# Digital Inclusion in London

# A review of how digital exclusion is being tackled across London

By Will Bibby on behalf of the London Office for Technology and Innovation.

# Executive summary

Digital exclusion is a major issue for many Londoners, affecting people's health, education and work outcomes. Many organisations, including boroughs and their third sector partners, are working hard to address this. This research report aims to address the lack of London-wide knowledge about what work is underway, especially since and during the pandemic.

The report sets out what digital inclusion looks like across London, reviewing over 100 digital initiatives identified through an open survey, and interviewing 38 people involved in digital inclusion work across the public, voluntary and private sectors in London. It outlines the main approaches organisations are taking to tackle digital exclusion, identifies a number of key challenges facing those organisations, as well as ways to overcome them, and puts forward six recommendations for London-wide action.

***Six main approaches organisations took to tackle digital exclusion***

1. Increasing digital skills and confidence
   a. Digital champions were a common approach adopted by many councils, while several national charities provide support to organisations to train and recruit digital champions.
   b. Informal digital skills training sessions were favoured over more formal adult education courses as they could be better tailored to meet needs and had lower barriers to joining.
   c. Some councils also produced printed resources and information for residents. Croydon's "How to Get Online" set of guides is one example, which was later adapted by Southwark Council.
   d. 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.

2. Increasing access to devices
   a. The majority of councils choose device gifting schemes, while there were only a couple of examples of lending schemes.
   b. More councils opted for new devices over refurbished devices - though this was often for pragmatic reasons such as needing devices quickly or not having sufficient council stock of old devices.
   c. Having different types of devices (e.g. laptops, chromebooks, tablets) available meant that needs could be better met for residents with a wider variety of needs.

3. Increasing access to the internet
   a. Providing free wifi in community buildings, typically in libraries, but also in community halls, children's centres, tenants' halls, and social care settings, is a common approach by councils.

b. Many councils are also securing free or subsidised broadband packages by working with internet providers and leveraging social value from them during contract negotiations.
c. A number of organisations and councils also provide residents with prepaid dongles - though it was commonly acknowledged that this option was less preferable and not appropriate in many situations.
d. Councils have used wayleave agreements with internet providers to maximise infrastructure investment to tackle 'not spots'.

4. Providing specialist support services
   a. Dedicated 1-2-1 support provides residents with a service they can go to get help with a specific need such as completing a council form.
   b. Helpline models support residents who can phone up or email with a specific query and get support.
   c. Signposting models help people who are digitally excluded access information and advice.

5. Building digital inclusion capability
   a. Supporting a network of organisations - e.g. national charities such as Good Things Foundation and Digital Unite supports 1,000s of community organisations across the UK to embed the skills to tackle digital exclusion in the communities they support.
   b. Upskilling council staff - e.g. Brent Council are training library staff across their six libraries to become digital champions.
   c. Training staff of external organisations - e.g. ClearCommunityWeb developed a programme during COVID that focuses specifically on training staff in local VCS orgs to use Zoom.

6. Role of libraries as a core part of London's digital inclusion infrastructure
   a. A place where residents can go to get online and use a device
   b. A place to learn basic digital skills
   c. A place to get 1-2-1 support with basic IT issues
   d. A distribution network for laptop gifting and lending schemes
   e. A coordinating service that brings together digital inclusion initiatives across the council

**Six key challenges for digital inclusion in London**

1. Securing access to affordable broadband for residents
2. Reaching digitally excluded residents
3. Meeting the scale of need for devices
4. Addressing the lack of funding and capacity for digital inclusion
5. Identifying and mapping need
6. Addressing the lack of evidence on digital inclusion programmes

***Key success factors that make digital inclusion initiatives more effective***

1. Working with the Voluntary and Community sector (VCS) helps identify and reach digitally excluded residents.
2. Cross-sector partnerships are able to leverage more resources and support than councils can do on their own.
3. Social value from contracts can secure significant benefits, but councils need to be proactive and clear about what they want.
4. Innovative funding practices, such as crowd-funding, can bring different organisations and citizens together as well as raise funds for devices.
5. Digital inclusion needs to be built into council strategies and must be supported by senior leadership.
6. A dedicated digital inclusion coordinator role - particularly in the case for digital champions programmes - can make all the difference.
7. Digital skills training and support needs to be pitched at the right level - focusing on the basics, provided in an informal setting, and delivered in 1-2-1 support or in small groups.
8. Device gifting and lending schemes need to be coupled with digital skills support, otherwise there is a risk devices will not be used.
9. Having a range of different types of devices available is beneficial for meeting the needs of a wider variety of residents.
10. Digital inclusion should be scaled and embedded through community infrastructure such as libraries, community halls, and children's centres.
11. The use of libraries for reaching and supporting those in need has been of particular significance, despite closures during lockdown.
12. Upskill staff, particularly library staff, who work with and have relationships with people who are likely to be digitally excluded to provide digital inclusion support.

**Overall conclusion:** Digital inclusion approaches are more effective when a blended approach - provision of devices is coupled with connectivity and digital skills training and support - is taken.

***Recommendations for London-wide action***

In the recommendations below, where actions are suggested for the "Mayor of London" , London's Chief Digital Officer will be responsible for their delivery.

1. **Devices:** In order to address device poverty, the Mayor of London and LOTI should explore whether creating a London-wide scheme and campaign could provide substantially more refurbished devices to digitally excluded Londoners.
2. **Data:** In order to address data poverty, the Mayor of London, LOTI and telecommunications companies should work in partnership with boroughs to secure more affordable broadband and mobile data deals for residents and make greater use of social value.

3. **Capacity:** In order to build digital inclusion capacity within London's community infrastructure, the Mayor of London and LOTI should work with London boroughs and the VCS, focusing particularly on libraries and local community groups that work with digitally excluded Londoners.
4. **Knowledge:** In order to scale successful initiatives, LOTI should facilitate the sharing of data, knowledge and leading practice in digital inclusion.
5. **Needs:** In order to maximise the take up of digital skills programmes, future provision must be designed to meet users' real needs.
6. **Evidence:** In order to build and share the evidence base for what works in digital inclusion, LOTI should run a Digital Inclusion Impact Programme.

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## About the author

Will Bibby is a freelance policy researcher and strategist specialising in social and public innovation. He previously worked for Nesta as a Senior Programme Manager, where he wrote a number of reports including _The People-Powered Shift_, _The Value of People Power_, and _Parents Helping Parents_. He also has four years' experience working in local government, when he worked at Essex County Council as the Innovation Lead in their Public Service Reform Unit. Will worked as a research associate for the University of Oxford, where he also did his Master's degree in Geography.

## Acknowledgments

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Tackling digital exclusion across London

[Millions of people in the UK are digitally excluded](#) - either through one or a combination of a lack of digital skills or confidence, access to digital technology, or access to the internet.

This can have a hugely [negative impact](#) on a person's life chances, potentially leading to poorer health, increased loneliness and isolation, and less access to education and jobs.

The COVID pandemic has made the issue of digital exclusion all the more important, as lockdowns have [intensified the digital divide for the UK's poorest and most vulnerable](#). Those who are not online are more disadvantaged than ever.

Hundreds of organisations across London are working to tackle digital exclusion - by helping people develop digital skills, providing devices, access to the internet, and providing direct digital support.

This report seeks to describe what digital inclusion looks like across London - that is, what are public, voluntary and private sector organisations in London doing to tackle digital exclusion, how are they doing it, and what challenges are they facing?

The report includes a range of case studies of digital inclusion in action, highlights a dozen key practical success factors, and makes a series of recommendations for London-wide action that are necessary to address major challenges and gaps in London's approach to support digitally excluded Londoners.

## 1.2. LOTI's Digital Inclusion Innovation Programme

The report has been commissioned by the [London Office of Technology and Innovation](#) (LOTI), which is part of London Councils.

It is part of the [Digital Inclusion Innovation Programme](#) (DIIP), a two year programme to use innovation methods to discover, design, develop and scale initiatives that support digitally excluded Londoners who have been left particularly vulnerable during the Covid pandemic.

The Digital Inclusion Innovation Programme is part of the Mayor of London's [Digital Access for All Mission](#) to ensure "Every Londoner has access to good connectivity, basic digital skills and the device or support they need to be online by 2025."

