Local Trust
trusting local people

Making connections: Community-led action on data poverty

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Local Trust

About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision making into the hands of communities.

About the authors

- Rosa Robinson is a social researcher whose work addresses a range of social inequalities. She is director of Frame Collective CIC, a not-for-profit company specialising in people-centred research, creative engagement and inclusive innovation around health and social inequalities.

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Front cover: Computers at Sale West community centre.
Photo credit: Benjamin Nwaneampeh

Contents

Foreword from the Operation Wifi alliance

The way we live our lives has changed. Services we used to access by phone, post or face to face now exist solely online. Contacting your bank? Looking for a new job? Your best bet is online. Registering to vote or buying bargains off eBay? Do it on the internet. Want to Zoom a family member or stream the latest series everyone's talking about? You'll need enough bandwidth to enjoy.

If you don't have access to the internet, you're locked out of living life to the full. As a result, existing inequalities deepen, because nowadays you'll find it difficult to get by without internet access. Where broadband isn't an option, often because of the cost, using mobile data can fill a gap. However, whilst data may seem more accessible than being locked into unaffordable long-term broadband contracts, it can also end up incurring extra costs. Paying one off instalments and topping-up when you need it most can very quickly become very costly, leading to data poverty.

The pandemic made it worse. In fact, 2.5 million people are behind on their broadband bills, with 700,000 people having fallen into debt on their broadband bills during COVID. And as people retreated into their homes, and WhatsApp mutual aid groups sprung into existence, some neighbours became increasingly disconnected. As teaching moved online, children without internet access missed out on learning.

Community groups were no longer sustained in hubs, halls or libraries, and the public wifi these places provided was no longer available either. People who had previously been at the table no longer came to meetings; a lack of internet access meant they could no longer participate.

Luckily, local knowledge made these groups well placed to identify and attempt to remedy data poverty, and through conversations with over 136 community members from across the country, this research lifts the lid on what happened next. It reveals how communities stepped in to help people exposed to data poverty, taking on a complex issue and revealing the limitations of what communities alone can do.

In our 'new normal', the need for data will continue to increase and the poverty that emerges from this should not be ignored. Progress is already being made, at a grassroots level and within industry and government, but we know there is more to do.

Good Things Foundation Online Centres Network will continue to support thousands of grassroots organisations working to tackle digital and social exclusion, while their Data Poverty Lab is building on these emergency responses to develop sustainable solutions to end data poverty. Meanwhile, more than 100 organisations that form a part of the Operation WiFi campaign will continue to champion the creation of a national data bank, to collect donations from people with excess data and give it to those who need it most.

As we move out of lockdown, we are committed to keeping data poverty on the agenda, so those that can not get online don't continue to be left out or forgotten. We will continue to share best practice and champion the work of communities and organisations on the front line to highlight their contributions but also the support they need.

This report is just the start, to better understand an issue that people in communities across the country are grappling with. We know there is much more to do, but invite you to find out about what is already happening and help push this conversation and issue forward.

Our advisory group

Thank you to the advisory group for their time and contributions to this research.

The All-Party Parliamentary Group for 'left behind' neighbourhoods is a cross party group of over 70 MPs and Peers.

The Group is committed to improving social and economic outcomes for residents in communities that suffer from a combination of economic deprivation, poor connectivity, low levels of community engagement and a lack of community spaces and places.

appg-leftbehindneighbourhoods.org.uk

End Data Poverty seeks to ensure all can afford data for essential needs. It will work towards this aim by raising awareness through research to influence policymakers and creating an online hub which will bring together resources, ideas and news through their network of broadband providers, academics, community groups etc.

data-poverty.org

APLE Collective stand for addressing poverty with lived experience. They are a national collective of individuals with lived experience of poverty. They work together with organisations that support us to take positive action to eradicate poverty.

aplecollective.com

F.

Frame CIC deliver people-centred research and engagement. Starting conversations that help people find their voices, grow in confidence, build community, explore ideas and play active roles in solving collective problems.

framecollective.org.uk

Community Organisers aims to ignite social action in communities, embed community organising locally and develop a network and sustainable future for neighbourhood community organising.

corganisers.org.uk

Good Things Foundation is a social change charity, working to close the UK's digital divide so everyone benefits from digital. We do this through partnership programmes and providing free support to hundreds of community organisations, libraries and social enterprises across the UK - the Online Centres network. Our work stretches across the spectrum of digital inclusion for adults: digital access, skills, confidence and online safety.

goodthingsfoundation.org

KeyRing
... We're Life Changing

KeyRing focus on smashing barriers to wellbeing and independence through connection, flexible support and skill-building.

