Appendix Six – Regional Policy Briefing

Digital Poverty Transformation: Accessing Digital Services in Rural Northwest Communities

Regional Policy Briefing

About the Work Foundation

The Work Foundation is the leading think tank for improving work in the UK. We have been an authoritative, independent source of ideas and analysis on the labour market and the wider economy for over a hundred years. As the pace of economic change continues to disrupt the ways we work and do business, our mission is to support everyone in the UK to access rewarding and high-quality work and enable businesses to realise the potential of their teams. To do this, we engage directly with practitioners, businesses and workers, producing rigorous applied research that allows us to develop practical solutions and policy recommendations to tackle the challenges facing the world of work. We are part of Lancaster University's Management School, and work with a range of partners and organisations across our research programmes.

Acknowledgements

A number of individuals and organisations help made this work possible. The market research agency, Blue Marble, carried out the survey of rural residents in North West England. This briefing sets out findings from a study undertaken in partnership between the Work Foundation and academic colleagues within Lancaster University's Management School: Professor Katy Mason. Dr Sharon Wagg, Professor Niall Hayes and Dr Bingbing Ge, with the research kindly supported by the British Academy. An expert policy workshop was convened for the project and thanks are extended to the attendees that generously contributed at the event.

Glossary

Digital poverty:

The inability to interact with the online world fully, when, where and how an individual needs to.

Rural North West England:

Areas across Cheshire, Cumbria and Lancashire which are not major metropolitan areas or larger cities and towns but settlements with a population of less than 10,000, such as villages or more isolated hamlets or dwellings.

Universal Credit:

A means-tested benefit for people of working age who are not in employment or on a low income. Universal Credit replaced six means-tested benefits previously available.