The DIIP programme has three main goals:

- <u>For residents:</u> A "minimum access package" that provides a menu of options, backed up by a range of reliable and affordable provision to meet individuals' essential device, data and skills needs will be available to digitally excluded Londoners.

- <u>For borough / voluntary sector staff:</u> Practitioners who work with digitally excluded Londoners will be easily able to access quality information, resources, services and peer support on digital inclusion to aid their users. The evidence base on what works – and the range of mature interventions that can be scaled – will be more extensive.

- <u>For corporates:</u> Information on the scale and nature of digital exclusion in London will be more detailed and easily accessible, giving companies a greater ability to provide offers of philanthropic support where they are most needed.

The research aims to support these goals by developing an understanding of what the digital inclusion landscape looks like and establishing a baseline of activity to identify opportunities for further work, collaboration, and pan-London action.

## 1.3. Methodology

*Survey data*

LOTI conducted an open, crowdsourced survey, inviting any organisation in London working on digital inclusion to respond and share what their initiative does and who it helps.

In total, 105 entries of different digital inclusion initiatives were recorded. The data summarising all of [the initiatives can be found in this airtable](#).

Due to the nature of the survey, the possibility of sampling bias within the survey dataset limits generalisability, and means we shouldn't consider this a comprehensive or necessarily representative sample of digital inclusion initiatives across London. Rather it gives us a good indication of the types and breadth of digital inclusion initiatives currently taking place and where there are potential gaps.

*Digital inclusion workshops*

LOTI also held two workshops with a range of public, voluntary and private

organisations delivering digital inclusion projects. These were held on [April 20th](#) and [May 25th](#), with a total of approximately 50 people attending.

The workshops largely focused on challenges, success factors, and opportunities for collaboration and London-wide action.

*Semi-structured interviews*

We also conducted 38 semi-structured interviews with local authorities (22), housing associations (2), voluntary sector organisations (11), and businesses (3) delivering digital inclusion work.

The interviews focused on understanding different approaches to tackling digital exclusion, identifying key challenges and success factors, as well as specific need for London-wide action.

The interviews were recorded, written up and then coded. The data was then analysed using [thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006)](#).

# 2. Context

## 2.1. Digital inclusion across London in numbers

*Headline numbers*

- A total of 105 digital inclusion initiatives in 31 boroughs across London have been identified through the crowdsourcing survey.

- 25 local authorities are leading or participating in at least one digital inclusion initiative.

*Initiatives by sector*

- The majority of initiatives involve third sector organisations (68%), as well as public sector organisations (62%), while 22% involve private sector organisations (12). 38% of initiatives are cross-sector partnerships.

Figure 1. Digital inclusion initiatives by sector
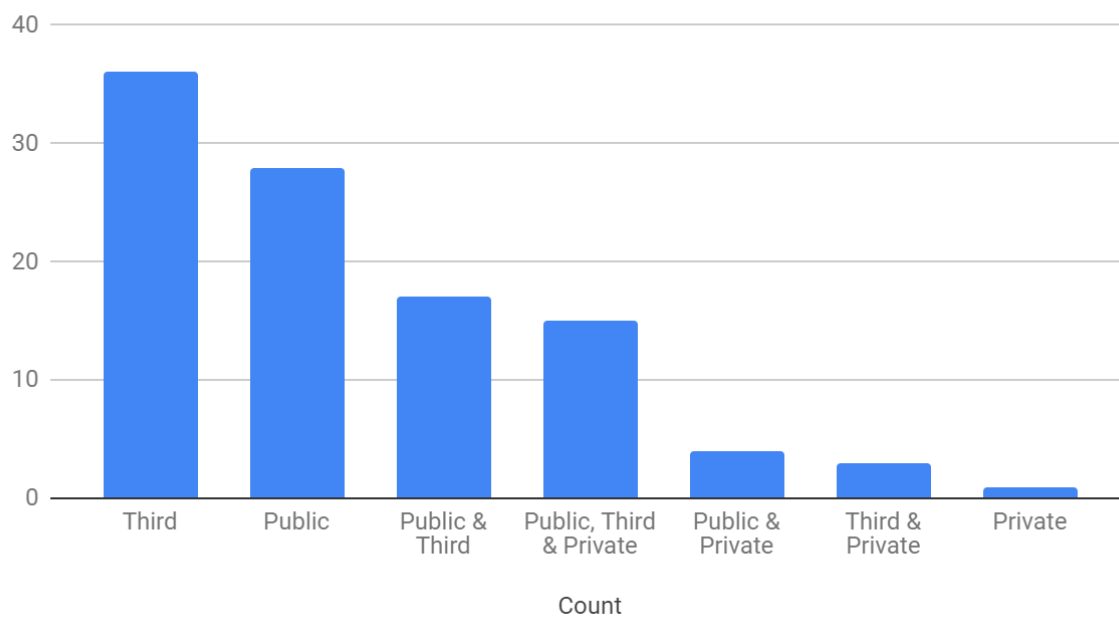


The majority of initiatives (60%) are part of a wider programme, compared to 40% which are standalone projects.

## Figure 2. A single initiative or part of a wider programme?
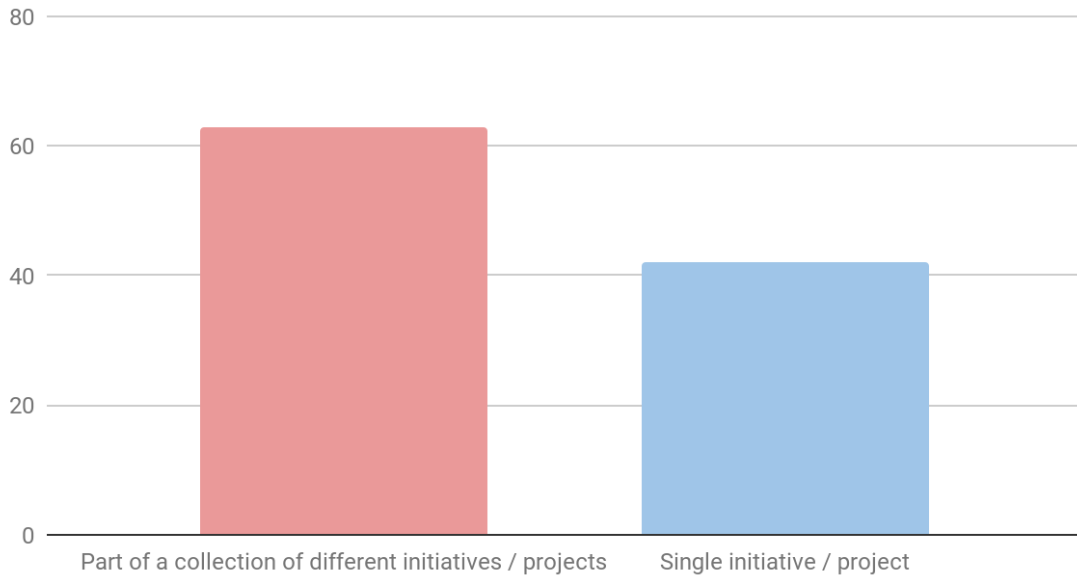


*Type of initiative*

The most common types of initiatives are provision of digital skills and training (84%), provision of devices (67%), identifying digitally excluded groups and their needs (58%), and provision of connectivity / data allowance (52%).

