



Combating digital exclusion

Jack Liddall

May 2020



Abstract

This briefing considers the problem of digital exclusion, especially in the age of social isolation and COVID-19, and how it should be combated. As such, this briefing is solution-orientated, exploring what is already being done to tackle the problem but more importantly, what more needs to be done. It highlights several potential solutions which are large-scale and look beyond “quick-fix” solutions. This research briefing is meant as a call to action rather than proscribing the actions which must be taken. It opens up avenues which need exploring if that “big picture” solution to digital exclusion is to be found.

Keywords

Digital exclusion, COVID-19, coronavirus, cross-sector, technology

Key points

- Digital exclusion is a huge problem, affecting the most vulnerable the worst.
- Digital access must be viewed as a necessity.
- Potential “big picture” solutions include high-level, government intervention, the development of “smart cities” and cross-sector initiatives.

The problem

There is a clear and extensive digital divide in Scotland and the UK as a whole. In terms of owning a computer and internet access, this story is one of “haves” and “have nots”. Digital exclusion refers to an inability to participate or contribute digitally due to a lack of technological equipment, internet access or being digitally illiterate (PSE, 2012). The extent of this exclusion is evident. Indeed, one-fifth of the UK’s adult population still lack “basic digital skills”. This includes over 300,000 young people (Wilson and

Grant, 2017). Similar numbers of people still don’t have access to the internet (Ofcom, 2019). There is also a divide based on wealth and income. More than one-third of low-income houses in Scotland don’t have access to the internet at all (Housing and Social Justice Directorate, 2017).

Thus, the problem is clearly well-documented. We live in a society of the digitally included and excluded.

People Know How's experience & COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted, perhaps like never before, the digital inequalities in society. Throughout this lockdown period of social distancing and isolation, online and digital communications have become ever more important for keeping in touch and keeping safe. Not being digitally included is leaving many thousands of vulnerable people unconnected and isolated. This can have an extensive negative impact, from not being able to do an online shop to falling behind on schoolwork because there is no way to access online materials. Indeed, it is estimated that 1.7 million are isolated by COVID-19 and are not online (Milner, 2020).

The team at People Know How has experienced first-hand how COVID-19 is simply laying bare existing digital inequalities. By an extension of the

charity's "Reconnect" service, recycled computers are being refurbished and distributed to those without. Assistance with broadband, internet connection and basic digital skills is also being provided to get people connected at a time when they most need it. In particular, there are vulnerable elderly people who are digitally excluded who are in need of the service to contact family and friends. On the other end of the age spectrum, there are young family households with school-age children who otherwise would be unable to participate in online home-schooling. In fact, People Know How's new service recently featured in an "Editor's Picks" article for The Broad about [COVID-19 and the educational attainment gap](#).

Perhaps, therefore, this national crisis is to be a turning point; to be the shock into action. Now, a concerted and extensive effort is needed to tackle digital exclusion.



A change in mindset

There needs to be a change in mindset which underlies whatever “big-picture” solutions are implemented. No longer should digital skills and technology be viewed as a luxury, but rather as a basic necessity. The framework of Maslow’s Hierarchy is often applied to various socioeconomic or political issues as a method of understanding or measuring the human “hierarchy of needs” (Mathes, 1981). As the most basic needs, at the bottom of the pyramid is placed physiological needs. Nearer the top is placed luxury, “esteem” needs. Digital skills and technology are too often thought of as contributing to this “esteem” status; that they are luxury items. In fact, in terms of a hierarchy of needs, in today’s interconnected and highly digitalised world, having a computer and internet access should be viewed as a necessity. Like indoor plumbing or electricity, without being digitally included, someone’s chances to succeed and contribute are severely hindered. Moreover, in this time of crisis, it has become even more apparent how much of a necessity digital inclusion is. Whether it be to gain health information or home-school, being digitally excluded leaves you more vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic (Adams, 2020).

The policy landscape

The Scottish and UK Governments both have clear policies and goals in terms of tackling digital exclusion which are informing their actions. Certainly, in finding those “big-picture”, cross-sector solutions, current policy should be considered and built upon. However, in many respects, government policy and

frameworks are lacklustre and limited compared to the scale of the challenge.

The UK Government updated a framework in 2019 for those working cross-sector to support adults who were not yet digitally literate. It provides criteria and advice by which to assess digital skills but it is not a policy document (Department for Education, 2019). On the other hand, the UK Government’s Digital Inclusion Strategy outlines what is being done across the sectors at the moment and sets out various goals. Overall, however, it is an evaluation of the current situation and efforts being made. It does not set out particularly clear strategies for tackling digital exclusion (Government Digital Service, 2014).

