DIGITAL POVERTY IN MARGATE:

A STUDY OF TWO HYPERLOCAL COMMUNITIES

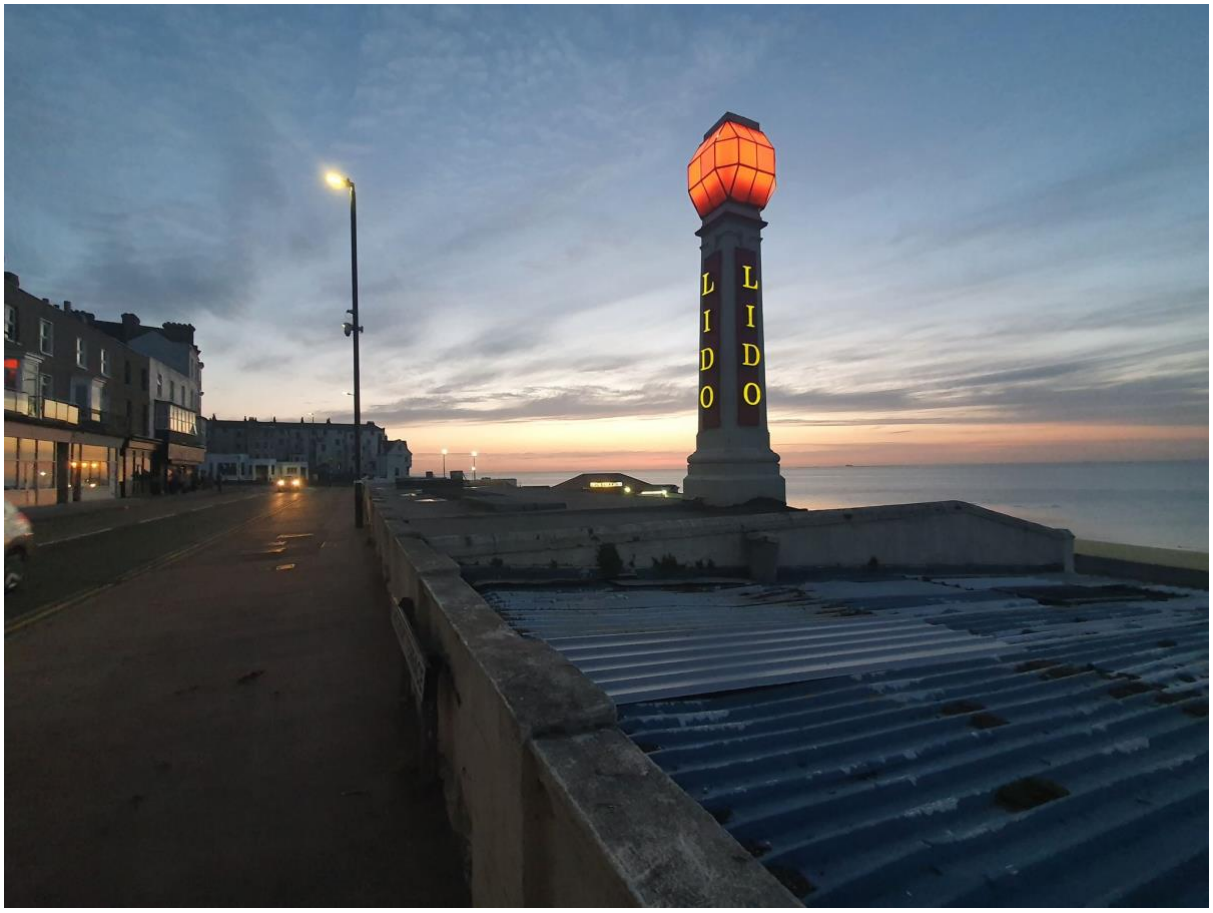

figure I, Lido at Sunset May 2022, photo by Rachel Stuart

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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of an in-depth, qualitative study of digital poverty from the perspectives of two hyperlocal communities in the UK seaside town of Margate. Specifically, the study examined members of the Roma and Creative Diaspora. We interviewed individuals in their milieu, using semi-structured questions that enabled the research team to segue into issues raised by the interviews to better understand their lived experiences of digital poverty. The analysis is presented under three key headings that are relevant to The British Academy, namely skills, productivity, and infrastructure.

We make the following recommendations to support The British Academy's ongoing programmes of research in relation to digital poverty.

Policy development:

1. Policies are developed based on several sources of data: empirical studies published in the literature and reports, quantitative data from large scale surveys, qualitative data, and consultations with interested stakeholders, public, private, third sector organisations, and the public. We strongly suggest that of the various data inputs to policy development, the use of in-depth qualitative data, drawing on peoples' lived experiences, should have greater influence. It is important to examine ways in which the use of lived experiences can be used more widely in digital poverty policy development.
2. The relative weight given to the different sources of data matters. The assumption that people don't know or won't know what actions need to be taken to alleviate their digital poverty needs to be questioned.
3. The use of people's lived experience creates better targeted policies. For example, based on our findings people who may appear, statistically, to be part of the digitally poor don't necessarily recognise themselves as digitally poor.
4. What digital poverty means to people doesn't fit into neat boxes and therefore, if the concept isn't better understood, policies are at risk of being misdirected.

Policy deployment:

1. Policies need to be followed up to understand their effects on people. Again, statistics tell part but not the whole story. We recommend development of programmes that create one or more frameworks for investigating and reporting on post-implementation effects of policies, to be assessed at hyperlocal levels.

Policy governance:

1. The locus of digital poverty policy governance is unclear. We recommend carrying out comprehensive studies to examine and specify coordination mechanisms that can be led at ministerial levels to mitigate digital poverty, to improve productivity, to raise skills levels and to implement appropriate technology infrastructure.

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INTRODUCTION

This report was commissioned by The British Academy (TBA) as part of a larger research project to explore the digital poverty. TBA were particularly interested in understanding contextual issues that surround digital poverty, especially place, social, cultural and communities.

The work presented here is novel because it focuses on the hyperlocal, by taking a qualitative approach to investigate experiences of digital poverty in two communities: Roma, and 'Creative Diaspora' (hereafter called 'Creatives') in Margate, a UK seaside town. Some of the findings parallel those of existing quantitative and qualitative research, and some are in concert with the literature around national and global experiences of digital poverty. However, our research emphasises that hyperlocal foci are crucial to formulating and implementing policies that take into consideration deeper understandings of how digital poverty intersects with other forms of marginalisation and disadvantage, and that, further, this is highly dependent on space and place. We see a need for development of a digital poverty index that would capture the complexities of this issue as well as the ways they can compound, but this is outside the scope of this project.

