



Connecting Everyone: 100% Digital Inclusivity by 2028

A review of Good Things Foundation's blueprint

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Abstract

This research briefing is about digital exclusion. This is taken to mean those who lack internet access or skills, be that due to motivational, economic or infrastructure barriers. This briefing is chiefly concerned with reviewing the objectives and approach of Good Things Foundation, the UK's leading digital inclusion charity, as outlined in their blueprint, and linking them with the work of People Know How in tackling digital exclusion. Following consideration of such work, this briefing also proffers some methods (although the range of methods is by no means exhaustive) by which these objectives may be achieved, the chief goal being 100% digital inclusivity by 2028.

Keywords

Digital exclusion, cross-sector, internet, technology, digital divide, Reconnect, Computer Delivery

Key points

- Digital exclusion is an issue which affects us all, but which affects the vulnerable the most.
- There are vast social and economic benefits to be derived from tackling digital exclusion and making the UK 100% digitally included by 2028.
- The work of People Know How offers an insight into how digital exclusion can be tackled.
- To achieve this goal, an ambitious, cross-sectional approach is needed.

Introduction

The aim of this research briefing is to review Good Things Foundation's "[A Blueprint for 100% Digitally Included Nation](#)" and the objectives it outlines as critical to achieving their vision of a world where everyone has the opportunity to benefit from digital. These will then be linked into the work of Scottish charity People Know How, who work with Good

Things Foundation in delivering their Reconnect service supporting vulnerable adults in Edinburgh.

In order to contextualise these objectives, Section 1 of the briefing is dedicated to highlighting the scale of digital exclusion. It looks at how many people are excluded, who these people are and examines the different barriers to

inclusion. It also sets out the current policy environment. This is the longest Section and those readers well aware of the scale and nature of digital exclusion may find it unnecessary and are encouraged to head to Section 2, where Good Things Foundation's objectives are detailed. Section 3 utilises the work of People Know How as a guide for how digital inclusivity can be fostered by those in the third and private sector. It also details which of Good Things Foundation's objectives are supported by each People Know How initiative. This research briefing's (and Good Things Foundation's) central recommendation is the adoption of an ambitious, cross-sectional approach. This necessitates a strong role for the state, often referred to within as the public sector or government. The methods explored in Section 4 are the means to this end.

Section 1 - Background

This section explores the scale of digital exclusion. If a path out of the wilderness of digital exclusion is to be found, it is first important to map the landscape with regards to both the core problems and current policy.

Who is excluded?

A significant portion of the UK population can be described as digitally excluded. According to the Office of National Statistics (ONS), the number of UK non-users of the internet (defined as having either never used the internet or having last done so more than 3 months ago) stands at 5.3m - 10% of the UK population (ONS, 2019, p.2). Currently, 11.9m people do not have adequate digital skills for everyday life - 22% of the

population (Lloyds, 2019, p.7). Internet non-usage within Scotland is higher than the rest of the UK, with 23% of Scots having no access at all to the internet (Citizens Advice Scotland, 2018, p.2). The number of non-users of the internet halved in the period 2011-2018, and indeed private and voluntary/third sector action, government policy and generational change have combined to mean that some progress is being made in reducing digital exclusion. Nonetheless, the rate of change is slow; as late as 2030, 4.5m (or 8% of the population) will still be disengaged (NHS Digital, 2020).

Digital exclusion is not spread evenly in the United Kingdom. Instead, it is linked to both age and socio-economic status. Adults over 65 "consistently made up the largest proportion of adult internet non-users", with three-quarters being over 75 (ONS, 2019, p.11). A similar proportion (76%) of those with no basic digital skills are over 75 (ONS, 2019, p.12). Within Scotland, only 12% of those aged between 65 and 79 reported being able to use a computer very well, with 38% reporting that they could not use one at all (Citizens Advice Scotland, 2018, p.15).

Those in the two lowest socio-economic are the least likely to access the internet. Whilst 13% of adults do not use the internet, the figure for the lowest groups is 27% (Ofcom, 2020a, p9, p5). Those in the lowest socio-economic groups are more than 3 times as likely to not use the internet (Ofcom, 2019, p.21). They are also the least confident users, the least likely to use a computer and the least likely to be aware of the possibility for inaccuracy and bias on websites (Ofcom, 2019, p21). This is an acute problem in Scotland specifically; the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) found that survey

respondents in the least deprived areas are twice as likely to report being able to use a computer well than those in the most deprived areas. Conversely, 19% in the most deprived areas report not being able to use one at all - compared to 9% for the least deprived areas (Citizens Advice Scotland, 2018, p15).