keyring.org

OPERATION WIFI

#OperationWiFi is a growing alliance of over 100 organisations from across the public, private and voluntary sector, making three 'asks' to ensure that the five million people who are disconnected, due to low income, can get online.

operationwifi.wordpress.com

JRF JOSEPH ROWNTREE FOUNDATION

JRF is an independent social change organisation working to solve UK poverty through research, policy, collaboration and practical solutions to ensure everyone has a good home, neighbourhood, living standards and prospects.

jrf.org.uk

STARTING POINT COMMUNITY LEARNING

Starting Point Community Learning Partnership is a Stockport based social enterprise. We believe in a world where people have the opportunities to lead happy, healthier and fairer lives through informal learning and community action. We focus on digital inclusion, addressing health inequalities and bringing people together to benefit from common unity.

startpoint.org.uk

Executive summary

The internet has become essential for accessing employment, education, health and care services, shopping, and social interactions – a reality exposed and embedded by the COVID-19 lockdowns. As a result, the new term 'data poverty' has emerged to describe the inability to afford sufficient, private, and secure mobile or broadband data for these essential needs (Lucas et al., 2020). This definition recognises that poverty is the problem's root cause.

Over the last year, awareness of data poverty and the impact on some people of not being able to afford enough internet access has grown, and communities, civil society, government and government have taken action. This research set out to understand how communities have responded to data poverty. We wanted to know how community groups have organised around data poverty and what helped and hindered local action. We carried out qualitative research between March and May 2021, combining stakeholder workshops, interviews, and an online survey with respondents from across England. Community-led and neighbourhood groups made up the largest part of the sample, along with housing providers, local and national charities. In this report, we describe the breadth and variety of community action and present the views and experiences of those we spoke with. What we found:

1. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted community action on data poverty. Community groups felt compelled to ensure that people could access services and support or stay connected as provision moved online and public wifi became unavailable. People said they had not previously recognised or realised the extent of data poverty.

2. Data affordability as a barrier to digital participation is not well understood. Descriptions of digital inclusion that emphasise motivation, skills or confidence as the main barriers to going online hide data poverty within them. The related terms of data poverty, digital poverty, and digital exclusion are used inconsistently and interchangeably across sectors, causing confusion.

3. Community groups were typically addressing data poverty within other activities related to digital exclusion, and most actions were device-led, small-scale and short-term. Data were most often provided with devices or training and comprised dongles, SIMs, MiFi routers, broadband access (including community broadband projects), public wifi and information about social tariffs. Understanding data needs, identifying appropriate data deals and supplying data were challenging and time-consuming.

4. Community action tended to focus on digitally or socially excluded groups and people on low incomes. We cannot know whether existing schemes have reached those in greatest need of data.

5. The visibility of digital exclusion increased access to funding during COVID-19 but didn't always enable effective action. Some funding

eligibility criteria and conditions were prescriptive, and this limited or prevented action on data poverty.

6. There were limited opportunities for project evaluation. Monitoring usually focused on the number of devices supplied or people supported. So we know little about what works for whom in which circumstances.

7. Organisations' digital capacity varied widely, and their knowledge and experience affected the action they could take. Some groups had to upskill their members, while others had dedicated roles to support digital work.

8. Community groups felt their work was more responsive to people's needs when co-produced with community members. At the same time, it was rare for community members to have the digital skills and knowledge needed to understand the complex and interconnected issue of data poverty.

9. Partnerships with external groups could be transformative but also slowed the action and risked a loss of control. Successful partnerships were felt to be those where all partners were willing to share power and respect the diversity of partners' knowledge and expertise.

10. Community groups hoped to continue supporting people to get online but were concerned about the sustainability of solutions. Groups felt they did not have the resources and technical expertise needed to provide sustainable solutions. Still, they recognised that people's data supply would 'fall off a cliff' if their group or organisation could not keep them connected.

11. There is a limit to what community-led action on data poverty can achieve. However, community groups recognise that alleviating the symptoms and causes of data poverty will require a coordinated effort from civil society, government and industry.

What should happen next

As data poverty became increasingly visible during COVID-19, communities, civil society, government and industry responded with programmes, funding and initiatives to help the most vulnerable people to get online. And the shift to digital, accelerated by the pandemic, is here to stay.

As our reliance on the internet for services, information, education, work and social connection increases, so does the need for universal, affordable access to data. Action to reduce poverty overall is crucial to solving the problem, and specific action on data poverty is needed. Data poverty research is a new field, and there is little evidence yet about what works to reduce data poverty. However, we know there is unlikely to be a single solution that will address all areas of data poverty. Addressing the problem will require continued, concerted and coordinated action from civil society, government and industry. Community-led action will continue to be essential, but cross-sector support must bolster it. We suggest pragmatic next steps for communities, civil society, government and industry, summarised below and in full at the end of this report.

