Digital inclusion across London
Emerging research findings

Loti

What do these slides cover?

High-level themes and insights
These will be build out with more detail, examples, case studies, quotes, and links in the report.

Initial findings from 30 semi-structured interviews
- 21 interviews with local authorities
- 9 interviews with VCS organisations
- 45 minutes long

The five main thematic areas covered
- The impact of COVID on digital inclusion initiatives
- Approaches to tackling digital exclusion
- Digital inclusion strategies and drivers
- Challenges and success factors
- London-wide needs and opportunities

Impact of COVID

COVID had negative impacts for residents, but drove digital inclusion work

1. **Exacerbated need and entrenched exclusion**

"Our community is already excluded, and then over the pandemic, because of their digital exclusion, they were even further excluded."

2. **Accelerated digitisation of public services**

"Lots of barriers have been coming down over last year and we've been putting so many processes online over the last year. There's a much wider range of things that residents can do online now."

3. **Made digital inclusion work harder to do.**

"It's difficult to understate the impact of not being able to do face to face - both for digital skills training which is very challenging to do remotely, as well as for generating donations (of devices)."

4. **Put a spotlight on digital exclusion**

"COVID has now put it front and centre and the council needed something that calls out that digital inclusion is a thing".

5. **Helped break down siloed working**

"The pandemic has given the opportunity to make connections across the council and bring people together."

Approaches to tackling digital exclusion

Improving digital skills

1. This was the **most common approach** to tackling digital exclusion

2. **Digital champions** - were a common approach adopted by many councils, and a national charity (Digital Unite) supporting organisations to train and recruit digital champions. But very few schemes operated at scale.

3. **Informal digital skills training sessions** - these were favoured over more formal courses as they could be better tailored to meet needs and had lower barriers to joining. Many councils held these in libraries, and VCS organisation like Mer-IT or ClearCommunityWeb also held community sessions.

4. **Formal digital skills / IT courses** - typically run by adult learning services or FE colleges, these were less common and often couple with informal sessions, providing an opportunity for people to learn more.

5. **Information & resources** - some councils also produced printed resources for residents. Croydon's "How to Get Online" guides is one example, which was later adapted by Southwark Council.

6. **Role of staff** - a number of councils upskilled staff (often in libraries or customer service roles) to act as digital champions or provide basic digital skills support and training to residents.

Increasing access to devices

1.   Gifting schemes vs lending schemes

The majority of councils choose device gifting schemes, while there were only a couple of examples of lending schemes (e.g. Merton libraries). Reasons given were that providing someone with a device to keep was a sustainable solution and lending schemes need officer resource to manage the loaning of devices. Merton favoured a lending scheme due being led by a library-model and the sustainability being able to purchase a stock of devices to continuously lend, while already having the staff resource in place to manage the scheme.

2.   New devices vs refurbished devices

More councils opted for new devices over refurbished devices - though not always as a concsious decision.

Reasons for choosing to buy new laptops include needing devices quickly, wanting something that would last a number of years, concerns about data security, and not having sufficient stock of council refurbished devices.

Reasons for councils choosing refurbished devices include lower cost, they meet users needs, scalable and sustainable (i.e. all organisatios refresh a proportion of their devices a year), and it helps meet council's green commitments.

3.   Type of device

Chromebook - many people suggested Chromebooks were preferable because they were more cost-effective, easier to set up, and easier to use. However, the lack of functionality meant they didn't suit all users.

Windows laptop - the most commonly refurbished device. The preferred for students/families due to the additional functionality compared to a Chromebook.

Tablets - a number of interviewees said that tablets were the preferred choice of device for older people because they tended to want something really easy to use, that was big enough to see the screen but not too bulky and easy to carry around.

Increasing access to the internet

The three main approaches councils took :

1. Free community wifi

2. Providing pre-paid dongles

3. Securing free or subsidised broadband packages

This is a massive issue but most councils haven't cracked it / don't have the powers to adequately tackle it.