We begin Section One by introducing Margate—its past, present, and some of its potential futures. This chapter shows that digital poverty, like all forms of poverty, is utterly situated and variable according to place, and therefore must be addressed at local as well as national levels. Chapter Two offers a targeted literature review, explaining that digital poverty is never singular and has definitions that are always moving and contextual. In Chapter Three, we move to showcasing the voices of the people we interviewed, demonstrating firstly the ways in which digital poverty manifests in Margate in 2022, and secondly that those who experience forms of poverty and marginalisation are often best placed to contribute to policy development for addressing digital poverty.

We contend that studies of digital poverty must include the opinions and experiences of those who are digitally poor, and/or of those who are at risk of becoming so — 'nothing about us without us'[1]. Further, we insist that qualitative studies at hyperlocal levels are crucial to gathering those experiences.

Methodology

We interviewed twenty-one participants, each for about an hour in person[2], in Margate. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically analysed. The participants were sourced from two broad categories: those who identified as Roma, and Creatives. One person identified in both categories. Full ethics approval was obtained, in advance, by Brunel's Research Ethics Committee.

The Roma, aged 24-56, were evenly divided in terms of gender. They had moved to Margate because of family connections and employment opportunities and were self-employed (only one was unemployed) or studying full time. Only one worked for an

[1] This phrase is mainly used in disability communities to insist that all policy about oppressed or disadvantaged people must have those people's voices at its heart (Charlton, J. I., 1998).
[2] Appropriate COVID19 safety precautions were taken to protect the research team and interviewees.

employer. Their education ranged from GCSE to those who were currently doing degrees. All identified as Slovakian, one as Czech. They had lived in the Margate area between 8-18 years and had household annual incomes between 10k to 30k.

The Creatives were also evenly divided in terms of gender. They had lived in Margate for between five months and 17 years. One identified as belonging to the Global Majority[3] while the others cited White British, White Irish, or White Ukrainian as their race/ethnicity. They were all self-employed. Most had degrees (one had GCSEs, one said he had no education). Household annual incomes ranged from below 10k to 140k, with most falling below 40k. Eight out of ten cited being priced out of London as their reason for moving to Margate; other reasons given included perceived risk of catching COVID19 being worse in London, and proximity to nature and the sea in Margate.

[3] Global Majority is a term used to counter the concept of 'ethnic minorities', noting that 80% of the global population is made up of black people, indigenous people, and people of colour. The term is often deployed as part of a decolonising language toolkit.

Figure 2 . Roma Cliftonville May 2022. Photo by Rachel Stuart

Figure 3 . Creatives Cliftonville May 2022 . Photo by Rachel Stuart

ONE: MARGATE: HISTORIES OF RESILIENCE

For much of its existence, Margate has been marked by liminality. Situated in the south-eastern corner of Britain, the peninsula on which it stands was, until four hundred years ago, part of an island separated from the mainland by the Wantsum channel. The memory of Thanet's history as an island is kept alive in the name of the Isle of Thanet, which makes up the majority of the district of Thanet. Margate has periodically been an important site of resilience, escape, and prosperity. In 1586, before the channel silted up and Thanet joined the mainland, Margate's inhabitants were described as dynamic and industrious, making their livings from both the land and sea; crafting nets, catching fish, trading, and working the land. However, by 1662, the pier and harbour that the town had depended upon were in a state of decay, and Margate's fortunes had declined. Margate remained a backwater until the 1730s, when the first visitors started coming to the town, attracted by sea bathing and good climate (Barker et al, 2015, p 5).

From the arrival of these early visitors, Margate developed a reputation as a space of leisure and escapism. This reputation has ebbed and flowed but remains to this day. By the 1760s, Margate had grown to prominence for its associations with sea swimming and the development of bathing machines which allowed bathers to be taken out to sea to bathe in the restorative saltwater. The innovation of 'modesty hoods'—enclosed carts that were immersed in the water, allowing swimmers to take a dip while observing the social dictates of the time (Barker et al, 2015)—protected privacy. By the end of the 18th century Margate was famed as a popular resort and its popularity continued throughout the 19th century until the 1960s, rivalled only by Brighton and Blackpool. Such was its dominance in the English collective imagination as a holiday destination, away from the cities that it featured strongly in popular culture. For example, J. B Priestly used the imagery that Margate conjured in the public imagination when writing about the hardships of World War II (Ward, 2016)[i]. He described how the privations of war should be thought of as a 'bridge leading us to a better Margate in a better England in a nobler world' (Gray, 2016: p, 73).

As befits a destination described in 1885 as a 'great business, the gross receipts of which total about a million a year received from visitors' (Stafford & Yates, 1985: p, 24) investments have been periodically made into Margate's infrastructure. As the demographics of its visitors and residents evolved and changed over almost three centuries, it has also been a space of economic generation. Investment in tourist attractions and more mundane infrastructure kept pace with the increasing demands placed on the town throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the hundreds of thousands of visitors who made the trip to Margate each year. These investments included railway stations, bathing pools, cinemas, and theatres (Ward, 2016). At the same time as investment in infrastructure that would allow the transport of visitors into the town and the entertainments and the amenities that would facilitate them spending money, there were improvements to sewage, schooling, and provisions for the destitute. Many of these less visible investments in the town's infrastructure resulted from the campaigning of national figures such as the social reformer Edwin Chadwick, who forced local councils to invest money into such provisions for the common good (Porter & Porter, 1990).

Investing in Margate

Margate's character has been shaped by its history, and its physical environs marked by the successive waves of investments needed to ensure that the town could profit from its popularity. Each wave left a distinctive imprint on the town. Adjacent to the harbour, with its flint buildings and narrow streets, the Old Town was the focus of the town's fortunes before the arrival of holidaymakers. Within a few decades of its burgeoning success as a holiday and leisure destination, better facilities were required to accommodate the growing numbers of the generally well-to-do visitors who made the trip along the Thames. The weight of numbers necessitated the construction of more appropriate housing and infrastructure. Consequently, two Georgian squares, Cecil and Hawley, were built slightly inland from the Old Town in the last decades of the 18th century. Cheap rail travel saw the numbers of visitors visiting the town increase substantially, and development of housing, entertainment, and underpinning infrastructures started to stretch along the coastline on either side of the Old Town, creating the areas of Westbrook and the now artistic enclave of Cliftonville. The town's development carried on into the early 20th century as visitor numbers continued to rival Blackpool and Brighton. In order to accommodate both holidaymakers and day-trippers, as well as those wishing to relocate to Margate, there was further expansion and the creation of suburbs featuring bungalows and large houses stretching outwards towards Thanet's other resort towns of Broadstairs and Ramsgate (Barker et al, 2015).