Community groups

Community groups understand local context and needs, and can lobby for the right actions locally. Data poverty is a new term and is neither well understood nor supported with funding now. We recommend that community groups continue to take time to listen and learn from people with lived experience of data poverty and understand what affordable, sufficient data means for their members before planning solutions.

Community groups could:

1. Listen to the lived experiences Of people experiencing poverty and data poverty
2. Think about prioritising specific dimensions of data poverty
3. Recognise there is no one-size-fits-all solution to data poverty
4. Consider where partners can add value
5. Plan how to evaluate what works to tackle data poverty.

Government and industry

During the pandemic, the government and industry responded to the newly visible problem of data poverty with various programmes and initiatives to help people access the internet. However, as services, information and socialising continue online, the need for large amounts of affordable data will increase. Government and industry will continue to be responsible for ensuring that this digital shift does not create a new group of people left behind and disadvantaged because they cannot afford data.

Government and industry could:

1. Make pricing less confusing and more transparent
2. Commission research to build the evidence on data poverty
3. Understand the minimum data requirements of 'digital by default'
4. Create scalable, inclusive solutions that do not deepen inequalities.

Civil society

The internet is as vital as other utilities like gas, electricity and water. Recognising this means changing how civil society operates – charities should expect to be running services digitally. This digital shift makes it imperative to check that everyone can afford the data they need to engage in this way. We recommend that data poverty should be a consideration for every project and every event, and community groups need support to do the same.

Civil society could:

1. Support groups to identify appropriate data options for their communities' needs

2. Recognise that data poverty is an essential but distinct element of digital exclusion that requires specific action and support
3. Listen to voices with lived experience of data poverty and engage in co-production
4. Identify options for data pooling/sharing at the community level
5. Commission or conduct evaluations of data poverty initiatives
6. Lobby for action by government and industry.

Conclusions

Our research highlights that there is no cure-all for data poverty – but it does show that an intimate understanding of who is affected and how must drive solutions to address this need. For example, those who need support will include the digitally excluded and digital natives who cannot afford sufficient data. The case studies featured in this report show how some community groups have responded to this need and give pointers for what has worked for them.

1. Introduction

In early 2021, Local Trust commissioned this research to understand more about community-led action on data poverty. We recognise that civil society, government and industry make larger-scale responses to data poverty – this discovery research is focused on community groups' experiences. The study sought to understand the work of grassroots groups, describe the actions they had taken and consider what has helped and hindered communities from responding to data poverty. While valuing community voices and celebrating their contributions, the research also aimed to highlight gaps in knowledge or action, particularly identifying actions that community groups can not do. We hope this research will galvanise support for community-led action, amplify the voices of community groups, and inspire action on data poverty across the UK.

1.1 What is data poverty, and what do we know about it?

Lucas et al. (2020) define data poverty as "those individuals, households or communities who cannot afford sufficient, private and secure mobile or broadband data to meet their essential needs".

At the heart of this definition is the recognition that poverty lies behind data poverty. Data poverty is a feature of not having enough money for all your needs. For example, those living on low incomes cannot afford to pay for data or internet access (ONS 2019; Serafino). Prior research by this team (Lucas et al., 2021) found that more than 1 in 5 of those with a household income of less than £20,000 a year were experiencing data poverty. It means regularly having to make hard choices about which essential needs to prioritise.

> 66 I've lived on my own for almost two years now…you've got to pay for your wifi because, as sad as it sounds, it is essential, especially if you live alone. I get about £340 a month in Universal Credit. I spend almost £100 on my phone and wifi, £37 on my water bill and around £27 for my gas and electric. So, I'm left with about £43 a week for food and everything else."

(First person quote taken from Lucas et al., 2021)

Low access to contracts, shared internet access, insecure housing and poor infrastructures also create data poverty. Compounding this are low digital and financial literacy, which reduces people's ability to identify and access affordable options. Going online is more costly for those who lack digital literacy, according to Lloyds research. Additionally, infrastructure is not equally distributed – some neighbourhoods have

a limited choice of providers. Together, these factors mean that those who are socially disadvantaged are more likely to experience data poverty.

