

# Developing digital inclusion networks and tackling digital inequalities

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*A Policy Brief outlining lessons and best practice for policy from three British Academy-funded research projects*

## Introduction

Since 2022, the British Academy has conducted an ongoing programme of work around the theme of Digital Society, including a range of activities as part of a project on Digital Technology & Inequality. This has included producing a report on Understanding Digital Poverty and Inequality in the UK that provided a number of lessons to inform policy on how to address digital poverty and its impacts effectively, and a Policy Brief that set out two key challenges for local and central government in tackling digital inequalities and four recommendations for central government to help overcome them. These included recommending the creation of a ‘Digital Inclusion Unit’ in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and that digital access should be considered a critical public service.

Building on this work, in April 2023 the British Academy funded three case study-based research projects on the theme of ‘Technology and Inequality’:

- **‘Co-producing a Theory of Change and Evaluation Framework for Local Authority-led, City-wide Digital Inclusion Programmes’** - Led by Dr Kris Southby and Dr Joanne Trigwell, Leeds Beckett University
- **‘Digital Inclusion Network Development: A Case Study in Derbyshire’** - Led by Dr Sharon Wagg, University of Sheffield
- **‘Exploring Challenges and Best Practice in Addressing Digital Inequalities: A UK Regional Case Study Approach’** - Led by Professor Simeon Yates, University of Liverpool.

These policy-focused research projects aimed to draw on the insights of the SHAPE (Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts for People and the Economy) disciplines to highlight clear and practical lessons for policymakers at local, regional and national levels for tackling digital inequalities, developing digital inclusion programmes, and supporting digital inclusion networks. These lessons are particularly important given that research has shown that digital inequalities and socioeconomic disadvantage can be mutually reinforcing, meaning that a lack of policy focus in tackling digital exclusion can risk compounding digital and socioeconomic inequalities for the most vulnerable.<sup>1</sup>

This Policy Brief highlights some of the findings and new knowledge from these research projects and builds on their recommendations, and our existing evidence base, to offer a set of real-world lessons for policymakers to inform local, regional, and national approaches to promoting digital inclusion. These lessons (as well as the diagrams included in the brief) have been synthesised as part of the British Academy’s Digital Society Policy programme and draw on insights from across the three research projects, and have been refined following a British Academy workshop in November 2023 that brought together policymakers and civil society organisations involved in digital inclusion at different scales. They do not represent formal policy recommendations of the Academy, but they do offer policy audiences with an interest in this area a range of ideas and insights which are supported by evidence and analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> British Academy (2023), Digital Technology & Inequality: Policy Brief, The British Academy, London, p. 2.

## Key lessons for policymakers at the national level

*“That’s something that we’ve regularly called for in a lot of our submissions to government, potentially having that national digital inclusion strategy... where we can all work towards what the government wants to do.”*

Figure 1: Quote from a Liverpool City Region policymaker interviewed as part of Yates et al.’s project.<sup>2</sup>

### Lesson 1: Digital inclusion provision at local and regional levels may be undermined by the lack of a nationally coordinated strategy

The government last published a digital inclusion strategy in 2014, which the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee has argued is now “out of date and insufficient”.<sup>4</sup> The three research projects demonstrate that local and regional approaches to digital inclusion vary from area to area and can benefit from being adapted to meet the needs of local communities.

However, the absence of a coherent UK-wide framework has led to a fragmented landscape of digital inclusion provision that is difficult to map and lacks coordination between areas. Policymakers and civil society organisations interviewed for one of the projects noted that this undermined local and regional digital inclusion provision, leading to fragmented digital strategies regionally and nationally, and to scenarios where local authorities did not have the resources from central government to support their digital strategies and ensure that mitigations were in place for citizens who were digitally excluded.<sup>5</sup>

An updated digital inclusion strategy at the national level could provide an overarching framework of policy guidance for the UK that could help to improve coordination of and communication about digital inclusion provision across regions, nations, and scales of government, while still allowing for local authorities to adopt place-based strategies tailored to the needs of their localities.<sup>6</sup>

*“[A] really important focus for us...is that digital inclusion is seen as a cross-cutting issue across all policy areas. So not just us working independently as a policy area in digital exclusion, but that all other policy areas consider it...at the start of every policy development.”*