Why are they excluded?

Those who are digitally excluded can be categorised into three groups based on the reasons for their exclusion. As such, it matters which group is targeted by any potential solutions; what works for one group might not for another because the main barrier to inclusion is different. This is therefore a solution-orientated classification.

The first group is those whose main barrier to digitisation is motivational. This group will be referred to as the 'apathetic excluded'. This group tends to be those who are older users. Studies have consistently shown that this is the largest group. Ofcom (2018, p.15) found that 52% do not go online because they 'don't see the need' or because it is not 'for people like them'. Another study found that the most common barrier (64%) to having household internet is that they either feel they do not need it, found it not useful or uninteresting (ONS 2019, p.20).

The second group of excluded is composed of those who are priced out. This group will be referred to as 'economically excluded'. For working age adults, 19% cite cost of equipment and devices as the key barrier to digital inclusion (Good Things Foundation, 2020, p12). Ofcom found that 15% of all respondents mentioned cost as a barrier (2019, p.20). For the clients of

Scotland's Citizens Advice Bureau (SCAB), 2 of the 3 most common barriers to internet use were financial reasons with 18% mentioning broadband costs and 17% mentioning phone and data costs (Citizens Advice Scotland, 2018, p.7).

The final group is those who are excluded due to either a lack of digital skills or to a lack of infrastructure. This group will be referred to as the 'untapped excluded'. A "lack of skills" accounts for 20% of internet non-users (ONS, 2019, p20). There is also the question of infrastructure, particularly pertinent in rural areas. Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK) estimated in 2011 that upgrading broadband access for the last 10% of households may cost three times as much as for the first two-thirds (Williams et al, 2016, p765). Connecting rural areas is less commercially viable, and therefore inhabitants of these areas are at risk of exclusion. There is evidence to suggest that Scotland is ahead of the rest of the UK with regards to reaching rural areas, with only "small differences" found across the rural/urban divide by SCAB, although this comes with the caveat that SCAB clients are not necessarily representative of the wider population (Citizens Advice Scotland, p.15).

Why does it matter?

Digital exclusion causes, underpins and exacerbates a multitude of issues for those subject to it. It is clear, from the evidence outlined above, that digital exclusion is tied to social inequality. Indeed, it can be said to be "exacerbating centuries old social inequality in our communities" and "stalling social inclusion" (Good Things Foundation, 2020, p.2). For instance, having digital skills not only makes

finding a job more likely (with 90% of jobs needing digital skills within the next 15 years) but also increases earning by up to 10% (Skills Funding Agency, 2016, p13; CEBR, 2015, p5). Less of these earnings are then spent, with online shopping 13% cheaper than in-store (CEBR, 2015, p6). Digital exclusion and a lack of digital skills therefore compound the poverty premium, making life more expensive for those least able to afford it.

Whilst elderly people are the most likely age group to be non-internet users, the digital divide is evident from a young age. According to the ONS (2019, p.11), 700,000 children between the ages of 11 and 18 do not have internet access from a computer or a tablet at home. This accounts for 12% of UK schoolchildren between those ages. Of this 700,000, 68% reported that it is difficult to complete schoolwork without it (ONS, 2019, p.11). Digital exclusion, ergo, has a profound impact on the quality of education - an impact which has been exacerbated with recent school closures due to the COVID-19 lockdown.

Both the UK-wide and Scottish Government have made commitments to digital delivery. In November 2012, the UK Government rolled out its Digital by Default programme, which included the digital roll out of Universal Credit (Cabinet Office, 2012). In August 2014, Scottish Government made a commitment to a fully digital justice system. However, this can unintentionally exclude those who do not have digital access. Of SCAB's clients seeking health/disability benefits, 34% were unable to fill out the relevant forms online in 2018 (Citizens Advice Scotland, 2018, p.22). Digital exclusion, therefore, not only hampers Governmental reforms aimed at improving efficiency, but also

systematically denies fundamental rights and needs such as justice and social security from those who in need.