Local Trust's pre-pandemic research with OSCI (2019) highlighted that digital exclusion is a defining feature of 'left behind' communities. Wilson and Hopkins (2019, 11, pp. 563-583) and Blank et al. (2018, 36, pp. 82-102) report that data poverty is one feature of digital exclusion, understood as a spectrum of digital access that combines infrastructure, confidence, skills and affordability. However, most work on affordability, to date, has addressed the affordability of devices. The impact of the affordability of data itself has only recently become apparent. In early 2020, although 93 per cent of the UK population were online, a quarter of those who had not gone online in the past three months said it was too expensive (Lloyds Bank, 2020). In a previous survey of data poverty in Scotland and Wales, eight out of 10 people had both a broadband connection and a mobile phone contract, including data. Still, one in 10 people with mobile contracts regularly ran out of data before the end of the month (Lucas et al., 2021).

Data poverty is one expression of poverty and exclusion. It follows that those actions to reduce poverty and social disadvantage will reduce the number experiencing data poverty. However, grassroots activities increase people's access to affordable data and lessen the immediate negative impact of data poverty. These actions are the focus of this report.

1.2 The impact of COVID-19

During the past year, communities have galvanised into action to get people online. They recognise that society changed during the pandemic period, and one of the most significant changes has been the shift to digital. During COVID lockdowns, people have relied on access to the internet: 85 per cent of people use the internet to stay in touch with friends and family, 80 per cent for entertainment and shopping, and 75 per cent for managing their money online. Notably, 65 per cent of people experiencing data poverty need to go online to access essential health and information services, 60 per cent for working, and 33 per cent to seek employment (Lucas et al. 2021). A 'digital by default' approach now dominates public services, and this means that internet access is essential for some of the most vulnerable people. Many charities and community groups have also moved services and communications online. These changes create a greater demand for data, and people need more of it, putting more people at risk of data poverty. The pandemic has amplified poverty and exclusion and widened existing inequalities. Nesta research in 2021 found that at least

a million adults across Scotland and Wales are currently experiencing data poverty (Lucas et al., 2021).

APLE Collective has gathered evidence on lockdown's impact on people experiencing poverty. It notes that the loss of shared access to computers and wifi in schools, libraries and community hubs has severely limited access to the internet for some groups (Goldstraw et al., 2021).

> **I [did] not have wifi at home even before the lockdown. [Therefore] I was unable to download important documents at home while researching with my phone. This did not help me to manage my time efficiently. At the moment, the lockdown has worsened the whole situation because I cannot go out to where I can connect to the network. I can only send emails if I beg to be connected to someone's wifi."**
>
> (First person quote taken from Goldstraw, Herrington, Skelton, Croft, Murinas, Gratton, 2021)

The Good Things Foundation also notes rising poverty's impact on data poverty. For example, it reports Ofcom data (2020) showing that almost one in five households has struggled to afford their telecoms bills. Similarly, Citizens Advice (2021) says that one in six broadband customers have found it hard to pay their bill.

1.3 Approach and participants

The primary aim of this research was to understand the views and experiences of groups and organisations involved in community-level responses to data poverty. The secondary purpose was to understand the role of community-led and grassroots organisations in these actions, describing their involvement and identifying activities that were needed but missing or beyond the scope of community action.

Between March and May 2021, we combined desk research, an online survey, interviews and stakeholder workshops to find community-led or community-level projects and approaches addressing data poverty. We sought variation in participants, including the experiences and views from different sectors and various roles within organisations. Our work was qualitative, and in this discovery phase, we sought to understand how communities respond to local people's data needs. We also wanted to find out what helps and hinders communities from leading action on data poverty, which connectivity issues communities cannot meet, and what communities believe are essential ingredients in projects successfully addressing data poverty.

Our work-plan was developed together with Local Trust and with input from an advisory group, comprising stakeholders with expertise in data poverty and digital inclusion. We recruited participants for both the workshops and the survey through direct communication with Local Trust's Big Local partnerships, via Operation Wi-Fi Alliance and the RAG, posts on Twitter and LinkedIn, our contacts in the sector, and snowball recruitment. In total, 62 people took part in workshops or interviews, and 74 people completed the online survey.

We spoke to groups from all regions of England and some from Wales and Northern Ireland. Community-led and neighbourhood groups made up the largest part of our sample. Nearly half of those who took part in workshops, interviews or the online survey were from a community-led group or organisation (for example, Big Local partnership, mutual aid group, community group). Our sample also included housing providers and other service providers, local and national charities, the health sector, and a representative from a telecoms provider. The range of roles represented

also demonstrates the breadth of our sample. They include community residents, engagement staff, managers and coordinators, chairpersons and CEOs. It was apparent that the participants' roles or job titles were not always a good reflection of the digital champion or facilitator role they had adopted in the last year. In smaller groups and organisations, and among those newer to work in the digital space, people had done the work that was needed or where they had the skills or networks to do it.