## Figure 3. Types of initiatives
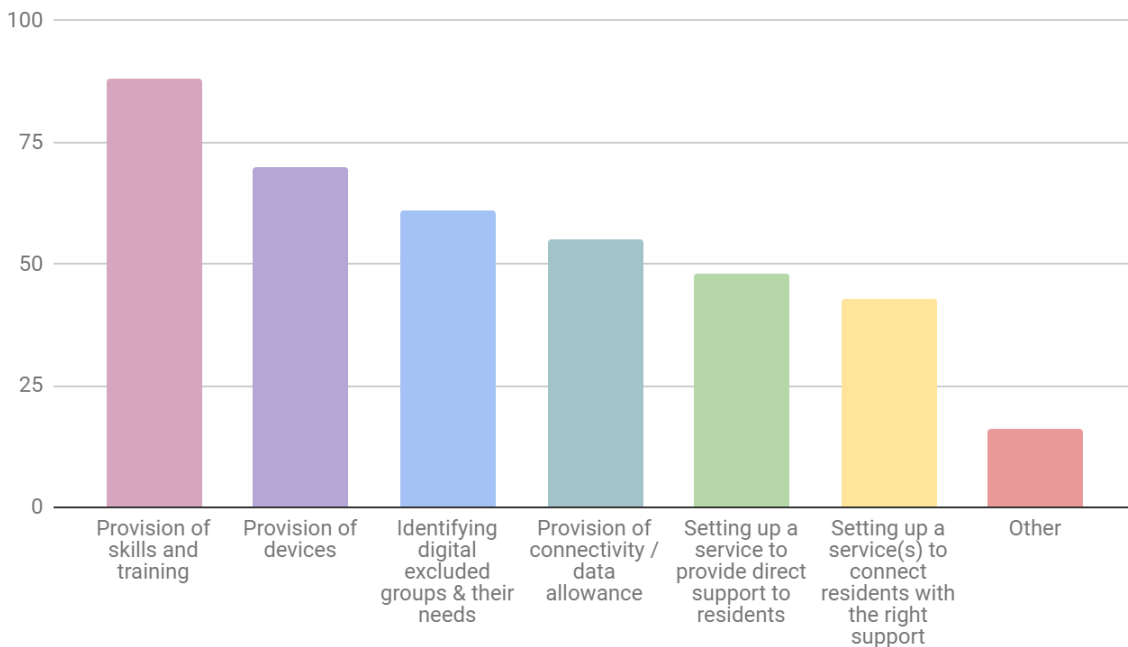


However, while different initiatives may share aims (e.g. provision of skills), many take quite different approaches to achieving them (see section three). For example, while many initiatives aim to provide access to devices to digitally

excluded residents, initiatives range from gifting old refurbished council laptops, to creating a formalised Laptop Library Lending scheme, to helping people repair their old or broken devices. Likewise, for initiatives that aim to improve digital skills, approaches vary from formal accredited IT courses to the creation of digital champion networks and digital buddy schemes.

*Who do the initiatives aim to help?*

41% of all initiatives aim to help all digitally excluded residents (41%). The next most common target beneficiary group are older people (27%), followed by low-income residents (17%), children and their families (16%), and groups identified as 'vulnerable' (16%).
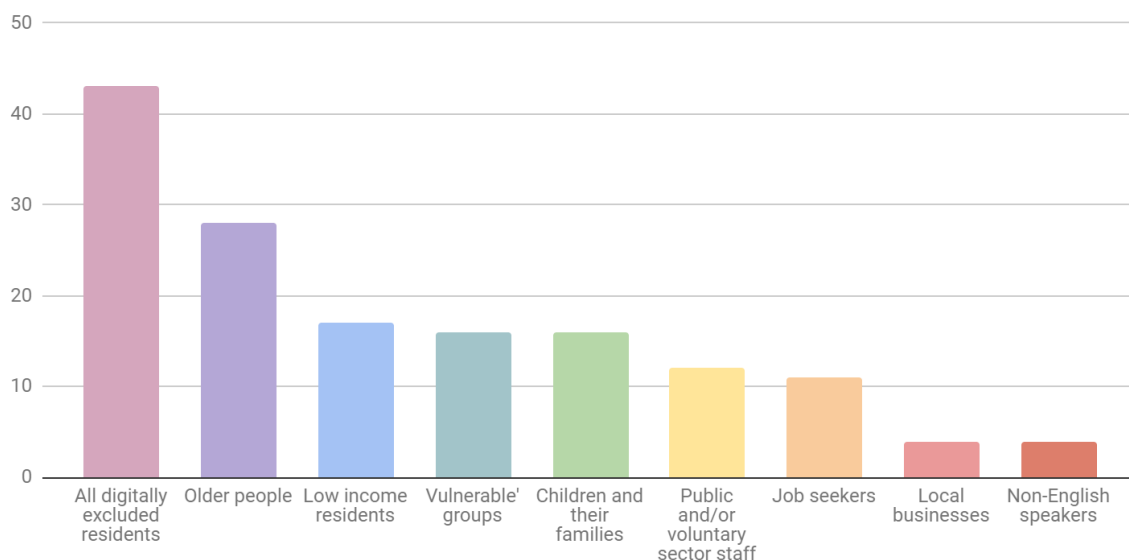
While 11% of initiatives aim to support public and/or voluntary sector staff, 10% support job seekers, and 4% support non-English speakers, and local small businesses.

Figure 5. Who do the initiatives aim to help?



## 2.2. Key drivers of digital inclusion work for London boroughs

Approaches that councils take to tackling digital inclusion differ in a range of ways, including how mature or well established the digital inclusion work is, where it sits within the council, and how it's funded.

There appears to be three broad approaches or models:

1. *As part of a whole council strategy*

In this case, digital inclusion programmes tend to have been around for a number of years, and have a level of priority within the council (i.e. is considered a priority by senior leadership). 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 the main drivers include tackling social exclusion and deprivation; as well as not leaving people behind as council digitises.

> *"A lot of authorities had customer access strategies which often included elements of digital inclusion. That was our approach. The digital inclusion strategy we did in 2016 was an appendix to this piece. So it was customer service driven initially. But it's not something that a customer service function should hold as there are so many elements… Our new Barnet Plan is a lot more focused on residents and engagement and all our outcome themes have a digital inclusion element within them. So it's part of our overall corporate strategy now rather than a separate digital inclusion strategy." - Barnet's digital inclusion lead.*

2. *As part of a move towards the digitisation of council services*

This typically involves a digital inclusion programme led by a specific department - usually customer 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 and regeneration teams negotiate agreements with internet providers). Often the main driver is not leaving people behind as they move towards digitisation of council services.

> "We're having to try and do more with less funding. So what we were trying to do is while we move to digitise our services or try and help people self-serve, we also want to make sure we're not leaving behind people who aren't online. So our digital strategy outlines that need to help vulnerable residents who aren't online to get online where possible…." - *Croydon's Head of Digital.*

3. *As part of a council's COVID response*

This approach is typically more ad hoc in nature and usually came about as a response to the impact of COVID. In this case, digital inclusion work is most likely to be a single initiative and/or a pilot and tends to be a newer focus for the council. Councils are often closer to the start of a journey and more likely to focus user research and mapping to understand needs across the borough.

> *"Our project with Citizens Online came out of the council's COVID response. It was initially a small, time-limited project … but seems to be getting bigger and bigger. We're still right at the start of the work but digital inclusion seems to be on every agenda in Ealing at the moment." - Ealing's digital inclusion officer*

> **Success factor:** *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." - Digital Inclusion Lead, West Midlands Combined Authority.*

*"[Our digital inclusion strategy] probably was relatively forward thinking at the time, but I'm not sure we were able to achieve all the objectives we set out to. Partly because we didn't know quite where it lived, partly because it was always tacked on to a day job, and partly because it didn't sit across the whole council." - Barnet's digital inclusion lead.*

## 2.3. How is digital inclusion resourced?

*Most often there is no dedicated budget for digital inclusion*

A lot of local authorities have digital inclusion in their strategy, but more often than not, they aren't able to find a dedicated budget for it. As a result, digital inclusion initiatives are often resourced through officer time, as a small part of a much wider role. Where this appears to 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.

> *"[Our digital inclusion strategy] didn't come with any budget though, which seems to be quite standard. People know they have to deliver digital inclusion but there's no funding to go with it" - Croydon's Head of Digital.*

> **Case study: Merton Libraries Laptop Lending Scheme**
>
> All libraries in Merton lend laptops and tablets for three months to vulnerable and isolated residents. The council invested in a stock of 200 new devices. Library members who sign a loan agreement can borrow a device and renew it every three months if no one is waiting. Merton Libraries also provide mobile broadband (via dongles) for those who can't afford data.
>
> In addition, Merton provides basic 1-2-1 IT support through their libraries. The support is provided by 20 volunteers. Libraries in Merton have always provided 1-2-1 support in libraries, so this is an extension of that role. Volunteers provide practical support that is based on individual needs, often based around showing how to do particular tasks (e.g. online shopping, using Zoom).
>
> The project has been funded through various grants to purchase laptops but

the plan is that it can be sustained because they have opted for a lending model which, combined with the use of volunteers to provide the 1-2-1 support in libraries and the use of existing library staff resources, means they are able to run the scheme at no additional ongoing cost.

