

Technology and Inequality – Call for Evidence

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2. What mechanisms are available for government to support access, uptake, and investment in digital technology in a way that doesn't entrench or exacerbate inequality?

We are Bradford Trident, a community anchor charity based in Little Horton, Bradford West Yorkshire. Our neighbourhood is one of the 5% most deprived wards in England and Wales, it is highly ethnically diverse and recent research has highlighted that 34% of households have “no or low English skills”. Nearly 50% of households do not own a car. It is estimated that 12% of households are digitally excluded.

We have run a number of digital inclusion initiatives over recent years primarily through working with the Good Things Foundation (GTF) but also through directing some of our Covid- Community Led Organisational Recovery Scheme funds towards digital inclusion work.

With support from GTF we have support 95 elderly (isolated) community members and 24 digitally excluded young people during Covid home tuition phase and 116 HMRC users to:

- Access digital technological hardware (gifted tablets) and free public accessible internet enabled CPU or laptops stations.
- Access the internet through helping connections or providing data packages (National Data bank)
- Through one to one tuition and then peer group support groups beneficiaries have gained confidence, knowledge, awareness and skills to use online applications and digital functions to aid HMRC records, Universal credit management, Online appointments, access health information and guidance, access local community assets and services, utility searches, job searches, CV preparations, connect with family and friends across the global and locally, online bank functions and many other now essential online resources and requirements.

These have been life changing interventions and once gained and established they radically alter, for the better, peoples interaction, access and use of local, national and international services and resources.

As a charity we have not noticed over the past 10 years any government inducements or support to deliver third sector or community technology provision.

Colleges and University of Bradford have support students in acquiring technology skills and this offer has extended to those working in the third sector. These have been free at point of use, locally based, face to face and extremely helpful. A number of our staff have benefited from enhancing their Microsoft suite knowledge and application in the workplace. However to access these people had to already be in work and needed the support of their employer to allow time to undertake the training. It did not help those furthest from the jobs market or least technologically enabled in any way. However I do support the initiative and would welcome its continuation.

Essentials for policy makers include: local accessible provision, in person delivery, delivery in accessible languages, free at point of access, delivered by trusted parties, responsive to the client's needs, delivered in bite sized chunks to keep time investment required by learners practicable, delivered orally, visually and practicably as everyone learns in different ways and at different rates.

Where possible making hardware and connectivity freely accessible to the public, especially those most in need and least aware or able to capitalise upon digital gains. This often needs: hardware, affordable data connection and accessible skills/awareness support and training. See GTF strategy which has distilled the digital divide needs into a achievable and practical plan to address them.

3. How can digital technologies be harnessed to improve the design of policies that tackle inequality and the equitable delivery of public services?

It is assumed that putting things on line (via a website, Facebook, Instagram or twitter) that it becomes accessible and of use to the public. This in my experience is not the case, especially when it is aimed at those most in need, who are often the least financially able to access digital resources, least equipped at hardware and data is increasingly expensive and arguably lower down on the hierarchy of needs (shelter, water, food, heat, society ...data).

In areas of multiple deprivation like Little Horton there are often hundreds of languages spoken and English ability is highly variable and often lacking. Literacy is also assumed to be universally and this is not the case. If you can't read English or you can't read then in the UK you are digitally excluded.

In Little Horton: 34% of our households have no or low English skills, around 10% are illiterate. 12% of households have no internet connection or "smart" device.

If society and government is to continue to pursue the everything on line policy than a long-term locally available through trusted organisations package of one to one support is needed to enable and resource everyone to access the internet in a safe and confident manner.

Community Centres need resourcing to provide free publicly accessible internet points so data poverty does not hold families and households in perpetual poverty and need, denying them opportunity to flourish and thrive.

Support for those new to the country or that have never experienced the internet needs to be provided and promoted, freely accessible, delivered in safe and trusted local locations, with one to one language appropriate support, for a sustained period, with and guidance covering the basics of safe internet use and introducing the vast array of resources, functions and opportunities the internet makes possible.

The Good Things Foundation's 2022 strategy is a good place to start as it is well informed by years of practice and insight, builds on a national network of neighbourhood providers with skills, connections and willingness to address digital exclusion.