Rejuvenation via Arts and Entertainment

As well as an attractive place to live, Margate was a space of entertainment and escape; these identities have also impacted its character. Perhaps its best known, most iconic leisure and entertainment space is Dreamland. The original Victorian pleasure gardens and amusements that occupied the site were replaced in the 1920s by the current art deco building and amusement park. Dreamland remained popular until the steady decline of tourists to the area impacted the town in the 1960s and 70s, finally closing after several decades of demise in 2004. It reopened in 2015 after a decade of abandonment and neglect. Currently, it houses a retro-style funfair and is a popular entertainment space that hosts live music performances, although is unlikely to recapture its heyday when more than 40,000 people would visit on a busy day (Evans, 2003). If the now-iconic Dreamland, whose presence dominates one end of the Margate seafront, can be posited as retrospectively looking to its past to create its future, the same accusation cannot be made about the Turner Contemporary, opened in 2011, and situated on the other side of Margate's gently sweeping main sands. Named for artist JMW Turner who spent his childhood in Margate and returned in adult life to complete at least a hundred paintings of the area. The buzz associated with the Turner Contemporary has had a transformational effect on the town's reputation, which has seen a resurgence in cafés, vintage shops, and boutiques radiating out from the Old Town and making inroads into Cliftonville (Evans, 2003).

Figure 4. Turner Centre. May 2022, Photo by Rachel Stuart

Changing Demographics

Despite the hope of Dreamland and Turner Contemporary, the town's current infrastructure, built upon and reflecting its history as a previously popular tourist destination, is symbolically represented by the now derelict lido, dilapidated former guest houses and, more recently, the closure of the Winter Gardens[4] Almost three centuries after the arrival of the first visitors to Margate seeking to 'embellish and add meaning to their lives' (Graburn, 1989), the infrastructure that in part dates from that period is sagging. It is not merely ageing; it is not fit for purpose in terms of the changing demographics of the town's latest arrivals.

Margate has experienced increased DFLs ('down from London'), Creatives drawn to the new cultural and edgy scene growing since the development of the Margate Renewal Partnership (MRP), a collaboration that includes the local Thanet District Council (TDC), Kent County Council and the South-East Economic Development Agency (Tibbalds, 2004; Ward, 2016; Margate Renewal Partnership 2007; SQW and BBP Regeneration, 2007; Fleming, 2008a; Fleming, 2008b; Shared Intelligence, 2008). In 2007, the MRP produced a document titled *A Cultural Vision for Margate: The Next Ten Years (Hubbard, 2017; Ward, 2016)*, the culmination of several years' worth of research undertaken on behalf of the MRP. The document spoke of the then proposed Turner Contemporary being the epicentre of a creative community that would become the

[4] See https://www.thanet.gov.uk/update-on-margate-winter-gardens/

Margate 'brand.' This 'brand' would combine seaside heritage and the widely available access to 'cultural narratives' (Hubbard, 2017) [ii]that situating an international art gallery in the heart of Margate would entail. In many ways, this has proved successful in rebranding Margate from an isolated, 'edge' space that is 'stigmatised' and 'adrift' from the larger south-east region, to one that can be thought of as a successful example of what Shah has described as 'coastification' (Fleming, 2008b; Shah, 2011).

Shah theorises 'coastification' as involving the changing perceptions of British coastal towns into desirable residential locations by what she describes as 'pioneer gentrifiers' (2011: p, 18). She describes these pioneers as 'the colonising arm of the cultural middle class/creative class' (2011: p, 20) who often possess relatively low levels of economic capital alongside high levels of social and cultural capital and are attracted to coastal architecture and landscape as a site of refuge, escape and diversity. Further, she positions the early phases of coastifiction as intricately associated with later waves of more affluent households as house prices become inflated in response to the influx of Creatives. A process of coastification has taken place in the Margate context that has proved so attractive that property values have skyrocketed more than anywhere else in Britain over the past 10 years, seeing an increase of 102% in the past decade[5].

Potential Futures

It is Margate's resurgence in popularity that could reverse its potential future fortunes and where lessons from the past need to be applied to ensure its economic future. Jarret (2015: 147) has described a phenomenon he calls seasideness: influenced by socio-cultural elements, this refers to and is influenced by what has been described as blue space (White et al, 2010). Blue space is a phrase used by Environmental Psychologists to refer to aquatic environments as a positive environmental feature, creating feelings of wellness and spirituality that lie at the heart of seasideness (Jarratt, 2015). Water, and especially the sea, is a central aspect of many towns and cities such as Margate, and as such, it is important to note that Margate's blue space is currently being severely impacted. For several years the sea around Margate has periodically been polluted by sewage that The Southern Water Foreness Wastewater Pumping Station has released. Southern Water has claimed that the releases are a consequence of the sewage system being so overstretched that storms mean it cannot cope with the level of waste. For example, during a storm on the night of June 16/17, 2021, it released waste into the sea which saw local beaches closed for six days[6].

The release of sewage into the sea highlights how the town's ageing infrastructure is overwhelmed: an inadequacy that has been exacerbated by decades of neglect. From the 1960s, Margate and other British seaside towns experienced a steep spiral of decline due to several interlacing factors, including increased disposable income and the affordability of foreign holidays. The vulnerability of Margate to the socio-economic effect of cheap airfares was further increased by the bomb damage the town experienced in World War II and that wrought by the severe storms in 1953 and 1978 (Ward, 2016).

[5] https://www.rightmove.co.uk/news/articles/property-news/margate-house-price-hotspot-decade/
[6] See https://www.thanet.gov.uk/southern-water-incident/

Figure 5. Margate High Street, May 2022 . Photo by Rachel Stuart

Racism

By the early years of this century, Margate, along with other seaside towns, was being derided in the tabloids as the national papers drew attention to the increasing numbers of Roma and Eastern European migrants moving into former B&Bs and into the once elegant mansions that had been divided and subdivided into bedsits and substandard accommodation (Hubbard, 2017)[iii].

Overlaying the town's existing material and symbolic properties, such as its heritage and uniqueness, its more recent poverty and neglect are the synergies between culture, leisure, and tourism for economic development. Like a diaphanous haze sitting over the faded past glories of Margate, the socially constituted discourses of culture, creativity and art can distract from the need for different more material forms of investment (Ward, 2016)[iv]. Occasionally this need for deeper, less visible forms of investment breaks through the haze, making its presence felt in various, often disturbing presentations, such as the sanitary products littering the beach after Southern Water failed to stop millions of gallons of raw sewage being pumped into the surrounding sea. During this research, we found examples of the need for infrastructure investments other than arts-based regeneration, especially digital.