*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 deliver 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 allocated dedicated budgets for digital inclusion, for example:*

- Havering has 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 has created a dedicated Digital Support Service, which is staffed by a team of five 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 has included digital inclusion as part of its Residents' Support Fund. The council has spent approx. £100k on devices for residents this year.

## 2.4. Impact of COVID on digital inclusion

There's no escaping the far-reaching impacts that COVID has had in a range of areas across society and digital exclusion is no exception. This research found that COVID has had negative impacts for digitally excluded residents, but also helped drive digital inclusion work in councils and communities across London.

1. Exacerbated need and entrenched digital exclusion

Digital exclusion was already a big issue before the pandemic, but the impact of lacking access to digital technology and connectivity has been even more severe as face to face connection was restricted. And those who were already the most socially excluded were worst affected.

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

*Manager at the Southwark Travellers Action Group.*

The finding that COVID has exacerbated the digital divide is supported by a number of studies and reports including from the [University of Cambridge](#), the [Centre for Aging Better](#), in [the Lancet](#), and [the BMJ](#).

2. Accelerated the digitisation of public services

Another effect of COVID is that many local authorities have greatly [accelerated the pace of their digitisation agendas](#), rapidly moving more and more public services online. This was a very common theme that came up during the interviews with councils.

> *"Lots of barriers have been coming down over the 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." - Tower Hamlets council officer.*

While this can be seen in many respects as a positive development - fast-forwarding changes that were already underway - it has also had the consequence of increasing the already significant need for digital inclusion support for those who can't access these services online.

3. Made digital inclusion work harder to do

At the same time, delivering digital inclusion support became more difficult as a lot of this support needs to be done face to face. Many programmes and services transitioned to phone or online support but where digital skills were a barrier to digital inclusion, this made it very difficult for many.

> *"It's difficult to overstate 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)." - City of London's digital inclusion lead.*

In addition, libraries, which play a key role in many local areas to increase access to digital technology, were closed, meaning one of the few places to access the internet was not available.

4. Put a spotlight on digital exclusion

However, not all the impacts were entirely negative. Due to the isolation of many residents, and the need to rapidly digitise services, many councils became more aware of the impacts of digital exclusion and began to prioritise digital inclusion initiatives.

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

Many councils, which hitherto had no digital inclusion strategy and initiatives, developed projects to support residents who were digitally excluded, and many except to continue this work post-COVID.

5.  Helped break down siloed working

Finally, the urgency and severe need that the pandemic created also shifted the conditions in which people working in the public and voluntary sectors operated, necessitating [old ways of working to be changed, or at least suspended](). The need to work more closely together and work across traditional boundaries and siloes meant that, often for the first time, digital inclusion agendas were being brought together from teams across the council, and often across the borough.

*"The pandemic has given the opportunity to make connections across the council and bring people together." - officer from Hackney Council's Digital Inclusion Network.*

# 3. Approaches to tackling digital exclusion

Six main approaches to digital inclusion that were identified as part of the research are outlined in this section. Under each of those broad headings, organisations adopted a range of models and strategies to achieve their aims.

## 3.1. Improving digital skills and confidence

This is the most common approach to tackling digital exclusion, with 84% of all digital inclusion initiatives aiming to improve digital skills. However, the way in which organisations are going about improving digital skills varies considerably.

**Digital champions** are a common approach adopted by many councils and there are a number of major national digital inclusion charities supporting organisations to train and recruit digital champions. Digital champions can be either volunteers or trained staff who support people with low digital skills or knowledge to understand the benefits of using the internet and show them how to do simple things online. But very few schemes operate at large scale.

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**Case study - Digital Unite's Digital Champions Programme**

Digital Unite is a national charity that helps organisations create and run digital champions programmes.

They work with councils, housing associations, NHS organisations, as well as charities like Age UK. Across the UK they have trained and supported over 2,500 digital champions. The idea is that "building capacity in organisations that work with digitally excluded people is far more sustainable and more impactful than running some IT classes for a few people."

Digital Unite's membership model means that organisations can join their network and train people as digital champions. Organisations pay a membership fee (£1,200/year) to join the network and then buy a licence based on how many champions they need.

They also host the Digital Champions Network, an online platform that contains training and support to help staff and volunteers become digital champions. It hosts a web-based learning platform full of courses and resources to support digital champion training and development, as well as a range of project management tools and templates to track progress and impact.

Digital Unite identifies two things that are needed for digital champions programmes to be really effective. Firstly, an effective local partnership working

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model. For example, Digital Unite is working with Brent Council, who are working to bring a range of local partners together to recruit and train 500 digital champions across the borough. "The only way to achieve this goal is to do it with partners locally to get the scale while ensuring consistent training and support," explains Digital Unite's programme manager.

The second key thing is to embed capacity within organisations to coordinate digital champions. "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."

**Success factor:** *A dedicated digital inclusion coordinator role - particularly the case for digital champions programmes - can make all the difference.*

**Informal digital skills training sessions** are generally favoured over more formal courses as they could be better tailored to meet needs, are able to be kept basic and start from the beginning and have lower barriers to joining. Many councils hold these in libraries, while VCS organisations like Mer-IT or ClearCommunityWeb also hold community sessions.

> *"The biggest challenge is understanding people's needs really well and delivering the basics. You need to keep it as simple and clear as possible." - ClearCommunityWeb's Managing Director.*

**Success factor:** *digital skills training and support needs to be pitched at the right level - focusing on the basics, provided in an informal setting, and delivered in 1-2-1 support or in small groups.*

**Formal digital skills / IT courses** are typically run by adult learning services or further education colleges. These are less common and often coupled with informal sessions, providing an opportunity for people to progressively learn more and gain deeper skills once they have reached a baseline.

Some councils also produce printed **information and resources** for residents. For example, Croydon Council designed a series of "How to Get Online" guides (see case study below).

A number of councils are also **upskilling staff**, often in libraries or customer service roles, to act as digital champions or provide basic digital skills support and training to residents.

**Case study: How to Get Online Guides**

As with many councils, COVID meant that all of Croydon's face to face digital inclusion work had to stop. In response, the council's Digital Croydon team came up with a plan to help residents get online with a series of simple guides.

"As a result of COVID, we realised we couldn't just stop what we were doing. So we then had to look at an offline solution, which was producing three 'How to Get Online Guides'… with really basic material in a really easy to understand language," explained Croydon's Head of Digital.

The council produced three A4 printed 'How to Get Online' guides that cover a range of step by step internet basics such as connecting to the internet, understanding Wi-Fi, searching the web, creating social media accounts, and using Zoom.

They then partnered with their library service as well as local VCS organisations in the borough like Age UK Croydon, Croydon Voluntary Action, and ClearCommunityWeb to distribute over 1,000 copies to digitally excluded residents.

The guides have since been borrowed and adapted by Southwark Council, who have used them to create their own guides for residents.

## 3.2. Increasing access to devices

Providing access to devices, such as laptops, Chromebooks, and tablets, is another common approach to tackling digital exclusion, and is often coupled with some basic digital skills support and/or access to connectivity. Many councils operated a device scheme, but there are also a number of notable third or cross-sector schemes such as Community Calling, Power to Connect, and Community Tech Aid.

**Case study: Community Calling**

Hubbub and O2 have partnered to create and deliver the Community Calling programme - a scheme that re-homes old smartphones.

Community Calling receives donations of used smartphones (as long as they hold a charge and the screen isn't cracked) from members of the public, as well as corporate and public sector organisations. They've partnered with Reconome, a device upcycling expert, to clean, data wipe, and refurbish the donated smartphones, before packaging them up and redistributing the

devices to someone in need. Each recipient also receives 12-months' free data provided by O2 and access to free digital skills training.

