessary to any inevitable technological changes that we will see in the future.

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