

Levelling Up UK: The Need for Digital Placemaking in Social Inclusion and Community Wealth-Building Strategies

Benefits of Digital Placemaking

Digital placemaking is about enhancing and leveraging the power of place through the combination and augmentation of it with digital capabilities and connectivity. It implies that improving place and opportunities within it should involve a strategic approach that re-combines physical space, local communities and access to technology. The critical role for digital technology at this level is to enhance the effectiveness of community places and spaces (e.g. schools, libraries, community centers) as they seek to meet community needs and build resilience and overcome inequalities.



DIGITAL PLACEMAKING CONSISTS OF:

Creating synergies between digital and economic recovery and health, care and well-being strategies

Ensuring effective access to digital: overcoming all barriers including skills, motivation, confidence and digital access

Integrating digital access and skill-building into existing social and spatial infrastructures

Adopting hyperlocal approaches — from place-based to neighbourhood-level

Leveraging local collective intelligence to improve trust, legitimacy and responsiveness of public institutions and services



A multi partner process: Digital placemaking requires no big masterplan, but ongoing multi-stakeholder cooperation, knowledge sharing and experimentation informed by open feedback loops and local needs data.

WHAT IS DIGITAL PLACEMAKING?

Recombines placemaking with digital: Digital placemaking addresses digital and social exclusion by investing in pre-existing communities, community spaces, and ecosystems to create integrated and digitally- and locally-embedded civic infrastructures – beyond traditional third spaces.

Bridging Divides: Digital capital is a bridge capital between online and offline life chances: it allows existing physical, social and institutional capitals in LBAs to be more efficiently used in the digital realm, while also fostering these capitals and producing new social and economic benefits into the offline realm (e.g. increased community engagement, access to information, mutual aid).

Limits of Current Policies

LIMITS OF DIGITAL STRATEGIES

Despite recent policy developments and public investments relevant to digital inclusion — [Data Strategy](#), [Local Digital Fund](#), [Roadmap for Digital and Data](#), and continued emphasis on 5G mobile and [gigabit broadband](#) — there is no UK-wide plan (nor a national plan for England) to holistically address digital exclusion and data poverty. There is a risk that digital inclusion remains everyone’s problem and no-one’s responsibility.

Government’s focus on digital connectivity and nationwide broadband infrastructure overlooks the complexity of reasons why people are digitally excluded. Affordability, as well as access to devices, digital skills, and motivation and confidence, continue to hold people back despite digital access, which means the digital divide is closing considerably slower than official targets ([Rouge Media, 2021](#)).

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE AND LEFT BEHIND AREAS

Without targeted and additional government intervention, 5.8 million people in the UK are estimated to remain digitally excluded by the end of 2032 — either through one or a combination of a lack of digital skills or confidence, access to digital technology, or access to the internet ([Centre for Economics and Business Research, 2022](#)).

Digital exclusion is particularly high in Left Behind Areas with nearly 80% of neighbourhoods classified as “e-withdrawn” or “passive and uncommitted users” ([APPG Left Behind Neighbourhoods, 2020](#)). Digital exclusion has a large negative impact on a person’s life chances, impacting education, employment, income, social contact and civic participation, and access to information and services, all of which impact physical, mental and financial health and well-being.

LIMITS OF LEVELLING UP

Despite welcome Government consensus around the importance of place, community involvement and local leadership in [Levelling Up](#) — along with [Towns Fund](#), [Future High Streets Fund](#) and [UK Shared Prosperity Fund](#) — the design and distribution of funds as well as decisions regarding investment priorities and the nature of financing available continue to be centrally controlled.

With devolution and reforms to local government listed as just one of its 12 missions, rather than a cross-cutting priority, Levelling Up risks undermining its central ambition, with analysis of the New Deal for Communities programme showing that prior interventions in Left Behind Areas have failed to reduce deprivation as a result of lack of community and local involvement and ownership.

Physical infrastructure investments dominate in Levelling Up, with up to 87-93% of the £5.17bn of proposed spending to date committed to physical infrastructure projects, while the importance of civil society organisations and social infrastructure for community well-being is overlooked ([NPC, 2021](#)).

Levelling Up identifies six types of capital, but fails to include digital capital as a separate category and/or recognise how digital inclusion is integral to delivering on its 12 key missions. Mission 1, for instance, seeks to level up pay and employment, but with 36% of the UK workforce lacking essential digital skills for work, this is unlikely to be achieved without embedding digital inclusion roadmaps into these interventions.