The most common approaches rely on working with internet providers, and leveraging social value from them during contract negotiations.

Providing free wifi in community buildings, often libraries, is also common, as something that is much more in the power of councils to do and many libraries had already been providing this.

Providing specialist support services

This was less common than the first three. Three main approaches or model:

1. Dedicated 121 support model

Example: Tower Hamlets' Digital Support Service - appointment based services.

2. Helpline models

Example: Dorset's helpline or Barnet Libraries' IT Support Service.

3. Signposting model

Example: Voxta

Building digital inclusion capability

Supporting a network of organisations

National charities like Good Things Foundation or Digital Unite. For example, Good Things Foundation supports a network of over 1,000 community organisations across the UK to build capacity and embed the skills and knowledge to tackle digital exclusion in the communities they support. Digital Unite helps organisations create and run a digital champions programmes and support a Digital Champions Network of 4,000 volunteers through an online platform with resources and training.

Upskilling council staff

Brent training library staff across their 6 libraries to become digital champions. Want to build the capacity of staff to help libraries fulfil it's new role as a place to learn basic IT skills and get online.

Training staff of external organisations

ClearCommunityWeb developed a programme during COVID that focuses specifically on training staff in local VCS orgs to use Zoom. For example, they worked with AgeUK Croydon to train their volunteers how to use Zoom in a facilitative way to increase their capability to reach people.

Other approaches

1. Promoting online safety

An area of work that doesn't feature as prominently. While a few boroughs (e.g. Southwark) have included it in their strategies, none have serious programmes behind it.This is perhaps understandable - particularly during COVID - as the priority was to get people online, and then you can worry about things like safeguarding online and cybersecurity. Several boroughs (e.g. Tower Hamlets) have mentioned this as an area for future work.

2. Jobs and employment

A couple of councils are working with internet providers to create internship and job opportunities for residents, and there are a couple of examples of initiatives that also aim to support small and micro businesses to develop an online prescence - but these types of initiatives are much less common. Creating job pathways and opportunities in the telecoms industry was suggested as an area for pan-London work by a couple of interviewees.

3. Infrastructure

Broadband roll-outs, in the context of connecting properties to high-speed broadband was mentioned a couple of times. And patchy access to high-speed broadband was raised by a couple of outer London boroughs as an issue.

However, others were clear that affordability not infrastructure is the issue in the context of digital inclusion.

"The focus on infrastructure can be a misplaced from a digital inclusion perspective. 5G is great but if you can't afford to connect to it... affordability is the real issue."

Digital inclusion strategies

Key drivers of digital inclusion

There seems to be three broad approaches:

1. **As part of a whole council strategy (e.g. Barnet)**

In this case, a digital inclusion programmes tends to have been around for a number of years, and has a level of priority within the council. They might be at the stage of moving towards bringing disparate parts of the council together through a cross-council digital inclusion group and taking a more strategic approach. Often main drivers might include tackling social exclusion and deprivation; as well as not leaving people behind as council digitises.

2. **As part of a move towards the digitisation of council services (e.g. Croydon)**

A digital inclusion programme led by a specific department, usually customers services, libraries or IT/digital services - and is often part of the council's digital strategy. Other parts of the council might be doing different things as well (e.g. many economic growth / regen team negotiate contracts and wayleave agreements with internet providers). Often the main driver is not leaving people behind as they move towards digitisation of council services.

3. **As part of a council's COVID response (e.g. Ealing)**

Typically more ad hoc in nature. Work is most likely to be a single initiative and/or a pilot and tends to be a newer focus for the council. Council's are often closer to the start of a journey and more likely to include user research and mapping to understand need across the borough.

Identifying need / digital exclusion

Mapping local hotspots of digital exclusion

Worked with a partner such as Citizens Online to research and map digital exclusion hotspots across their boroughs - e.g. Ealing and Havering.

This was also noted as a challenge by a number of councils and identified as a pan-London need, which supports the work to develop a London-wide map of digital exclusion.