Community Calling adopts a hyperlocal approach by partnering with small, community-based grassroots organisations in order to reach digitally excluded people, which have been identified by the community partners.

So far, they've re-homed over 5,000 smartphones, but have a target of reaching 10,000 digitally excluded people across the UK.

1. *Gifting schemes vs lending schemes*

The majority of councils choose device gifting schemes, while there are only a few of examples of lending schemes (e.g. Merton libraries, Greenwich, [Catbytes](#)). Reasons given include that providing someone with a device to keep is a more sustainable and more empowering solution and that lending schemes need officer resource to manage the loaning of devices.

> *"Device lending schemes need officers to manage the loaning of devices, which is why we've done gifting over lending." City of London*

Merton favoured a lending scheme partly due it mirroring libraries' established book-lending model, and partly because it provides greater sustainability as the council only had to purchase a stock of devices once which they can then continuously lend, and they already have the staff resource in place to manage the scheme on an ongoing basis.

2. *New devices vs refurbished devices*

More councils opt for new devices over refurbished devices - though not always as the result of a systematic process.

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 that they are lower cost, meet users' needs, and are a scalable and sustainable solution (i.e. all organisations refresh a proportion of their devices a year). Using refurbished devices also helps meet councils' green commitments.

**Success factor:** *device gifting and lending schemes need to be coupled with digital skills support otherwise there is a risk devices will not be used.*

3. *Type of device*

Many people suggested Chromebooks are preferable because they are more cost-effective, easier to set up, and easier to use. However, the lack of functionality means they don't suit all users.

> *"We used Chromebooks for everyone other than school children and if we were doing the project again, we might do all of them with Chromebooks. They seem to be more intuitive to use and easier to set up - an hour versus an afternoon." - Southwark Travellers' Action Group*

Windows laptops are the most commonly refurbished device and appear to be the preferred device for students and families due to the additional functionality compared to Chromebooks.

A number of interviewees said that tablets are the preferred choice of device for older people because they tend to want something really easy to use, that is big enough to see the screen but not too bulky.

> *"We found that older people tended to want tablets not laptops. They just want something simple and easy to use. And something that wasn't too bulky and was easy to carry around." - Hyde Housing digital inclusion lead.*

> **Success factor:** *having a range of different types of devices available meant that needs could be better met for residents with a wider variety of needs.*

## 3.3. Increasing access to the internet

This is a massive issue for London and many councils feel like they lack the resources and powers to sufficiently tackle this on their own. That said, a number of different approaches have been trialled to increase residents' access to the internet.

1. *Free community wifi*

The most common approach, done by nearly every council to a greater or lesser degree, is to provide free wifi in community buildings. This is typically always the case in most libraries, but some councils have also provided free wifi in a range of community buildings such as community halls, children's centres, residential social care settings, and tenants' and residents' halls.

> *"Our Ideas Stores are a sort of library plus and they have free access to wifi if you have your own device. And for a lot of people, it's the connectivity that's actually the issue. At one point, we were hoping to have borough-wide free wifi or free wifi hotspots, but there were some*

*legislative changes… that kiboshed that. But we can give people free wifi in the Idea Stores." - Tower Hamlets council officer.*

Providing free community wifi is something that is much more in the power of councils to do and most library services had already been providing this before the pandemic, so the closing of libraries meant this lifeline was taken away in many cases.

2.  *Securing free or subsidised broadband packages*

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

*"We need to work with [internet service providers] as the council doesn't really have any powers or the funding to develop a sustainable solution without them." - Hounslow Council officer.*

Many councils also secured free or subsidised broadband packages by working with internet providers and leveraging social value from them during contract negotiations.

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

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

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**Case study: Southwark's use of wayleave agreements to generate social value from internet providers**

In 2018, Southwark Council signed wayleave agreements with internet providers, Hyperoptic and Community Fibre, to connect all their housing stock in the borough. They used these agreements to leverage significant social value to deliver digital inclusion support for Southwark residents.

As the project manager leading their digital inclusion work put it, "the idea behind that was to basically future proof our housing stock and our commercial stock, and so far we have about 37,000 properties gigabit enabled in the borough. But as part of that wayleave agreement, both providers offered to provide a digital inclusion service."

The council pulled together a cross-council list of specific asks and put them to the internet providers, who were able to meet most of what was requested.

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The benefits included free, lifelong community broadband in community buildings such as libraries, community halls, and tenants' and residents' halls; free laptops for libraries; and digital skills training provided by charity Digital Unite.

Southwark notes that they were the third council to sign a master wayleave agreement to give access to all council properties, and so they acknowledge that there are some offers that might not be available for other councils now. However, they advise other councils to be clear about what offers they require and approach internet providers to see what they can do.

3. *Providing prepaid dongles*

A number of organisations and councils also provided residents with prepaid dongles. For example, based on user research, Greenwich decided to use 4G prepaid dongles specifically to support families with younger children who were facing high costs and were not able to use devices due to the affordability of broadband, allowing pupils to do home schooling.

However, it was also commonly acknowledged that this option was less preferable and not appropriate in many situations.

> *"We needed to also provide internet access with devices. But we couldn't get contracts because you can't get a contract on behalf of someone. So the only way to provide data was to get a contract with dongles for a few months." - Programme manager at Toynbee Hall.*

4. Using master wayleave agreements to maximising investment in digital infrastructure to minimise 'not spots'

London currently has five or more active providers investing significant capital into deploying full fibre networks at scale across London. However, even with all this investment, we are likely to be left with 25-35% premises in London without a full fibre connection by 2025.

Ofcom data tracking the growth of full fibre across London shows that where boroughs have supported provider investment through entering into a master wayleave agreement, they have benefitted from millions of pounds of investment into their local economies and worked with operators to secure coverage in 'not spot' areas, as well as supporting digital inclusion through connecting community spaces, affordable social tariffs, and digital skills training. See examples here, here and here. Data show that where providers are not able to get support from a borough, they are limiting their investment there.

A master wayleave agreement allows a provider to access to all listed premises within the agreement, reducing associated legal costs for individual wayleaves and allowing the provider to plan their build with confidence.. As part of the master wayleave agreement process, providers have provided free broadband connections and WIFI to public buildings such as local community hubs or communal spaces within social housing estates. Some providers are also working closely with boroughs to identify vulnerable and low income residents in order to provide free connections for a period of time.

The GLA recommends adopting the City of London [Standardised master wayleave template](), developed with the British Standards Institute (BSI), which helps speed up installation and lower costs.

## 3.4. Providing specialist support services

Providing specialist support services is less common than the first three approaches, though there are a number of interesting models and examples across London.

1. *Dedicated 1-2-1 digital support*

These are services where residents can go to get help with a specific digital need, such as completing a council form. For example, Tower Hamlets' created a new Digital Support Service, an appointment based service supported by a small team of five council staff where residents can make an appointment and a support staff will meet them in any of their "Ideas Stores" - their 'library plus' buildings. They describe it as "more of a 'do it for' support, rather than a 'this is how'" type of service. The support tends to be focused on helping residents with public service processes and completing official forms such as help transacting with council or other government services.

2. *Helpline models*

Helpline models allow residents to phone up or email with a specific query and get support. For example, in response to COVID, Barnet Libraries developed a new "IT Support Services" with the aim of maintaining contact and providing advice and support on basic IT queries.

They wanted to create a helpline which people could phone or email from 9am-5pm, five days a week and they'd guarantee a response within 72 hours. Staffed by a small team of five people, the bespoke service deals with specific problems and queries ranging from setting up email accounts; troubleshooting mobile phones and tablets; setting up library apps; basic support using Windows; some people also just want a chat. A lot of follow up support and building relationships with people and some would move on to Zoom or Skype calls.

3. *Signposting models*

These models help people who are digitally excluded access information and advice - see case study below for an example.

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**Case study: using technology to tackle digital exclusion**

A London-based tech start-up is using digital technology to help people who are digitally excluded access information and advice about bereavement services during the pandemic.

During the pandemic, bereavement services were especially hard to access for people who are digitally excluded, particularly for people whose first language isn't English - a big issue given that BAME communities were disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

In response to this need, Voxta, a digital AI company specialising in voice bots and voice assistance, have developed a multilingual bereavement virtual assistant helpline.

