Understanding digital poverty and inequality in the UK

Executive summary briefing

November 2022

The British Academy
Digital Society

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In 2022, the British Academy commissioned six projects that examined different aspects of digital poverty in the UK, to draw upon the vital insights from the SHAPE disciplines (social sciences, humanities, and the arts for people and the economy) to inform policy thinking around the crucial challenge of addressing inequality – and specifically, the relationship between digital technology and inequality – across the UK.

As digital technology has become increasingly integrated with modern life, the ability to digitally engage has become more and more essential to interacting fully with society and the economy. Systems and services in both public and private contexts are shifting their focus to online forms of delivery, and while this brings new opportunities for social impact and benefit, it also risks creating new challenges and exacerbating inequalities for those who lack the capacity to digitally engage, whether due to insufficient access, skills, resources, or motivation.

Disparities in levels and types of digital access, digital skills, usage, and outcomes exist across the UK, aligning with the 'three levels' of the digital divide: poor access to digital technologies (first level), poor digital literacy and skills (second level), and a reduced ability to exploit digital resources and transform them into tangible social benefits (third level). We note the Digital Poverty Alliance's definition of 'digital poverty' as "the inability to interact with the online world fully, when, where, and how an individual needs to." As we discuss in this report, inequalities and technologies are both subject to change over time, so it is important to have a flexible definition – the shape of digital poverty may look different from place to place and time to time.

We recognise that a variety of contested terms exist in this space, such as digital exclusion and inclusion, digital inequality, digital poverty, and the digital divide. We see the lessons here as relevant to understanding how to support those people who are most marginalised and at need in the UK (especially in relation to digital engagement), irrespective of the terms and definitions one may choose to adopt.

This briefing highlights the six policy lessons that emerged from an analysis of the outputs produced by the six commissioned projects. These lessons, summarised below, can shape policy thinking on how to effectively address digital poverty and its impacts across the UK.

Policy lesson 1: Addressing digital poverty involves more than improving access – interventions must empower people and places to benefit from digital access.

Efforts to improve and invest in digital infrastructure (access, connectivity and devices) should take into account the physical and social context of place and locality; for instance, development of digital infrastructure in new build housing estates should be responsive to local contexts including how people live and work, and the choice of services required. Moreover, while developing digital infrastructure to improve access is crucial, to be effective it needs to be supplemented with initiatives that build digital literacy and skills and improve people's ability to make full use of digital resources and transform them into tangible social benefits in their everyday, local contexts.

- Digital poverty emerges in different ways in urban and rural contexts, and is shaped by physical (landscape, housing, technologies) and social elements (demographic inequalities, changing populations).

- Local authorities are likely to have a deeper understanding of their local contexts and needs (e.g. the local socio-economic and demographic profile of the area, local infrastructure and housing stock) than central government, which can inform policy to tackle digital exclusion at the local level.

Policy lesson 2: Local resources and intermediaries can be valuable assets in tackling place-based digital poverty, and the public sector has a crucial role to play in enabling them.

Local organisations, who often have built trust with local communities through existing relationships, are often best placed to reach digitally excluded populations. However, many such organisations are financially stretched and may struggle to provide people with wrap-around digital skills support or relevant referrals. People on low incomes or who lack internet at home often rely on public places for internet use. The public sector can play a vital role enabling and supporting local resources and infrastructure through co-ordination, knowledge sharing, and funding (both in terms of provision and enabling access to funding channels).

- Partnerships with local charities, business and civil society organisations can help to better position local authorities to address local digital needs and can provide more social value return on investment. Policy should ensure that partner organisations have the appropriate funding and digital skill sets to adequately support others.

- The efficacy of intermediary support varies with people's digital needs and contexts of use. Community anchor institutions (such as libraries, churches, gyms, banks, pubs) offer valuable spaces and networks within which different digital services can be provided, particularly when coupled with adequately resourced intermediaries (e.g. community champions).

- Digital technologies should be adapted to the personal and cultural activities and needs of a community.

Example options:

Schools can involve both children and parents in digital competency programmes; the use of peer-to-peer outreach to boost people's confidence in accessing digital services; incentivising job platforms and recruiters to conduct outreach to assist local residents with online job searches and applications.

Policy lesson 3: Strategies to tackle digital poverty are important components of broader policies of tackling inequality.

Digital poverty is associated with deprivation and social inequalities more broadly. This association points to the existence of a 'double loop' of inequalities, where offline inequalities reinforce digital inequalities, which in turn reinforce further social inequalities. Identifying and addressing digital poverty and its effects is therefore an important consideration for policies aimed at tackling broader social inequalities, such as the provision of Universal Credit.