Figure 2: Quote from a policymaker in Wales interviewed as part of Yates et al.’s project.<sup>3</sup>

### Lesson 2: Digital inclusion is a cross-cutting policy issue that can impact social and economic policy agendas

Digital inclusion cuts across social and economic policymaking, as digital inequalities can reinforce, and themselves be compounded by, existing socioeconomic inequalities.<sup>7</sup> An updated UK-wide digital inclusion strategy would therefore benefit from embedding considerations around digital inequalities within policy areas across government departments. Relevant policy insights emphasised in the case studies and related work by the British Academy include:

- Requiring digital inclusion impact assessments at the start of new policy development;<sup>8</sup>
- Recruiting more digital inclusion leads with the skills and accountability to integrate digital inclusion agendas into cross-Whitehall decision-making and at different scales of government;<sup>9</sup>
- Creating a Digital Inclusion Unit in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology that can coordinate this work, which the British Academy has previously recommended in its Digital Technology & Inequality Policy Brief.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>2</sup> D’Arcy, J., Polizzi, G., Harris, R., Barrera, P., Yates, S., Yeoman, F. (2024), *Exploring challenges and best practice in addressing digital inequalities: A UK regional case study approach*, University of Liverpool and Liverpool John Moores University, p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> D’Arcy et al., *Exploring challenges and best practice in addressing digital inequalities*, p. 53.

<sup>4</sup> House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee (2023), *3rd Report of Session 2022-2023: Digital Exclusion*, p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> D’Arcy et al., *Exploring challenges and best practice in addressing digital inequalities*, pp. 6-7, 36-38.

<sup>6</sup> See Policy lesson 2 in British Academy (2022), *Understanding digital poverty and inequality in the UK*, The British Academy, London, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> British Academy (2022), *Understanding digital poverty and inequality in the UK*, The British Academy, London, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> D’Arcy et al., *Exploring challenges and best practice in addressing digital inequalities*, p. 49.

<sup>9</sup> D’Arcy et al., *Exploring challenges and best practice in addressing digital inequalities*, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> British Academy (2023), *Digital Technology & Inequality: Policy Brief*, The British Academy, London, p. 3.

## Key lessons for policymakers at regional and local levels

### Lesson 3: Approaches to digital inclusion can benefit from recognising it as an intermediate policy outcome rather than an end in itself

Digital inequalities are complex and tackling them requires a holistic view of the wider socioeconomic inequalities faced by those experiencing digital exclusion and how these inequalities can interact with and reinforce each other. It is emphasised across the three reports that the most effective, nuanced approaches to digital inclusion involve viewing it as:

- An intermediate outcome that should aim to improve the quality of life for people (particularly those with complex needs) in ways that are meaningful to them and enable communities to better meet their needs;
- An ongoing and iterative process that can take time, with digital inclusion support a key component within a broader set of interconnected activities and interventions.

**Info Box 1:** For instance, the ways of working of 100% Digital Leeds, a programme led by the digital inclusion team in the Integrated Digital Service at Leeds City Council and Leeds Health and Care Partnership NHS West Yorkshire Integrated Care Board, reflect the complexity of digital inclusion by:

- **Empowering** individuals and communities to use digital tools, technologies and services in ways that improve their health, wellbeing, and quality of life; for example, through enabling greater access to public services, economic opportunities, and social connections;
- **Building up** the capacity of delivery partners who are better placed to provide a personalised service and target support where it is most needed;
- **Accepting** that interventions/activities may not necessarily lead to desired outcomes immediately.<sup>11</sup>

### Lesson 4: Longer-term and less prescriptive funding arrangements can enable delivery partners to provide tailored support that meets people's long-term digital inclusion needs

While tackling digital exclusion is a complex and long-term process that should be tailored to individual needs, a recurring theme across all three research projects was that funding arrangements for those delivering digital inclusion initiatives are often inconsistent, short-term, and prescriptive.

