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EXPLORING CHALLENGES AND BEST PRACTICE IN ADDRESSING DIGITAL INEQUALITIES: A UK REGIONAL CASE STUDY APPROACH

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1   Executive summary

This project was commissioned by the British Academy as part of their Technology and Inequality policy programme aimed at producing Policy Insight Case Studies. The project focused on five areas of the UK (Birmingham/West Midlands, Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, Scotland and Wales) to explore the challenges and best practices of policymakers and civil society organisations promoting digital inclusion in those areas.

This research is timely considering the extent to which our societies have become increasingly reliant on the use of digital technologies, which can present considerable opportunities and benefits for individuals and different communities. However, digital inequalities remain prevalent in the UK, where gaps in terms of digital access and digital literacy skills still affect much of the population in ways that are intertwined with socio-economic inequalities. Reducing digital inequalities and promoting digital inclusion through policy and practical interventions are therefore much needed.

This project explored the in-depth perspectives and experiences of two under-researched groups (policymakers and civil society organisations) and what initiatives are currently being implemented in their areas. To do so, the research team primarily employed qualitative methods, enhanced by quantitative methods. More specifically, elite interviews supplemented by an online survey were conducted with both policymakers and organisations in each of the five areas. The data was analysed to produce key findings and recommendations for advancing policy and practice in digital inclusion in the UK.

This project was undertaken by a team of researchers from the University of Liverpool and Liverpool John Moores University and ran in parallel to another study. Whilst this parallel study focused on digital or media literacy provision within the same populations (i.e., policymakers and organisations) and the same five areas in the UK, this report specifically focuses on *digital inclusion provision*.

Finding 1: The reasons given for promoting digital inclusion, and the target groups prioritised, reflect the complexities of tackling digital inequalities, as these relate not just to promoting material access to technology, but also to wider issues of social exclusion.

- The main motivators for both policymakers and organisations promoting digital inclusion are increasing access to health services, social interaction, employment and participation in society.
- Both groups primarily targeting people with disabilities, older people, and low-income households.

Finding 2: The two overarching goals that underpin the activities carried out by both policymakers and organisations are the promotion of access to digital technologies and the provision of digital skills development for different populations.

- To promote digital inclusion, policymakers primarily develop policy and guidelines and allocate funding.

- Organisations provide digital devices, mobile data and/or broadband access, raise awareness, and deliver events, resources and/or training programmes.

- Training opportunities to develop digital skills focus primarily on the basic digital skills required to operate digital technologies and use the internet both practically and safely, with more limited attention given to more complex, critical skills and knowledge relating to understanding and navigating the broader digital environment.

Finding 3: Collaboration is crucial to the work of both policymakers and organisations.

- Collaboration can take multiple forms (e.g., networks, taskforces, industry partnerships, co-production, and co-delivery of initiatives) and involve multiple actors (e.g., policymakers, public bodies, organisations, industry, experts, communities).

- There is not much difference between the five areas selected for this study in terms of the types of collaboration established by and with policymakers and organisations. However, some areas are more developed than others in terms of digital inclusion provision, which is reflected in the extent to which different forms of collaboration are taking place within the areas.

Finding 4: The main challenges that policymakers and organisations experience primarily relate to funding, collaboration, and the lack of a cohesive and overarching framework.

- Funding opportunities for organisations are inconsistent, short-term, and often prescriptive.

- Industry funding, which is welcomed by both policymakers and organisations, can be more consistent and longer-term. However, it raises ethical questions around the involvement of internet corporations.

- Despite their importance, collaborative relationships may be undermined by issues of communication, by difficulty establishing trusting relationships, and by limited digital skills within some organisations.

- Both policymakers and organisations think that digital inclusion provision is undermined by the lack of a cohesive and overarching framework that provides better coordination: 1) across

the different regions and nations of the UK and 2) across the different levels and hierarchies of government (i.e., local, regional, national).

- Organisations from both Wales and Scotland praised their own national digital inclusion strategies but remarked on the need for an overarching framework.

Finding 5: Examples of best practice include the establishment of digital inclusion networks, the delivery of tailor-made support, and the use of participatory methods.

- Digital taskforces and networks enable different stakeholders (e.g., policymakers, organisations, industry etc.) to gain insights into the current provision of digital inclusion initiatives and to share knowledge of what works and does not work within specific areas.
- The delivery of digital inclusion resources and digital skills training opportunities tends to be more effective when provided via face-to-face support that is tailor-made to the needs of a given community.
- Participatory methods were felt to be beneficial when co-producing and/or co-delivering resources and initiatives with members of populations of interest.

Finding 6: Areas identified for future improvement relate to funding, collaboration, and framework.

- Organisations need more government funding and would like funding opportunities to be more balanced, with some being more prescriptive and others allowing organisations to exercise more autonomy.
- More and better coordinated collaboration between organisations is necessary and, while industry partnerships are welcome, there needs to be more discussion and oversight over the role of internet corporations in the promotion of digital inclusion.
- Both policymakers and organisations would like to see a cohesive and overarching framework coordinating the UK digital inclusion sector.

Recommendations

We recommend that **policymakers**:

- create an updated national framework to enable a more cohesive and better coordinated approach to the promotion of digital inclusion across the UK.
- integrate digital inclusion within every policy area – e.g., through requiring digital inclusion/exclusion assessments for new policies and/or through embedding dedicated staff (e.g., Digital Inclusion Officers) in policy areas.

- create and recruit more government roles (Digital Inclusion Leads) with the necessary expertise and accountability at local, regional, and national government levels.
- allocate more funding to organisations in this space, while achieving a greater balance between prescriptive and non-prescriptive or less-prescriptive funding calls.
- lead discussions around the involvement (especially as funders) of internet corporations in the promotion of digital inclusion.

We recommend that **civil society organisations**:

- continue to undertake and enhance their involvement in coordinated forms of collaboration with other organisations, including strengthening relationships with partners.
- consider use of participatory methods, whenever possible, with a view to co-designing and/or co-delivering resources and initiatives with other organisations and members of the populations that they serve.
- consider pursuing industry partnerships but in tandem with discussions around the involvement of internet corporations as potential funders.

We recommend that **researchers**:

- conduct further research on the perspectives and experiences of policymakers and civil society organisations promoting digital inclusion, and on the extent to which both these groups engage directly with citizens.
- conduct further research on the implementation of digital inclusion policy and the extent to which this meets the needs of different communities.
- conduct further evaluative research into the effectiveness of different methods of digital inclusion delivery, including participatory approaches and the co-design and co-delivery of initiatives.
- widen the scope of this study by focusing on other areas in the UK (e.g., London, Northern Ireland), and/or the UK in comparison with other major European countries and/or North America.

2   Introduction

Our societies have become increasingly reliant on the use of digital technologies. Whilst these technologies offer opportunities (e.g., in terms of education, employment, social interaction and participation in society), these can also present risks including, to name a few, misinformation, financial safety, privacy and online abuse (Livingstone et al., 2017). It follows that, to participate in society, citizens need not only *access* to devices and connectivity, but also the *skills and knowledge* required to use digital technologies both practically and safely.

Participation in society is increasingly mediated by digital technologies but digital inequalities remain prevalent. In the UK, gaps in terms of digital access and skills affect much of the population in ways that are intertwined with socio-economic inequalities. Reducing digital inequalities and promoting digital inclusion through policy and practical interventions are much needed. In the UK, 1 in 14 households still have no access to the internet at home (Ofcom, 2023a), with around 8% of households struggling to afford broadband and this is exacerbated by the current cost-of-living crisis (Ofcom, 2023b). What is more, 10.2 million people in the UK lack the most basic digital skills (Lloyds, 2022), which emphasises the need for not just a focus on access but on digital skills development. In this way, digital inclusion significantly overlaps with what is commonly referred to as digital literacy - i.e., the functional and critical skills required to use digital technologies (Polizzi, 2020). This overlap is captured in a new instrument, the Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS), recently developed by the research team responsible for this report, along with academic and non-academic partners and through deliberative discussions with members of the public (Blackwell et al., 2023). The MDLS was developed to measure the extent to which households with children are digitally included or excluded in UK society. It is based on a consensus deliberative definition – developed by UK households – of the minimum requirements of a household in terms of access to digital devices and skills.

Gaps in terms of digital access and skills are further exacerbated by pre-existing socio-economic inequalities as well as factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, and disability (Carmi & Yates, 2020; Yates et al., 2015; Yates & Lockley, 2018; Yates et al., 2020). It follows that marginalised groups are more likely to experience different forms of digital inequalities. Digital inclusion, rather than being a binary between *no access* and *full access* or *no skills* and *full skills*, can be better understood as a spectrum. Yates et al. (2020, 2018, 2015) identify a range that moves through 'non-users' and 'limited users', who respectively lack access entirely or do not have the access and/or skills to take

full advantage of online opportunities, all the way up to 'extensive users', who know how to make the most of what digital technologies have to offer. In the UK, limited users are five times more likely to come from low-income households, and six times more likely to be over the age of 65. What is more, non-users are two times more likely to have a disability or health condition and 74% of mixed ethnicity (Yates et al., 2020, 2018, 2015) and Black internet users faced potential online harm in the last four weeks according to Ofcom (2022).

Aiming to contribute to work addressing digital inequalities in the UK, this project responded to a call from the British Academy (BA) in the theme of 'Technology and inequality', asking for work that provides evidence to enable lessons and insights into policy and practice. The project explored, via case studies from the perspective of both policymakers and civil society organisations, what initiatives are currently being implemented in Birmingham and the West Midlands, Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, Scotland, and Wales in order to tackle digital inequalities, with a focus on the challenges that these stakeholders experience and what best practice entails in their area.

While most research to date has focused on the needs, and different levels of digital exclusion, of the general public, if we are to better promote digital inclusion across the UK then it is important to also understand the role that organisations play and the challenges that they face in the context of promoting digital inclusion. Such an understanding, in turn, cannot be explored without considering the responsibilities of policymakers who play a crucial role in terms of mediating and enabling the practices of these organisations (e.g., in relation to funding). Policymakers and civil society organisations, however, remain an under-researched aspect of the response to digital inequalities. As such, this project makes both an empirical and practical contribution to research and practice in the field of digital inequalities. Empirically, it provides an analysis of data collected from two groups whose experiences and views, despite being crucial to the digital inclusion landscape in the UK, have been overlooked. Practically, it provides a set of recommendations for both policymakers and organisations in digital inclusion with a view to advancing both policy and practice in this area.

The project adopted a case study approach through a largely qualitative methodology, based on conducting elite interviews, supplemented by the administration of an online survey, with both policymakers and civil society organisations. Key findings are based primarily on the qualitative work for this study and enhanced by the survey data collected. As a result, this project sheds light on the views and experiences of those implementing policy and practical interventions, thus providing insights into the current state of digital inclusion provision across five areas in the UK. This project was run in parallel to a different study (Polizzi et al., 2024), conducted by the same research team,

which readers might wish to consider alongside this report. The team includes researchers from the University of Liverpool and Liverpool John Moores University. Whilst this parallel study focused on digital or media literacy provision within the same populations (i.e., policymakers and organisations) and the same five areas in the UK, this report specifically focuses on *digital inclusion provision*. The reason behind this decision was grounded in the recognition that promotion of digital inclusion and of digital literacy, despite their differences in focus, shares a common emphasis on digital skills development. Alongside this project the team has undertaken a significant case study of a digital inclusion initiative in Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) focused on social housing funded by GMCA, University of Liverpool, and Internet Service providers. This included engagement with local organisations working with local government and a social housing providers. Although these three reports have been written to stand alone, they are pieces of the same puzzle. As we note throughout all three reports, there is a need to link together policies for digital inclusion, digital and media literacy, with social policies. Digital exclusion is fundamentally linked to issues of social exclusion and inequality. Being digitally included without commensurate digital skills and literacies is only part of the story and leaves individuals at risk of on-line harms and mis-information – which itself has personal and civic consequences.

3   Context and literature review

3.1   Digital inclusion research landscape

The promotion of digital inclusion has never been so vital. The COVID-19 pandemic and its consequent lockdowns and restrictions in the UK, as in many other countries worldwide, have amplified the extent to which we live in a digital-by-default age, in which most of our lives are increasingly mediated by digital technologies (Hantrais et al., 2020). However, issues of digital inequalities are far from resolved and have now become more visible and pronounced – both as a result of the pandemic and in light of the current cost-of-living crisis (Zheng & Walsham, 2021). Many citizens and communities have limited or no digital access or lack the skills, knowledge, and motivation to use the internet and digital devices. Research increasingly acknowledges the complexity and diversity of digital inequalities and the extent to which these are context-dependent (Helsper, 2017). Furthermore, while material access is still a universal issue, it is widely held that simple definitions of having or not having physical access to ICTs do not account for the complexities of online experience, but that a focus only on particular digital skills is also insufficient (Goedhart et al., 2022). This points to the necessity of conceptualising digital inequalities as multifaceted, including issues of motivation to use digital technologies and a spectrum of types of online

engagement, with some users completely disengaged, some taking extensive advantage of the opportunities offered by digital technologies, and many in-between (Helsper, 2021; Yates et al., 2015, 2018, 2020).