User research

Greenwich conducted qualitative research with the community (semi-structured interviews and workshops) to understand community needs and co-created solutions with the community and tailor what they did as a result.

Resident surveys

Tower Hamlets identified through a survey that there was a need of 10,000 devices to provide every child access to online learning across the borough.

How is digital inclusion resourced?

Most often there is no decided budget for digital inclusion

A lot of local authorities have digital inclusion in their strategy, but more often than not, they haven't been able to find a dedicated budget for it, so digital inclusion initiatives are resourced through officer time, often as a small part of a mich wider role. Where this appears to be have been most successful is with libraries, where the scope of the library staff role has been shifted to have a greater focus on supporting residents who might be digitally excluded.

External funding pots are a major source of funding for digital inclusion, without which many projects wouldn't exist

Funding sources range from central government funds, GLA funding, LGA grants, as well as from foundations and charitable funders like the National Lottery. For example, Croydon were only able to do their digital inclusion projects through two £25k grants, while Greenwich used £150k from a £720k MHCLG public health grant to deliver their digital inclusion programme.

A number of councils have made dedicated budgets for digital inclusion, for example:

- Havering have committed £250k in 2021/22 as part of their ambitious digital strategy and have projected the budget for the following year to be c.£430k (though is yet to be confirmed)
- Tower Hamlets have created a dedicated Digital Support Service, which is staff by a team of 5 FTE and managed by the council's contact centre. The estimated cost per year is £200k-220k.
- Southwark raised c. £230k for laptops for low-income families through a crowdfunding campaign and match-funded it.
- Brent have included digital inclusion as part of their Residents' Support Fund. They have spent approx. £100k on devices for residents this year.

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Sustainability and scale

The sustainability of digital inclusion projects is a risk

"The big thing still is making it sustainable. You can often get one off money for a device, for a connection for a year, but it's then what do you do in a year's time?"

Sustainability is a big issue for many digital inclusion projects, especially ones that have been funded through external grants or as one-off council funds for pilots. Many of the external funding sources were COVID responses funds, which raises major sustainability risks for digital inclusion projects when these sources dry up.

The current scale of digital inclusion initiatives isn't sufficient to meet the need

The current scale of most programmes is relatively small. For example, there are only a few device schemes are in the 100s of devices; some places have been able to recruit between 100-200 volunteers; and there are examples where councils are running a 9-5, Mon-Fri helpline. But in some places digital champion schemes are being run from libraries with fewer than 10 digital champions, and might be done for 1 hour, once a week. And nowhere does the scale of work appear sufficient to meet the need.

However, there appears to be three common routes to scale:
1. Scaling through existing community infrastructure. For example, many councils have already, and very quickly, scaled initiatives borough-wide through their libraries network (e.g. Barnet, Brent, Merton, Tower Hamlets).
2. Device refurbishment schemes offer a potential route to scale using old public sector and corporate devices (donations from public not a sufficient route to scale). However, current concerns about data security hold back the potential of refurbishment schemes.
3. National charities which offer support and online learning provide opportunities for scaling capacity building support for smaller, VCS organisations as well as council staff.

Measuring impact

This appears to be a major gap in the field

There doesn't seem to much data or evidence or robust evaluations to draw on to understand what is really working. And this was an area that was noted a challenge by a couple of interviewees. Some of the national charities that focus on digital inclusion have evaluations of their programmes available.

There are a several evaluations of programmes currently underway

For example, Greenwich have a developed Theory of Change and have commissioned an external academic evaluation partner. Camden is conducting a pre and post questionnaire-based evaluation of their pilot supporting job seekers. And Hubbub's Community Calling programme requires partner organisations to have everyone who receives a device to complete survey when they receive the device and 6 months later.

But all too early to have an indication of impact yet.

But the majority of initiatives lack evidence and evaluations

People mentioned the difficulty of doing evaluations with digitally excluded people, with one interviewee suggesting is was "impossible". Others said evaluations were too difficult during COVID. Others were reluctant to add additional burdens on beneficiaries. Others didn't prioritise it or were confident it was the right thing to do.