Digital exclusion not only affects finances, access to benefits and justice or education - it also reduces quality of life. Those with digital skills are able to connect socially with people 14% more frequently than those without (CEBR, 2015, p.6). Accessing online services saves 30 minutes per transaction on average in comparison to accessing the same services in person (CEBR, 2015, p.6). The National Health Service (NHS) sees a clear link between digital provision and health. With the NHS website receiving over 40m visits each month, and having become a valuable resource in healthcare, those who are not able to access it are less informed about health (NHS Digital, 2020).

Lastly, it is important to assert the economic impacts of digital illiteracy. This is localised evidence of a much larger issue; the digital gap is costing the UK £63b a year in lost additional GDP (House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, 2016, p.3). Digital Exclusion, therefore, is not only exacerbating existing divides, but damaging the entire UK economy.

The policy environment

Governments have recognised the problems posed by digital exclusion. In November 2012, the UK Government introduced its 'Digital by Default' strategy. It aimed to "transform public services online", thereby "making them better and cheaper for taxpayers" (Cabinet Office et al, 2012). As highlighted above, this is worthwhile only so long as those who most need these public services can

access them- only guaranteed in a 100% digitally included nation. Nonetheless, more should be done by the state sector.

Current UK Government strategy can be described as private sector orientated; “strong competition will help ensure the private sector meets consumers’ needs and demands” (DCMS, 2017). Indeed, there are a considerable number of business-led digital skills programmes. These include Microsoft training public servants and free digital skills training through Google’s ‘Digital Garage’.

As alluded to above, “supply and demand” economics render it not commercially viable to provide broadband and other infrastructure to some areas (Williams, 2016, p.765). Government recognises this and committed itself to a Universal Service Obligation to reach those in premises that “cannot be connected on a commercial basis” (DCMS, 2017). From the 20th of March 2020, every home and business in the UK has the legal right to request an upgraded connection if the download speed is below 10 Mbits/s and your upload speed is less than 1 Mbit/s (Ofcom, 2020b). Installation of the upgrade is free up to £3,400, with excess costs paid for by the home/business. Nonetheless, it may take 24 months to get a connection, whilst the package can still cost up to £46.10 a month when connected (Ofcom, 2020b). As such, this policy does little to address those who are fall into the economically excluded category.

The Scottish Government has also turned its attention tackling digital exclusion. The Scottish Government launched the Fairer Scotland Action Plan in October

2016 which pledged 100% superfast broadband. During the COVID-19 crisis, the Connecting Scotland programme was launched. The programme aims to connect 9,000 people who are at a high risk in order that they can access services and connect socially. Everyone in the programme is offered an internet connection, training and support and a laptop or tablet. These efforts are praiseworthy, and clear government action is encouraging. Nonetheless, helping 9,000 people has been labelled “the tip of the iceberg”, with more structural and far-reaching solutions being suggested by the third sector instead (Liddall, 2020, p4).

Section 2 - Good Things Foundation, and how to reach 100% digital inclusivity by 2028

This section introduces the recommendations of Good Things Foundation, within the framework detailed above. Good Things Foundation is setting the goal of making the UK a 100% digitally included nation by 2028, and has published a Blueprint with 6 objectives, as follows, aimed at tackling the problems detailed above.

1. Set a bold ambition: agree a goal of 100% digitally included nation by 2028.

It has already been highlighted that 6.9m people are currently projected to be digitally excluded by 2028. As such, there can be little down that a goal of 100% digital inclusivity is bold. Nonetheless, there is a “social and moral imperative

to act” (Good Things Foundation, 2020, p4). However, this goal is only reachable through efforts from a broad coalition of the private, public and third sector.

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of digital connections, and as such presents an opportunity for tackling digital exclusion. Indeed, The Connecting Scotland programme was launched in response to the pandemic. With schoolwork taking place on video call (with 36% of consumers using video call for the first time since the COVID-19 crisis began), there is political space for supporting this ambition (EY, 2020).