It has been argued, indeed, that digital inequalities should be understood as encompassing attitudes, physical access, skills, motivation, autonomy of use, amount of usage, and types of internet usage (van Deursen et al., 2021), as well as the ways in which socio-economic and digital inequalities can be mutually reinforcing (Helsper, 2021), not only replicating offline inequalities but heightening their impact. While digital inequalities can originate in disparities of material access, these are mediated by factors that must be considered in relation to total life contexts (Ignatow & Robinson, 2017; Robinson, 2009). As Carmi and Yates (2020) put it, 'the divide is not two but multidimensional'. This means that vulnerable and marginalised communities tend to benefit less than other groups from the use of the internet and digital devices, with socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, and disability, among other factors, playing a key role in determining users' ability to pursue online opportunities (Tsatsou, 2022). Indeed, as argued by the British Academy (2023a), intersecting inequalities are likely to exacerbate issues like digital poverty, and not just researchers but also those designing practical interventions need an understanding of the ways in which digital exclusion is grounded in broader socio-economic contexts.

To date, digital inequalities research has focused primarily on issues of digital access and levels of online engagement among the general public, with a focus on marginalised and vulnerable populations. In doing so, studies have often prioritised the use of quantitative methodologies, with large-scale surveys capturing trends and patterns both nationally and cross-nationally (see, e.g., Helsper & van Deursen, 2015; Ofcom, 2022). As part of this research, many instruments have been developed to measure issues of digital exclusion at the level of the individual (see, for example, van Deursen et al., 2015). Recently, a useful instrument was developed to measure digital inclusion at household level in the UK (Blackwell et al., 2023). At the same time, outside of academia, interest in addressing digital exclusion through policy and practical interventions has grown considerably, with such interventions mushrooming across the country (see, e.g., Tyrell et al., 2023) – although academic evaluations of these interventions are few and far between. While some work has been conducted to map the digital inclusion landscape in terms of both policy and practice (see, e.g., Good Things Foundation, 2024), much still remains to be done with a view to facilitating the development, implementation and evaluation of decision-making processes and practical interventions in digital inclusion. This area of work, indeed, is still in its infancy, with evidence-based understandings of the views and experiences of those working on the ground being under-

developed. This is why this project adopted a mixed methodology, focused primarily on the use of qualitative methods, to explore in depth the experiences of challenges and best practice among two frontline groups who are tasked with the policy and practical objective of promoting digital inclusion in the UK: policymakers and civil society organisations. The section that follows reviews relevant policy documentation about digital inclusion in the UK.

3.2   National level strategies

In 2014 the UK Cabinet Office, together with the Government Digital Service, published the Government Digital Inclusion Strategy for the UK, which claims to set out 'how government and partners from the public, private and voluntary sectors will increase digital inclusion', and outlined ten actions for government alongside partners from the public, private and voluntary sectors to 'help people go online'. This document includes aims to embed digital inclusion in wider government policies and programmes, improve the digital capabilities of civil servants, and boost, improve and extend partnership working (2014). Since 2014, UK governments have also introduced initiatives and projects designed to support, for example: 1) SMEs, e.g., the short-lived 2022 'Help to Grow: Digital' scheme (2022), whose recent closure leaves a gap in such provision (techUK, 2022), 2) skills and education support such as statutory entitlement to Essential Digital Skills qualifications for adults with low digital skills (DfE, 2022), and 3) infrastructure, for example large investments in broadband access for hard-to-reach communities (Building Digital UK, 2022).

However, while the above might seem to be positive steps, as discussed in the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee report, the UK government 'does not have a credible strategy to tackle digital exclusion', as this strategy is 'out of date and insufficient' (2023, pp.3; 24). This is because not only have there been no significant updates since its publication in 2014, but the extent to which the government has met the goals set out in this strategy remains questionable. As the report points out, formal evaluations undertaken by the government appear to have ceased; there are fewer working groups in this area; interventions are 'timid'; and there is a lack of motivation to drive meaningful change (2023, p. 3). Similarly, as argued by the British Academy (2023b), there is a need for better coordination of digital inclusion provision across the UK and both policy and practical interventions need to be designed and implemented in ways that account for issues of place, time and scale.

Nationally, organisations like Good Things Foundation and the Digital Poverty Alliance are working to set up networks and bring together key players working on the ground, and there are examples of industry players such as Internet Service Providers (ISPs), banks and internet corporations providing funding and working with local communities to improve digital access and skills. However, the lack

of national policy guidance has created a fragmented landscape, which makes it difficult to map what provision is taking place across the country, with pockets of good practice but a lack of consistency. In this climate of insufficient national policy guidance, local and regional government bodies, as well as civil society organisations working in digital inclusion, have had no choice but to create their own frameworks and strategies to coordinate initiatives addressing digital exclusion in their areas. Later in this report, we review relevant policy and strategy documentation for each of the selected areas of the study, in conjunction with presenting key findings from each case study.

3.3   Overview of project

The five case studies selected (Birmingham and West Midlands, Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, Scotland and Wales) allowed for the project to generate insights into policy and practice. Scotland, Wales and Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) have built digital inclusion into policy and manifesto commitments, whereas Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) and West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) could be considered at an earlier stage of development. Each of these areas has close links to key stakeholder organisations delivering digital inclusion, and this project builds on previous work carried out by the research team to engage with both policymakers and organisations working in this field.

Regional policy implementation and the ways in which it links into local digital inclusion 'eco-systems' is a key issue for both policymakers and organisations. Each of these areas also holds different levels of devolved powers and budgets, which impacts how far they can fund and implement policy locally, as well as how they are able to engage with national policy (e.g., DCMS, DSIT, Ofcom), their relationships to industry (e.g., BT Openreach, ISPs), regional organisations and communities.

Policymakers and civil society organisations are under-researched groups in this area. Most studies on digital inclusion focus primarily on the public (e.g., Ofcom, 2022; Yates et al., 2021), with only a few recent studies focusing on civil society organisations that tackle digital inequalities (e.g., Edwards et al., 2023) and DCMS/DSIT's current and ongoing digital literacy work (BIT, Yeoman, Yates, 2023). As a result, there is a dearth of research on the views, experiences, and challenges of those tasked with implementing digital inclusion policy and practical interventions at both regional and national levels. At a national level, bodies such as DCMS have provided some guidance and legislation aimed at promoting digital inclusion and digital literacy skills among the public across the UK (e.g., DCMS, 2021, UK Cabinet Office & Government Digital Service, 2014). However, the scope of national policy in this area is often insufficient, broad and based on centralised delivery, with limited attention to the specificity of local context. Relatedly, little is known about the ways in which

policymakers and organisations within different areas of the UK adopt and adapt national policy to fit their locality and meet the needs of different populations within their area.

To address these gaps, this project aims to shed light on the ways in which policymakers and organisations in five key areas in the UK promote digital inclusion in ways that account for both national policy developments and what practical initiatives they take on a local level.

3.4   Aim, objectives, and research questions

Considering the above context, this project had the following aim and objectives:

3.4.1   Aim

To develop and explore digital inclusion case studies within and across five UK areas, focusing on the challenges and best practices of policymakers and civil society organisations in Birmingham and West Midlands, Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, Scotland, and Wales.

3.4.2   Objectives

1. To design and administer a survey among policymakers and organisations in each area so as to explore the state of practice and future directions for digital inclusion.
2. To undertake elite interviews with policymakers and representatives of organisations involved in digital inclusion provision.
3. To present key findings from both the survey and interviews.
4. To produce a set of recommendations for both policy and practice in digital inclusion.

3.5   Research questions

1. What frameworks / strategies do policymakers and organisations employ to promote digital inclusion?
2. What activities do policymakers and organisations undertake to promote digital inclusion?
3. What challenges do policymakers and organisations experience in the context of promoting digital inclusion?
4. What do policymakers and organisations see as examples of best practice in their area?
5. What do policymakers and organisations want to see in the future in terms of media literacy provision?

4   Methodology

4.1   Research design

Based on a case study approach, this project adopted predominantly qualitative methods, conducting 18 semi-structured interviews with policymakers and civil society organisations, enhanced by the administration of an online survey (n = 46) across the five selected areas. Participants included individuals who identified themselves as working in digital inclusion, media literacy or both, as this project was conducted in conjunction with another study focusing on media literacy (Polizzi et al., 2024). The total number of participants who took part in the survey and interviews as part of both projects was 48 valid survey responses and 23 interviews. For the purposes of this report, the number of participants in both the survey and interviews refers to those working either in digital inclusion or in both digital inclusion and media literacy (thus leaving out those who only work in media literacy) to ensure that all voices of participants working in the area of digital inclusion were accounted for.

The survey was designed by the research team behind this project, using the online survey design tool Qualtrics. This was developed via an iterative process involving regular meetings and discussions and tested by the team before being administered (see Appendix 1 for sample questions).

Interview guides were designed by the same team, again using an iterative process involving regular meetings and discussion (see Appendix 2). The interviews were conducted by members of the research team from the University of Liverpool. The project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Liverpool and fieldwork conducted from July 2023 until October 2023.

Preliminary findings were presented and workshopped at an in-person event, which was held in London on 27th October 2023.

4.2   Participant selection

The five areas chosen for this project were purposely selected because of their active and ongoing commitment to the promotion of digital inclusion. Similarly, participants for the survey were purposively recruited through individual contacts and networks known to the research team – e.g., Digital Inclusion Alliance Wales (DIAW), Cwmpas, Sottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO), Local Government Association (LGA) and digital task forces in GMCA, WMCA and LCRCA – and then snowballing was employed to share the survey further. Participants were contacted mainly by email; felicitous encounters at events and word of mouth also played a part. Participants filled out the survey online and there were 46 full responses recorded that were fully anonymised prior to

analysis. There were separate routings through the survey for policymakers (PMs) and civil society organisations (CSOs). Table 1 below shows the number of respondents to the survey by area. However, some respondents worked in more than one geographical area. Therefore, even though the total number of respondents completing the survey was 46, some participants provided responses for multiple areas, as included in the table below.

Table 1: Survey respondents by area

Area	No. of policymakers	No. of civil society organisations
Birmingham / West Midlands	1	8
Greater Manchester	0	5
Liverpool City Region	4	10
Scotland	5	10
Wales	2	6

The survey asked questions about the types of initiatives being undertaken by respondents, key challenges they face, what best practice looks like in their field, the role of collaboration and networks, and expectations for the future in terms of how to better promote digital inclusion.

Participants for interview were also purposively selected through individual contacts and networks known to the research team, as well as through identifying relevant organisations and individuals via targeted internet searches. Participants were approached by email, given information about the project and asked if they wished to contribute. The team conducted a total of 18 interviews, with a range of policymakers (PMs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) working in digital inclusion. Participants were selected with a view to maximising heterogeneity within each area. Table 2 below indicates numbers of participants in each area, along with participants' acronyms used when presenting key findings below – e.g., policymaker one = PM1; civil society organisation one = CSO1. It should be noted that some of the participants recruited for interviews operate nationally and/or may be based in different cities or areas but are conducting relevant work in different or multiple areas – in the table below, these participants are attributed to only one of the five areas selected for this study. For example, CSO2 was a digital inclusion and media literacy organisation currently undertaking projects in areas of the UK that include, but are not limited to, Birmingham, Manchester, and Scotland.

Table 2: Number of participants interviewed by area

Area	No. of policymakers	Acronyms used for analysis	No. of civil society organisations	Acronyms used for analysis
Birmingham / West Midlands	1	PM1	4	CSO1, CSO2, CSO3, CSO4
Greater Manchester	2	PM2, PM3	0	
Liverpool City Region	1	PM4	2	CSO5, CSO6
Scotland	1	PM5	3	CSO7, CSO8, CSO9
Wales	2	PM6, PM7	2	CSO10, CSO11

Interviews lasted between 30 mins and one hour and were conducted online via Microsoft Teams at the convenience of participants. Two research team members attended each interview, with one leading the interview and the other taking notes. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymised.

Preliminary findings were presented and workshopped at an in-person event in order both to verify what had emerged and expand upon the analysis. Interview participants were invited to the event, as well as other participants identified as relevant to policy, research, and practice in digital inclusion, with the aim of having a mixture of voices from different levels of government as well as from those delivering services and research. There were 14 attendees, including representatives of local and national governments from Manchester, West Midlands, and Scotland, representatives from Ofcom and a variety of civil society organisations and academics working in the field of digital inclusion. Attendees were asked to complete tasks based on preliminary findings emerging from the data. Members of the research team were present to take notes, and these were subsequently collated, analysed and included in the findings below.