1.4 Limitations of our approach

While our sample successfully achieved reach and variation, we are careful to note that it is not a generalisable sample.

The people and groups who volunteered to participate in our research were self-selecting and more likely to be interested in data poverty, particularly those who came through our RAG contacts. Those who have not acted or feel the topic is unproblematic were less likely to speak to us. The issues of overlapping terms and confusion about data poverty as a distinct form of digital exclusion were also challenging. We acknowledge that we could not always unpick these differences in either workshops or the survey. We tried to be clear about the focused aim of this research, but digital inclusion and data poverty are inextricably linked, and responses often addressed broader and specific issues. As a result, it wasn't always possible to disentangle the place of data poverty in the experiences reported to us.

2. Community action on data poverty

We drew on previous research from Goldstraw et al. (2021), Good Things Foundation (2020), Lucas et al. (2020 and 2021), workshop discussions and responses to our survey. Then we started with a simple typology of actions taken to reduce data poverty. Figure 1 summarises the survey responses and the proportion of respondents who had acted within each category. In this typology, provision of devices and data were the most common actions. However, examining survey and workshop responses revealed a more nuanced understanding, and a matrix of activities emerged. Most often, groups were involved in more than one action, usually in combination. Figure 2 shows this matrix and names the range of actions within matrix domains.
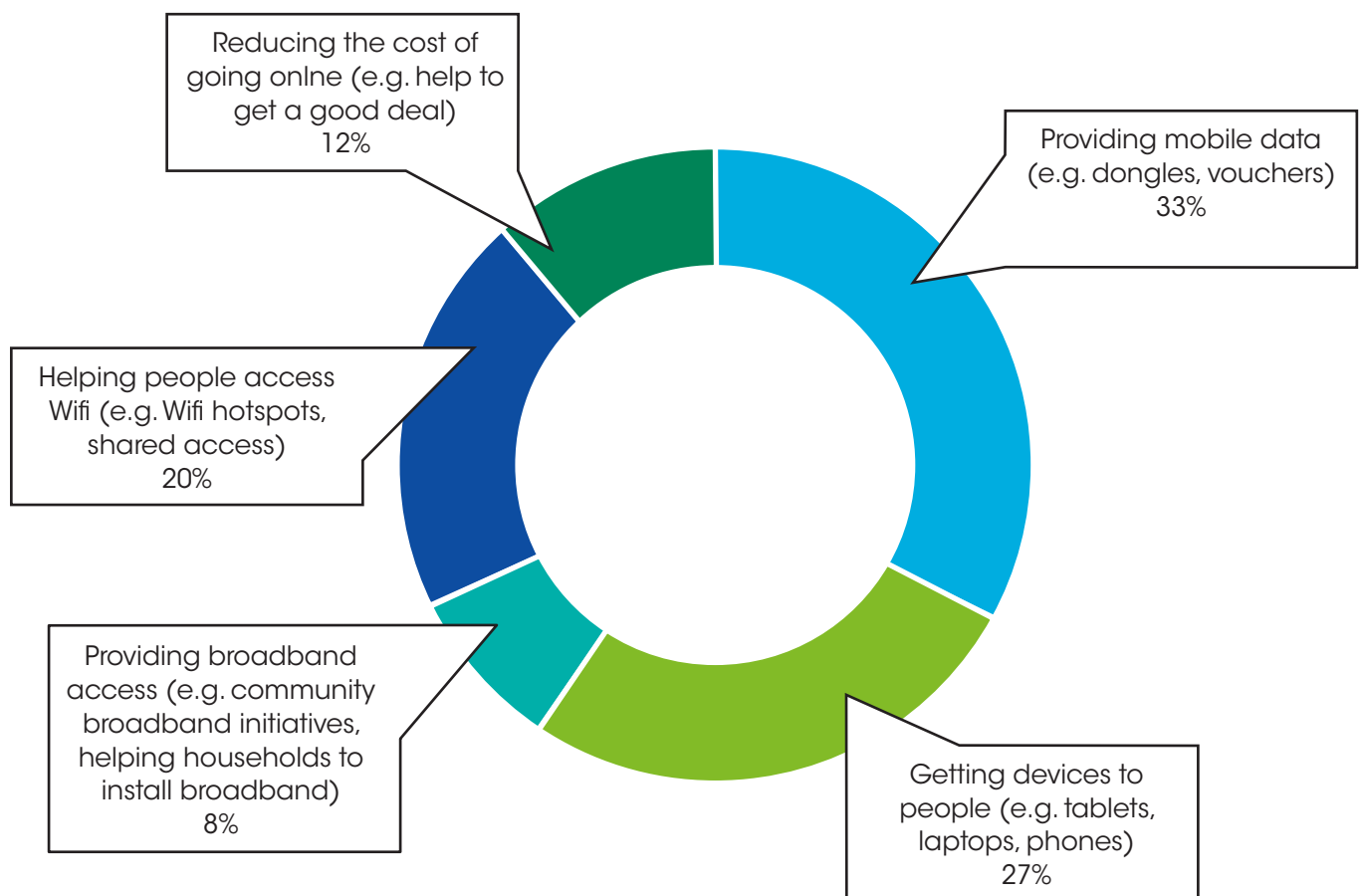