We note that urban geographer Phil Hubbard has described the 'slow creep of gentrified businesses out of the Old Town' as having had little impact on the adjacent areas, which remain 'relatively deprived' (2017: 221).

Disadvantage

Deprivation is represented in various ways within Margate; across Thanet, almost a quarter of the population, 23%, live with a long-term disability[7], and there are long-standing issues with addiction and unmedicated mental illness. In 2018 the ONS identified Thanet as having the ninth highest rate of drug-related deaths in England and Wales[8]. One of its districts, Cliftonville West, is the fifth-most deprived in the country for the IMD 2019 indicator measuring children and young people's education, skills, and training[9]. The emergent regeneration of Margate that has centred around Dreamland, Turner Contemporary, and the Old Town's retro-chic bohemianism, has not been for everyone; instead, it consolidates what Hubbard has described as an imagined divide between 'creative' newcomers and existing residents, especially those from the less advantaged ethnic minorities (2017).

Shah (2011) notes that one of the impacts of coastification is the displacement of transient populations with few ties to the area, arguably victims of the cultural re-imagining that coastal resorts are particularly adept at employing because they have long engaged in place-promotion and undertaken strategies for reinvention whereby 'particular social relationships, images and ideas of social class were managed and manipulated' to meet changing tastes (Ward, 2016)[v]. Although those living in 'the overcrowded flats and bedsits on north Margate and Cliftonville' may not have any use for 'overpriced craft goods or affordable art' (Hubbard 2017: p, 221), they are likely to have already been squeezed out of the Old Town, as well as the upper reaches of the High Street.

Margate's resilience and economic prosperity have always depended on interpreting and adapting to the needs of the changing demographics that have flocked to the town. Margate is in danger of placing a divide—real, not imagined—not between the creative incomers and less advantaged citizens, but between itself and its future. This is because it currently fails to tackle the issues that previous generations have successfully acknowledged and addressed. In the 19th century, the town invested in its sewage system, a necessity if the town environment was to be protected from the overwhelming amounts of waste that visitors and inhabitants produced. Once again, Margate needs to address this issue. But this is not the only matter that could have serious impacts on the town's future and its ability to be a space of continued resilience and reinvention. In earlier incarnations, economic success resulted from adapting to the changing nature of those who came to Margate. A fixation on the ability of art to regenerate Margate sustainably is short-sighted and may ultimately be ruinous to the town's future. This report shows that investment in the town's digital infrastructure is vital if the town wants to offer a viable future to all its inhabitants—residents, workers, and visitors.

[7] See https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldseaside/320/320.pdf
[8] See https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/halfoheroinmorphinemisusedeathhotspotsinenglandandwalesareseasidelocations/2018-04-04
[9] See https://www.kent.gov.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/7956/Children-in-poverty.pdf

Figure 6. Margate School May 2022. Photo by Rachel Stuart

The Margate Digital Bid for £6.3 million was recently granted to the East Kent Council, and The Margate School—an independent liberal arts school—will bring the former Marks and Spencer building back into use as a specialist industry-focused centre on the high street. The site has been lauded as a future 'cutting-edge, industry-relevant training space that will focus on digital technology and offer Higher Education provision focused on Art and Design and provide a range of industry support.'[10]

Next, we examine critically the concept of digital poverty, drawing on empirical evidence in the literature.

[10] https://www.thanet.gov.uk/work-begins-on-53-57-high-street-building-set-to-become-margatedigital-centre/

TWO: DIGITAL POVERTY LITERATURE REVIEW

The growth and commercialisation of the Internet in the 1990s was accompanied by a host of expectations and promises relating to its emancipatory potentials that could advance democratic processes and empower individuals and communities. While these potentials should not be underestimated, from early on it became apparent that the popularisation of the Internet also carries pitfalls that need to be carefully and systematically addressed. At present, digital technologies have pervaded all facets of personal and social lives making it imperative to attend to issues relating to inequalities created or reinforced by them. It is argued that it is impossible to fully examine the social landscape nowadays without taking into consideration digital inequalities (Robinson et al., 2015). In fact, the recent global pandemic, that challenged the way we live, communicate and work, unearthed and accentuated digital inequalities across the globe.

Over the past three decades, academic scholarship at the intersection of social inequalities and digital technologies has developed, mainly around the notion of the 'digital divide.' Initially, the notion referred to inequalities in access to technologies and the Internet, which become known as the first level of the digital divide. Further studies then paid attention to a second level of divide digital that concerns inequalities that arise from disparities in knowledge and skills that determine people's engagement with new technologies (see Ragnedda and Muschert, 2013). As Van Deursen and van Dijk (2011) underlined while disparities in access may be diminishing, the gap in digital skills is growing. Beyond academia the term was also used by governmental and international organizations. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defined the digital divide in 2002 as

> 'the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels with regard to both their opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICTs) and to their use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities' (OECD, 2002).

Selwyn (2004) argued that the digital divide should not be seen as binary issue but as a complex multifaceted phenomenon as there is a need to carefully examine the relationship between 'access to ICT' and 'use of ICT' but also considers the outcomes of engaging with digital technologies. Taking this into consideration, more recent studies have shifted the focus on yet another level of digital divide, the third, which is concerned with the winners and losers of digital technologies by focussing on the benefits that individuals manage to accrue from using the Internet (Blank and Lutz, 2018; Van Deursen and Helsper, 2015). It is suggested that research on digital inequalities also needs to pay attention to adverse issues pertaining to algorithmic decision-making, information privacy, and datafication (Lutz, 2019). Datafication refers to the marginalisation of segments of the population who fail to meet prescribed data standards (Charitsis and Lehtiniemi, 2022).

While the term 'digital divide' has attracted considerable academic attention, the term 'digital poverty' remains underexplored. As Alderete (2019) acknowledges, the term 'digital divide' has dominated studies on digital inequalities while 'digital poverty' is barely mentioned. Goggin (2018) even argues that the term 'digital divide' is the main analytical