4.3   Data analysis

Survey results were analysed by the research team using Qualtrics and Microsoft Excel and visualised in graphs and tables. As unpacked later in this report (see subsection 3.4 below), responses to the survey were limited in number, which affects the extent to which results may be

generalised. However, the small number of survey responses was anticipated considering the elite and niche populations of interest for this project – i.e., policymakers and organisations promoting digital inclusion in five specific areas of the UK. Despite being limited in number, the responses we gathered to the survey are indicative of key aspects of the digital inclusion landscape that these populations navigate in those five areas, especially when examined in conjunction with key themes from the interviews, which were first transcribed and then thematically analysed. Thematic analysis was considered ideal for identifying codes and patterns describing portions of the data as well as more overarching themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). The research team designed an initial coding framework, and this was developed via iterative discussion and group analysis of transcripts. Transcripts were then coded in NVivo using this framework.

4.4   Limitations

As the research design of this study involved the selection of a limited number of areas and recruitment of participants from these areas was based primarily on the use of existing contacts and partnerships known to the research team, it is limited by the absence of policymakers and organisations representative of Northern Ireland. Similarly, in its focus on regional aspects of digital inclusion provision and practice in the UK outside of London, this report is limited by the exclusion of the capital city, which is generally regarded as an example of intensive digital activity and development. Equally, this report does not make comparisons with mainland Europe or North America.

As the populations of interest are niche and elite, this project was also limited by the small number of participants for both interviews and the survey. 18 participants for elite interviews with niche populations was a reasonable number that allowed us to conduct in-depth analysis of the qualitative data. By contrast, while the relatively low number of survey responses we gathered (i.e., 46) was to be expected and adequate for producing overarching descriptive statistics, it was insufficient to carry out more advanced statistical work and affects our ability to generalise the quantitative findings beyond the sample. This is why, as mentioned previously, this report is based primarily on insights from the qualitative data in ways that are supplemented by some statistical observations.

Unfortunately, we were unable to recruit any representatives of organisations working in digital inclusion from the Greater Manchester area for the survey. However, alongside this project the team has undertaken a significant case study of a digital inclusion initiative in GMCA focused on social housing funded by GMCA, University of Liverpool, and Internet Service providers. This included engagement with local organisations working with local government and social housing providers. The full details of this study can be found in Tyrell et. al. 2023. The fact that the number of

policymakers was particularly low is in and of itself a finding. Policymaker and governmental posts with a digital inclusion focus within the five selected areas are few and far between, and those holding such positions are understandably extremely busy. In addition, the non-inclusion of London as an area of focus potentially limited the involvement of people who may be undertaking lobbying and/or campaign work that would be relevant to the areas chosen for this study. Finally, it was recognised during the workshop event, that some terms in the survey had been worded somewhat vaguely, with terms such as "the economy" causing discussion around its meaning.

5   Case study snapshots by area

In this section, we bring together policy documents from each area of consideration, followed by findings from interviews about what policymakers and organisations are doing to promote digital inclusion in each area.

5.1   Birmingham / West Midlands

5.1.1   Policy, frameworks and strategy

Birmingham City Council published 'Connecting our communities and enabling a digital Birmingham: A digital inclusion strategy and action plan for the citizens of Birmingham' in 2021(a). This set out aims for 2021-2023, including creating a joined-up approach to tackling digital exclusion, providing access to digital devices and affordable connectivity, and building trust and addressing online security concerns (p. 5), along with a detailed action plan outlining activities to be undertaken in order to meet these aims (pp. 19-23). The council have provided funding for two years for a digital inclusion team with a remit to map digital inclusion provision across the city, address gaps and coordinate activities of organisations in the area (Birmingham City Council, 2021b). In 2021, West Midlands Combined Authority also published the 'Digital Roadmap', with digital inclusion as a key focus.

5.1.2   What are policymakers and organisations doing in Birmingham and West Midlands?

Birmingham City Council is running a fixed-term digital inclusion project over 15 months mapping provision across the city, taking a community-led approach. They do not fund organisations directly, but help them to find funding, for example through small grants from the Adult-Social-Care-funded Neighbourhood Network Schemes (NNS). A key aim of this project is to bring together representatives from local networks such as NNS, Community Digital Skills Network, local organisations and businesses, members of the public and decision makers to talk about issues of

digital inclusion. The City Council work together with local libraries on several activities around digital inclusion and media literacy.

Organisations in Birmingham provide a range of services including networks such as the NNS, Community Digital Skills Network and Libraries Connected Network, and the West Midlands Coalition for Digital Inclusion. Some organisations focus on specific populations, for example one UK-wide organisation undertakes regional work with particular funders. They work in Birmingham with residential housing providers to give support for digital skills through training sessions including online safety and how to use devices. Another organisation works with difficult-to-reach communities to help them engage with services, using an inter-generational model to encourage parents and children to develop digital skills through targeted learning packages. Another works with older people to promote digital literacy and digital inclusion, including provision of devices, drop-in sessions with help to use devices, and database tracking of local needs and services. In addition to this, one organisation provides access to devices, a device lending scheme and free Wi-Fi, and works with Good Things Foundation to help provide free data as well as access to digital literacy educational resources.

5.2   Greater Manchester

5.2.1   Policy, frameworks, and strategy

Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) recently set out their 'Digital Blueprint 2023-2026' (2023a), with key priorities being removing barriers to social mobility and employment through digital skills and joined-up public services. As part of its digital inclusion agenda, GMCA set up a Digital Inclusion Taskforce in 2020 made up of members from industry, voluntary sector, local government, health, and education/schools (2023b). Alongside this network they have set up the Digital Inclusion Action Network (2023c) which specifically targets under-25s, over-75s and people with disabilities. Manchester City Council published its own 'Digital Strategy 2021-2026' with digital inclusion as a key priority.

5.2.2   What are policymakers and organisations doing in Greater Manchester?

Each of the ten boroughs across Greater Manchester has a Digital Inclusion Lead, and these meet on a monthly basis to share knowledge and resources. In recent years, GMCA have undertaken research and launched several pilot initiatives to address digital exclusion. In 2022, GMCA published their 'Social impact report: Fixing the digital divide' and launched a pilot testing an intervention to support care-leavers with digital devices and skills. In 2023, they ran a pilot linking social housing providers with ISPs and commissioned the University of Liverpool research team behind this report to

undertake an observational study of this work (Tyrell et al., 2023). GMCA work with Good Things Foundation to deliver the Greater Manchester Data Bank. They offer Get Online, a landing page where residents can find support in their local area as well as a digital skills map showing where digital support services are located. In 2020, as a response to the COVID-19 lockdowns, GMCA launched a Technology Fund to support students with home learning, of which the recent third phase targeted students with Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) (2023d).

One UK-wide organisation undertakes regional work for a particular funder in four key areas, including Manchester. They target over-65s with training programmes in digital skills and offer sessions in places where people feel comfortable, e.g., libraries or even home visits. While we did not speak to organisations specifically based in Manchester, as part of the project we ran in parallel with this study (Polizzi et al., 2024), we interviewed another UK-wide organisation that mainly focuses on media literacy and is undertaking work in Manchester that is relevant to issues of digital inclusion. They ran a project in Manchester training vulnerable young people to be 'digital champions' and teach digital skills and how to stay safe online to others.

5.3   Liverpool City Region

5.3.1   Policy, frameworks and strategy

In 2020, Liverpool City Region published their 'Digital Strategy 2021-2023', which includes a whole section on digital inclusion. They launched their digital inclusion taskforce - made up of members from industry, the voluntary sector, health, and schools - which meets regularly to showcase local projects, share knowledge, and discuss collaboration (LCRCA, 2023a). In 2023, they also set up a digital inclusion network (LCRCA, 2023b) for organisations delivering digital inclusion initiatives to share knowledge and resources, as well as providing additional funding to support digital inclusion (e.g., the LCR Cares Digital Inclusion fund; Digital Connectivity for Community Facilities grants programme). They are training volunteers to become 'digital champions' who can give advice and support to adults who want to use the internet. NHS Cheshire and Merseyside launched their Digital and Data Strategy, with 'increasing digital inclusion' as a critical success factor (2022, p. 8). LCRCA have recently partnered with Lloyds Bank and Vodafone as part of a national digital inclusion initiative to pilot a scheme which will provide devices, internet access and digital skills training (2023c).

5.3.2   What are policymakers and organisations doing in Liverpool City Region?

In 2022, LCRCA set up a dedicated digital inclusion team, following research commissioned by LCRCA and undertaken by the University of Liverpool research team behind this report, as well as by VOLA

Merseyside consortium, looking at digital inclusion in the area. There are two dedicated digital inclusion staff in LCRCA, whose remit is coordination across the city regions, provision of interventions, leverage of national partners to support residents' digital inclusion, and promotion of the importance of digital inclusion. Some council funding focused on specific populations, e.g., care-leavers, survivors of domestic abuse, refugees, and asylum seekers. The digital inclusion team often collaborates with other initiatives and with national partners in order to target digital inclusion. Recently, they have been running an initiative to reuse devices in partnership with Good Things Foundation, where they collaborate with other sections of local government (e.g., the 'households into work' programme; Housing First) to identify digitally excluded people and provide an intervention, giving people devices and SIMs via the National Data Bank, as well as signposting to digital skills support. Through the Restart scheme, in partnership with Lloyds Bank and Good things Foundation, they offer devices and basic digital skills training.

One UK-wide organisation working with people with learning disabilities is currently running a digital inclusion project for adults in Liverpool, creating accessible learning resources. Another organisation based in Liverpool but providing service nationwide targeted adults and young people with neurological conditions and neurodivergencies. This organisation offers services including training for parents and carers on internet safety.

5.4   Scotland

5.4.1   Policy, frameworks, and strategy

In 2021, Scottish government published their most recent digital strategy titled 'A Changing Nation: How Scotland will thrive in a digital world', with the ambition of achieving 'world-leading levels of digital inclusion' (2021a, p. 29). In 2021(b), the Digital Health and Care Directorate published their 'Digital Health and Care Strategy', and as part of this strategy launched a digital inclusion programme in partnership with the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO). This programme funded 13 'Digital Pioneer' projects aimed at helping people access services online (Scottish Government, 2023). In addition, 2023 saw the publication of 'From pillars to practice: Developing a framework for embedding digital inclusion in health and social care' (Slater and French, 2023).

In 2020, as a response to the COVID-19 lockdowns, Scottish Government set up the Connecting Scotland programme, providing digital access through provision of devices, data and digital skills support focused on people on low incomes. Since its inception, it has grown and received additional funding, supported by SCVO, local authorities and with support delivered through third sector organisations (Scottish Government, 2021c). SCVO recently announced, after the programme had

been paused, that there will be new funding opportunities for organisations to apply for, for expanding device lending library services, or providing devices and/or connectivity for people in social housing or transitional accommodation, with a third opportunity yet to be announced in the coming year (SCVO, 2023a). SCVO launched their 'Digital inclusion roadmap for Scotland' in November 2023(b).

5.4.2 What are policymakers and organisations doing in Scotland?

Scotland has 30 local authorities, some of which offer provision for free devices for their residents. The Scottish Government executive agency Education Scotland has a digital skills team which focuses on upskilling teachers, particularly around online safety, offering services (e.g., webinars) for teachers through their website.

One organisation focuses on older adults. They work with Housing Associations to provide 'digital cafés', where people have the chance to socialise as well as access problem-solving support with using their devices. They offer home visits and/or a Zoom group for those who cannot leave their homes. They also work with Sky Broadband (who provide volunteers) to offer free devices, broadband and support, and offer workshop training in basic digital skills including online safety. They have participated in various research projects around digital technologies.

Another organisation focuses on digital inclusion in disadvantaged and vulnerable communities via providing devices and training in how to use them, as well as basic digital skills training, including scam awareness, online safety, and misinformation. They offer drop-in sessions helping with digital life tasks, such as filling in forms online, and have a hub where people can come for in-person one-to-one support. They work with the National Data Bank to distribute SIM cards and act as a donation point for devices that have reached end of life. They recently ran a project commissioned by the Highland Council focused on providing devices and skills for employability. They have also begun a pilot project to take their work into more rural areas for community outreach.

5.5 Wales

5.5.1 Policy, frameworks, and strategy

Welsh Government's Digital Strategy for Wales (2021), which has a clear focus on digital inclusion, includes: 1) the 2022 launching of the Centre for Digital Public Services (CDPS); 2) Cwmpas-led Digital Communities Wales (DCW), who run the Digital Confidence, Health and Well-being programme (2022) and coordinate the network Digital Inclusion Alliance Wales (DIAW); 3) the educational guidance Digital Competence Framework (Welsh Government, 2016) as well as 4) strategies specifically focused on the digital economy, connectivity and infrastructure. The recently published

'Digital and data strategy for health and social care in Wales' (Welsh Government, 2023) has an entire section on digital inclusion, and in 2023 the Auditor General for Wales produced a report titled 'Digital inclusion in Wales', which also recognises the work of Welsh Government's Financial and Digital Inclusion Team chairing a Digital Inclusion and Skills Programme Board. Welsh Government recently commissioned the University of Liverpool research team behind this report, alongside academic and non-academic partners, to produce 'Towards a Welsh Minimum Digital Living Standard' (Blackwell et al., 2023), the implementation of which is a priority identified in DIAW's recent agenda (2023).