The Scottish Government launched its “Fairer Scotland Action Plan” in October of 2016, the launch of which People Know How’s Chief Executive attended. The Minister for Communities, Angela Constance, had declared that “this will not be a document gathering dust on a shelf”. A central tenet of the plan, which appears to be a far-reaching and transformational one in terms of tackling poor internet provision, was Action 6. This pledge stated: “We will deliver 100% superfast broadband access by 2021, helping low income households reduce costs” (Housing and Social Justice Directorate, 2016).

However, following an update by the Minister for Connectivity, it was announced that the rollout will complete in 2023 and that the pledge for 2021 was not possible. This “R100” (Reaching 100%) project, worth £600 million, was delayed due to legal challenges by bidders for the contracts of various Scottish broadband regions.

Overall, whilst the current policies and frameworks are ambitious, governments have not yet found the right combination of overarching solutions to tackle the problem.

Finding “big-picture” solutions to a far-reaching problem

Herein, six overarching and extensive undertakings to tackle digital exclusion are presented. These are presented as potential avenues of exploration. Evidently, this is not an exhaustive list of solutions. It should be considered whether these offer tenable routes through which to bring about structural and transformational change. Indeed, this briefing is not looking for more short-term, regionalised or solutions focussed on particular groups in society. Whilst government grants for small voluntary sector projects are of course necessary, long-lasting change does not come about that way.

1. Scottish Government funding in partnership with SCVO

A new £5 million programme has only just been announced by the Scottish Government in partnership with the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) to secure internet connection, digital skills support and a device to 9,000 vulnerable people who are digitally excluded during this COVID-19 pandemic (Scottish Government, 2020).

Clearly this is an example of helping large numbers of digitally excluded and vulnerable people through large-scale investment and cross-sector coordination. However, it is still just the tip of the

iceberg. In a country where 300,000 young people lack digital skills, this help for 9,000 vulnerable adults should just be the beginning.

Further, there should be coordination to help those who do not qualify for this government scheme. Those who are not “shielding” nor fit the criteria to be one of the 9,000 could benefit instead from schemes like those set up by People Know How. It would be fruitful to see a mechanism in place whereby charities or third sector organisations could prioritise their services for those who are not covered by the government scheme.

2. Labour’s 2019 manifesto

The larger picture of domestic party policies should also be considered. Some parties believe the way to solve the internet provision problems is through nationalisation and the free delivery of broadband to all. The proposals in the Labour Party’s 2019 Manifesto included pledging to provide “free full-fibre broadband to all by 2030” (Labour Party, 2019). Perhaps the solution can only come through radical and transformational policies at the very highest level. The Labour Party would have seen the broadband-relevant parts of British Telecoms come back into public ownership. The rollout of full-fibre broadband would have been paid for by taxation of multinationals and tech giants.

Certainly, this vision was ambitious and perhaps it is what is required. However, there is a central and far-reaching role for the voluntary and private sectors to play as well.

3. Technology in schools

Various local government initiatives have seen councils and schools set aside huge amounts of funding for the provision of free devices to school children. Perhaps this decisive, blanket policy is simply what is needed to provide every household with modern technology. For example, Glasgow saw the largest digital education project in Europe with 54,000 iPads given to pupils and teachers across the city from 2018 (Glasgow City Council, 2019). This strategy is also double-edged in that children using the iPads in school gain the digital skills needed for later life.

Whilst this does not solve the problem of digital exclusion of the older generations nor the cost of internet or broadband, it is clearly a far-reaching solution with considerable investment behind it.

4. A price cap

Perhaps introducing further regulations is necessary to ensure cheaper internet provision. Considering Ofgem's introduction of a price cap on energy tariffs last year, is a similar regulatory move needed for the provision of internet? Ofgem's price cap was estimated to save 11 million people around £76 a year (Ofgem, 2019). Perhaps regulatory intervention is what is needed to lower the costs for the most vulnerable and ensure digital inclusion.

However, particularly in this case, regulations were viewed as a very temporary solution to a broken system. Ofgem sought to review the price cap and wanted longer-term reforms to promote competition in the marketplace.

5. A coordinated third sector/ cross-sector response

The third sector has of course seen the development of some large-scale, nation-wide strategies; strategies which target large numbers of people and have ambitious aims. Building on and expanding these initiatives is key to the third sector's role in tackling digital exclusion.

For example, in 2015, six UK organisations launched the One Digital Programme, including Age UK and the SCVO (Dunn, 2017). Supported by the Big Lottery Fund, the programme saw trained individuals help people to get online and gain digital skills. In its first year, over 11,000 people were supported. The collaboration aims to have supported 37,000 individuals by 2020.

This level of coordination clearly yields results in terms of being high-impact and large-scale. More of this "big-picture" thinking is needed to further expand a coordinated third sector response. Indeed, having assisted 37,000 individuals with digital skills is incredible. Yet, again, there are 300,000 young people in Scotland alone who lack critical digital skills. Further, this is just focussing on the skills aspect; it assumes individuals not only have the technology but have broadband and internet access.