Reducing the cost of going onlne (e.g. help to get a good deal)
12%

Providing mobile data (e.g. dongles, vouchers)
33%

Helping people access Wifi (e.g. Wifi hotspots, shared access)
20%

Providing broadband access (e.g. community broadband initiatives, helping households to install broadband)
8%

Getting devices to people (e.g. tablets, laptops, phones)
27%

Figure 1: Types of actions reported in the survey

We found examples of community-level action across the responses (see Sections 2.1 to 2.3). The community sometimes headed these projects, but they were often led by or in partnership with other organisations. Reflecting our focus on community-led approaches, much of the work we heard about was local and modest in scale. So, although our typology includes some larger-scale responses, most were micro-scale. Examples are projects in a single shelter or community centre, distributing a handful of smartphones to those most in need, often working with a group of volunteers in a single neighbourhood.

Figure 2: Matrix of actions to reduce data poverty

2.1 Actions on data poverty

For most communities, tackling data poverty was part of emergency response during the pandemic:

> 🔢 **The closure of libraries and community centres has meant communities have had to take action on data poverty."**
>
> Workshop participant

Actions targeting access to data and affordability included support to individuals, households or communities. For example, they gave mobile data dongles or SIMs to individuals, MiFi routers or broadband access to families and homes, and set up wifi hotspots. There were also community broadband projects making it easier for households to sign up for broadband (HartlePower, n.d.). While many projects bundled devices and data (see below), some were data-only projects.

Community-led actions on data poverty ranged from small-scale, self-funded emergency responses to larger-scale collaborations between communities and public services. The types of activities taken depended on the group or organisation's role and its perception of the community's connectivity needs. In some cases, an urgent need to provide continuity of access to lifeline services and support prompted action.

> 🔢 **A significant number [of clients] didn't have broadband...we had to supply mobiles with data to ensure people in addiction treatment could get online. We were surprised how much data poverty there was, including people struggling to home-school and work from home without access to the internet. And so many could not access Universal Credit...so we had to buy the data out of our own pockets because we could not have people dying because they could not stay in touch with us."**
>
> Changing Lives

In the context of emergency responses, without time or resources to understand people's specific needs, many communities said they had to make informed guesses to provide solutions quickly. For example, people who cannot afford data may not have access to an appropriate device and people without devices are unlikely to have access to data. Both were often deemed essential parts of a solution. Groups tried a range of different data solutions, frequently changing tack once provision was up and running, and they understood more about the support people needed.

Goldstraw et al. (2021) report that public wifi points in libraries and other community centres were lost when they closed during the pandemic. It was a more significant problem in communities that were also less well-served by other resources.

> **During lockdown, the only venues where [wifi] access was available, albeit limited, were closed down, for example, libraries and customer service centres...the lack of vision from a regeneration perspective has left areas exposed and disproportionately disadvantaged even further by the pandemic."**
>
> Survey respondent

Recognising this, some groups set up new public wifi in open locations (for example, in places of worship). Plaistow South Big Local ran a pilot to address the lack of internet access among homeless people in the area. Many have devices already but don't have data. With the advice of a consultant, the group is now planning to buy two routers with unlimited data which

people can access where they already congregate, for example, centres providing free lunches. However, there are still issues to address around specific aspects of data poverty, such as security and privacy. The group is unsure whether to require a password to access community wifi hotspots or make it fully open but is aware that each choice has different implications.

Many groups tried to find solutions to enable people to access services and join meetings through video calls. They often shared MiFi devices to provide shared mobile data access to groups of people in supported housing or community locations. In two cases, they used dongles to create portable hotspots that project workers could take with them.

A few people said they were helping people find good deals and access low-cost options (for example, BT basic[1]) or giving vouchers or subsidies to offset the cost of purchasing data. However, helping people navigate the telecoms market for this purpose was rare.

2.2 Supporting actions

Supporting actions were often important components of data poverty responses. Undertaking local consultation or research activities to understand support needs were essential precursors to further efforts and involvements. Several groups invested in research before engaging with community members to co-produce solutions based on people's lived experiences of data poverty. Other communities tested solutions through pilot schemes.