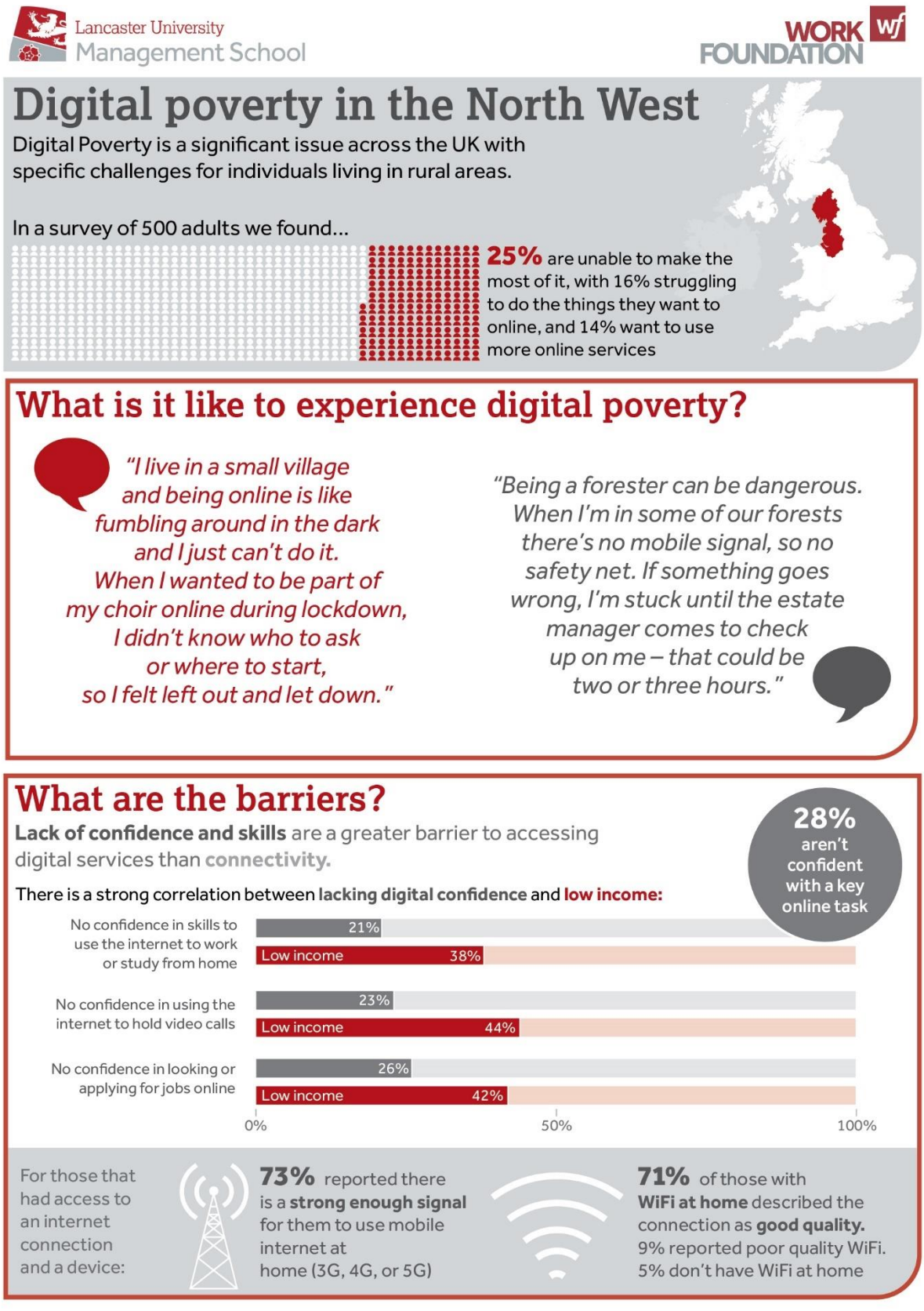
Executive Summary

A variety of interrelated factors drive digital poverty, including cost, connectivity and confidence. Our research focussed on the experiences of those living in rural communities in North West England found that digital poverty presents in specific instances. Individuals can face real barriers when attempting to navigate the welfare system or applying for a job online for the first time. Rather than categorising people as either being in digital poverty or not, interventions must be designed to meet the specific moments of digital poverty that people face.

Across our quantitative survey of over 500 rural residents living in the North West, and qualitative interviews, we found:

- 28% of the entire sample aren't confident completing a key digital task
    - The two skills that respondents had the most trouble with were: looking for work or applying for jobs online (26%) or video calls using Zoom, Microsoft Teams etc (23%)
- In responding to these challenges, one in five of our survey sample would ask family or friends for help – 22%, with older participants and those on lower incomes even more likely to do so.
- Survey results found that while 95% of the sample have access to the internet through broadband or WiFi, just a quarter of respondents are unable to make the most of it – either having trouble doing the things they want to do on the internet or wanting to use more online services than they currently do
- Older people (aged 65+) and those on lower incomes are more likely to experience forms of digital poverty in rural areas.

Figure 1



Informed by this evidence, local and regional Government should take a strategic approach to tackling digital poverty at a local level. This briefing outlines policy recommendations that could

catalyse such approaches and ensure that online digital services work as inclusive vehicles rather than as a cleft of inequality.

We call for digital poverty interventions to focus on:

- Distinct needs experienced through life stage transitions such as retirement or entering the world of work for the first time;
- Specific tasks and services where confidence is low, rather than digital literacy or inclusion as a whole;
- Supporting peer-to-peer learning models.

In driving these initiatives forward Local Government should work with the third sector and other bodies to:

- Harness social value investment from commissioned large-scale connectivity partnerships, to target educational outreach to the rural residents at the greatest risk of digital poverty;
- Incentivise job platforms and recruiters to conduct outreach to assist rural residents with online job searches and applications;
- Undertake peer-to-peer outreach to boost confidence in accessing digital services.

Introduction

More than ever, public services require users to engage with digital platforms. Across welfare, health and housing, the 'Digital-by-Default' policy agenda has become the standard approach for service delivery.[i] As a consequence, individuals without a secure digital connection or confidence to carry out tasks online, are at severe risk of not being able to access to critical services.

This risk is heightened in rural areas. Research from the Good Things Foundation indicates that on average 80% of rural households in the UK have standard broadband availability compared to 98% in urban households.[ii] Individuals experiencing digital poverty in rural areas are less likely to have alternative ways to access services within their local community. 17% of England's population live in rural areas according to research by DEFRA[iii] and this segment of the population have persistently been at a disadvantage with regard to digital connectivity. Government have recognised the importance of increased connectivity within its Levelling Up White Paper - pledging that by 2030 the UK will have nationwide gigabit-capable broadband and 4G coverage, with 5G coverage for the majority of the population.[iv]

Connectivity barriers could be impairing business growth in rural areas, which contribute 16% of England's economy with small businesses key to economic activity – 71% of workers across rural areas are employed by SMEs, compared to 41% in urban areas.[v]

In the North West of England, progress towards closing the digital divide has been slow in comparison with other regions. The UK's Digital Inclusion Strategy, published in 2014, set out a target to reduce the number of people offline by 25% every two years. But across 2017-2019, the North West only achieved a 15.4% reduction rate, with the region ninth out of twelve in in making progress to bridge the digital divide.