5.5.2   What are policymakers and organisations doing in Wales?

Wales is part of the UK-wide Technology and Digital Leaders Network, aimed at promoting the digital agenda across governments. They have set up an online environment for this group which allows members from different departments in government, including the digital inclusion team, to receive and share updates including on issues relating to policy. This represents a way to connect different departments, ensure that consideration of digital inclusion is cross-cutting, and that people from across government can ask questions and share knowledge and best practice.

Priority groups targeted by the digital inclusion team set up by Welsh Government are those traditionally digitally excluded, such as older people, Black and ethnic minority groups and people living in social housing. In the digital inclusion team, there is a focus on basic digital skills. The team is doing work mapping areas of provision for digital support across Wales through an interactive geospatial map (DataMapWales). They work closely with Ofcom and Citizens Advice, as well as BT, who sit on the Digital Inclusion and Skills Programme Board. In terms of networks, they are part of a digital inclusion network with the British Irish Council. They also work with academics who provide an evidence base for policy decisions, for example the recently commissioned Minimum Digital Living Standard (Blackwell et al., 2023) is a key piece of work in driving actions in this.

One organisation works on a cascade model, working with public, private and third sector partners providing digital skills training, e.g., training carers who then go on to train older people in care homes. They loan devices to organisations who, in turn, can loan them to others. They work with other organisations to undertake skills audits and recommend actions based on the results.

Another organisation runs digital projects with young people and other civil society organisations. They are running a project working with youth workers and co-designing workshops with young people in a deprived community, and a project providing support to third sector organisations facing digital challenges.

6   Cross-regional Findings

Once the data was analysed, key findings from both the survey and interviews were organised under the following six overarching themes, common to all geographical areas, which are presented below. These themes include 1) what policymakers and organisations do to promote digital inclusion and why, 2) groups and skills prioritised, 3) collaboration, 4) challenges, 5) best practice, and 6) expectations.

6.1   What policymakers and organisations do to promote digital inclusion and why

As part of the survey, participants were asked to select all the different activities that they undertake with a view to promoting digital inclusion, both in terms of enabling different groups to access digital technologies and in terms of skills development. When it comes to the promotion of digital access, the activities that were more strongly identified by policymakers relate to the allocation of funding, as shown by Figure 1 below.
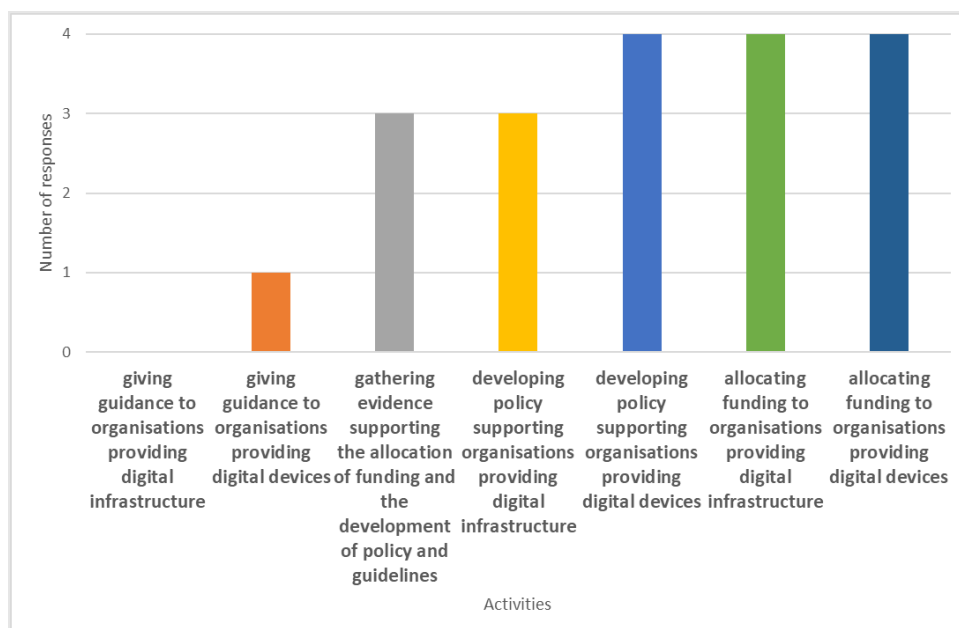
Figure 1: Activities undertaken by policymakers to promote digital access.

Meanwhile, in terms of skills development, policymakers primarily reported developing policy to support organisations in this area (seven of eight responses), followed by the allocation of funding to such organisations (six of eight responses), gathering evidence about digital inclusion (five of eight responses), and providing guidelines to support organisations in this area (three of eight responses).

As for organisations, the two main activities that they reported undertaking to promote digital access were providing digital devices and mobile data and/or broadband access, as shown by Figure 2.

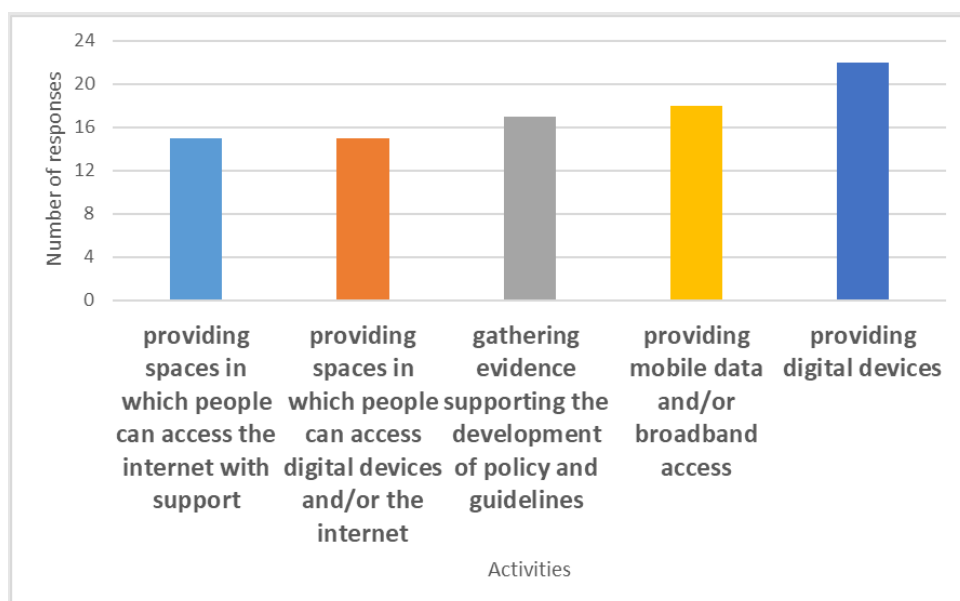*Figure 2: Activities undertaken by organisations to promote digital access.*

In terms of digital skills development, the activities identified primarily by organisations included delivering events, resources and/or training programmes, campaigning or raising awareness among the public, and lobbying or directly influencing policymakers (13 of 16 responses each), followed by fundraising (7 of 16 responses). In terms of what policymakers do to promote digital skills development, the activities that they reported undertaking the most were developing policy, supporting organisations that provide training, resources, and events (seven of eight responses), followed by allocating funding to such organisations (six of eight responses), gathering evidence (five of eight responses), and providing guidelines to support organisations (three of eight responses). Meanwhile, as shown by Figure 3 below, the activities that organisations undertake to promote digital skills development include, first and foremost, delivering events, resources or training programmes, campaigning or raising awareness among the public, or lobbying or directly influencing policymakers (13 of 16 responses each).
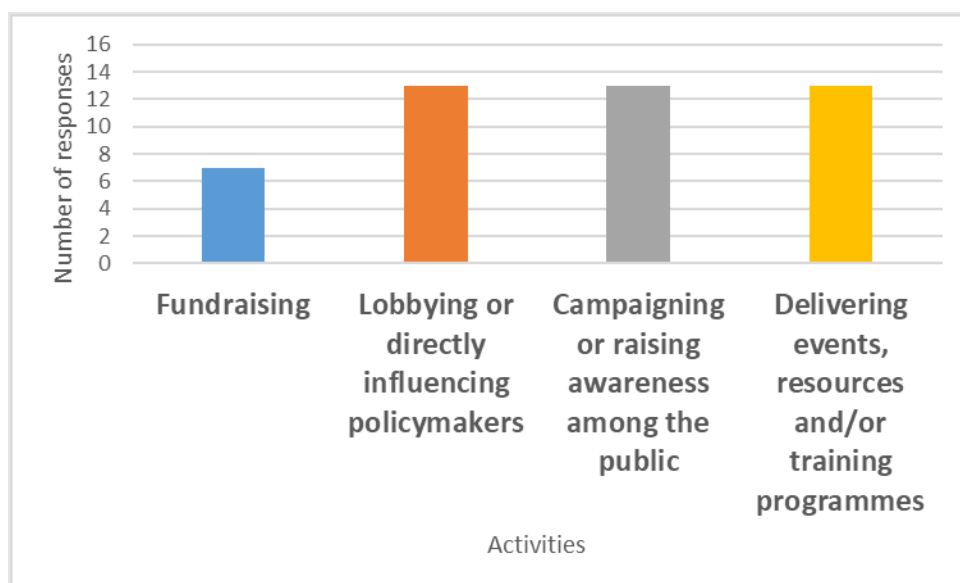
Figure 3: Activities undertaken by organisations to promote digital skills development.
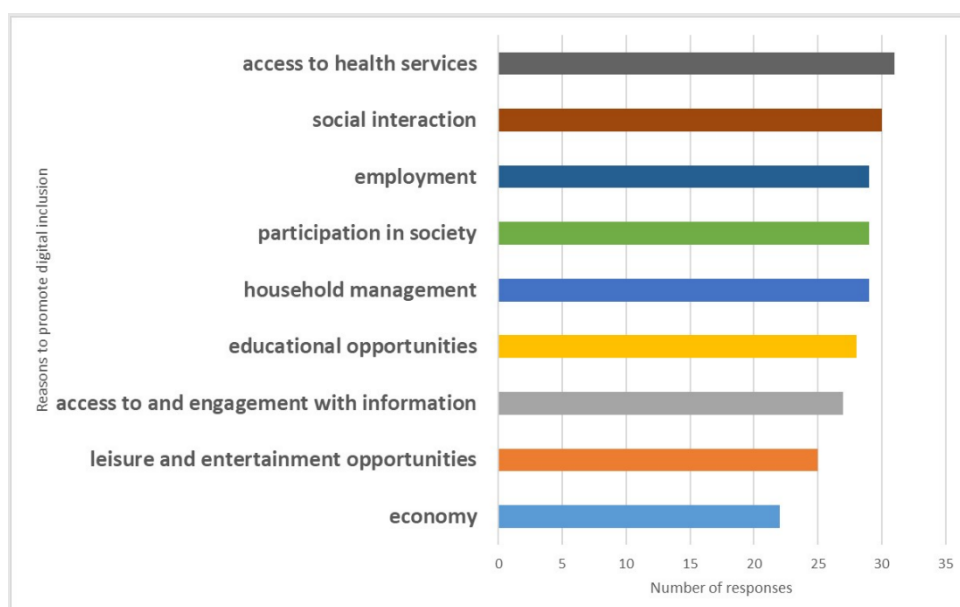
Figure 4: Reasons why policymakers and organisations think promotion of digital inclusion is very important or extremely important.

When completing the survey, policymakers and organisations were also asked why they thought it is important to promote digital inclusion. Figure 4 below shows the reasons why they thought it was either very important or extremely important to do so, with access to health services (31 of 35 responses), social interaction (30 of 35 responses), employment, participation in society and household management (29 of 35 responses each) being the most selected.