As highlighted by the project that examined the development of a digital inclusion network in rural Derbyshire, the sustainability and value of a network depends on whether it has the capacity to meet both the short and long-term needs of its users. Short-term and inconsistent funding creates uncertainty for staff and incentivises organisations to deliver interventions that may not best support the long-term needs of users, while overly prescriptive funding may fail to adapt to the specific needs of different local contexts.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Box adapted from Southby, K., Trigwell, J., Brown, S., Poduval, S., Hearn, A., Tutin, J., Waller, L. (2024), *Co-producing a Theory of Change and evaluation framework for local authority-led, city-wide digital inclusion programmes*, Leeds Beckett University, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Wagg, S., Vannini, S., Zamani, E., Klyshbekova, M., Aylward, B., Jia, X. (2024), *Digital inclusion network development: A case study in Derbyshire*, University of Sheffield, pp. 5-6

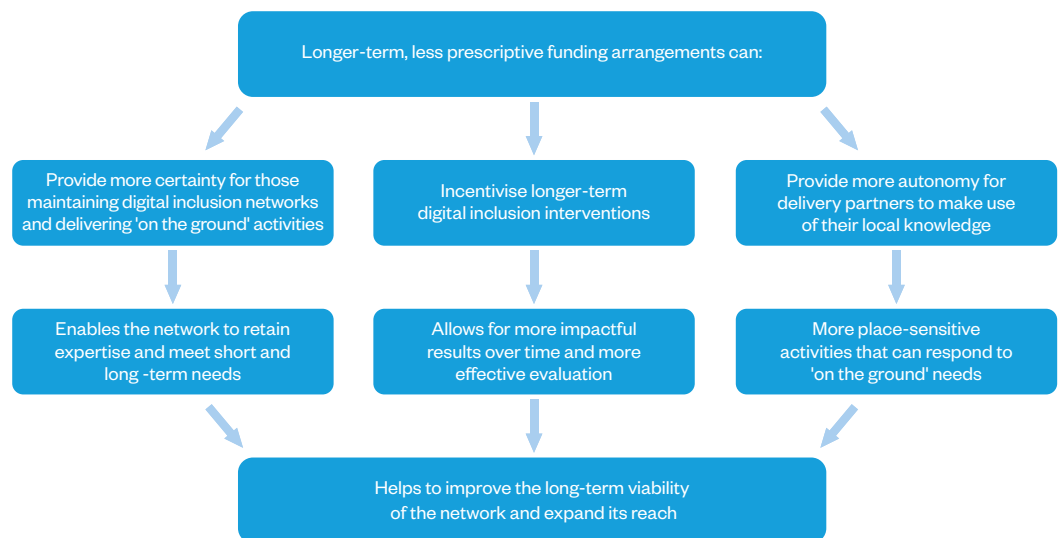


Figure 3: A summary of the possible benefits provided by longer-term and less prescriptive funding arrangements for organisations and networks delivering digital inclusion initiatives, synthesised by the British Academy policy team using insights from Wagg et al. (2024), *Digital inclusion network development*.<sup>13</sup>

## Lesson 5: Digital inclusion programmes benefit from taking place-based approaches that are tailored to local contexts and co-produced by actors at different scales

All three of the research projects highlighted that digital inclusion programmes, networks, and interventions are affected by, and must be responsive to, the context of the place(s) in which they operate, including socioeconomic and demographic factors.

- Digital inclusion initiatives can be strengthened by being co-designed and co-delivered with people and organisations that are already embedded in local communities and have existing relationships in a place that are built on trust. These stakeholders will better understand the needs, assets, and geography of their area, and as a result will be better placed to identify and target support towards those with the greatest needs in those areas.
- One project team developed a theory of change for local authority-led, city-wide digital inequalities programmes, which emphasised that the most successful digital inclusion programmes are co-produced by a range of actors at different scales, with each actor taking on a clear, defined role.<sup>14</sup>

**Info Box 2:** From interviews conducted as part of their project, the project team at University of Liverpool and Liverpool John Moores University found that the most common reasons given by policymakers and civil society organisations for promoting digital inclusion include:<sup>15</sup>

- To improve users' **access to health services**;
- To increase **employment**, improve users' **social interaction** and **participation** in society.

Additionally, the report finds that their support is most commonly targeted at marginalised individuals/communities at risk of or already experiencing social and/or digital exclusion, including:

- **Low-income** households;
- **Ethnic minority** and **older** age groups;
- Those with **disabilities**.

<sup>13</sup> Wagg et al., *Digital inclusion network development: A case study in Derbyshire*.

<sup>14</sup> Southby et al., *Co-producing a Theory of Change and evaluation framework*, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> D'Arcy et al., *Exploring challenges and best practice in addressing digital inequalities*, p. 50.