The UK is one of the most geographically unequal economies within the OECD. Equal access to digital services will be essential to the Government's ambitions to address this.[vi] It is also worth noting that employment rates are 3% higher in urban settings compared to rural areas, within England. Predominantly urban areas in England also enjoy higher workplace-based earnings over rural places - at £25,400 (excluding London) to £22,900 outside of urban places.[vii]

This briefing is based on a study undertaken to understand the drivers of digital poverty among rural communities in the North West, an area home to large rural areas and a diverse local economy. Evidence generated through this research will be relevant to policy development in the North West, but also for other regions and at a national level. An accompanying national policy briefing sets out how our evidence should inform Central Government policy.

The statistics cited are based on a survey of 501 individuals living in rural areas in the North West, between 25th February and 13th March, with further depth interviews conducted with 16 survey respondents experiencing digital poverty. Output from an expert policy workshop is also included within the briefing.

What is digital poverty?

We draw on a Digital Poverty Alliance definition of "*digital poverty*" for this research - as *"the inability to interact with the online world fully, when, where and how an individual needs to."* [viii]

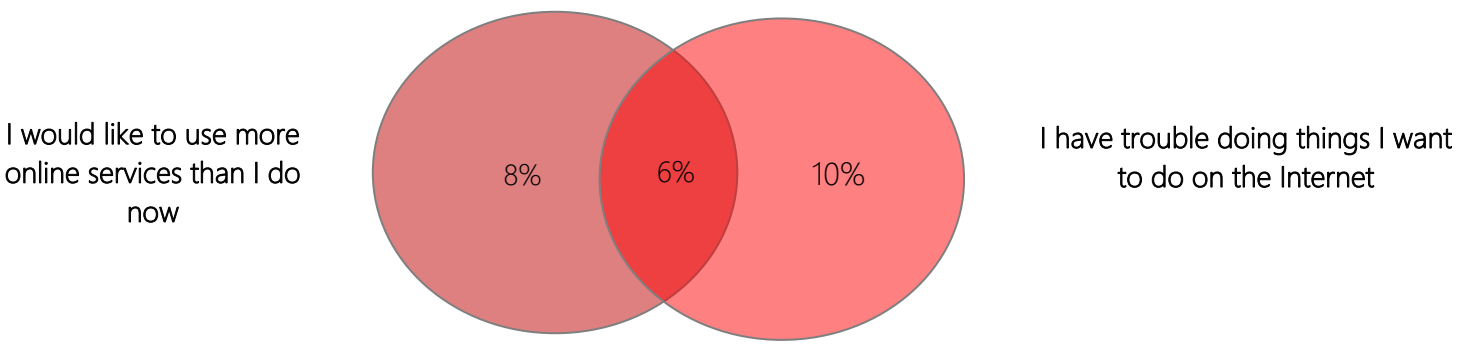
Context is essential here: digital poverty occurs where a specific need cannot be achieved through digital engagement.

While for one individual this might be around engaging in social media, another person may experience digital poverty in relation to needing to access Universal Credit online. Although digital poverty is closely linked with socio-economic conditions, it is distinct from economic poverty. Individuals who are not on a low income may face other barriers to digital services[ix], including confidence and connectivity. Digital poverty can be experienced despite having a good income. As this briefing sets out, besides costs, there are broader drivers of digital poverty which include confidence and connectivity.

Key findings

This research has explored the ways that digital poverty is impacting rural residents in North West England. Survey results found that 95% of the sample have access to the internet through broadband/WiFi, and nine in ten agreed that the internet provides advantages in every-day life. However, just a quarter of respondents were able to make the most of that, with 14% saying they would like to use more online services and 16% reporting they have trouble doing things that they want to do online. 24% of the sample have a perceived lack of digital fulfilment, in that they would like to use more online services. but have trouble doing so

Figure 2



Any perceived lack of digital fulfilment:
24%

Age, income and education are linked with digital poverty

There are strong demographic and socio-economic drivers underpinning attitudes to internet use and fulfilment. For example, while the overall proportion of respondents who had trouble doing things they wanted to do online was 16%, this rises to 28% among respondents of 65 years and above and 32% of those whose household income is £20,000 or less.

Older people and those on a lower income those who had completed fewer years of formal education are at greater risk of experiencing digital poverty. There is a strong correlation between lacking digital skills and being on a low income.