6.2   Groups and skills prioritised

Digital inclusion interventions are generally conceived with specific groups of interest in mind. One of the questions in the survey asked both policymakers and organisations to select from a list of options all the populations they tend to target through their work. What stood out from the analysis of the quantitative data was that the groups of interest that are primarily targeted include, as shown in Figure 5, people with disabilities (29 of 33 responses), older people (28 of 33 responses), low-income households (27 of 33 responses), and ethnic minorities (25 of 33 responses), with primary, secondary and higher education students being the least selected (16, 15 and 14 of 33 responses respectively). [1]
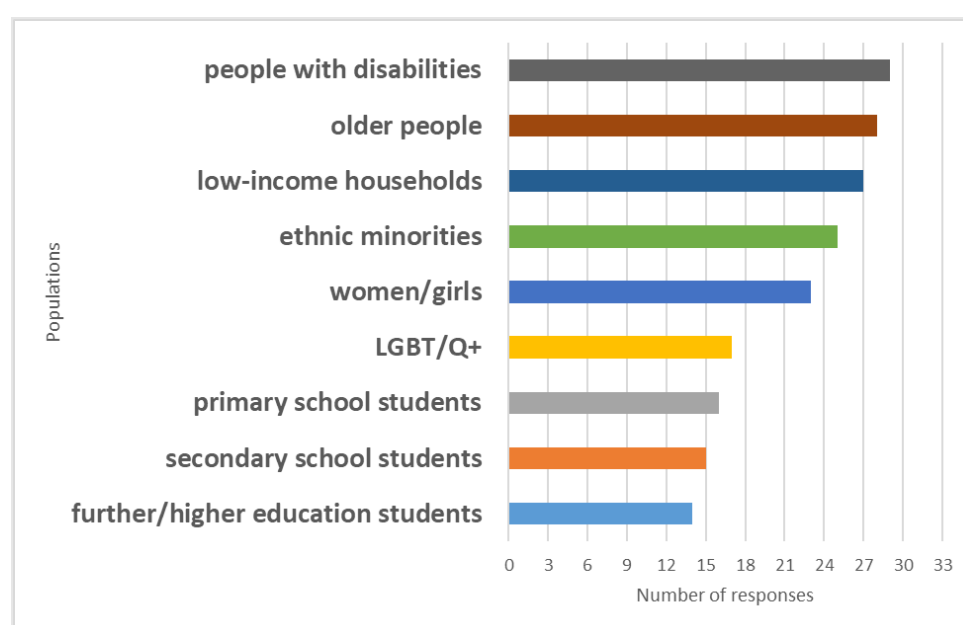
Figure 5: Populations target by policymakers and organisations.

Respondents to the survey were also asked to select from a list of options all the digital skills, knowledge, and attitudes that they target in the context of their work aimed at promoting digital inclusion. As shown by Figure 6 below, the digital skills that both policymakers and organisations reported targeting to some extent or a large extent include those required to find and navigate

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[1] Conversely, responses of interest for our parallel project found that those working in media literacy primarily target educators and parents, followed by primary and secondary school students, along with people with disabilities and disadvantaged communities (Polizzi et al., 2024). This targeting of different populations, i.e., primarily children, could suggest there is a disconnect between people who are helped to get online and people who are helped to operate there.

information (27 of 34 responses), those required to protect one's own privacy (26 of 34 responses), the functional skills to use digital technologies (25 of 34 responses), and the critical skills required to evaluate the trustworthiness of online content (25 of 34 responses). By contrast, the digital skills that are the least targeted are those that are required to create and upload content (19 of 34 responses). Whilst motivation and attitudes to use technology are also targeted to some extent (24 of 34 responses), the knowledge area that is the most targeted pertains to the risks and opportunities that digital technologies present for the individual user (e.g., financial safety) (25 of 34 responses). At the same time, the least selected items include knowledge about the benefits and downsides that digital technology presents for society (e.g., for democracy) (18 of 34 responses), and knowledge about the digital environment and how internet corporations operate (16 of 34 responses).

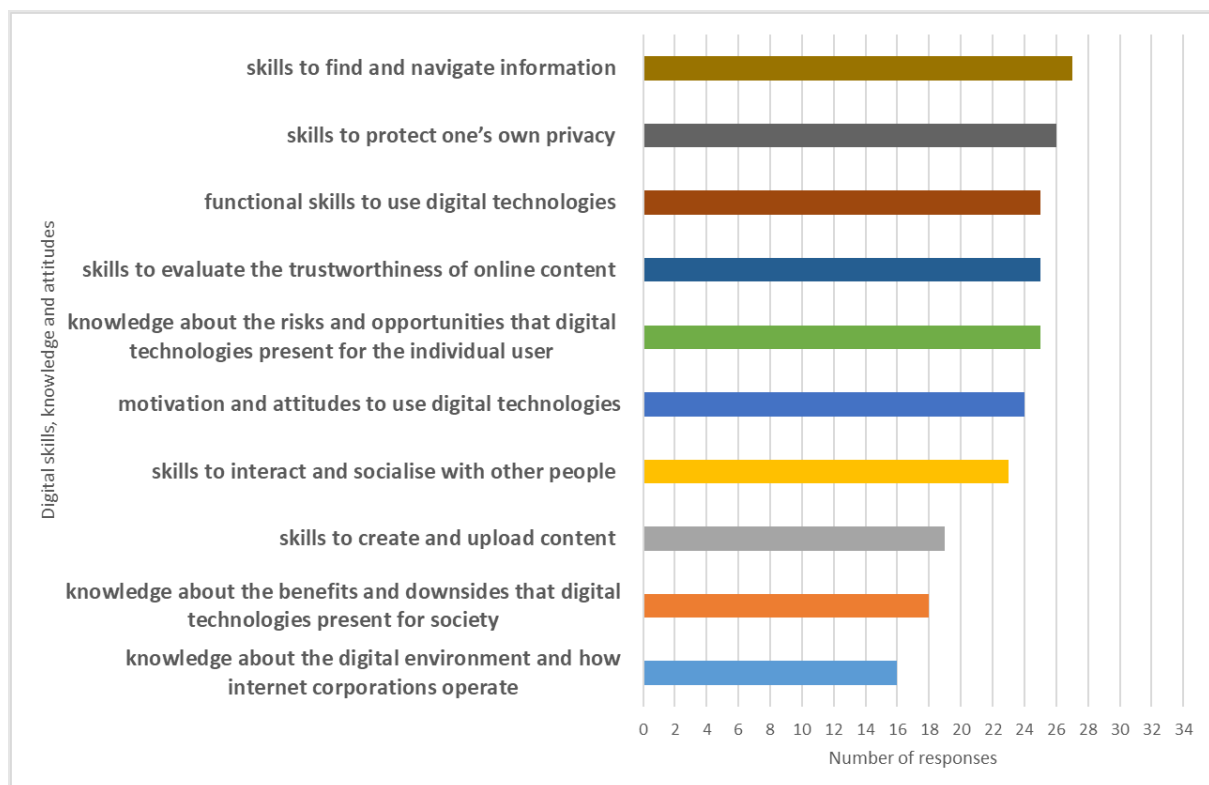*Figure 6: Digital skills, knowledge and attitudes targeted to some extent or to a large extent by policymakers and organisations.*

6.3   Collaboration

During the interviews, both policymakers and organisations emphasised the importance of collaborating with different local and/or national/devolved governments and stakeholders with a view to promoting digital inclusion within their area. As remarked by CSO9, collaboration is

'absolutely essential because we're so large… we wouldn't be able to do [our work] without collaboration'.

When it comes to policymakers, what stood out from the interviews was that they tend to collaborate with a range of stakeholders, which may include: 1) civil society organisations, 2) industry (e.g., ISPs), 3) experts in the field (e.g., academics), 4) public bodies (e.g., libraries), and 5) policymakers from different departments. Relatedly, collaboration can take many forms for policymakers: 1) coordination of different groups and networks (e.g., digital taskforces, industry partnerships), 2) allocating funding to projects conducted primarily by civil society organisations and public bodies, and 3) networking and knowledge exchange with other policymakers and other departments regionally or cross-regionally. What stood out from the interviews is that the networks that have been established within each area are primarily concerned with issues of digital inclusion, with media literacy provision often being an integral but secondary element of these networks, given the focus on digital skills development. It was raised at the workshop event that one element of this is the existence of focal points for digital inclusion collaboration in organisations such as Good Things Foundation and the Digital Poverty Alliance, while these do not really have equivalents in terms of media literacy. With this in mind, as emphasised by PM1 about the network and regular meetings of different stakeholders that are coordinated by Birmingham City Council as part of their digital inclusion strategy:

> *Our role is very much to bring those organisations together and create a psychologically safe space for them to talk freely about ... what the issues are, what the impacts are, and what people's proposed approaches [are] or [to] shar[e] best practice with each other [...as well as] mistakes.*

Meanwhile, organisations often collaborate with stakeholders that tend to include: 1) other civil society organisations, (e.g., those working with specific populations and umbrella organisations), 2) businesses (e.g., local companies), 3) industry (e.g., internet corporations), 4) public bodies (e.g., NHS, libraries, hubs/centres), and 5) policymakers. During their interview, CSO1, a representative from an organisation based in Birmingham, provided examples of some of the stakeholders they work with to deliver digital inclusion and literacy projects providing different communities with digital skills and internet safety training:

> *We work with local authority. We work with West Midlands Combined Authority. We also work with the NHS. We're working on a completely different project with the NHS at the moment…, so that's really exciting. We also work with a number of the big telephone companies as well, like Virgin Media O2.*

As for the forms of collaboration that organisations tend to undertake, what emerged consistently from the interviews was that these forms include: 1) taking part in groups and networks (e.g., digital taskforces and industry partnerships); 2) working with other organisations to access specific populations (e.g., young people, families with children, people with disabilities); 3) designing resources and/or programmes with funds provided by internet corporations; 4) co-design of resources with experts (e.g., academics) and/or communities and populations or interest; and 5) co-delivery of interventions and/or initiatives with other organisations.

CSO9, a representative from an organisation based in Scotland, discussed the importance of reaching the communities they support, in terms of developing the digital skills and knowledge they need to be safe online, through a referral mechanism that they set up based entirely on collaboration with other organisations and stakeholders. As shown by the quotation below:

> *We wouldn't be able to [...operate] without collaboration [and] people on the ground in these areas. So, I've got a referral network of over 200 organisations... They're made up of, you know, public bodies and voluntary organisations, civil society organisations, charities, support organisations, even community groups. So, … we've actually built that referral network up across the whole of [area in Scotland].*

6.4 Challenges

One of the main themes that emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data, which is corroborated by some of the key findings from the survey, is that both policymakers and organisations face significant challenges in terms of promoting digital inclusion. In this section, we present findings from the survey in conjunction with specific themes from the interviews, particularly in terms of the challenges that policymakers and organisations face in relation to: 1) funding; 2) collaboration; and 3) the lack of a cohesive, overarching framework both in England and across countries in the UK.

6.4.1 Funding

One of the questions in the survey asked respondents to reflect on the challenges that they experience in the context of promoting digital inclusion. The main challenge that organisations somewhat agreed or strongly agreed experiencing relates, as shown by Figure 7 below, to their perceptions that internet corporations do not provide enough financial support (18 of 18 responses), followed by a range of other challenges (some of which are discussed in the following subsections), including difficulty securing funding to support they work they do (15 of 18 responses).
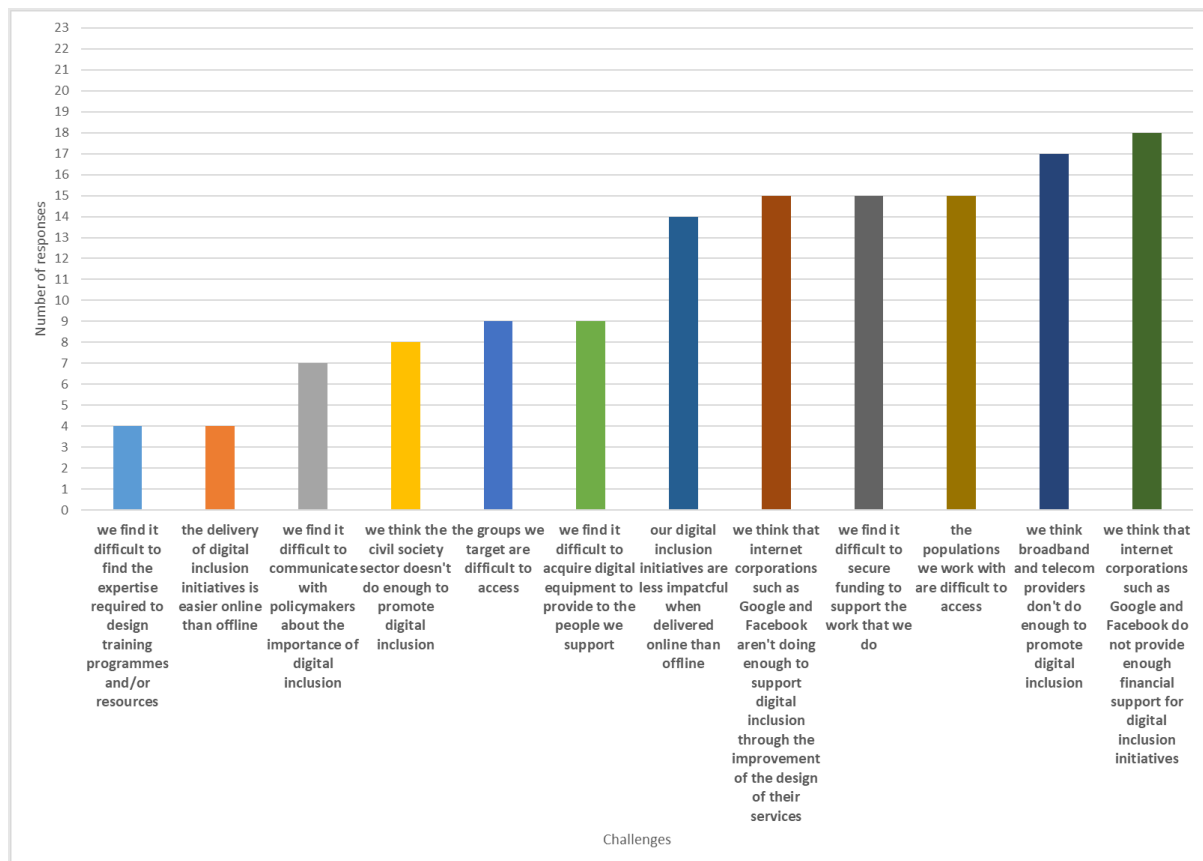
Figure 7: Challenges that organisations somewhat agreed or strongly agreed experiencing.