The idea is that anyone can ring up and the virtual assistant will pull and translate information about a range of different services - from emotional support, to organising a funeral, to financial assistance to cover funeral costs - and then put them directly in touch with the support they need.

The development and testing of the virtual assistant helpline is being funded through the Mayor's Resilience Fund, a £1 million challenge prize run by the GLA and Nesta.

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## 3.5. Building digital inclusion capabilities

These approaches aim to support the organisations and staff that work directly with people who are likely to be digitally excluded to embed and increase the capability to provide digital inclusion support. There are a number of strategies that were adopted to build digital inclusion capabilities.

1. Supporting a network of organisations

National charities such as Good Things Foundation and Digital Unite support 1,000s of community organisations across the UK to embed the skills to tackle digital exclusion in the communities they support.

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**Case study: building the capacity to tackle digital exclusion**

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The Good Things Foundation is a national charity that works with community organisations across the UK to build capacity and embed the skills and knowledge to tackle digital exclusion in the communities they support.

They use a 'hyperlocal model' of supporting small grassroots organisations that are embedded within communities and work directly with a range of different people, which can range from from local charities and volunteer-led community groups, to housing associations and libraries.

The network is free to join for any organisation that wants to tackle digital exclusion. Community partners in the network get access to information and resources, and the potential to receive small grants - typically ranging from £2,500 to £20,000 - to work with digitally excluded people.

The network also has access to a free online learning platform called *Learn My Way*, which community partners can use to support people who have no or very low digital skills, which covers the basics from how to turn a device on and how to use a mouse, to things like online shopping.

Good Things Foundation also works with partners like Lloyd's Bank Foundation or West Midlands Combined Authority to develop and deliver larger funded programmes focusing on particular issues, like digital financial inclusion.

One such example is the Power Up programme, a focused grant programme aiming to drive economic inclusion by improving digital skills in communities, in partnership with J.P. Morgan.

The programme aims to support people by improving their digital skills and confidence using technology, improve local provision by supporting how organisations embed digital inclusion across core delivery, and connecting local community organisations, service providers and councils to create a more joined up local approach to referral pathways and support.

The programme works in four areas across the UK, one of which is East London. It provides £50-100k grants to five organisations in London: a local Citizens' Advice Bureau, two social housing associations; a local charity called Quaker Social Action; and, a youth training provider. The grants fund a range of different digital inclusion projects focusing on improving digital skills for employability, improving financial capability through digital skills, or improving digital skills for small and micro businesses.

2. *Upskilling council staff*

Many councils such as Brent, Ealing and Tower Hamlets are actively training and upskilling council staff to better support digitally excluded residents.

For example, Brent Council wants to build the capacity of staff to help libraries fulfil its new role as a place to learn basic IT skills and get online. They are training library staff across their six libraries to become digital champions.

> ***Success factor:*** *upskill staff, particularly library staff, who work with and have relationships with people who are likely to be digitally excluded to provide digital inclusion support.*

### 3. Training staff of external organisations

Several organisations spoken to were also providing specific training for staff in other organisations, particularly smaller community organisations that have direct relationships with local residents. For example, Greenwich developed and provided training packages for community centres so that staff could deliver digital skills training.

Similarly, ClearCommunityWeb, a local charity based in South London, developed a programme during COVID that focuses specifically on training staff in local VCS orgs to use Zoom. They worked with AgeUK Croydon to train their volunteers how to use Zoom in a facilitative way to increase their capability to reach people.

As their founder explained: "smaller community organisations are often the best placed to support because we're meeting people on a face to face basis, and we have relationships with people. And because of that, there's a different type of trust that's built."

## 3.6. Role of libraries

A common theme that came out of the research time and again was the core role that libraries play as a key piece of London's digital inclusion infrastructure.

Many digital inclusion services were run by the local library service, libraries were the most common place where digital inclusion support was provided from, and they were often the place where many of the approaches discussed above were brought together in one place. And many councils were explicit and deliberate in shifting the role of libraries to become local digital hubs.

> *"Libraries now play a new role, that of a hub for the local community, a place where people can obtain information on any area, where they can come to educate, be entertained and to integrate and socialise within the*

*community. And of course, a place to learn basic IT skills and get online." - Brent Library Manager.*

As such, many council have made libraries an integral part of their digital inclusion offer, using libraries as:
- A place where residents can go to get online and use a device
- A place to learn basic digital skills
- A place to get 1-2-1 support with basic IT issues
- A distribution network for laptop gifting and lending schemes
- A coordinating service that brings together digital inclusion initiatives across the council.

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**Case study: Newham's Digital Inclusion Hubs**

In July 2020, in response to the growing digital divide caused by the pandemic, Newham led a digital inclusion workshop with various council services, as well as VCS groups in the borough. As a result, Newham decided to pilot new Digital Inclusion Hubs in two libraries.

Newham decided to use libraries because they represented an existing infrastructure of public buildings embedded in local communities across the borough, because residents tend to stay relatively local to where they live to access this kind of support, and because libraries were well place to take on the role as they were already a place where a lot of digital inclusion work has happened before.

As part of the pilot, Newham upskilled their front line library staff through digital skills training to enable the library to deliver three main functions as a digital inclusion hub.

Firstly, it acts as a hub for digital champions, recruiting and training volunteers to act as digital champions (e.g. via online courses such as Digital Unite's).

Secondly, it provides basic digital skills training and support to digitally excluded residents, via a referral process. The training and support is bespoke and tailored around what people want to do online, rather than a more formal fixed IT course.

Lastly, Newham Council allocated funding to purchase a number of new devices and use the digital inclusion hubs, in partnership with local VCS groups, to distribute them to residents in need, along with data packages to help residents get online.

To date, Newham has over 40 digital champions, trained over 100 residents in

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basic IT skills, and gifted more than 100 devices from the two libraries. The aim is now to scale the model across all libraries as well as supporting local community VCS organisations with physical buildings to become digital inclusion hubs.

*Success factor:* the use of libraries for reaching and supporting those in need has been of particular significance, despite closures during lockdown.

# 4. Six key challenges (and ways to overcome them)

From interviews and workshops with policymakers and practitioners, a number of common challenges emerged that make tackling digital exclusion more difficult. In this section, we outline the six most common challenges, and use case studies and examples to highlight ways that organisations have tried to overcome them.

## 4.1. Securing access to affordable broadband for residents

Getting residents access to broadband connectivity was the biggest and most commonly mentioned challenge by interviewees from both local authorities and the VCS.

> *"The number one challenge is getting connectivity. The problem is data poverty - people just can't afford it." - Digital Unite programme manager.*

Interviewees were clear that affordability, not lack of infrastructure, is the key issue here in the context of digital inclusion. For example, a programme manager from the Good Things Foundation put it this way: "The focus on infrastructure can be misplaced from a digital inclusion perspective. 5G is great but if you can't afford to connect to it... Affordability is the real issue."

Connectivity in general, and affordable broadband more specifically, was considered a foundational issue for many as it has a huge impact on the effectiveness of other digital inclusion initiatives. For example, if you can't get online it doesn't matter that you have a device or now have the skills and confidence to do so.

It is also a particular challenge because many councils themselves felt that this was the issue they are most unable to do much about, and pointed to the need for action from internet providers, central government, and coordination at a London-wide level.

> *"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." - Newham Council officer.*

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**Case study: using social value to secure access to broadband for residents**

Brent has identified its approach to generating social value from contracts with ISPs as a key success for the council's digital inclusion programme. They signed deals with both Hyperoptic and Community Fibre with social value

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commitments that included:

- Community connections for free in community centres near social housing; and children's centres
- Digital champions network with one of the providers who manages and coordinates ten volunteers
- A [Citizens Online](#) report identifying digital exclusion hotspots locally.
- Discounted connections for the council to provide low-income residents through their residents' support fund.

Lessons learned for other councils include:
- All providers can offer it, but you need to ask them specifically - they won't bring it to the table voluntarily.
- What they can do differs so it's useful to have a pre-set idea or set of asks
- It's also about how much leverage you have and the size of the providers (e.g. Openreach versus Community Fibre).