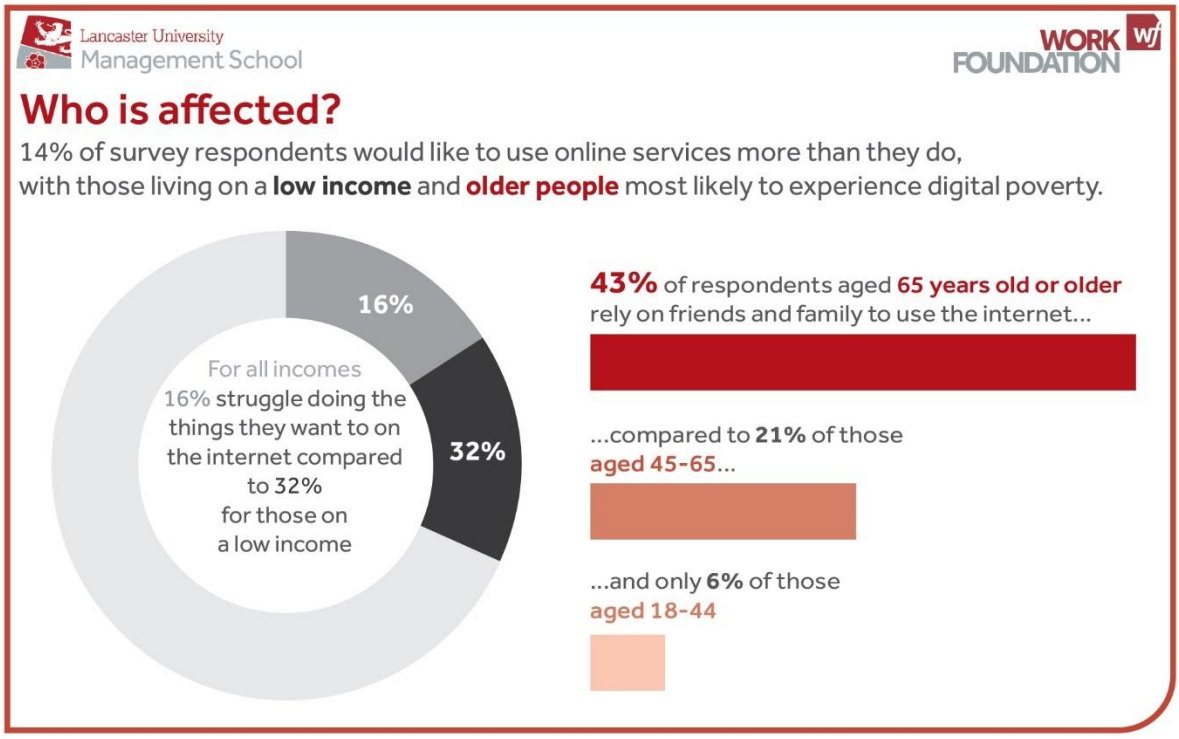
Our research found that digital poverty is exhibited in moments in which there are multiple connections between different drivers, such as accessibility and cost.

Digital poverty is preventing individuals from making the most of key online services. 79% of the sample stated that they were confident to work or study from home, with this dropping to 62% among the respondents from a household which has an income of £20,000.

There are similar differences across other digital skills, with survey respondents who report a household income of £20,000 or less demonstrating less confidence:

- Downloading or saving photos you find online: 81% - 70%
- Emailing or other online messaging: 89% - 79%
- Video calls using Zoom, Microsoft Teams etc: 77% - 56%

Figure 3



The degree to which rural residents can access devices and the extent to which affordability constraints hinder their usage, are closely related with having more limited digital skills. Confidence is also strongly correlated with age - 28% of the entire sample lack a form of digital skills but this rises to over half of those aged 65 and above.

Our evidence highlights a set of factors which drive digital poverty, manifesting in relation to specific digital tasks, creating moments of digital inclusion and exclusion. In navigating potential moments of digital poverty, individuals will weigh up decisions and actions in ways that could either be enabling or disabling; evaluating where engagement with the digital world offers sufficient benefits to outweigh the risks; and assessing trade-offs and remedial action for poor connectivity against carrying on without taking remedial measures. Policy measures must be based around these key 'touch points' and moments at which lacking engagement can result in poor outcomes for residents who require online public services.