Challenges & success factors

The five key common challenges were

1. **Securing access to affordable broadband for residents**

"The number one challenge is getting connectivity. The problem is data poverty - people just can't afford it."

"There are limits to what councils are able to do on broadband. Local authorities are not internet providers. Unless councils are willing to pay for residents' broadband, only so much influencing is possible. We just don't have the powers."

2. **Reaching digitally excluded residents**

"We know there's people who need support but it's about how to reach them and raise awareness that digital inclusion support is available."

3. **Meeting the scale of need for devices**

"It's a huge challenge to meet demand for devices and connectivity. It's like chipping away at a huge mountain due to the scale of the demand."

4. **Lack of funding and capacity for digital inclusion**

"It's about having the resources to do it properly. Digital inclusion can often be just one small part of someone's job, which can affect how successful a scheme is."

5. **Identifying and mapping need**

"Understanding the true size of the need across the borough has been really hard."

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Other challenges mentioned included...

6. A lack of evidence on digital inclusion programmes

"The level of published data about digital exclusion could be better. What's big picture on the impact on digital skills and inclusion?"

7. Working with volunteers

"We were able to get volunteers easily at the time but the ongoing challenge will be keeping the programme going as it relies on volunteers. How to keep up momentum and volunteers engaged?"

8. Keeping attention on digital inclusion post-lockdown

"The challenge is ensuring this is really on the radar of policymakers. Right now, there's a real opportunity for that because the pandemic has really shown up what we already knew existed. But it's also a challenge because there are so many challenges and there's so much that needs to be done and changed."

9. The multi-dimensional nature of digital exclusion

"Digital exclusion is caused by many things - it's not just a case of giving people equipment a bit of training. It won't work for everyone."

Key success factors

1. Working with the VCS to identify and reach digitally excluded residents

"Absolutely working through community organisations is what works. Funding organisations to be able to reach the people who are most excluded is crucial. You can't do this without the voluntary sector."

"We work through community organisations because they are the trusted faces in local places. They really know how to engage and support and build relationships with people who are often facing a multitude of challenges in their lives. They'll often turn up at a community organisation because they've faced a crisis."

2. Partnerships are able to leverage in more than councils can do on their own

"We were able to give devices out to children very quickly by working with Tower Hamlets Education Parntership. [They] organised for schools to collected and then hand out to families."

3. Social value can secure significant benefits, but councils need to be proactive and clear about what they want

"All [internet] providers can offer it, but you need to ask them specifically - they won't bring it to the table voluntarily."

4. Digital inclusion needs to be built into council strategy and have senior leadership backing

"The key thing is about making digital inclusion part of strategy. It helps bring together stakeholders at a regional level from different sectors."

Key success factors (cont...)

5. A dedicated digital inclusion coordinator role - particularly the case for digital champions programmes.

"The most successful programmes we've seen are when there has been a dedicated coordinator role that can project manage the initiative, act as a volunteer manager to recruit, train, and coordinate a community of volunteers, and match up with learners that need to be helped"

6. Digital skills training and support needs to be pitched at the right level - the basics, informal, and 121 support or in small groups.

"The biggest challenge is understanding people's need really well and delivering the basics. You need to keep is as simple and clear as possible."

7. Scale and embed digital inclusion through existing community infrastructure and networks.

"The reach of community champions and our network of community centres means the project can reach 50,000 residents"

London-wide needs and opportunities

London-wide needs and opportunities

1. Using the collective power of councils to secure better broadband deals for residents

2. A cross-London device refurbishment scheme

3. Sharing knowledge and best practice in terms of what other councils have done and are doing.

4. Sharing best practice around social value and transparency around deals

5. Mapping digital exclusion

6. A London-wide campaign to secure devices

7. Preparing Londoners for jobs in the telecoms industry

8. Digital inclusion toolkit

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Thank you for reading. Please note these are interim findings and further analysis and write up is currently underway.

Contact details

Will Bibby

07472 899809

will@bibby.work