2. Drive motivation: promote the benefits of the internet

This goal is most pertinent to those who are here termed ‘apathetic excluded’ - those who feel that the internet is ‘not for them’. As mentioned, internet usage saves time, leads to better healthcare outcomes and increased social engagement. Despite this, 63% of non-users say that nothing will encourage them to go online in the next 12 months (Good Thing Foundation, 2020, p6). Encouraging progress is being made, with a welcome rise in the number of small businesses and charities with the lowest digital capability now seeing digital work as relevant.

Nonetheless, there remain significant room to further address specific concerns. Issues surrounding cybersecurity remain; 7% cited “privacy and security” as the main barrier to internet usage (ONS, 2020, p.20). Of those using SCAB, 11% reported hardly ever having private internet access (Citizens Advice Scotland, 2018, p.10). Moreover, Facebook’s role in Cambridge Analytica “appear to have

had a lasting effect on user confidence” (Ofcom, 2019, p.15). Whilst 14% say COVID-19 has made them more likely to purchase a 5G mobile package, 24% remain wary because of inaccurate information on social media, despite reassurances from service providers and Government (EY, 2020). Confusion also delays upgrades; less than half understand what marketing terms such as ‘ultrafast’ and ‘superfast’ mean (EY, 2020). There are lessons for the private sector here concerning how products are presented.

3. Build skills: Provide free essential digital skills for everyone who needs it

As highlighted in Section 1, many adults lack core digital skills, which are outlined in the UK Essential Digital Skills Framework. A lack of digital skills affects not only employability and earning potential, but increasingly access to Government services - most notably Universal Credit. The principle of ‘trusted faces in local places’ is fundamental in achieving the goal of a 100% digitally included nation by 2028. The Connecting Scotland programme, which pairs those who are vulnerable with a ‘digital champion’ for 6 months to support them, might act as good inspiration.

4. Lead from the front: employers taking responsibility for their employees

With 90% of jobs soon to require digital skills, it is clearly in the interests of employers to have a digitally included nation. Employers where 100% of staff are digitally included should be highlighted as role models. These

employers, as well as peers and volunteer groups in sector-specific networks of microbusinesses can support each other in applying skills to their own business. Employers need access to high quality online basic digital skills learning resources for employees; whether these resources are funded by Government, consist of private organisations' programmes or rely on charity work is less important than the fact that they need to exist.

5. Make it affordable: ensure no one is denied access to the digital world because of their personal income

This objective targets the 'economically excluded'; those 15% of non-users of the internet who cite cost as the main reason they are not online. Whilst the state and private sector are active in increasing internet access, "the time is now right for a more ambitious approach" to provide internet access to those not able to pay (Good Things Foundation, 2020, p.12). Whilst Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and device providers are important, a coalition of Government, private sector organisations and charities are vital in this aim.

6. Make digital a social priority: bring social inclusion and digital inclusion together

Digital exclusion compounds the poverty premium and damages the most fragile in society. Digital inclusion should be linked to social inclusion and embedded within delivery and design of healthcare and social programmes - in Jobcentres, at the GPs or when engaging with Councils. As with the other objectives,

some progress has been made. Free WiFi is provided across all libraries in England through Arts Council England, for example (DCMS, 2017). Once more, for a 100% digitally included nation by 2028 more is needed, including having a champion of such an approach in every Government Department, as well as encouraging charities and businesses to invest in digital skills.

Section 3 - How the work of People Know How supports these objectives

This section details how the work of People Know How dovetails with the objectives detailed above and may well act as a guide for others in the third sector.

A large part of People Know How's Reconnect service, supporting adults across Edinburgh, is orientated around combating digital exclusion. The service tackles digital exclusion in conjunction with social exclusion, operating a "telephone befriending" service for instance (People Know How, 2020). This has become increasingly important as social isolation and loneliness has been on the rise throughout the COVID-19 lockdown. People Know How befrienders offer a vital lifeline to those who need human interaction and conversation. Therefore, it is an example of the approach required to achieve Good Things Foundation's objective six more effectively; "bring social inclusion and digital inclusion together" (Good Things Foundation, 2020, p.13).