Evidently, a multi-pronged and wide-scale approach is needed.

6. The development of "Smart Cities"

A "smart city" refers to the integration of data and digital technologies into the fabric of a city in order to enhance its productivity, sustainability and the

wellbeing of citizens (Scottish Cities Alliance, 2018). Perhaps one of the very first steps in this process of making our cities truly modern is offering city-wide WiFi access. Indeed, in May 2016, Edinburgh launched free WiFi in a 10-year contract with technology WiFi (Sword, 2016). Residents get free connectivity, funded by the UK Government part of the SuperConnected Cities programme.

This is a start. However, it only covers the city centre – where those who could really benefit from WiFi access do not live – and there are few other UK cities considering this option. It also excludes remote communities. Clearly, much more work is to be done in this area.

Conclusions

This is a call to action. By exploring six of the larger scale, “big picture” responses to digital exclusion, this briefing has sought

to begin a conversation on real structural change. This type of transformational and far-reaching change should include and be guided by the following:

- A change of mindset, remembering that being digitally included should be considered a necessity
- Cross-sector coordination which yields greater benefits and a wider impact
- High-level, government policy solutions, be that in the form of funding or even nationalisation
- Cooperation in the above from the private sector, recognising that it is time to prioritise the vulnerable digitally excluded

Poverty and Social Exclusion (PSE) research project (2012), *Growing Problem of ‘Digital Exclusion’*, www.poverty.ac.uk/report-social-exclusion-disability-older-people/growing-problem-‘digital-exclusion’

Gina Wilson and Anna Grant (2017), *A Digital World for All?*, Carnegie Trust, https://d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net/pex/carnegie_uk_trust/2017/10/NotWithoutMe-2.pdf

Ofcom (2019), *Adults: Media Use and Attitudes Report*, www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0021/149124/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-report.pdf

Housing and Social Justice Directorate, Scottish Government (2017), *Scottish Household Survey: Annual Report*, www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-people-annual-report-results-2017-scottish-household-survey

Helen Milner (2020), *COVID-19 Makes Digital Exclusion an Emergency*, UK Authority, www.ukauthority.com/articles/covid-19-makes-digital-exclusion-an-emergency

Stan Adams (2020), *In the Middle of COVID-19: Can We All Agree Now That Internet Access is a Necessity?*, Center for Democracy and Technology, <https://cdt.org/insights/in-the-middle-of-covid-19-can-we-all-agree-now-that-internet-access-is-a-necessity>

Department for Education, UK Government (2019), *Essential Digital Skills Framework*, www.gov.uk/government/publications/essential-digital-skills-framework/essential-digital-skills-framework

Eugene Mathes (1981), *Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs as a Guide for Living*, Journal of Humanistic Psychology, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2F002216788102100406>

Government Digital Service, UK Government (2014), *Government Digital Inclusion Strategy*, www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-digital-inclusion-strategy/government-digital-inclusion-strategy

Housing and Social Justice Directorate, Scottish Government (2016), *Fairer Scotland Action Plan*, www.gov.scot/publications/fairer-scotland-action-plan

Scottish Government (2020), *Getting People Online*, www.gov.scot/news/getting-people-online

Labour Party (2019), *It's Time for Real Change: The Labour Party Manifesto 2019*, <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Real-Change-Labour-Manifesto-2019.pdf>

Glasgow City Council (2019), *Digital Learning Strategy*, www.glasgow.gov.uk/article/24934/Thousands-of-Glasgow-pupils-to-benefit-from-digital-learning-strategy---pupil-iPad-roll-out-begins

Ofgem (2019), *Energy Price Caps Explained*, www.ofgem.gov.uk/system/files/docs/2019/02/information_for_elected_representatives_and_stakeholders.pdf

Sara Dunn (2017), *The One Digital Collaboration, One Digital*, <https://storage.googleapis.com/onedigitaluk/2019/05/9bf6daf9-one-digital-phase-1-exec-summary-evaluation.pdf>

Scottish Cities Alliance (2018), *Scotland's 8th City - The Smart City*, <https://storage.googleapis.com/onedigitaluk/2019/05/9bf6daf9-one-digital-phase-1-exec-summary-evaluation.pdf>

Alexander Sword (2016), *6 UK Cities with Free WiFi Networks*, Computer Business Review, www.cbronline.com/news/6-uk-cities-with-free-wi-fi-networks-4978367

Contact People Know How

525 Ferry Road
Edinburgh
EH5 2FF

www.peopleknowhow.org

0131 569 0525

contactus@peopleknowhow.org

Registered Charity No. SC043871

 /peopleknowhow

 @PKHinnovation

 @peopleknowhow

 /PeopleKnowHow1