tool used to discuss digital inequalities, even though it is an inadequate concept. Digital poverty, as a term, first appeared in academic scholarship in the early 2000s but it was not properly defined and uncovered until 2007 and the publication of the edited book 'Digital Poverty: Latin America and Caribbean Perspectives' (Galperin and Mariscal, 2007). The editors of the book summarised digital poverty as a 'a concept that grasps the multiple dimensions of inadequate levels of access to ICT services by people and organisations, as well as the barriers to their productive use' (Galperin and Mariscal, 2007: 8). Barrantes (2007: 49) offered an elaborate analysis of digital poverty in the book, which was defined as the 'lack of ICT with regards to access and use of the information and communications allowed by the technology.' Drawing similarities to scholarship on the first and the second levels of the digital divide, Barrantes (2007) elaborated that digitally poor are those who do not possess, due to lack of knowledge or financial means, adequate information and communications that can be made available by digital technologies. She identified three causes of digital poverty: lack of supply which relates to lack of access, lack of demand that she associated with inadequate income, and lack of need or capacity, which concerns individuals who have the financial means to access digital technologies but refrain from doing so due to age or lack of knowledge. Based on the abilities to receive and send information, Barrantes (2007) provided a taxonomy of digital poverty and wealth that classifies people as extreme digital poor, digital poor, connected, and digital wealthy. The extreme digital poor can only receive transmitted information via older technologies, for example radio or television, the digital poor can receive and send information but only through traditional means of communication (landline or mobile phone), the connected, who connect to the internet through publicly available internet spaces and have basic digital skills that do not allow them to fully engage with digital services, while the digital wealthy are those who access the internet in their homes and have the skills to take full advantage of digital affordances and services. Barja and Gigler (2007), in another chapter of the book, use the term *communications and information poverty* to refer to 'a lack of basic capabilities needed to participate in the information society.' A common thread among those studies is the attempt to develop criteria in order to measure digital poverty. Thus, while similarities can be identified between the terms 'digital divide' and 'digital poverty' the latter aimed at establishing the minimum levels of access and engagement with digital technologies that constitute the digital poverty threshold.

Since the publication of the book in 2007, there have not been many attempts to advance understandings of digital poverty. The majority of the studies that engage constructively with the term 'digital poverty' focus on the Global South. Examining the intersection of digital poverty with other forms of poverty in four countries in East Africa, May (2012) concluded that households without ICT score lower in all poverty indicators than households with ICT. In addition, the study highlighted the gender dimensions of digital poverty as women across all age groups were found to be significantly less likely to have access to ICT (May, 2012). More recent studies have examined digital poverty in various socioeconomic contexts including among adolescents in China (Yuan and Guo, 2021). They have focused on digital inclusion policies aimed at reducing the gender gap by enhancing women's--from lower economic backgrounds--digital capabilities (Mancilla, 2016), examined the role of digital poverty in relation to transportation policies in Thailand (Setthasuravich and Kato, 2020), as well as policies directed towards entrepreneurship in Malaysia (Othman et al., 2021).

The global pandemic stimulated renewed interest in digital poverty. Sibilla and Gorgoni (2022) caution that the emergence of smart welfare services (hastily introduced due to the pandemic) may increase digital poverty and create additional layers of inequality as those who do not have access to digital technologies or the knowledge to use them will face more hurdles as citizens. A report commissioned by the Scottish government on access to Higher Education during the pandemic concluded that the switch to online education has more negatively affected students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds as they do not have adequate means-- IT, internet access and dedicated study space-- for effective learning (Scott 2020). In addition, (lack of) digital literacy was also highlighted as an important factor that affected more students from deprived social backgrounds. Connoly's (2021) report on digital poverty among children and young people in South Australia purports that digital poverty should not be treated as a binary division between 'have' and 'have nots' as children and young people may experience varying levels of access and engagement with digital technologies. In addition, for some, the experience of digital poverty can be brief, others may experience it occasionally, while for another group of children and young adults digital poverty can be a permanent situation (Connoly, 2021). Addressing the practical and ethical considerations of conducting online remote academic research, Engward et al. (2022: 4) add the dimension of safety in relation to digital poverty as they maintain that 'digital poverty not only refers to the resources needed to access the internet, but also the digital skills to safely participate online.' Donaghy (2021: 54) defines digital poverty negatively as the absence of digital capital which denotes the 'the foundation that supports a full interaction with the digital world' and comprises 'the physical and social assets that enable digital engagements.' Donaghy further discusses the societal implications of digital poverty that include issues that existed before the pandemic but became much more prominent during the pandemic (e.g. social isolation), but also issues that are directly related to the pandemic as the digital poor who could not access necessary information and digital services (such as track and trace applications) were more vulnerable.

THREE: ROMA AND CREATIVE DIASPORA VOICES[11]

Figure 7. Empty Properties High Street. May 2022, Photo by Rachel Stuart

We present the voices of members of the hyperlocal communities based on three factors suggest by The British Academy: Skills, Productivity and Infrastructure. We begin by first discussing the meaning of the term digital poverty from the perspectives of people who may experience it.

Understandings of Digital Poverty (DP)

We asked people what DP meant to them. Some had never heard the phrase, others were adamant that it meant the simple inability to afford hardware: 'today's society is all computers and technology, and I guess digital poverty means not having that' (R7). More complex answers noted that software, knowledge, education, confidence, broadband, language and culture all play into DP: 'It's not not having the equipment, because I think a lot of people have got phones and laptops these days, but it's about not being able to use it properly' (C4). One stated 'I think the digital poverty is just an extension of poverty' (C1), and this was validated as people told us of the expenses related to DP. One, speaking of lack of broadband access in her home (this is discussed extensively below), said 'what's very interesting is that people say, "Oh yeah, [you] can go to the coffee shop

[11] Creatives are coded C1-C10, Roma are coded R1-R10

[to use their WiFi]," but who's got £4 to buy a coffee all day?' (C7). One Roma told us how DP caused serious deprivation: 'So yeah, it's just [that you have] a really small world without it. It's almost like feeling trapped' (R1).

SKILLS

Education:

Many respondents spoke of being disadvantaged in their past, present, or future because of DP, often noting intersecting reasons:

> 'I'm digitally poor… Because it's a mixture of my age and my background, and also my dyslexia is a big problem. Because I missed out on computers at school… and I missed all the things… I feel like I'm missing some really basic understanding now' (C4).

One interviewee told us how DP impacted the degree she had begun. Before she had 'begged' for a laptop from a charity, she would have 'scraps of paper everywhere and then I would staple them together, and somehow I managed to stay kind of organised' (R1) before writing her essays on her phone. We asked how she did this and her answer showed great resilience:

> 'the keypad is really small on an Android, but then I realised that you could just— I wrote the essay out and then I could just speak into the microphone and it would type it for me. But then the downfall to that was it would get words wrong. Yeah, so I didn't really get the grades I could've got had I had a laptop' (R1).

While Creatives mostly had some tertiary education, some of the Roma were just starting on that pathway and knew that DP would be a problem:

> 'I'm going to do Open Uni… over the internet... I'm going to see if I can get some people that know how to deal with the laptops and stuff… I need to better myself because I want to learn' (R3).

Parents told us how, even with an abundance of high-end hardware, lack of broadband was 'a very big impact at the lockdown' on their children's online schoolwork:

> '… because we all had to be here, the kids and me… it wasn't very good (laughs) and the connectivity… You know, if you get a very serious phone call, like let's say, doctors or you know, some appointment or something [then children have to be disconnected] (R6)

This had serious implications for learning:

> '…my daughter was a very good reader and everything when she started school, but obviously with this lockdown, her grades are lower' (R6); and '[my child] really, really struggled with doing the lessons online' (C4).