Labour market characteristics of Rural North West communities

With a rich industrial heritage, manufacturing remains a prominent sector within the North West, with 9% of the region's jobs overall. Other big employers include service sectors such as retail and logistics (21%), health (14%) and accommodation and food services (7%).[x] While not as large, the agricultural sector is significant in the region with more than 80% of the land area in the North West designated as rural. The region is also host to a cluster of high-tech industries which link closely to Higher Education Institutes, notably the aerospace sector which, at £7 billion, contributes one quarter of the UK's overall turnover from the sector. Across the board, the majority of firms (83%) in the region are micro-sized with fewer than 10 employees. 16% are SMEs employing between 10 and 249 people, and just 0.4% (or 1,300 firms) employ 250+ people.[xi]

Across the three counties that comprise the North West, our survey had more respondents from Lancashire, at 43% of the sample, followed by 23% and 34% for Cumbria and Cheshire respectively.

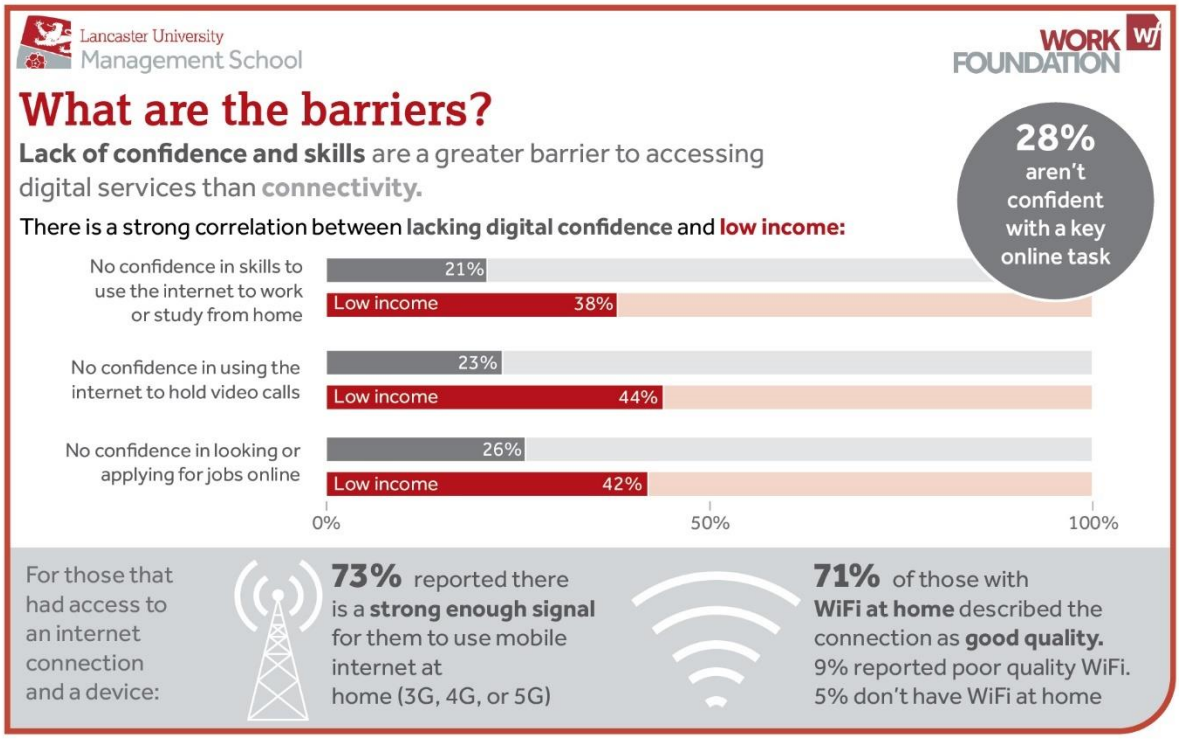
What are the drivers of digital poverty in the Rural North West of England?

Lacking confidence is a strong driver of digital poverty

Our research found that inability to effectively carry out key online tasks and services was a key driver of digital poverty:

- 28% of the sample lack one form of digital skills across the measures asked about: e.g. installing apps, online banking.
- The two skills that respondents had the most trouble with were: looking for work or applying for jobs online (26%) or video calls using Zoom, Microsoft Teams etc (23%)

Figure 4



Again, older and respondents on low incomes exhibited even further struggles with these tasks.