The Learn Digital project also falls under the umbrella of the Reconnect service and is aimed at helping adults improve

their digital skills. Learn Digital operates in three steps: providing devices (as part of People Know How's Computer Delivery project), assisting with internet provision and providing digital support. As such, it not only tackles an individual's economic barriers to being digitally included by providing a device and internet, but it also enhances their digital skills. It aids service users in finding a job online, using digital devices, navigating the internet and social media, and improving financial wellbeing online. The project uses Good Things Foundation's 'Learn My Way' platform to inform its training and support service-users. Clearly, this meets the above objectives in various ways, not least by "driving motivation" and employing the principle of 'trusted faces in local places' (People Know How, 2020).

In terms of the device and internet-provision, by the end of 2020, as part of the Computer Delivery project, over 1,000 devices are expected to have been delivered to those in Edinburgh and East Lothian who need computers to stay connected. This clearly helps in the meeting of the fifth objective; ensuring no-one is denied access to the digital world because of income.

Good Things Foundation's fourth objective is to 'Lead from the front', and have employers take responsibility for their employees (Good Things Foundation, p.10). This requires cross-sector cooperation and highlighting the resources utilised by model employers. Under its Connect Four service, People Know How brings together the business, public, academic and third sectors to facilitate exchanges of ideas and coordinate action - much of which is aimed at reducing digital exclusion. The Reconnect service also

supports businesses, charities and other social enterprises to become more technologically proficient.

Lastly, People Know How is committed to publishing research briefings such as this. These help inform groups and individuals as well as drive motivation (objective two). Moreover, these briefings have reinforced Good Things Foundation's assessment that "the time is right for a more ambitious approach" (Good Things Foundation, 2020, p.12). This ambition is evident in objective one; agreeing a goal of 100% digital inclusion by 2028. It is an ambition shared by People Know How; in May 2020, People Know How published a Research Briefing highlighting six potential "big picture" responses, describing itself as a "call to action"- a call echoed in this publication (Liddall, 2020, p6).

Section 4 - Going forward; a 100% digitally included nation by 2028

This section reiterates what prior research briefings for People Know How and Good Things Foundation have previously asserted: that an ambitious, cross-sectional approach is required to increase digital inclusivity, especially to reach an objective of a 100% digitally included nation by 2028. With the widescale adoption of this approach the central recommendation, no single specific policy is given particular prominence. Nonetheless, attention is drawn to different policies which may form part of this approach.

Currently, the third sector carries a disproportionate burden in helping those most vulnerable gain access to digital

skills and infrastructure. These include the programmes run by People Know How which are detailed above, as well as other services offered by other charities in areas outside Edinburgh and East Lothian. It also extends to some locally owned networks (sometimes called alternets). These offer a rural equivalent of 'smart cities' (more information on which is available in People Know How's last briefing on digital exclusion). Examples include B4RN (which stands for Broadband 4 the Rural North), which is a non-profit Community Benefit Society providing broadband in the North of England and redistributing profits amongst the community. The SCAB acknowledges that relying on third sector organisations to support those without skills is one answer. It is also clear that it is "not a full or satisfactory answer", with Government bearing responsibility for harnessing this enterprise - something Government has also explicitly recognised (Citizens Advice Scotland, 2018, p.27, DCMS, 2017).

The UK-wide Government has placed "strong competition" from the private sector at the forefront of its strategy, as highlighted in Section 1 (DCMS, 2017). Within this framework, Social Impact Bonds (SIBs) offer potential. Also known as pay-for-success bond, SIBs encourage innovative solutions - with private investors only receiving public sector financing having achieved a specific social outcome. Whilst these are relatively new (the first UK SIB was launched in 2010 to tackle recidivism rates), a DCMS commissioned study found that "there is potential for replicating and/or scaling SIBs in the UK" (Wooldridge et al, 2019, p96). The study recommends a partnership model be adopted by SIB commissioners from the

outset and identified the need to make services "bespoke for local commissioner needs" (Wooldridge et al, 2019, p96). This chimes with the cross-sectional focus and 'trusted faces in local places' emphasis of Good Things Foundation. Caveats exist, both intrinsic to SIBs and specifically in using a SIB-centred approach to tackle digital exclusion - most notably the question of whether the state sector would have enough of a stake. Indeed, whilst private sector involvement is important, the central goal of achieving social equality in terms of digital inclusivity must be at the heart of these Government policies. Whilst this could be an approach to incentivize the private sector, public funds must, of course, be protected and utilised in the most cautious and effective of manners in tackling digital exclusion.