Skills and Knowledge:

We asked people what DT skills they already had and whether they needed more, and what was hindering that. Some had excellent skills: 'I can set up our Wi-Fi and (laughs) I can text and I can do videos and stuff, but then I can do stuff like put together a computer and create the systems on your computer so that they can run. I can code and create a game and stuff' (C10). Many showed initiative and proactively developed new skills: 'When I need to learn something, I go on YouTube and I watch a video. In fact, I learned how to fix my tumble dryer by watching a YouTube video. I was well chuffed (both laugh)' (C4). However, the same interviewee said:

> '[I'm] a single parent looking after three kids and trying to earn a living (laughs) and trying to find the time to train myself as well. I have applied to the Arts Council. They do these things called DYCPs, Develop Your Creative Practice, and I've applied about three times now. They've said I can't apply anymore because they're not interested in funding me to train myself' (C4).

A props stylist told us that DP had 'meant that the work that I do is quite limited… because I haven't had time to train myself on software packages, for example, CAD Design and Photoshop and Adobe Illustrator, those kinds of things. I can't do proper presentations, so I can't move on to that next step in my career' (C4). Others were painfully aware of what they did not yet know. A student said:

> 'I'm not fully computer literate. If I'm on Adobe with the uni on an online tutorial but I don't know how to turn my camera on, for instance, when I'm on the laptop. I don't know if I need to buy a camera to attach to the laptop, so I never have my camera on… You see, all of this stops me reaching my full potential with studying' (R1).

Or of their skills being outdated:

> 'I've used Windows, the one I really liked was Windows Vista, obviously XP was really good, but like the Windows 8 and the Windows 10, it just got to a point, this is so complicated for me to use, like I don't actually know how to use it, I don't even know what Windows they're using now' (R8).

And some didn't know where or how to start learning skills, but felt the lack: 'Yeah, I'm going to have to learn how to do it properly because I haven't got the experience for it' (R4).

While most of the Creatives were very comfortable with DT, one told us 'I'm like a dinosaur with technology' (C4). A lack of knowledge was by no means limited to Roma, despite stereotypes.

One Roma said 'I don't actually have an idea, if I wanted to start a business online, which most people do, I have no idea how to start that' but she was adamant that 'when it comes to digital stuff like finances and businesses and things like that, I think anyone can learn that, yeah, I think anyone can do that, if they're taught properly and showed and stuff, yeah (R8). She even told us she'd learn code, given the opportunity:

> '…if I knew how to write codes for a programme… like if someone was teaching me how to… write codes or work, open businesses online and just stuff like that,

obviously I think it'd make life easier for, not just for me personally, but a lot of other people, because you never know, obviously everyone has other ideas' (R8).

Fear and Confidence:

Fear and lack of confidence played parts in people's ability to deal with DT and DP. After finally getting hardware, software and connections to work, one respondent told us they were now '…sort of scared to upgrade' (C4) in case of jeopardising the set-up. Others spoke of feeling excluded or being afraid to join social media worlds: 'I think digital poverty can also include not having the confidence, perhaps, to have an Instagram account, if that's what you want (C5). This respondent noted that age also plays a part, and told us of 'an older chap' they knew who'd said '"I just don't feel included. I feel excluded" [from social media]' (C5). It is important to note that the 'older chap' emphasised feelings of being actively *excluded* rather than choosing to not participate. Another interviewee noted 'people are just afraid to engage with the online space, because they feel like they don't belong there' (C6).

Those with more social capital were well aware that their confidence to play and experiment with technologies was an advantage when things stopped working: 'if you're afraid of technology and kind of tinkering and understanding' (C6) then 'finding out what's wrong' may remain elusive and therefore problems remain unaddressed.

Others told us of overcoming fear in order to become connected. One person had been afraid of broadband, although she saw its importance: 'I really wanted it and I wanted to understand it and knew people were doing stuff on it, but I didn't get my head round it… I just had a fear around it' (R1). With the encouragement of a friend though, she eventually 'went for it.' This was no ordinary overcoming of a difficulty: she went on to described bravery and perseverance: 'I went for twenty years not having a digital connection and then… every step of the way was fearful… it was really unknown to me and every step was something new within the digital sort of thing, it just filled me with fear' (R1).

PRODUCTIVITY

Income and Employment:

When one Roma told us 'So I can never have just one job. I'm the foreigner (laughs)' we asked what he meant, and he continued:

> 'Well, a lot of foreign people don't have just one job. They never will, and especially if you drive, they will not have one job because I know a lot of foreign people who have – who drive would have a daytime job and in night time they'll do deliveries or do another job, you know. And especially now with Just Eat, Uber Eat and Deliveroo, you need good internet for that (R5).

The intersectionality between ethnicity, migrant status, and DP is clear. We found that several interviewees' DP was not simply caused by lack of hardware or access to internet. This was most obvious when considering income and employment. Lack of signal was very serious for those working or attempting to work in service industries: Minicab drivers said 'For example, if I do five, five customers, this takes me probably two, three jobs to do. So I am less three jobs a day… that mean it's £15 to £20. Yeah, a day. A week it's £100' (R4). And

> ‘when you’re coming [to a job] when you’re there, like two minutes before you’re arriving, you should, they should receive a text message, okay we’re there, so I’ll say to come, but they don’t receive it, because they haven’t got a signal there. So there is a big problem, so you go there, you never pick up your customers’ (R7).

A jobbing actor told us: ‘if there’s no signal you’re not getting a job at all, you’re just sitting on your arse… And sometimes they call me up, if I don’t have a good signal, there’s a job gone (R5). And one interviewee revealed how other aspects of digital poverty could render owning the latest technology useless:

> ‘Yeah, yeah, yeah, I knew a lot of people on the streets that when they got paid would buy a phone, a good one, like a smartphone, but none of us were able to hang onto them because we couldn’t work them, for one. And if someone offered to buy the phone, we’d just take the cash because what good was it to us anyway, you know?’ (R1).

DP and income have a complex, Catch22, connection: without income, the hardware and software can’t be purchased but, without the equipment, the income can’t be made. A Creative said ‘The other day, I went up to London to repair my laptop – and this is digital poverty, right? I get about £1,200 a month, if I’m lucky, right? My laptop, to repair it, cost £479’ (C10). And a Roma told us: ‘I’m a single parent, I live on my own, I’m on minimum wage so I can’t afford to buy a laptop and I can’t even get – even if I did get internet, I would still have to connect it from my phone because I can’t get internet where I live (R3).