Given the shift to remote working resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, it is concerning that such a high proportion of the rural population within the North West struggle with these skills. Data taken from the Annual Population Survey, in 2020 shows that rural areas have a higher rate of home working than urban places (25% to 16%).[xii] And with the Covid-19 pandemic having resulted in more workers moving to rural locations where they can work remotely, there is a risk that the dividing line between those who are digitally engaged and able to benefit as a result, and those who experience digital poverty, will become sharper.

For those lacking confidence in online job searches and applications, they may well struggle. Even for jobs that don't are not computer-based, such as customer service within the hospitality industry, recruitment will predominantly be conducted online. Evidence also shows that a deficit of digital skills is associated with lower wages – with proficiency shown to lead to an increase in earnings of between 3% and 10%.[xiii] There appears to be a compounding dynamic occurring with those with less digital competence struggling to engage with vital online services, despite their greater need for them. And lacking of confidence and familiarity with key digital tasks such as making online payments can also be detrimental. Recent reports found that council tax rebates of £150, that Government has made available to poorer households, are being delayed for consumers who do not pay council tax by direct debit.[xiv]

Lacking confidence and willingness to engage with digital activities may also be influenced by a lack of trust which prior research has shown to be a driver of digital exclusion.[xv] 16% of the survey sample lacked confidence in engaging with online banking services and reservations around this activity were also evident within the qualitative interviews conducted:

"I should do [online banking] because it saves you money in the end just getting information is so much easier but I'm just old-fashioned, I just hold back over time. But I know at some stage I will have to because I suspect that even cheques will get faded out soon."

"I changed bank because they closed my branch in my village. I don't want to be doing it online."

In responding to challenges such as this, a high proportion of the survey sample would ask family or friends for help – 22%, with older participants and those on lower incomes even more likely to do so.

"Family or friends help. I've got neighbours that are pretty good upstairs… and a friend just round the corner sorted something out on my phone for me."

Lacking confidence with digital technology could also impair people from engaging with online social forums, which during the pandemic sprung up to replace in-person meetings:

"During lockdown I joined the isolation choir, but I didn't feel I could go ahead with it, because I didn't feel I could do the… where you have to send in what you're singing, record yourself singing and send it in. I couldn't go the full way with that, which I was a bit sorry about really…… I just hadn't got anybody to ask about it, so I didn't continue with that. Never mind, I enjoyed the rehearsals anyway."

Lacking access as a driver of digital poverty

Access is one element of digital poverty among rural North West communities but is far from the only factor that prevents people from engaging with digital services. Fixed broadband is broadly affordable, with 74% of respondents agreeing that it is. There are, however, barriers to access experienced by individuals in rural North West. Our survey found that:

- 13% of the sample have poor quality or no Wi-Fi
- 1 in 5 have no mobile broadband

High speed internet access has been persistently lower in rural areas compared to urban ones. Ofcom data shows that 98% of urban areas in the UK enjoy a superfast broadband connection which drops to 83% among rural places.[xvi] Research shows that the absence of digital infrastructure in rural areas can negatively affect communities, with young people moving to cities to pursue lifestyles closely bound up in digital worlds.[xvii]

Qualitative findings highlighted that participants with poor digital connectivity could be vulnerable in the event of their connectivity being cut-off, lacking a 'plan B'. This could result in people needing to adapt their approach in ways that are not conducive to the task at hand, such as when working from home:

"I have to have the hub in a certain place [in my house] otherwise it's very difficult for me to pick up a signal. I tend to work in the kitchen where I've got a goods surface to work on but I have to go where the walls aren't too thick to make a call."

For lower paid workers in particular, lacking access or unreliable broadband or mobile signal could be a key cause of concern as disruption to work may result in a loss of salary or not being paid, as

our qualitative research found. Adaptive practice also included individuals relying on their mobile phone data at home, over and above their Wi-Fi connection.

Qualitative findings also showed how a lacking trust in technical reliability also impacted both upon people's ability and willingness and ability to work from home, which in the context of Covid-19 and the health challenges it presented, could give rise to challenging situations.

"…I literally have to go into an office, during lockdowns principally because working from home was not an option for me. Which was very frustrating because we do have clinical vulnerability in the house. So, it's not without consequence…. It's two trains… more than one hour away"

"I probably wouldn't be able to hold down a job that relied on the internet… I am not confident in working from home… because I wouldn't… especially if it was… the internet is fine, most of the time. It's the phones, the phones are bad. I'm not confident that I would be able to work a job where I would have to use the phone, because it would just be so unreliable."