• Life can be more expensive for the digitally disadvantaged, further compounding existing social inequalities as well as the unequal effects of crises. Policy should consider how different levels of support can be provided across demographics - including to the digitally excluded on relatively higher incomes to ensure that they do not fall into a cycle of worsening inequality.

> **Example options:**
>
> Central government support to local authorities to identify local needs and provide differentiated programmes according to different levels of digital poverty; making obligatory the provision of social tariffs by internet service providers, along with initiatives to ensure that those eligible are aware of them (e.g. Universal Credit claimants).

• Policies that address other issues related to inequalities, such as overcrowding, precarious living circumstances, and household energy efficiency, can have beneficial knock-on effects by reducing the likelihood of people falling into digital poverty. Digital poverty and other forms of inequality (e.g. housing inequality) need to be tackled across government departments and not in policy silos.

> **Example option:**
>
> Digital poverty amongst 16 to 24-year-olds could be alleviated by addressing lack of reading and writing skills in this age group.

• Not everyone will be able to – or want to – get online. Service providers (including housing providers, GP surgeries and banks) should ensure that people are given a choice as to whether they would like to use the internet to access their services. Efforts should be made to ensure that for those not using online services, the quality of service and ease of access to it remains high.

Policy lesson 4: Policies should consider how and why intersecting inequalities are likely to exacerbate digital poverty, and design interventions that can benefit those most at risk of digital poverty.

When inequalities intersect, they compound to create intensified impacts on certain groups and demographics. Tackling these complex dynamics of inequality requires connected and scaled approaches at local, regional, and national levels.

- Social value outcomes should be emphasised in investments in large scale connectivity partnerships (e.g. the UK's Project Gigabit), to tackle the complex overlap of digital and social inequality.

- Tailored initiatives can be implemented for those groups most at risk of digital poverty. These can be formulated at both local and national scales.

   Example options:

   NHS programmes that provide training and support to enable vulnerable people to use technologies for health-related needs; reviewing social housing bidding processed to ensure that the digital excluded are not placed at further disadvantage; the national provision of free Wi-Fi in temporary and sheltered accommodation, for example through 'Zero rating' government websites.

Policy lesson 5: People can move in and out of digital poverty over time.

Policy should avoid binary assumptions that digital poverty is something that a person either does or does not experience or that once someone has been 'lifted out' of digital poverty they will remain digitally included for life. Crucially, digital poverty hinders people's opportunities over time, so that it becomes harder for someone to move out of digital poverty the longer they remain digitally excluded.

- It is more useful to consider digital poverty as a continuum that people can experience to different degrees at different times. The rising cost of living will create financial pressures for those people 'on the edge' of digital poverty, which may push them into digital poverty. Policies can aim to provide safety nets to prevent this happening.

   Example option:

   The creation of measures to provide affordable broadband internet service, specific digital skills training and device support targeted toward single parents (who are one of the groups most at risk of becoming digitally excluded).

- Digital inclusion is best seen as a lifelong process rather than a singular event. Policies that include sets of interventions to address short-, medium- and long-term experiences of digital poverty will be better positioned to tackle digital poverty as a lifelong process.

Example option:

The implementation of educational paths in the use of the internet and technologies at all educational levels, including the provision of suitable tools, valid technical support, and training in digital competencies for capital enhancing activities.

Policy lesson 6: Consider policy interventions that can adapt to demographic and economic changes, through consistent and long-term investment.

The social demographics and economies of the UK – within localities, regions, and as a whole – are changing over time and under the influence of broader policy agendas. An ongoing understanding of the changing populations and needs of a place is required to formulate policies around digital poverty (and poverty generally) that are attuned to both present and future needs.

- An ongoing understanding of the changing populations and needs of a place is required to formulate policies that are attuned to both present and future needs. Local and regional authorities, when working with civil organisations, charities, and businesses, will be best placed to understand local and regional needs and adjust to situations on the ground, including changing economies and demographics. Consistent investment in, and support for, decentralised interventions over medium- to long-term timescales can help address digital poverty.

Example option:

The establishment of a What Works Centre for digital skills to marshal the evidence on approaches to improving confidence and to support a range of bodies engaged in delivering digital skills interventions.

- Interventions should account for periods of transition. Investment in digital infrastructure is often needed over longer timescales, so it is important for policy to consider how the needs of people in a place or region may change more rapidly than new infrastructure can be deployed. Interim policies may be required to address these needs whilst infrastructure is still being developed.

Example option:

Interventions that focus on distinct needs experienced through life stage transitions such as retirement or entering the world of work for the first time.

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To cite this report:
British Academy (2022), *Understanding digital poverty and inequality in the UK: Executive summary briefing*, The British Academy, London

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