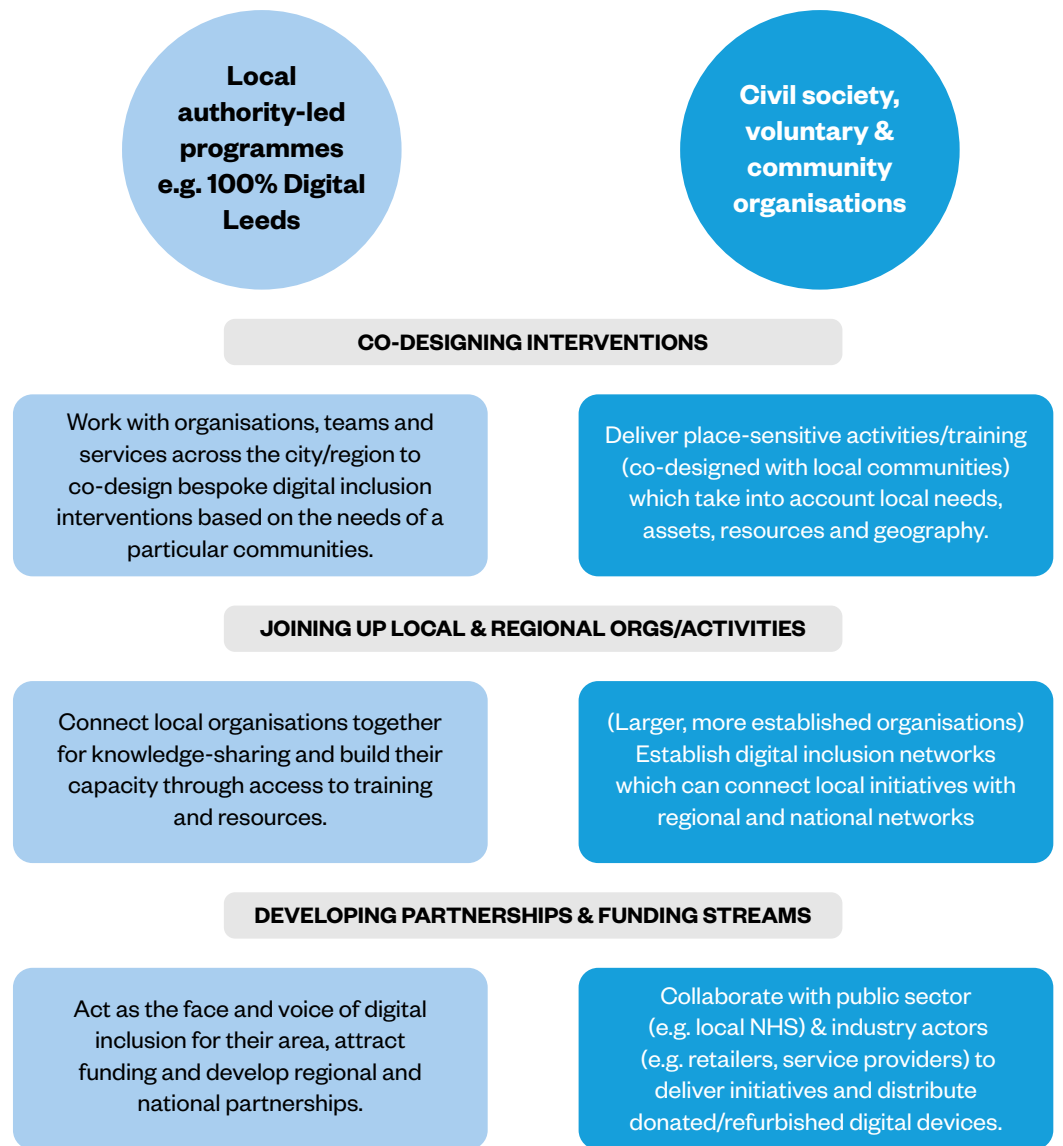


Figure 4: How local authority-led programmes and civil society organisations collaborate on digital inclusion with different actors at local, regional and national scales, synthesised by the British Academy policy team using insights from Southby et al. (2024), *Co-producing a Theory of Change and evaluation framework*.<sup>16</sup>

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Southby et al., *Co-producing a Theory of Change and evaluation framework*.