Issues around limited funding emerged consistently also from the interviews. In particular, the current state of funding for digital inclusion provision appears paradoxical. On the one hand, as participants pointed out, it is supposed to support organisations in promoting digital inclusion. However, on the other hand it often ends up hindering, rather than facilitating, their work. This is because funding remains *inconsistent*, *short-term* and is often *prescriptive*, as in prescribing the type of digital inclusion provision that funders expect organisations to deliver rather than allowing these to decide the type of provision they wish to deliver.

Because it is *inconsistent*, organisations often struggle with uncertainty as to where to apply for funding and what is available. As remarked by CSO1, "our biggest challenge is funding" and, as added by CSO3, "it's not easy to find funding".

Funding opportunities are also generally *short-term*. This creates precarity in the workforce of organisations, with staff members being left uncertain as to whether they can keep their jobs and organisations, in turn, losing expertise due to staff members having no choice but to leave. As a result, it is a big challenge for organisations to retain staff, even, as discussed by CSO9, for a short period of time:

> *We are constantly chasing funding to cover the staff costs to deliver [our] services. My dream is to find somebody to fund our core costs for a year so that we don't have to be constantly thinking.*

Finally, because funding is often *prescriptive*, it undermines organisations' autonomy and expertise in delivering provision. CSO3 explained:

> *In other sectors, you can test things, try, and fail. We're not allowed to fail as charities, ... we have to succeed or at least, you know, try to achieve the outcomes for which we applied for the funding.*

Relatedly, as emphasised by CSO5: "when government offers funding for a project [we hate it that they usually say] we want this to be done for this money".

As an alternative to government funding, seeking funding from industry partnership was discussed in interviews as being encouraged among both policymakers and organisations. This has often proven to be valuable, as it can lead to innovation and more long-term funding opportunities. In the case of CSO5, who work with people with learning disabilities and are running two digital inclusion projects, one of which is funded by Google:

> *They actually funded us for two years to start from scratch and [conduct] research [...with] parents, carers, teachers, [and] support workers... That's because we've got the funding from Google to enable that. So, on our [publicly funded] project, for example, it's a tenth of the funding.*

This project has now reached a third 'test and learn' phase (CSO5), which will be followed by evaluation and dissemination phases, all funded by Google. This suggests that industry funding can increase scalability and sustainability of digital inclusion projects. During the workshop at which stakeholders discussed preliminary findings from this study, participants commented that funding from industry is often more flexible and long-term than from government. Several break-out groups, however, raised the issue that industry funding also adds a layer of complexity by bringing the vested interests of industry into socially driven issues.

6.4.2 Collaboration

While funding emerged as one of the main areas of concern for organisations responding to the survey and participating in interviews, the main challenges identified by policymakers in the survey related primarily to communication and collaboration rather than funding. What policymakers somewhat agreed or strongly agreed experiencing primarily include limited communication and/or collaboration between different government departments (8 of 9 responses), difficulty reaching consensus over the

best policies needed (6 of 9 responses), followed by difficulty gathering evidence (e.g., through collaboration with academics) of digital inclusion provision (5 of 9 responses).

Even though collaboration was praised by both policymakers and organisations as crucial to the promotion of digital inclusion, many recognised during the interviews that it is not always easy, when communicating with different stakeholders (e.g., policymakers themselves, other organisations or industry), to share the same language and find common ground in terms of understanding the nuances and importance of addressing digital inclusion, which is a key challenge. As explained by PM2:

> *We've always got to make a business case to leaders…Each counsellor leads different directorate. So, for digital we had a particular counsellor and she said to me, 'are you just wasting people's time?' …If I accepted that challenge, then we wouldn't really be where we are… The thing that has kept us going is working with the willing.*

Leadership and political commitment were key topics of discussions around findings on collaboration at the workshop event. Several participant groups raised the value of having a designated person in government with accountability and a cross-cutting brief that enables them to move between different departments and levels (local, regional, national), so as to bestow legitimacy on their work and allow them to get things done in terms of actively forwarding the digital inclusion agenda and facilitating communication and collaboration between different stakeholders. From the perspective of policymakers, it is often difficult to discuss digital inclusion provision when communicating with different government departments, as discussions of it need to tap into pre-existing agendas and be mindful of the different priorities that such departments may have in relation to its promotion. Some participants felt that there is a need to get better at 'telling the story' of the work that is being done, and that some areas are better at this sort of communication than others.

In discussions of findings on collaboration at the workshop event, it was commented that there is scope for better collaboration and/or cohesion in England, as well as better join-up between national/regional levels and the hyperlocal. Participants raised that Scotland and Wales have strong national ecosystems in place, but that local government is less well developed there in terms of networks, whereas in England there are strong examples of local leadership and networks, but the national level is less developed. It was also raised, however, that networks for collaboration may or may not be available in hard-to-reach communities, and that it is important to recognise that it is difficult to know who is *not* being reached by such networks and interventions.

Meanwhile, communication can also be a challenge for civil society organisations when communicating with other organisations. As remarked by CSO5, "why do people have to overcomplicate things? Anytime I see an organisation … using informal language …, I jump for joy".

Communication barriers are not the only ones that can undermine the quality of collaboration between different stakeholders. Another challenge that stood out from the interviews relates to the extent to which organisations may find it hard to establish trusting relationships with other organisations, for example with a view to accessing and co-delivering forms of digital inclusion provision to specific populations. As mentioned by CSO2:

> *I think some organisations find it hard to let us in, [they're] worried that we're gonna take over, which is not our format at all. We just wanna work together as much as we can to help as many people as we can.*

Another challenge that organisations sometimes experience relates to their collaboration with partners whose remit is not necessarily digitally focused (e.g., businesses or community groups that work with specific populations). As reported in the survey (see Figure 7 above), one of the main challenges that media literacy organisations somewhat agreed or strongly agreed experiencing is that it is difficult to access target populations (15 of 23 responses). As a result, digital inclusion organisations often have no choice but to work together with partners that, despite not being digitally focused, can help them access specific target groups (e.g., specific professions, young people, people with disabilities). However, this means that those partners might lack digital skills and literacy themselves. As remarked by CSO1 during their interview:

> *We're always three steps ahead of some of the organisations we're working with and certainly the Council as well, because I think skills development is very slow in a lot of these organisations... The people you're working with are still at this level and you think, 'you're my peer, you should really know about this'.*

Finally, many organisations recognised during the interviews that, even though they could not exist without engaging in forms of collaboration with other organisations, in practice they find themselves in competition for the same limited funding opportunities. As described by CSO5, "if you collaborate, you share the [same] pot of funding" and, as emphasised by CSO9, "third sector organisation funding is always a critical issue. It's highly competitive".

6.4.3 Lack of a cohesive and overarching framework

Overwhelmingly, both policymakers and organisations recognised, during the interviews, the lack of a cohesive framework for promoting digital inclusion both nationally (i.e., in England, Scotland and

Wales) and across the nations. Indeed, participants from England, Wales and Scotland acknowledged that promotion of digital inclusion needs to be part of national and cross-national strategies, especially considering that the current UK digital inclusion strategy is out of date and inadequate (see section 2.2). Through a more cohesive framework, better coordination and communication about digital inclusion provision, along with a clearer understanding of who should be doing what, could be enabled with a view to targeting different groups within the UK population.

As discussed by PM4:

> *That's something that we've regularly called for in a lot of our submissions to government, potentially having that national digital inclusion strategy in that national distribution where we can all work towards what the government obviously wants to do. The last one was in 2014 and that hasn't been updated since then. So there's obviously a lot of other areas that are in the same boat where there's a lack of steer from the government… in terms of digital inclusion, Gov UK have led, and a lot departments have led, with this digital first approach without necessarily having the resources from central government to back it up and make sure that those mitigations are in place.*

Organisations from both Wales and Scotland praised their own national digital inclusion strategies but remarked on the need for a framework covering not just England but the whole UK. In the absence of such a framework, policymakers are left with no choice but to create digital inclusion strategies for their own areas (see section 4 above). As emphasised by PM2:

> *We got a cross-policy team… we've put together [our own] framework […, which] includes making sure that we are joined up as a combined authority across all of our policy areas.*

Similarly, organisations must rely exclusively on their own frameworks which, despite operating in ways that do not necessarily account for the national or cross-national digital inclusion landscape as a whole, are tailor-made to the needs of specific populations within specific localities. Talking about the lack of national guidance for how to promote digital inclusion among marginalised communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, CSO8 from Scotland explained:

> *We didn't wait for a framework or guidance, we just saw the problem and figured out what we could do to help. [...Indeed,] we've never really looked for guidance from a local government or from [the national] government. We've just tried to figure out on the ground what's gonna work in our location, [...which is why] we've developed referral systems, allocation systems and outreach systems, [...and] we completely created our own framework... I think that's what's been successful for us as an organisation, 'cause we're very tailored to our*

> *region. Now, [our area in Scotland] is nothing like [another area in Scotland]. The issues they have there are nothing like what we have in [our area]. So, a national framework that didn't focus on the issues of [our area] would be useless to us.*

6.5   Best practice

This section begins with a table of findings about which of the five selected areas were primarily praised by participants as examples of best practice. It goes on to provide the main examples of best practice that emerged across all five areas, as discussed by policymakers and organisations in relation to: 1) the delivery of resources and training; 2) the role of networks; and 3) the materials and resources available for delivery.

6.5.1   Best practice examples by area

The table below shows key examples of best practice praised, in interview or at the workshop event, by participants speaking about their own area, and/or by participants speaking about another area. Where a cell of the table has been left blank, this is because no specific examples emerged for that area.

Table 3: Key examples of praise for best practice by area

Area	Key example of praise by own area	Key example of praise by others
Birmingham / West Midlands	At the workshop event, one participant discussed the good work Birmingham has undertaken in recent years building digital inclusion networks, and that local government is committing funding to the extension of the digital inclusion project undertaken by Birmingham City Council (see section 4.1 above).	