## 4.2. Reaching digitally excluded residents

Reaching digitally excluded residents was another key challenge identified by interviewees, especially for councils. Public services often struggle to reach the most socially and digitally excluded residents and this became particularly difficult in the context of a pandemic.

> *"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." - Hackney council officer.*

Councils mentioned that many of their usual approaches to promoting services and reaching residents require digital methods, which of course don't work in this context. Others mentioned that the take up of the support available wasn't as high as it could be and that many digitally excluded residents were likely missing out.

> *"The challenge has been reaching the people you need to support as it usually requires digital approaches but doesn't work in this context. So it has been about working with community groups, church leaders, etc. to reach people". - Hackney council officer.*

For example, Brent took the opportunity to include a digital inclusion component to their Residents' Support Fund, and they have been able to give every eligible resident who applied a device. But they know that not everyone who needs it is applying because the application form is online.

*"Applications for the Residents' Support Fund are online and we haven't been able to do face to face because of the pandemic."*

In response to this challenge, many councils and other digital inclusion organisations have been working closely with local VCS organisations to reach digitally excluded residents as they already have pre-existing relationships with many of them.

*"Absolutely working through community organisations is what works (to reach people). Funding organisations to be able to reach the people who are most excluded is crucial. You can't do this without the voluntary sector, frankly. And lots of people get that. But it's something we say over and over again. Because they are those people who are experts at providing the support, and building the relationships that are needed to help people online." - Good Things Foundation*

**Case study: "Trusted faces in local places" - working with VCS organisations to reach digital excluded people**

The Good Things Foundation is a national digital social inclusion charity that supports a network of over 1,000 community partners across the UK to embed digital inclusion in the wider support they provide to people in their communities.

The community partners they work with are often small, grassroots organisations that work directly with local communities and can range from community centres, local charities, volunteer-led organisations, social housing providers, small training providers, and libraries.

Their model of helping small, local organisations to build capacity and embed digital inclusion in their work is designed specifically to reach digitally excluded people who public services often struggle to reach.

As a Senior Programme Manager at Good Things Foundation puts it: "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. And that organisation will be expert at helping them deal with that crisis but then also building the sort of relationship that can lead to more and that's often where digital skills get woven in."

A number of regional and city governments across the UK that Good Things Foundation are working with are also recognising the importance of working

with the voluntary and community sector to tackle digital exclusion. For example, the West Midlands has recognised that the voluntary sector needs to be supported to help close the digital divide and have developed a West Midlands Coalition for Digital Inclusion, which brings together local authorities and other public sector bodies like health, police and fire, with voluntary sector and community leaders, as well as further and higher education institutions. Similarly, Greater Manchester Combined Authority have developed a digital inclusion strategy which includes a focus on supporting the VCS as often the best placed to reach people who are digitally excluded.

**Success factor:** *Working with the VCS helped identify and reach digitally excluded residents.*

### 4.3. Meeting the scale of need for devices

The scale of device gifting and lending initiatives ranged from small-scale, hyperlocal schemes gifting between 10-20 devices to larger, borough-wide schemes gifting or lending between 100-1,000 devices. Often the schemes that have managed to reach the most people are run by charities or initiatives specialising specifically on device gifting such as [Power to Connect](#) (1,350 devices), [Mer-IT](#) (1,000 devices), [Community Tech Aid](#) (800 devices), often with the support of the local council.

However, while many device gifting and lending schemes have been successful at increasing access to devices for many digitally excluded Londoners, there are many more Londoners in need of devices. For example, Tower Hamlets identified 10,000 children in need of a device to support with school, while Newham identified a need of 5,000.

This was a commonly acknowledged challenge by many councils. One Cabinet Member responsible for digital inclusion described the situation as "like chipping away at a huge mountain due to the scale of the demand."

It's also worth noting that need is likely not evenly distributed across London. While this research didn't look specifically at this question, and there is work underway by LOTI to develop a [London-wide map of digital exclusion](#), anecdotal evidence suggests this is the case. For example, the City of London is considering whether to donate excess devices to neighbouring boroughs to help them support digitally excluded residents in their areas.

More generally, it has been difficult to assess the scale of digital exclusion and whether existing provision is meeting the scale of need. As this report shows,

there are well over a hundred initiatives across London, but it is likely that more needs to be done to understand need and reach all digitally excluded Londoners.

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**Case study: Crowdfunding campaigns to raise money for additional devices**

A number of councils, including Southwark, Redbridge and Tower Hamlets, ran crowdfunding campaigns to raise funds to purchase devices to support digitally excluded people, which they would then match fund.

For example, in response to the need identified locally, Tower Hamlets launched the Every Child Online campaign in Feb 2021 to raise £1million to buy 10,000 devices. It aims to ensure that every child has access to a device and can connect to the internet.

They have so far raised over £180,000 for new devices as well as given out an additional 300 refurbished devices. The campaign has raised money from corporate sponsors, trusts and foundations, as well as a JustGiving page for individual donations.

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***Success factor:*** *Innovative funding practices, such as crowdfunding, brought different organisations and citizens together as well as raised funds for devices.*

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## 4.4. Lack of funding and capacity for digital inclusion

While a number of councils have digital inclusion budgets to fund work, more often there is a lack of dedicated resources or it is funded through external funding pots, without which many digital inclusion projects would not exist.

> *"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." - Digital Unite's programme manager.*

Sustainability is also 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 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?" - Hounslow's digital inclusion officer.*

One area where councils have managed to embed digital inclusion and align existing resources in a sustainable way is by scaling through existing community

infrastructure such as libraries. For example, many councils have already, and very quickly, scaled initiatives borough-wide through their libraries network (e.g. Barnet, Brent, Merton, Tower Hamlets) and many have widened the scope of the library staff roles to have a greater focus on supporting residents who might be digitally excluded.

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**Case study: Tower Hamlets' digital inclusion partnerships**

Tower Hamlets worked with a number of partners to secure and distribute devices to digitally excluded families to help children do home learning and identified this as one of their key success factors.

For example, they worked with [London Grid for Learning](#) to secure devices rapidly for competitive prices for devices, meaning they could reach many more children than they would have been able to on their own.

By working with the [Tower Hamlets Education Partnership](#) (THEP), they were then able to give the devices out to children quickly as the THEP used their relationships with schools and organised for schools to collect and then hand out to families. THEP also brought in their own additional funding (from corporate donors) and also brought in a local charity called Tech Inclusion, who recycle devices and donated 300 devices.

As the officer leading this work explained: "we were able to give devices out to children very quickly by working with Tower Hamlets Education Partnership. [They] organised for schools to collect and then hand out to families."

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*Success factor:* Cross-sector partnerships are able to leverage in more resources and support than councils can do on their own.

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## 4.5. Identifying and mapping need

> *"Understanding the true size of the need across the borough has been really hard." - Newham Council officer.*

This was noted as a common challenge by a number of councils who identified this as a pan-London need. Councils took a number of approaches to identifying, understanding and mapping what digital exclusion looked like in their borough and what the specific needs were. Approaches to identifying and mapping need included:

- *Mapping local hotspots of digital exclusion*

A number of councils worked with a partner such as Citizens Online to research

and map digital exclusion hotspots across their boroughs - e.g. Ealing and Havering.

- *Resident surveys*

For example, 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.

- *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 (see case study below).

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**Case study: user research to understand digital exclusion in Greenwich**

DG Cities, a spin-out company owned wholly by Greenwich council to co-develop innovation projects in the community and promote technology for good, conducted qualitative user research with the local community to understand needs and co-design tailored solutions.

In total, they held over 20 semi-structured interviews with residents and engaged 50 people through a series of workshops. They explored the barriers that residents face when it comes to accessing online information, the kind of challenges they see when it comes to skills and capability, and the kind of technologies they would like to use when they are wanting to seek information.

As their Head of Research and Service Design put it: "a significant mobilisation of a large number of people around the issue was all down to well networked community teams at Royal Borough of Greenwich, who are embedded in the community. They quickly were able to locate groups and point the research process in the right direction."