The absence of digital inclusion as an explicit, cross-cutting priority of Levelling Up means no indicators or high-quality, granular data exist on progress on digital deprivation, making national, regional and local government institutions work in a digitally-blind way.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1 EMBED DIGITAL INCLUSION INTO ECONOMIC RECOVERY AND HEALTH & WELLBEING STRATEGIES – CREATING SYNERGIES BETWEEN THEM

With digital exclusion reflecting, creating and compounding political, economic, social, and health inequalities, integrated place-based and system-level approaches are essential.

1. **Recommend Digital & Social Inclusion Roadmaps** for regional and local implementation of Levelling Up to act as holistic, place-based visions for digital and social inclusion that create synergies between investments and interventions.
2. **Design UK-wide indicators to track progress** on digital inclusion to increase the quantity and quality of data on digital and social inclusion.

3 INTEGRATE DIGITAL AND SOCIAL CAPITAL IN THIRD PLACES

‘Hard’ forms of social infrastructure, such as shared and accessible physical places where people can meet at low or no cost, are of equal importance to the ‘soft’ social infrastructure of communities, such as civil society organisations and mutual aid networks, to deliver on the potential of digital inclusion for social inclusion and community wealth-building.

1. **Equip communities in LBAs with the sustainable local institutions**, powers and skills to shape local Levelling Up plans and sustain changes after the initial period of investment and intervention.
2. **Replace current short-term competitive funding with long-term**, needs-based funding that gives local communities the resources for bold, system-level and adaptive Levelling Up plans.
3. **Deliver on previous Government intentions to pilot a set** of Community Covenant approaches, building neighbourhood-level partnerships between Councils, public bodies and communities that share power and make decisions collectively.
4. **Learn from the Open Doors** programme pilots to leverage alternative “meanwhile” use of properties for digital placemaking.

5 LEVERAGE LOCAL COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE FOR AND BY MEANS OF DIGITAL INCLUSION

In order to deliver the scale of action needed to tackle the social and digital exclusion of many LBAs, national and local governments will need to leverage the collective knowledge and experience of actors across sectors who are already active in this space. Digital approaches enable coordination, data and knowledge sharing among multiple stakeholders.

1. **Ensure all local stakeholders are equipped with financial means** and contractual safeguards to act as independent actors with distinct and valuable voices, expertise and skills.
2. **Support active learning and practice sharing** between Left Behind Areas through communities of practice, regional or thematic learning events, or a national open-source database of best practices for digital and social inclusion.
3. **Explore and invest in the role of local universities** in facilitating data collection, learning and experimentation around digital and social inclusion strategies.

2 MATCH INVESTMENTS IN TECHNOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE FOR EFFECTIVE DIGITAL ACCESS

Marginalised communities lack not only hardware or software, but ‘access to access’: the support networks and physical spaces for digital capital to become meaningful in their everyday life.

1. **Rebuild cultural, educational, leisure and green assets** in Left Behind Areas to ensure people have trusted community spaces to gain digital skills, motivation and confidence for effective digital access.
2. **Incorporate social infrastructure into existing Levelling Up plans** via ring-fenced funds within the Levelling Up Fund, Towns Fund and UK Shared Prosperity Fund.
3. **Consider developing City or Regional Councils** tasked with collecting reliable, comprehensive data on the diversity and well-being of the UK’s social infrastructure to manage targeted future investment plans.

4 STRENGTHEN PLACE-BASED POLICIES THROUGH A HYPERLOCAL FOCUS

Place-based approaches have focused on physical and economic infrastructures of regional and town centres, overlooking the needs of communities located on the periphery of those towns and cities who may not see immediate benefits from, or be able to easily access, the results of those new investments. Hyperlocal approaches centering neighbourhoods increase the relevance and efficiency of Levelling Up investments through dynamic local accountability and local needs data.

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6 INVEST IN DIGITAL PLACEMAKING TO STIMULATE AND EXPAND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Many LBAs suffer from a deficit in civic engagement and low levels of mutual aid activity. Digital placemaking helps build vital social capital and enables people to access the networks, data and information, and platforms to collaboratively address community issues and become more active in shaping their neighbourhoods.

1. **Subsidise digital technologies** such as public wifi, sensors and open data platforms to make them available for community groups to embed them in their peer-to-peer models.
2. **Experiment with Living Labs to empower citizens** to influence local policies and interventions based on their skills, interests and time.
3. **Leverage play and game-based approaches** to encourage civic engagement among diverse and younger demographic groups.