Accessibility challenges also included mobile coverage and reliability, which could result in everyday practices of work needing to be altered. Mobile phone coverage was important to participants who were aware of 'not spots' in their area:

"you really have to go to the top of the drive if you want to use that [mobile signal]. It dramatically improves at the top of the drive……. I think people are used to it. People who know us are used to it and they probably email us before they'd text us."

Affordability concerns and low consumer confidence are limiting digital engagement

People living in rural areas have to contend with higher prices for fast broadband connectivity, with previous survey evidence showing a 76% higher price than urban areas.[xviii] Coupled with the cost of devices, this can present a disincentive to engaging with the digital world.

Across the affordability measures the survey sample was asked about, 19% exhibited some form of cost barrier, whether in relation to broadband access, mobile phone contract data and access to devices. Cost is certainly a driver of digital poverty and unsurprisingly, households on low incomes are more adversely affected, which will compound inequality with limited connectivity (more likely to be experienced in low income households) limiting earning potential in of itself. 45% of the survey sample found their PC, home broadband and mobile and contract with data affordable, but this drops to 25% among households with an income of £20,000 or less.

"I would probably get a more modern phone [a smartphone] if it was more affordable But I have a limited income at the moment so I have to watch what I'm spending… I can't just go out and spend a few hundred pounds on a phone, I would maybe like to…"

Qualitative findings provide rich context around the ways through which digital cost requirements interface with other expenses that rural households need to meet, which can create a struggle to balance other costs and results in other forms of poverty. Given the current cost of living crisis, these expenses will be felt all the more severely with the costs of essentials outpacing wages and welfare benefits. And personal circumstances were closely interwoven with choices that people had to make when deciding on how and to what extent they can afford to make use of digital technologies.

"maybe if I didn't have a child, it wouldn't have bothered me so much."

"I felt really stuck where I was. The boiler kept breaking. The internet was … always going off; and for a while, I was so skint, … because I was paying two mobile phone contracts."

Qualitative findings also highlighted how low levels of consumer confidence and technical understanding could result in people committing to costly and sub-optimal contracts that they are then tied in to, such as product-service contract bundles that include Wi-Fi and mobile data services:

"My internet was terrible… loads of people didn't [have reliable connectivity] but the best one [connectivity] was if you went up to the third floor… you could kind of get signal there, or you could go outside and get signal. But that was about it. So, I changed my mobile phone connection, because I was in a contract with one company which I didn't get any signal for. So, I phoned them and said, "I don't get any signal here, you know, in my own home and I'm a new mum, a single parent, do you think I could maybe cancel this contract?", "not really, no". So, I finished… I just ended up paying out that whilst opening up another and at the time, … I was really… yes, really skint…."

How can we best design interventions to address digital poverty?

It is vital that interventions are designed in relation to the local context and the range of services that are available, such as transport, community hubs and local libraries.

If a rural area does not have access to frequent and reliable public transport, many residents will have difficulty travelling to facilities that could host digital skills training. Rural bus services in particular have been declining, with local authority-supported provision falling by 54% between 2011/2012 and 2019/2020.[xix]

This highlights the challenge in the provision of interventions in rural areas overall. Interventions will need to be designed so that they can be easily accessed and do not deter people from engaging; particularly as potential service users will already lack confidence or could experience other barriers, such as learning difficulties or poor mental health. In the example of physical access, where lacking public transport may hinder take-up, it will be necessary to reach people 'where they are', embedding interventions within community settings, such as village halls.

Our research identified a set of measures that can helpfully frame interventions that seek to address digital poverty in rural areas:

1. Tailor interventions and support to meet needs at specific points in time

Previous research has highlighted the need for digital initiatives to fully reflect social purpose and practices within community settings, if they are to drive effective take up.[xx] As someone enters retirement, becomes a carer or applies for benefits like Universal Credit, these transitions will each come with different digital requirements. Interventions should be focussed on supporting individuals to access the services they need to when they need them, rather than taking a more general approach.

Binary distinctions between people who are digitally included as opposed to the digitally excluded are not helpful in framing interventions to address digital poverty. Individuals experiencing a specific problem with digital access and engagement are more likely to engage with forms of education and support that speak to the nature of the challenge they face. Initiatives seeking to help people to search for work and submit job applications online would be more salient to job seekers than a more generic workshop on digital skills, for example. With just under a quarter (24%) of the survey sample indicating a lack of digital fulfilment, there are clearly a range of activities that people require support around, and interventions are best framed on these specifically.