In response to what they found out, Greenwich developed a holistic programme to tackle digital exclusion, starting with piloting three digital inclusion projects:
- Tablet lending scheme for older people
- 4G dongle lending scheme for young families
- Digital skills training packages delivered through community centres and community champions

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## 4.6. A lack of evidence on digital inclusion programmes

This appears to be a current gap in the field as there is a dearth of data, evidence or robust evaluations to draw on to understand what is really working in practice.

While some of the national charities that focus on digital inclusion have evaluations of their programmes available, such as the [digital champions programme](#), this was an area that was also noted a challenge by a couple of interviewees.

> "The level of published data about digital exclusion could be better. What's the big picture on the impact on digital skills and inclusion?" - DG Cities' Head of Research & Service Design.

That said, there are also several evaluations of programmes currently underway. For example, Greenwich has a developed Theory of Change and commissioned an external academic evaluation partner of their programme. 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 a survey when they receive the device and six months later. But all are too early to have an indication of impact yet.

But the majority of initiatives currently lack evidence and evaluations. Interviewees mentioned the difficulty of doing evaluations with digitally excluded people, with one interviewee suggesting it was "impossible". Others said evaluations were too difficult during COVID, while others were reluctant to add additional burdens on beneficiaries.

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**Case study: evaluating the Community Calling project**

Community Calling is a partnership between Hubbub and O2 to refurbish and redistribute old smartphones to digitally excluded people across the UK. They work with a network of community partners, charities, community organisations, libraries, etc. to reach digitally excluded people.

As part of the programme, everyone who receives a phone is asked to fill in a questionnaire. Hubbub ensures that all organisations who sign up as a community partner agree to support recipients to complete the questionnaire as a condition of being a community partner.

Hubbub does a benchmark survey as people receive the phone, and a follow up survey 6 months later. So far they've had about 1,000 responses to the baseline survey so far, but it is too early to get an understanding of impact yet.

They've also worked with Reconome, their device upcycling partner, to understand the environmental impact of the programme and have calculated that for every phone redistributed they save 53kg CO2e.

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# 5. Recommendations

In the recommendations below, where actions are suggested for the "Mayor of London" London's Chief Digital Officer will be responsible for their delivery.

1. **In order to address device poverty, the Mayor of London and LOTI should explore whether creating a London-wide scheme and campaign could provide substantially more refurbished devices to digitally excluded Londoners.**

    1.1. The Mayor of London, in conjunction with LOTI, should explore the creation of a sustainable mechanism through which organisations can upcycle their old devices and encourage them to sign up to the scheme. The scheme should work with and support existing local device upcycling and device distribution schemes to avoid duplication and target support where there are gaps.

    1.2. LOTI should explore how each upcycled device could come with a simple and well-designed how to use guide - and signpost to local digital skills support offers.

2. **In order to address data poverty, the Mayor of London, LOTI and telecommunications companies should work in partnership with London boroughs to secure more affordable broadband and mobile data deals for residents and make greater use of social value.**

    2.1. LOTI should work to raise awareness about available social tariffs that can benefit digital excluded Londoners.

    2.2. The Mayor of London and LOTI should work with internet providers and boroughs to ensure that new social tariffs are easy to access for low-income Londoners.

    2.3. The Mayor of London should work with internet providers to report on uptake of social tariffs for low income Londoners.

    2.4. The London Recovery Board should ensure all London boroughs sign master wayleave agreements with internet providers to increase investment in digital infrastructure by March 2023. LOTI should support the wider use and adoption of the City of London's [Standardised master wayleave template](#).

    2.5. LOTI and the Connected London Team should collate and actively share best practice with boroughs on working with internet

providers to use social value to secure benefits that increase access to connectivity.

2.6. Local authorities should seek social value from negotiating master wayleaves, such as connecting neighbourhood centres, libraries or supporting digital inclusion initiatives.

2.7. LOTI should create standard ways of including social value clauses into contracts that can support a wider range of digital inclusion initiatives.

**3. In order to build digital inclusion capacity within London's community infrastructure, the Mayor of London and LOTI should work with London boroughs and the VCS, focusing particularly on libraries and local community groups that work with digitally excluded Londoners.**

3.1. The Mayor of London and LOTI should work with London boroughs to build on libraries' core digital inclusion role and explore the creation of a training programme to upskill library staff to be better able to support people with their digital skills.

3.2. The Mayor of London and LOTI should partner with a national digital inclusion charity to build the digital inclusion capacity of London's VCS to help more local charities and community groups support more digitally excluded Londoners.

3.3. The Mayor of London should seek to identify and establish corporate partnerships to bring in additional funding to support boroughs' digital inclusion initiatives and maximise the benefit of Corporate Social Responsibility programmes..

**4. In order to scale successful initiatives LOTI should facilitate the sharing of data, knowledge and leading practice in digital inclusion.**

4.1. LOTI should support and promote the [Digital Inclusion Toolkit](#) developed by Croydon and Leeds, and encourage organisations to use and contribute to it.

4.2. LOTI should create and convene a London-wide digital inclusion learning network, bringing together a range of organisations interested in digital inclusion (e.g. councils, libraries, other public bodies, VCS organisations and internet providers).

4.3. LOTI should encourage London boroughs to learn from, adapt and build on existing resources like Croydon's 'How To Get Online Guides'

for digitally excluded Londoners.

4.4. LOTI should ensure as many boroughs as possible are using the London-wide map of digital exclusion to inform their work.

**5. In order to maximise the take up of digital skills programmes, future provision must be designed to meet users' real needs**

5.1. The Mayor should explore ways to promote and raise awareness of the London adult education offer including the Essential Digital Skills Entitlement to increase take up.

5.2. The Mayor should work with Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations within the communities identified as digitally excluded to provide outreach and support to target those most in need of adult education.

5.3. LOTI should map digital skills support available across London as part of the digital exclusion mapping programme.

**6. In order to build and share the evidence base for what works in digital inclusion, LOTI should run a Digital Inclusion Impact Programme.**

6.1. LOTI should work with a research partner or interested foundation to fund evaluations to find out what works in the field of digital inclusion.

6.2. LOTI should work with the research partner and London boroughs to develop a common evaluation framework for digital inclusion with a standardised set of outcomes and metrics to bring consistency across London.

# Annex A: Resources to help with your digital inclusion programme

| Resource | Description |
| --- | --- |
| **Digital Inclusion Toolkit** | A toolkit designed by Croydon and Leeds councils to help you find and share information about tackling digital exclusion in your community. You can also contribute your own findings and learn from the experience of others. |
| **Good Things Foundation** | Their network is free to join for any organisation that wants to tackle digital exclusion. Community partners in the network get access to information and resources, and the potential to receive small grants - typically ranging from £2,500 to £20,000 - to work with digitally excluded people. The network also has access to a free online learning platform called Learn My Way, |
| **Digital Champions Network** | Digital Unite runs the Digital Champions Network, an online platform that contains training and support to help staff and volunteers become digital champions. It hosts a web-based learning platform full of courses and resources to support digital champion training and development, as well as a range of project management tools and templates to track progress and impact. |
| **Citizens Online** | Citizens Online provides a range of services and support to councils, including mapping digital exclusion to identify local hotspots, Digital Maturity Assessments, and Digital Champion training. |
| **London Digital Exclusion Map** | A London-wide map that uses publicly available data sets to identify wards that may have relatively high levels of digital exclusion. The map shows community demographics and characteristics that have been identified through research as the key factors or proxy indicators to the propensity for digital exclusion |
| **Digital Exclusion Personas** | A pack of 24 personas designed by LOTI to help you understand the needs, experiences and barriers of people experiencing digital exclusion. |
| **How To Get Online Guides** | A series of three How to Get Online guides for residents developed by Croydon Council that cover a range of step by step internet basics such as connecting to the internet, understanding Wi-Fi, searching the web, creating social media accounts, and using Zoom. |

| A standardised master wayleave template | The GLA recommends adopting the City of London [Standardised master wayleave template](#), developed with the British Standards Institute (BSI), which helps speed up installation and lower costs. |
|---|---|
| Support from Connected London team | The [Connected London team](#) at the GLA is working with providers and boroughs to support deployment across London. The team can help facilitate introductions, share best practices and guidance, arrange cross departmental workshops, and where required provide legal and programme management support. |