Figure 8 . Health Margate May 2022 . Photo by Rachel Stuart

Healthcare:

Although we didn’t ask about access to medical care, many interviewees brought it up in the course of the interviews. Access to healthcare is included because it has consequences for productivity and can be exacerbated by digital poverty. One said that compared to London ‘…the actual resources from the GPs down here are disgusting. I mean they’re really, really poor… people are now trying to push for digital solutions to this stuff’ (C1).

But digital solutions were not working, and people told us: 'Like you go through eConsult… I've tried it with the medications and then they ask for the code and it's just, it just makes it really complicated' (R8), and 'I know a few times because my mum cares for her sister, she had to have an appointment via this website to have a video, my mum struggled. She was trying to look for the website for two hours' (R5). The worst thing we were told was about an operation being cancelled because of poor broadband connection:

> '… they cancel our appointment because they said, "I had – I give you call and you not give me answer," because the signal not coming there and we didn't have this call from them. My operation, it's cancelled because I don't have network here' (R3).

A Creative told us of her daughter's isolation after moving from London, and this impacting her mental health:

> '…playing Robloxs with her mates from London was an issue because we didn't have [broadband]. So actually, I think it probably affected her more than it affected me… Yeah, it affected me and it was really annoying for business and stuff, but it was also her (C5 talking about her daughter).

While a Roma told us about her daughter, who lives with a mental illness:

> 'if there's no internet, she – because that's her life, like you see right now, she's in a bedroom and she's on the tablet. If there's no signal, she doesn't know what to do and she gets angry, she gets frustrated and she argues with them, with us and everyone because she doesn't understand the signal and stuff, do you know what I mean? So it's not good for her either (R4).

Importance of Digital Technology (DT) In Everyday Life

The ubiquity of DT was noted: '…people use it for everything, for communicating with their friends, their family… to educate themselves… *It's most people's life, I think* [our emphasis]…' (C7). Every participant spoke about the key role of DT in professional and personal life. For work, one told us 'I've never been able to – not that I ever would – do my job without absolutely cutting-edge digital technology' (C5). Some spoke about the importance of DT during the Covid pandemic: 'it kept some people sane more than other situations would've… it's, the ability to kind of have a hybrid life or existence' (C6). DT was important to those with family abroad:

> My grandmother obviously passed when there was Covid, I couldn't see her, even before she was passing, I couldn't see her personally. Yeah I've been able to… watch the funeral and also I spoke to my grandmother, I think a day before she passed, on FaceTime. So I think if [DT] wasn't around obviously, it'd be, it'd be quite sad' (R8).

We were told how DT enables social and socio-political connections, both global and local: 'I'm just loving the idea of you connecting to people that you would never have connected' (C10), and 'I've created a black and brown group with Margate, four or five years ago. We've got a huge WhatsApp group' (C7). Participants spoke of DT positively enhancing general knowledge, connections with family, social lives, and study. Some insisted it was integral to mental and physical wellbeing and the practicalities of daily life: 'everything I do by phone, by phone, by phone, because now I care about my sister, she

is disabled' (R2). DT was essential to earning capacity: a taxi driver said 'when I used to do delivery work, obviously you use maps on your phone' (R8) and a designer told us: 'you're like, literally connecting with the world and having your products across the other side of the world and things like that' (R8). One respondent told us how DT had transformed parts of her life: 'It just blows my mind because I've only just woken up to it myself, you know (R1).'

INFRASTRUCTURE

Growth in demand for digital services

As noted in chapter one, Margate is undergoing a population influx that is being encouraged by government, if not actually engineered. The assumed benefits are a bigger, more educated, wealthier community but this has clearly not been thought through in terms of sociality or infrastructures. In the words of one of our interviewees: 'I mean, that's just standard, isn't it? Moving people in and then not worrying about the infrastructure and how they're all going to live together later (laughs)' (C8). Below, we outline what our participants told us about their experiences of socio-cultural experiences and digital infrastructure logistics in Margate.

One interviewee had been, 'in the past, physically dependent on stuff, substances and stuff.' She spoke of trauma, of living in hostels, moving from London to Margate, and 'just having no awareness of—I didn't even have the awareness of digital stuff.' Becoming digitally connected was central to her new life: 'Obviously, I knew people had phones and laptops, but I didn't understand what they could do or how it could change my life… I'm thirty-seven and I've only had the internet and smartphones in the last two years of my life' (R1).

Experiences of Digital Poverty

Our focus on two hyperlocal communities showed that digital worlds are connected to their physical locales, and that paying attention to the local is key to understanding DP. People told us of local charities giving out laptops, especially during the pandemic, and providing connection hubs. Overall, despite several not being able to afford laptops, sub-par broadband connection in the area was the main concern. Many wrongly blamed poor connectivity on the area's natural features, especially the sea, often assuming this couldn't be overcome:

- 'If you're on the seafront, you literally don't have any connection at all, phone connection, unless you're on Vodafone' (C1).
- Yeah I've heard that many people around the seas have the same problem. (R 6 7)
- Yeah but we live in a seaside... there is not a problem with the signal, or London or, but the seaside we have no [internet]' (R6).
- 'Yeah we were close to the sea and someone that I used to work with, he thought that the connection was going down due to the high amount of people using the internet in that area because of the shops and stuff like that' (R8).
- 'It's a black hole, Thanet, for some reason, particularly where I'm at at the moment… yeah, we don't get any signal there' (C3).
- 'Because you go through fields [on the bus], I would text you and then I'd have to stop texting you…' (C10).

- ‘There’s dead spots all around Margate. If you go past the Turner, [there’s nothing] until you get to Cliftonville. You can’t even make a call… it’s really whack’ (C7).
- ‘…from Spain Road, yeah, there’s no internet. Like I went to see his mum the other day, I couldn’t get on the phone and it was important phone calls I had to make, there’s no signal in Cliftonville’ (R2).
- Because that’s just how it is, you know, it’s the sea and everybody around the sea don’t get that connection’ (R7).

Some knew that the poor broadband was nothing to do with natural features, instead noting problems with the providers:

> ‘Margate must go at the bottom of the list. I’m talking big corporations. Even with my new house now, for us to get Virgin… it was a big palaver because nothing had ever been put down that street in Margate. And this is the poshest street in Margate’ (C7).

> ‘I only really experienced [bad connectivity] in Margate, to be honest… Yeah, it wasn’t as apparent in London as it is in Margate.’ She was one of many who had resorted to patience and resignation of a sort: ‘So there are quite a few spots where it’ll just cut out. Me and my friends stay on the phone because we’re aware that it’s a spot where it’s cut out and then it’ll probably reconnect in a bit’ (R1).