Indeed, if SIBs were not found to be the most effective method or the most efficient use of taxpayer's money, a more centralised approach (with the state sector as a guarantor of digital rights) would drive inclusivity. Such an approach was offered in The Labour Party's 2019 Manifesto, with the pledge to provide "free full-fibre broadband to all by 2030" - paid for by taxation on tech companies (Labour Party, 2019). However, whilst this pledge addresses some of those who are 'economically excluded' and 'untapped excluded', it does not address the lack of skills that exist, nor the reality that the price of devices excludes as many people as the price of broadband access (ONS, 2019, p.20). Free broadband would need to be coupled with a price cap touted in previous People Know How research briefings, both of which would then need to be reinforced with a deeper programme providing digital support.

Such a programme may well model itself on the Scottish Government's "Connecting Scotland" programme, which has partnered with the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) to provide internet and digital skills support to 9,000 vulnerable people during the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach is cross-sectional, utilises the 'trusted faces in local places' principle, and offers support as well as equipment. However, 300,000 young people in the UK lack digital skills and therefore the "Connecting Scotland" programme needs to be scaled up as much as possible (Wilson and Grant, 2017, p.60).

This Government-led injection of urgency and priority to digital inclusion is made more immediate, and possibly more possible, when reviewed in the light of the (first stage) of the COVID-19 crisis. The urgency and importance of meeting the challenge is heightened by a situation where the absence of digital access has been shown to make the difference between having or not having education, or indeed in relation to healthcare access, to make the difference between life and death. The achievability of the goal is perhaps increased in a post-crisis environment where the UK Government appears determined to "spend its way out" of the economic challenges, with a focus on big infrastructure projects, rather than repeating the austerity experiment adopted post-2008.

Moreover, initial Government funding aimed at providing skills, broadband and devices for all need not result in indefinite financial commitments. Instead, the Rural PAWS programme has demonstrated (albeit with a small sample size) that exposing the 'untapped excluded' to broadband infrastructure

at a functional but basic level (with Government services 'whitelisted' and operating at a faster speed), stimulates some demand for faster services. This potentially might be profitable for ISPs, with individuals having to decide whether to "migrate to a paid service" when their usage increases above the capacity of the free services (Williams et al, 2016, p.771). As such, initial outlay on universal infrastructure on behalf of the state would lead to long-term economic benefits, without necessarily committing Government to interminable, large-scale spending so long as the universal technology is adequate.

Finally, and despite this potential to recoup some of expenditure, it is crucial to draw attention to the fact that digital exclusion is not only a social problem, but an economic problem. The digital divide costs the UK economy £63bn a year in lost potential GDP (House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, 2016, p.3). A Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) report indicates that for every £1 invested in tackling digital exclusion, £15 can be gained if the UK is a 100% digitally included nation by 2028 (CEBR, 2018, p.9). As such, Government should not fear spending as part of an ambitious plan to tackle digital exclusion by 2028 because such spending would be dwarfed by revenue. For the UK Government, there are also ideological benefits to tackling digital exclusion:

"As we leave the European Union, it will be even more important to ensure that we continue to develop our home-grown talent, up-skill our workforce and develop the specialist digital skills needed to maintain our world leading digital sector." (DCMS, 2017)

If the UK were to be 100% digitally included by 2028, it would probably be the first nation in the world to achieve total digital inclusivity. As such, Government should not fear spending as part of an ambitious plan to tackle digital exclusion by 2028 - if not for the vast social benefits, then for the economic and ideological ones.

Conclusion

It is clear the digital exclusion constitutes a threat to the social and economic well-being of the UK. It is equally clear that the private sector and the third sector can continue to make valuable progress in tackling this threat.

Nonetheless it is even clearer that, for the UK to reach 100% digital inclusion by 2028, the public sector needs to incorporate digital needs into its very fabric. The Government must commit to the goal of 100% digital inclusivity by 2028 and lead a cross-sectional coalition in tackling digital exclusion. There are evident social benefits detailed in Section 1 as well as economic and ideological benefits. Becoming the first 100% digitally included nation in 2028 would suit the UK Government narrative of a 'Global Britain', post-EU. With this clarity established and acknowledged by Government, it is most clear of all that 100% digital inclusivity would benefit everyone.

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