Policy recommendation

Job websites and recruiters should work with local authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and other partners to conduct outreach with rural residents with low confidence in looking for jobs online to improve accessibility and user experience.

Moving into a new job or re-entering the workforce after having received Universal Credit is a significant transition. Our research found that there is a lack of confidence in looking for work and submitting online applications.

Job search platforms, recruiters and local bodies such as councils and LEPs should work in partnership to build confidence among rural residents in searching and applying for jobs online, through outreach activities in local settings and at home. This activity should be coordinated with job centres and employment support programmes, such as JETS and the Work and Health Programme. Local and regional authorities should embed this activity within digital strategies.

There will be a range of events that could host this form of outreach. Job fairs could be one opportunity to help reach rural residents in need of support, bringing together employers, recruiters and job search websites to offer training. It will also be necessary to extend support beyond events at external venues to individuals who require support where they are. This could take the form of telephone calls to guide people in navigating online recruitment platforms, working directly with individuals identified as requiring one-to-one support, following initial outreach activity. Research has shown that standard digital awareness-raising strategies are less effective in rural areas due to the independent nature of the population and less footfall past community venues.[xxi]

Building support into mediums with which some rural residents are more comfortable with is another mechanism through which should be developed and could include a series of short media videos on searching/applying for jobs online, made available through social media.

Policy recommendation

Local authorities should harness social value investment from commissioned large-scale connectivity partnerships, to target educational outreach to the rural residents at the greatest risk of digital poverty, equipping them with the key skills needed to search and apply for jobs online.

Government-led initiatives to increase digital connectivity will involve social value within their procurement processes, and this offer an opportunity to generate new investment for digital outreach and support activities.

The Gigabit project as a notable example, given the scale of investment. Providers applying for Government grants under the Gigabit project are required to demonstrate their approach to delivering social value throughout the procurement process and Government has entrusted local authorities with responsibility in delivering the social value component of the project, [xxii]

Under the Government's guidance, providers bidding for public contracts can focus the social value component of their proposals around a range of skills and employment activities, including involving local stakeholders in community-led initiatives, and the creation of training opportunities for those who face barriers to employment.[xxiii] The specific form that this takes will need to vary according to place and councils already engaged in this process should seek to share their approach through a range of local government forums in order to assist other local authorities to shape their programmes.

It is vital that this investment is channelled to individuals in rural areas with the most acute digital engagement needs and tailored to address the key problems they face.

Peer-to-peer interventions can be well-placed in reaching those who struggle to access services online

Across both the quantitative and qualitative research conducted, intermediaries were shown to be a common form of access for digital services, with numerous instances of families and friends working to bring services, information and connections to those who would otherwise be excluded from them. Drawing on the trust and engagement that peer-to-peer interventions build, and nurture will help to deliver impact for those who are furthest away from engaging confidently with digital services.

A further benefit of peer-to-peer approaches is that, by design, they automatically take in to account the characteristics of the area in which they are sprung. It is far easier to bring training into the context of people's lives, be it in the local village hall, or pub, trusted places, than it is to require people to travel to more distant and formal venues.

Peer-to-peer approaches are also better able to address hidden barriers that can prevent engagement with digital services, such as mental health issues, learning difficulties or English language barriers.

2. Policy recommendation

Local authorities should collaborate with third and private sectors to undertake peer-to-peer outreach to boost confidence in accessing digital services.

This should include Community Covenants, which were outlined in the Government's Levelling Up White Paper as a new form of public service delivery that will empower local actors, including

public bodies and communities themselves, to identify and drive forward solutions to social issues through a series of pilots. [xxiv]

With investment available through public procurement, finance must be coordinated and led by local groups and bodies. Local authorities have an important role to play in coordinating new investment and interventions with existing activity that is being undertaken by the third sector.

Our research found that intermediaries and trusted individuals are key to helping those most at risk of digital poverty to engage across a range of online activity. It is on this basis of trust that interventions seeking to boost digital inclusion must be based.

It is easier to bring support and education to where people are. This may function in different ways, including workshops in community settings such as a village hall; the loan of tablets or other devices accompanied with over-the-phone support; or through models that draw on digital champions to reach people who are struggling with digital tasks. The overriding principal however, for peer-to-peer interventions, is that they are delivered by a trusted person in a trusted place.

Empowering local actors who are best placed to understand the nature of the issues in their area and how best to address them is more likely to be an effective approach.

[please see endnotes at the end of appendix seven – formatting problem prevented us including them here]

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