We heard both from larger organisations providing funding and groups whose main activity was finding or accessing funds for their local communities. In some cases, this took the form of infrastructure work:

[1] BT Basic is a low-cost package for people on benefits: https://www.bt.com/content/dam/bt/help/including-you/BT_Basic.pdf

> **We have formed a working group of stakeholders such as Housing Associations to research possible access provision."**
>
> Survey respondent

Others were doing research and campaigning or lobbying for money or action by others:

> **We're currently doing research about digital exclusion across the North. And we're hoping that this is going to be something that can influence policymakers to make the changes and really recognise that digital exclusion is a very broad and complex area; it is not just as straightforward as giving people kit."**
>
> Voluntary Organisations'
> Network North East

> **We have been raising awareness of the issues and sharing/signposting to all available current resources"**
>
> Survey respondent

> **So, one of the things we became involved with is Operation WiFi... it is a national movement to help with data poverty."**
>
> Community Roots CIC

Groups created various skills and training activities to help individuals get online, including identifying champions to encourage, answer their questions, help them develop essential digital skills, set up their kit and liaise with providers:

> **[We've been] working with people who do not even know how to switch a computer on. Helping them decide what device best suits by lending them our devices, teaching them the basics."**
>
> Survey respondent

Importantly, these skills and training activities were not always at the level of the individual community members. Groups also directed them to other groups and organisations. With the growing recognition of the need to help community members get online, there was a realisation that groups and organisations also needed to grow their digital skills and resources to support others:

> **In terms of digital competence… over the last 12 months we've put in a training schedule for our staff, so we get everybody up to a benchmark of competence in terms of their ability to use all these fantastic different types of resources that are there and that we're paying for."**
>
> Northern Rights Social Enterprise

2.3 Action on devices

Data poverty was often addressed in the broader context of digital inclusion and solutions primarily focused on providing devices, sometimes with data. The most reported action across the workshops, interviews and survey was to loan or give devices to individuals and households. Devices distributed included smartphones, tablets and laptops.

Groups bought devices to give away or loaned for a short period (device libraries) or medium-term (six to 12 months). Some groups focused on collecting and redistributing second-hand devices, although these schemes also needed a partner who could clean and refurbish

donated hardware. Some had a loan-to-own arrangement, where they loaned tech for an agreed period, expecting that most would be bought at a low cost at the end of the loan period. These devices sometimes came with training or support to use them. Often people were supporting several individuals at a time:

> **We had some funding for awards for our men's groups to provide them with tablets with data, which was great; they are an isolated group of individuals. I've got another tablet for a lady through 100% Digital Leeds and [one] with data from another pot of funding for an individual, again that met a slightly different criteria, but it is not something across the board for everyone."**

Feel Good Factor

Organisations realised they needed to find permanent device solutions for people they were supporting:

> **We're running a tablet loan scheme…in reality [we're] extending that loan period, so we're absolutely not going to be taking back a digital device that somebody is using and hugely benefiting from, and we've seen such incredible benefits from people being able to be online at this time. So, although it is technically called a loan scheme, we extend those loans for as long as people need, and we've linked in with a local, not for profit, who are refurbishing equipment. Through that, we're able to provide permanent solutions for people as well."**

Digital Brighton and Hove

Several organisations worked on digital exclusion before the pandemic and had existing programmes in place, like device loans and training, to help digitally excluded people get online. These were often adapted to meet changing needs throughout the pandemic. However, many schemes became oversubscribed, and others didn't receive adequate funding:

> **Before lockdown, we knew there was a real issue with access to digital services…so we equipped our centres with digital devices, provided the support to people with online claims – helping people to find employment and access tax credits. We were supported by a national charity, Leonard Cheshire, who has been a fantastic partner...but unfortunately had a very limited budget once COVID hit."**

Northern Rights Social Enterprise

When groups provided data with devices, it was usually time-limited (for the loan duration or a fixed period). In the survey, slightly more than half of those who said they had provided mobile data or broadband connections said they also offered devices. However, it was often not clear what proportion of devices came with data and vice versa. For example, Business in the Community told us about half the devices their business members provided to communities came with a data package. We categorise these responses as 'device first'. That is, the focus was on getting devices to people without internet access. The aim of adding data was to provide connectivity for the equipment rather than addressing data affordability.

3. Community experiences

Through our workshops, community groups and organisations shared their experiences of tackling data poverty. They described challenges they faced and their decisions, often with limited knowledge, capacity and resources. For many people we spoke to, the pandemic opened their eyes to the extent of data poverty in their community and the specific issue of affordability of data as a barrier to getting online. Many could see the scale of the problem and were acutely aware of the gaps that they could not fill.