Greater Manchester	'In terms of what works … what we're doing great [here] is making sure we've got frameworks in place to better respond to that evolving [digital inclusion] landscape' – PM2	'Manchester have got it sorted, aren't they? They're very collaborative. There's someone that needs someone at the helm of each of the areas… if every Council ran their digital inclusion the way Manchester have kind of done theirs, that would probably make it a lot simpler' – CSO11
Liverpool City Region	'We try to regularly meet with many other [local] authorities and many other local areas … and share best practice... We're trying to share best practice locally through the digital inclusion network, trying to share that best practice on a national level is really important' – PM4	
Scotland	'[We] work with local authorities and through the NHS … [and we have a] health programme … which is about giving out devices and connectivity and skill support to those who are either addicted to drugs or in rehabilitation from drug use... What we've found is that it's really been of benefit and [has] actually been effective in	'[It's] useful to know how other countries are addressing [digital inclusion]… You know, Scotland are *very proactive*' – PM6

	a way to reduce drug usage and increase mental health' – PM5	
Wales	'[It's useful to] understand what is happening in other countries. So we're not blinkered as to what's going on in Wales… the challenges in other devolved countries are the same pretty much. So it's useful to have that insight… We all may have slightly different approaches to address the challenges, but equally we can pick up some best practices' – PM6	'Wales have done a lot of good work with their [Welsh Government-funded digital inclusion programme] Digital Communities work' – PM5

6.5.2   Delivery of resources and training

Some organisations suggested that the delivery of digital inclusion resources and digital skills training opportunities tends to be more effective when provided via face-to-face support that is tailor-made to the needs of a given community. As emerged from the survey and shown by Figure 7 above, 14 of 23 organisations somewhat agreed or strongly agreed that one of the main challenges to the promotion of digital inclusion relates to the extent to which resources are more impactful when delivered offline than online, which casts doubts on the reach and effectiveness of digital delivery. Asked what works in terms of their provision of digital inclusion support, CSO2 explained:

> *In terms of what we offer skills-wise, through the volunteers, it's very tailored to the individual. It's often an at-home visit where someone has requested help with something in particular, and it could be skills but it could be the fact [that their] computer's running slowly […,] so it could be practical technical help as well as digital skills. But that would just be tailored to that person ... from their starting point and what they want to achieve. So, tailoring it to individuals… you're talking about, 'what do you want to be able to achieve? Do you want to*

> *be able to phone your granddaughter, see photographs? Do you want to be able to book a GP appointment online?'*

6.5.3 Role of networks

During the interviews, organisations commented that digital taskforces and networks were examples of good practice since they enable different stakeholders (e.g., policymakers, organisations, industry etc.) to gain insights into the current provision of digital inclusion initiatives and to share knowledge of what works and does not work within specific areas. What we found from the interviews is that local governments across the five areas are actively establishing networks that focus primarily on the promotion of digital inclusion, with Greater Manchester serving as an example of good practice. As discussed by PM2 from Manchester:

> *We've got a cross-policy team within Greater Manchester Combined Authority …, making sure that we are joined up as a combined authority ... and we've also got […, across] all of our ten boroughs […, a] local leads group that meets on a monthly basis, and the benefits of that, we've seen, are that local authorities are working together in ways they've never worked in that sense before... People are sharing resources, sharing capacity, making sure that we're bridging the gaps so that there isn't a postcode lottery [...but] residents in all boroughs are able to be supported around the same thing... The other part of joining up is around our digital inclusion taskforce. At the start of and during the pandemic, I was having individual conversations with lots of different people from the telecom sector to community groups to schools and colleges…, so I brought everyone together in a digital inclusion taskforce … but also … we've got national global organisations that have a footprint in Greater Manchester that are part of that network.*

This was echoed in discussions at the workshop event, where Manchester was discussed as having a mature ecosystem with good leadership and coordination. The positive effects of such networks were discussed, specifically in Soctland, as it was commented that they are able to avoid duplication as being more collaborative/connected means they can share research between departments more easily, rather than departments undertaking their own, separate research. The Welsh Hwb was also mentioned as an example of best practice.

6.5.4 Materials and resources

Finally, organisations emphasised that it is important "not [to] reinvent the wheel" (CSO2) and draw on resources and materials that have shown to be effective. Examples of these that were praised and used by some organisations included: 1) the National Data Bank and the Learn My Way digital skills

programme produced by Good Things Foundation, which provide donated/refurbished devices/data, and digital skills training and support respectively; and 2) the Tech4Families programme created by the Digital Poverty Alliance, which provides free devices to families in need. As explained by PM1:

> *The National Data Bank is remarkable… the ease of access and the range of service that they now offer. So if you register with the Good Things Foundation as a member for free, you can access the national data bank, the National Device Bank, you can get training for free as well as digital champions… It's been such a lifeline for our citizens… I think that is certainly the best practice and that every local authority should be tapped into the National Data Bank and Good Things Foundation.*

What is more, a few organisations discussed the co-design of materials and co-delivery of projects, whenever possible, as an ideal example of best practice. As an extension of the idea of supporting people by meeting them where they are (see subsection 4.5.1 above), co-design and/or co-production here refers to the process of working with target populations with a view to producing resources together with members of those communities in order to tackle their specific needs. As mentioned by CSO5, "coproduction is absolutely best practice, as far as I can see". Participants often spoke about co-design/co-production in terms of engaging with local communities through participatory methods (e.g., focus groups; consultation) to produce resources and deliver initiatives together with individuals and groups from those communities (e.g., targeted digital skills training). Asked what works best in the context of their work, CSO1 from Birmingham said:

> *I think, for us, it's participatory, so it's including and involving, at every stage, the people we are working with, the people we are training, the people … who are coming to our classes, whether that's through a focus group, whether that's through involving them at an event, whether that's inviting them to speak to us on a one-to-one basis... Yes, that's the thing that makes us a success... You have to include the people who you are designing this product for.*

6.6   Expectations

Another main theme that stood out from the interviews and was corroborated by findings from the survey relates to the hopes and expectations that both policymakers and organisations have in terms of how to better promote digital inclusion in the future. Here, we present findings from the survey in conjunction with specific themes from the interviews, especially in relation to: 1) funding; 2) collaboration; and 3) the need for an overarching framework.

6.6.1   Funding

When responding to the survey, the areas of work that policymakers somewhat agreed or strongly agreed need more attention in the future primarily include the need for better communication and knowledge sharing between government departments (9 of 9 responses), followed by the need to allocate more funding to promote digital inclusion (8 of 9 responses), more funding for research to inform decision-making in this area (7 of 9 responses), and more funding allocated to organisations supporting marginalised communities (6 of 9 responses). Similarly, as shown by Figure 8 below, most organisations that took the survey somewhat agreed or strongly agreed that policymakers should allocate more funding to promote digital inclusion, and that funding should be allocated primarily to organisations and/or initiatives promoting digital inclusion among marginalised populations (21 of 22 responses each).

Perhaps not surprisingly, during the interviews both policymakers and organisations also expressed the need for more funding opportunities to be made available for the promotion of digital inclusion. Organisations, in particular, suggested that calls for proposals should be more varied, including some that are prescriptive and some that allow organisations to exercise more autonomy. On the one hand, as remarked by CSO2, organisations would benefit from clear "funding proposition[s] that […come] from government with a set of guidelines of what you need to achieve". On the other hand, as explained by CSO5, it would be helpful:

> *if the government […,] a local council or a government organisation said, 'we've got £250,000, we want to reach people about improving their media literacy and ... would like [to fund a...] project [...that lasts] at least two years. What could you do for £250,000?' And then all the charities could bid for it.*

6.6.2   Collaboration

As shown by Figure 8 below, most organisations that took the survey somewhat agreed or strongly agreed that more collaboration is needed among organisations themselves to better coordinate digital inclusion initiatives as well as to understand gaps in digital inclusion provision (21 of 22 responses each). To a lesser extent, some also agreed that more collaboration is needed between them and experts, such as academics, particularly with a view to designing, delivering and evaluating digital inclusion initiatives and/or resources (13 of 22 responses).
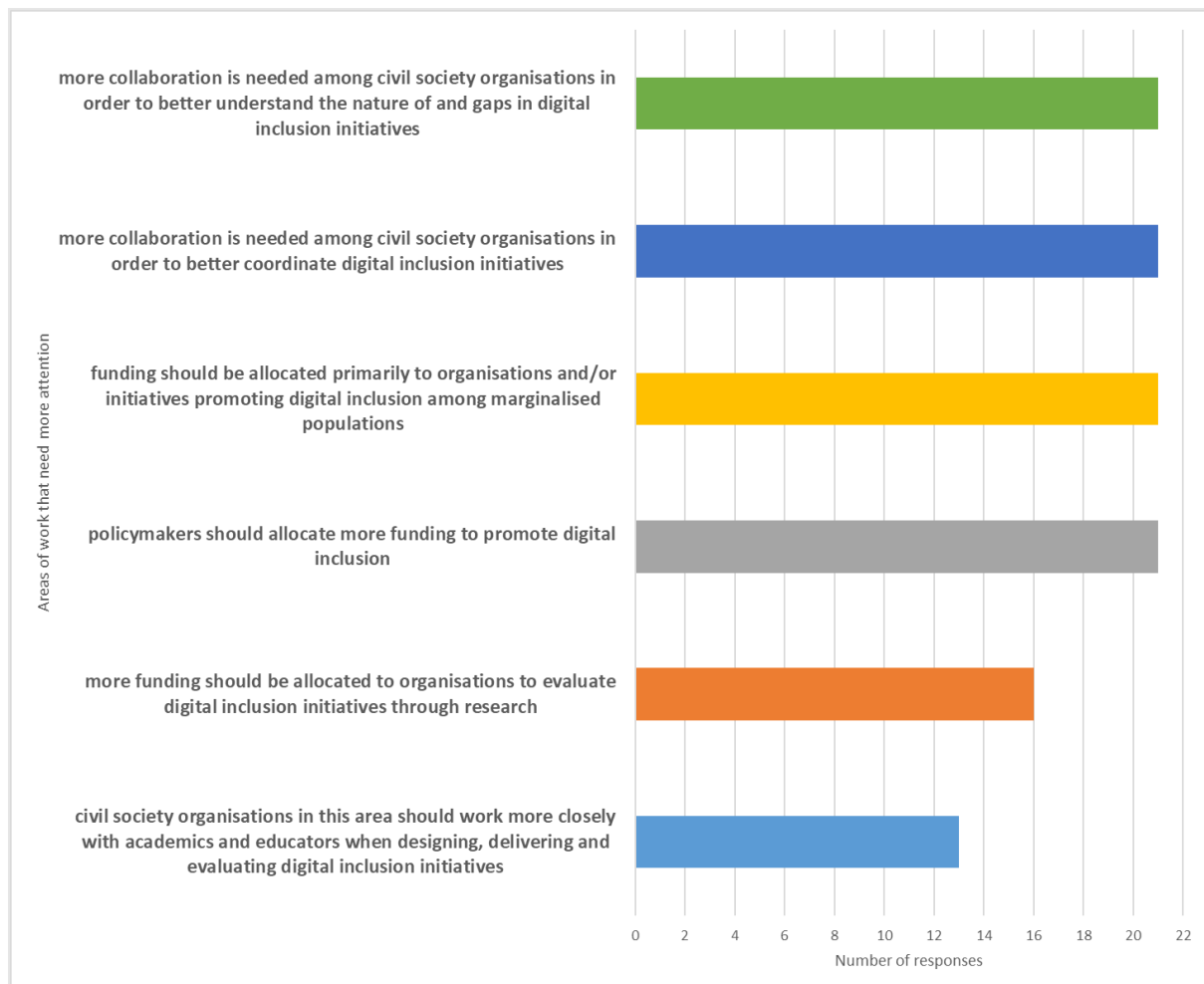
Figure 8: Areas of work that organisations somewhat agreed or strongly agreed need more attention in the future.

While collaboration was praised as an area of best practice by most interview participants, the need for more collaboration was also discussed as a key area for the future. As remarked by CSO3, 'I think what we need is more providers. We need a marketplace. We need to encourage more'. Similarly, PM1 spoke about expectations for developing future partnerships which have the potential to enable a better understanding of issues of digital exclusion in their area:

> *We're reaching out to partners like the NHS and the police and DWP so that they can start putting data in here so that you can start to really look at what the picture of the city is. We don't necessarily have a picture of the direct impact of digital exclusion on certain health outcomes, on attainment levels, on career prospects, on earning potential, on social isolation.*

6.6.3   Framework

Insofar as both policymakers and organisations recognised the lack of a cohesive, overarching framework as one of the main challenges to digital inclusion provision in the UK (see subsection 4.4.3

above), it is not surprising that something they hope for the future is the development and implementation of such a framework. As discussed during the interviews and mentioned earlier in this report, this is crucial to enabling better coordination and communication between the different initiatives that are taking place in different areas. Such a cohesive and overarching framework would need to account for flexibility at the local level to enable organisations to provide services that meet the needs of their specific communities and localities. Also, it would only be effective provided digital inclusion were to be firmly embedded within every policy area and high on the agendas of every government department, rather than serving as an afterthought. As emphasised by PM6:

> *[A] really important focus for us and our expectation 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 a cross-cutting issue as part of their policy development… [with] each policy area [… having] to complete an integrated impact assessment as part of the policy development … [and] digital inclusion becom[ing] part of that … at the start of every policy development.*

7   Discussion and conclusion

This project aimed to explore the ways in which both policymakers and civil society organisations promote digital inclusion within five key areas in the UK (Birmingham / West Midlands, Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, Scotland and Wales), with a focus on the main challenges and best practices that they experience. To do this, this study adopted a case study methodology based primarily on conducting and analysing 18 semi-structured interviews, supplemented by the administration of an online survey (n = 46 responses), with policymakers and representatives from relevant organisations operating within the five selected areas. Given the limitations of our quantitative data in terms of both the number of survey responses and its generalisability (see section 4.4 above), the findings presented here are based primarily on the interviews in ways that are enhanced by some overarching descriptive statistics from the survey. As such, in its focus on two under-researched populations, this study contributes to the field of digital inequalities in ways that are both empirical and practical. The analysis offered in this report sheds lights on the views and experiences of these populations, who are key players in both the design and implementation of policy, and the delivery of practical interventions, aimed at promoting digital inclusion. Thus, not only does this report contribute to research in digital inequalities but also has the potential to help reshape the digital inclusion landscape in the UK in terms of both policy and practice. Empirically, it provides an analysis of data collected from two groups whose experiences and views, despite being crucial to

the digital inclusion landscape in the UK, have been overlooked. Practically, it provides a set of recommendations for both policymakers and organisations in digital inclusion with a view to advancing both policy and practice in this area.