People told us that getting broadband had taken between a month to ‘over a year now [and still waiting]’ (R2) and ‘I get messages every month saying, “Oh, we’re working on it”’ (R4). Frustrations were high and many were confused about the poor service: ‘we’re even with PlusNet, so there’s like this whole thing with PlusNet and then there’s the BT infrastructure thing, and the BT part took much longer than it was supposed to, and then even after they were connected, they were sent back and forth’ (C6). Some found the waiting period distressing:

> ‘…when they came to install it – I know this sounds really weird – I found it traumatic. It was like these people were sending you all these things, they’re coming, they’re coming. Then they came in and they couldn’t because there wasn’t a point for it, so then they had to make another appointment and come back. So yeah, they said it would only take two weeks and it took about six weeks’ (R1).

Figure 9 .Digital Resilience May 2022 . Photo by Rachel Stuart

Resilience and Social Capital:

Many people told us about innovative, clever, and adept 'life hacks' for dealing with DP—this was mostly to do with poor broadband. Those with significant social capital were able to demand proper service:

> '…when we were with BT, I had to convince the local BT guy to go to my box to tell me what was going on in the box so I could call BT up and say, "I want fibre optic," (laughs). And they were like, "There's none left in your area," and I was like, "There is 14A Unit 7, a spot free, I want that spot" (C1).
>
> 'It was my friend who said, "No, no, you've got rights to services. Phone them back up and tell them that." So within a week, they came and dug up the road and gave me the rights to services' (C7).

Others had less understanding of the necessary infrastructure: a family conversation between three interviewees went:

> 'when we live in Margate and we had Wi-Fi, we pay for Three network and we still didn't have network. And after they told us if you want a good signal, you need to buy some boxes.'
>
> 'Yeah, it's the black things.' (By 'black things' we assume they mean a router).
>
> 'Black things.'
>
> 'Black things and just five numbers' (R 2,3,4).

One Creative told us she had 'got a really big casting job for a big national advert and I really struggled to do my job properly' because of the poor broadband. However, she developed her social capital by making friends with the local librarians and then worked in the library for weeks.

While those with social and educational capital that they could deploy to argue with digital providers or sort out alternate working spaces had some satisfaction, people with less social and educational capital fared less well: 'I even phoned my provider, you know, I said like, please like improve my connections because I've got online teaching at home from university and the children, I said or help me out, give me better connection or something, but they didn't do nothing' (R6).

SECTION FOUR: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

The British Academy commissioned this report as part of a project that sets out to study digital poverty from multiple perspectives, in order to 'underpin ongoing and new policy programmes at the Academy in relation to digital societies and cultures.' In this report we have deployed in-depth, rich, personal accounts from a small sample of twenty-one in-person interviews with a mixture of Roma and Creatives. The data have been analysed and presented under three headings: Skills, Productivity and Infrastructure.

Overall, digital poverty affects peoples' lives on a day-to-day basis – not just their ability to work and support themselves and their families but also their confidence to interact digitally with the external world. Whereas, the literature has several ways of defining digital poverty that people can relate to, our study shows that the relationship between people and digital poverty is not passive. Instead, many interviewees that might meet the literature's criteria of digital poverty, didn't think of themselves as being digitally poor. Rather than waiting for someone else to mitigate their apparent poverty, they took matters into their own hands, using their social capital, however meagre, to address shortfalls in the infrastructure available to them. The effects of digital poverty on productivity is significant. There is the direct effect of people not being able to attend online interviews, access job vacancies and the like. There are deeper, longer-lasting effects on their confidence, frustration and stress levels and, ultimately, the feeling of being ground down by the inability to overcome digital barriers that exist in Margate but not, say, in London. Productivity and place are interrelated and place, combined with poor digital infrastructure, compounds the effects of digital poverty. People are stuck in a digital rut.

SECTION FIVE: CONCLUSION

We have discussed examples of digital poverty and exclusion as well as optimistic resilience within Margate. We have revealed a complex and nuanced landscape that excludes both Roma and economically constrained Creatives from being able to access the necessary digital resources to make a more secure future for both themselves and Margate.

DP has no easy definition. It is caused by intersecting factors including, but not limited to, money. We found that patchy, intermittent or unreliable broadband was, in Margate, the major cause of DP, closely followed by lack of skills and knowledge. It affected lives in terms of relationships, education, earning capacity, developing skills, and even the ability to shop. Stress resulting from bad connections added to lack of wellbeing, feelings of social and familial disconnection, and of course, ability to engage with work. This stress was felt across the small sample of the community that we engaged with. Although those with the social capital that allowed them to successfully argue with and push local authorities fared better, and those with more knowledge of the practicalities of connections fared better still, the time and effort necessary to do this impacted them too. People working to gain degrees, enjoy newfound sobriety, give their children the best opportunities they could, etc. were thwarted. For many, connecting to the internet meant physical labour—moving about the house to connect, moving about the town by car or by foot. This showed resilience and initiative but of course took away from other endeavours and was totally unavailable to anybody with mobility issues or caring responsibilities that prevented movement.

Margate currently fails to provide adequate digital infrastructure. Without it, the Creatives who have bought so much potential optimism to the town could be squeezed because of DP. However, this is not the only tragedy that Margate seems incapable of averting because of its fixed gaze on art as the only way to regenerate the area. A failure to address Margate's inhabitants' needs, including those of the Roma, prevents Margate from other forms of regeneration that fall outside of the remit of the creative arts but are needed if its former economic success can be revisited.

One respondent drew together many of the themes we note here. They spoke of local infrastructure and the need for it to work for people across the community:

> 'But surely town or council should have some kind of mast that is free. Do you know what I mean? Or that estate should have it, or pockets, you know? And even for business, not just for people in poverty but for people in business… 'If you've got a girl selling candles and cat bags and she's got four online orders, she can't send those orders out until she gets home, back to her yard, because there's no fucking internet there' (C7).

They linked individuals to businesses, and then to Margate as an interconnected community that needs good digital connectivity to thrive. This very locally yet inclusive focus is part of what we mean by policy makers needing to work, practically and logistically, at the hyperlocal level: in order to connect people and business to local, national, and international worlds *and* in order to enhance the local. This circle of connectivity makes the hyperlocal global, whilst enhancing the robustness and resilience

of the local. In other words, the fictional 'girl selling candles' needs broadband that will connect her internationally in order to thrive, but her business' wellbeing will directly enhance the lives in close physical proximity around her. This may seem an obvious conclusion to make, but it is necessary that policymakers and network providers understand that this is precisely why universal strong broadband is a need not a want. As one of our respondents reminded us: 'It's not a luxury anymore, the internet' (C7).

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