Key findings from this project suggest that what policymakers and organisations primarily do to promote digital inclusion within these areas include the development of policy and guidelines as well as the allocation of funding (policymakers), and the provision of digital devices, mobile data and/or broadband access, along with delivering events, resources and/or training programmes and raising awareness (organisations).

In addition, the main reasons as to why both policymakers and organisations promote digital inclusion include access to health services, social interaction, employment and participation in society. This finding resonates with the recognition of the complexities of digital inclusion, as discussed earlier in this report, in relation to not only material access but wider social issues (Goedhart, 2022; Yates, 2023).

The target populations that both policymakers and organisations prioritise when promoting digital inclusion include people with disabilities, older people, low-income households as well as ethnic minorities. It is not surprising that the main populations targeted by policymakers and organisations relate to the aforementioned intertwined issues of social and digital exclusions, as groups of interest tend to be what could be termed marginalised communities and/or those more at risk from social exclusion such as people with disabilities, older people, low-income households and ethnic minorities (Carmi and Yates, 2020).

Another key finding from this project suggests that collaboration is crucial to the work of both policymakers and organisations. This can take multiple forms (e.g., networks, taskforces, industry partnerships, co-production, and co-delivery of initiatives) and involve multiple actors (e.g., policymakers, public bodies, organisations, industry, experts, communities). While there is not much difference between the five areas selected for this study in terms of the types of collaboration established by and with policymakers and organisations, the extent to which different forms of collaboration are taking place varies from one area to another, with Greater Manchester, for instance, serving as an example of good practice in relation to the establishment of multiple networks, including, for example, a cross-policy team, a local leads group, and a digital taskforce. Similarly, the establishment of bespoke local referral mechanisms based on collaborative networks, as those established by one of the Scottish organisations interviewed for this project, is another example of how both policymakers and organisations are making efforts to coordinate digital inclusion provision and ensure that this is both equitable and consistent across their areas. The networks established

across the five selected areas remain, however, focused on the promotion of digital inclusion, with media literacy promotion piggybacking on these networks.

The main challenges that this study found policymakers and organisations experience primarily relate to funding, collaboration, and the lack of a cohesive and overarching framework.

Funding opportunities for organisations are inconsistent, short-term, and often prescriptive, which echoes some of the findings from a recent piece of research conducted by the London School of Economics (Edwards et al., 2023). Furthermore, industry funding is welcome but raises ethical questions around the involvement of internet corporations, whose objective is generally to make profits, which may skew the priorities or parameters of digital inclusion interventions.

Meanwhile, collaboration may be undermined by issues of communication (as different government departments and organisations may have different priorities and approach digital inclusion in different ways), by difficulty establishing trusting relationships, and by limited digital skills within some organisations.

The Digital Inclusion Strategy is considered out of date and inadequate (HoL, 2023) and both policymakers and organisations think that digital inclusion provision is undermined by the lack of a cohesive and overarching framework that provides better coordination: 1) across the different regions and nations of the UK, and 2) across the different levels and hierarchies of government (i.e., local, regional, national). As a result, organisations are often forced to produce and rely on their own frameworks. While organisations from both Wales and Scotland praised their own national digital inclusion strategies, all remarked on the need for a framework covering not just England but the whole UK.

In terms of best practice, many organisations championed the importance of providing face-to-face support that is tailor-made to the specific needs of individuals and communities. In addition, some remarked on the benefits of using participatory methods to co-produce and/or co-deliver resources and initiatives with members of the populations of interest.

As for their hopes for the future, organisations commented on the need for more government funding, which is necessary for their promotion of digital inclusion and delivery of resources, initiatives, and programmes within marginalised communities. Organisations would like funding opportunities to be more balanced, with some being more prescriptive and others allowing organisations to exercise more autonomy. In addition, not only is more and better coordinated collaboration between organisations seen as necessary but, while industry partnerships are welcome, there needs to be more discussion and oversight over the role of internet corporations in the promotion of digital inclusion.

Finally, both policymakers and organisations would like to see a cohesive and overarching framework coordinating the digital inclusion sector. This would entail integrating digital inclusion in every policy area and more recruitment of government roles with the requisite skills and accountability to support promotion of digital inclusion at local, regional, and national levels.

8   Recommendations

In the light of findings discussed above, this report provides the following recommendations for policymakers, civil society organisations, and researchers.

8.1   Policymakers

We recommend that policymakers:

- create an updated national framework – a clear UK-wide digital inclusion policy – with a view to enabling a more cohesive and better coordinated approach to the promotion of digital inclusion across the different regions and nations of the UK.

- integrate digital inclusion within every policy area. This could be through requiring digital inclusion/exclusion assessments for new policies and/or through embedding dedicated staff (e.g., Digital Inclusion Officers) in policy areas – which resonates with the British Academy's (2023) suggestion that a Digital Inclusion unit be established as part of DSIT.

- creating and recruiting more government roles (Digital Inclusion Leads) with the necessary expertise and accountability at local, regional, and national government levels.

- allocate more funding to organisations in this space, while achieving a greater balance between prescriptive and non-prescriptive calls that allow organisations to exercise more autonomy.

- lead discussions around the involvement (especially as funders) of internet corporations in the promotion of digital inclusion.

8.2   Civil society organisations

We recommend that civil society organisations:

- continue to undertake and enhance their involvement in coordinated forms of collaboration with other organisations, including strengthening relationships with partners.

- consider use of participatory methods, whenever possible, with a view to co-designing and/or co-delivering resources and initiatives with other organisations and, most importantly, with members of the populations that they serve.

- consider pursuing industry partnerships but in tandem with discussions around the involvement of internet corporations as potential funders.

8.3 Researchers

We recommend that researchers:

- conduct further research on the views and experiences of policymakers (with a focus on policy implementation) and civil society organisations promoting digital inclusion, and on the extent to which both these populations engage directly with citizens and different communities.

- conduct further research on the implementation of digital inclusion policy and the extent to which this meets the needs of different communities. This could involve focusing on a given hyperlocal context and collecting data from both niche populations, such as policymakers and organisations, and citizens so as to map and explore not just the state of digital inclusion provision but also citizens' uptake of such provision.

- conduct further evaluative research into the effectiveness of different methods of digital inclusion delivery, including participatory approaches and the co-design and co-delivery of initiatives.

- widen the scope of this study by focusing on other areas in the UK (e.g., London, Northern Ireland), and/or the UK in comparison with other major European countries and/or North America.

We advise that these recommendations are read and considered together with those outlined in our parallel report about media literacy (Polizzi et al., 2024), though they have also been written to stand alone. As we note throughout both reports, there is a need to link together policies for digital inclusion, digital and media literacy, as these are intertwined and cannot be explored in isolation from each other.

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Appendix 1 – Sample questions from survey

Groups targeted

Which of the following populations does your organisation target in the context of promoting **digital inclusion**? Tick all that apply.

☐ Primary school students

☐ Secondary school students

☐ Further/Higher Education students

☐ Low-income households, e.g., social housing tenants/individuals receiving benefits

☐ Women/girls

☐ Disabled people

☐ Elderly people

☐ Ethnic minorities

☐ LGBT/Q+

☐ Other (Please specify)

What policymakers do to promote digital inclusion

In what ways does your organisation enable people to **access** digital technologies with a view to promoting **digital inclusion**? Tick all that apply.

☐ By allocating **funding** to organisations that provide **digital infrastructure**

☐ By allocating **funding** to organisations that provide **digital devices**

☐ By developing **policy** that supports organisations in the provision of **digital infrastructure**

☐ By developing **policy** that supports organisations in the provision of **digital devices**

☐ By providing **guidelines** that support organisations in the provision of **digital infrastructure**

☐ By providing **guidelines** that support organisations in the provision of **digital devices**

☐ By gathering **evidence** that supports the allocation of funding and the development of policy and/or guidelines to promote access to digital technologies

☐ Other (Please specify)

What organisations do to promote digital inclusion

In what ways does your organisation enable people to **access** digital technologies with a view to promoting **digital inclusion**? Tick all that apply.

☐ By providing **mobile data** and/or **broadband access**

☐ By gathering **evidence** that supports the development of policy and/or guidelines to promote access to digital technologies

☐ By providing **spaces** in which people can access **digital devices** and/or the **internet**

☐ By providing **spaces** in which people can access the internet **with support**

☐ Other (Please specify)

Appendix 2 – Interview guides

Interview schedule for interviewing policymakers

1. Context and current work
- Could you please give us a brief summary of what your organisation does? (digital inclusion, media literacy, or both?)
- What department do you work for?
- What geographical areas does your organisation cover?
- What age groups/populations do you target?
- What is your role? How long have you worked in the context of promoting digital inclusion?
- What is your focus when it comes to promoting digital inclusion (digital access, digital skills)? And why is it important?
- What digital inclusion networks, if any (e.g., taskforces, boards) are you part of? How regularly do you meet?
- In what ways do you promote digital inclusion (e.g., through developing policy, gathering evidence, funding initiatives, providing guidance and resources, working with the school curriculum, etc.)?
- What projects and/or initiatives are you currently funding and/or supporting in order to promote digital inclusion?
- How do you evaluate and select which projects and/or initiatives to fund and/or support?
- Are you currently collaborating, or have you ever collaborated, with local partners and other organisations working in the same area? If so, who are your partners and where are they based?

2. Challenges and best practice
- What challenges, if any, have you experienced in the context of supporting and funding digital inclusion initiatives? How did you deal with these challenges?
- If they collaborate – How important to your success is your collaboration with other partners / membership of a network? Why?
- If they collaborate – What challenges, if any, have you experienced in the context of collaborating with local partners in this area and/or in terms of the network that you are part of?
- If they do not collaborate – Is the lack of collaboration with local partners in this area a challenge? In what ways?
- Any challenges in the context of developing policy in this area (e.g., limited communication between departments)? How did you deal with these challenges?
- What do you think is the biggest barrier to promoting digital inclusion/media literacy?
- Any specific challenges in relation to the projects and/or initiatives that you are currently funding/supporting? How have you dealt with these challenges?
- On the other hand, what has worked effectively in the context of promoting digital inclusion? Why do you think this worked?
- Are there any studies and/or initiatives from elsewhere that you draw on as examples of best practice?
- What do you think is the most important thing to consider as a policymaker when it comes to the practical task of promoting digital inclusion?

3. Expectations
- What are your hopes as a policymaker in terms of how digital inclusion could be better promoted in the future?
- Who needs to do what and when to make this happen?

Interview schedule for interviewing organisations

1. Context and current work
- Could you please give us a brief summary of what your organisation does? (digital inclusion, media literacy, or both?)
- What geographical areas does your organisation cover?
- What age groups/populations do you target?
- What is your role? How long have you worked in the context of promoting digital inclusion?
- What is your focus when it comes to promoting digital inclusion (digital access, digital skills)? And why is it important?
- What digital inclusion/media literacy networks, if any (e.g., taskforces, boards) are you part of? How regularly do you meet?
- Do you work directly with policymakers?
- In what ways do you promote digital inclusion (e.g., through developing resources, training, programmes, interventions, working with the school curriculum etc.)?
- What projects and/or initiatives are you currently supporting, delivering and/or evaluating?
- How do you come up with ideas for projects/initiatives? Why do you think these are important?
- Are you currently collaborating, or have you ever collaborated, with local partners and other organisations working in the same area? If so, who are your partners and where are they based?

2. Challenges and best practice
- What challenges, if any, have you experienced in the context of supporting, delivering and/or evaluating digital inclusion initiatives? How did you deal with these challenges?
- If they collaborate – How important to your success is your collaboration with other partners / membership of a network? Why?
- If they collaborate – What challenges, if any, have you experienced in the context of collaborating with local partners in this area and/or in terms of the network that you are part of?
- If they do not collaborate – Is the lack of collaboration with local partners in this area a challenge? In what ways?
- Any challenges in the context of designing resources in this area (e.g., working with experts/academics/educators)? How did you deal with these challenges?
- What do you think is the biggest barrier to promoting digital inclusion?
- Any specific challenges in relation to the projects and/or initiatives that you are currently supporting, delivering and/or evaluating? How have you dealt with these challenges?
- On the other hand, what has worked effectively in the context of promoting digital inclusion? Why do you think this worked?
- Are there any studies and/or initiatives from elsewhere that your organisation draws on as examples of best practice?
- What do you think is the most important thing to consider as an organisation when it comes to the practical task of promoting digital inclusion?

3. Expectations
- What are your hopes as an organisation in terms of how digital inclusion could be better promoted in the future?
- Who needs to do what and when to make this happen?

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