> **[Before the pandemic] we always said that people had a lack of motivation to go on online because they didn't think it was for them. But what I've seen over the last 12 months is that the big issue is a lack of sustained access due to the unaffordability of data."**

100% Digital Leeds

3.1 Finding people most in need

Groups described feeling concerned about people they usually saw regularly but weren't engaging since communications moved online:

> **We had been working with large numbers of local people – over 3,000 – running coffee mornings, etcetera., and many have just disappeared since everything has moved online, so it is clear there is some issue, but we don't know what that is exactly and how much of it is data poverty."**

Flintshire Disability Forum

Groups wanted to identify the people most in need of support but were aware that the most disconnected were often hardest to reach and help:

> **It is challenges like giving information out to our women… probably more than half of our members are very difficult to contact because they haven't got any data, they haven't got email addresses."**

Women's Health in South Tyneside

Several groups told us they were determined to keep people connected. They resorted to socially distanced analogue methods of communication, such as doorstep visits and phone calls, to communicate with them and let them know about any digital and data support on offer:

> **I've actually been ringing people up in the community to see how we can reach them and support them to access data and to find out what support they might need."**

Big Local Central Jarrow

For groups used to working digitally, using online methods of communication were most resource-efficient, but meant not reaching people in need:

> **We find it hard to reach people. We know who they are and where they are, but digital communication is essential for us in terms of affordability of time and resources."**
>
> Workshop participant

3.2 Capacity to act

People in community groups and organisations were motivated to make whatever difference they could to help people get online, even if digital inclusion or poverty alleviation were not part of their organisation's usual remit. Consequently, many lacked the knowledge, skills and resources they felt they needed to make 'the best' choices. People described finding this hugely frustrating and often upsetting.

Capacity and resources varied across organisations. In some communities, organisations had dedicated roles to support this work (often prompted by the pandemic and looking at digital inclusion broadly), such as at Carers Leeds, whereas others were entirely volunteer-led. The capacity of organisations and the circumstances of their members affected the scale of action they took:

> **We would love to do more, but we are a very small board (eight members), and only one of the board was able not to shield."**
>
> Birchwood Big Local

With many organisations having limited knowledge of data poverty, people told us it was difficult finding the most appropriate solutions and the best data deals, balancing the quantity of data and price. Often, accessing the best deals required contracts, which smaller organisations could not commit to. People also felt their knowledge and experience affected the action they could take:

> **We are aware that as a very small charity in a specific area, we don't have a huge [number] of digital skills even within the organisation."**
>
> Home-Start Camden and Islington

As a result, some sought support from telecoms businesses, which were providing pro bono support, such as BT.

> **We've partnered with Good Things Foundation, signed up as a learning network [online centres network member], and they have provided us with a mentor from BT, who has identified equipment – a device and data – that we can use for the pilots; the best cost for the best data package."**
>
> Big Local Central Jarrow

Community example: Gaunless Gateway Big Local

Gaunless Gateway Big Local, identified data poverty as being a big problem for single men living in shared accommodation with no broadband connection. The community group wanted to find a solution and invested time asking the men what they would find helpful – they said wifi hotspots around the local area, so that is where we focused the action.

> There [are] all the local places people will go, like churches and community centres, and they could open up their wifi for community use, so we are encouraging that. And we're asking private businesses to consider doing the same. The council has recently put wifi in for shops, so we are asking them if they could extend that for community use too."

Community member, Gaunless Gateway

> Community centres are the big thing that pops up for us. And going forward, we need to get the government to change [its] views and support more because they are essential hubs. When people need to get to speak to doctors or do job searches, they need those spaces with free wifi."

Community member, Gaunless Gateway

3.3 Understanding data needs

People described how they quickly realised that they needed to understand how people used data and the data cost of different activities. COVID-19 social distancing restrictions meant that solutions that got people online before the pandemic were no longer options, which created additional challenges:

> **Recently we've done a project where we've loaned tablets, but we had to get over the problem of portable wifi because you need to be together to use that and we could not because of COVID. So, we used 4G enabled tablets on pay-as-you-go, but it was difficult to administer because data was running out at different rates, and so we had to keep topping people up. We had a problem that depending on what people were doing; the data was going very quickly."**

Search Newcastle

Sometimes organisations realised that their services required high levels of data and that their digital offer and data provision were not compatible:

> **The issue I'm finding is that we provide a MiFi device with some data, 15G of data, yet our sessions are run on Zoom, and a Zoom session for an hour can use anything from 1G to 2.4G depending on how many people are in it."**

Leicester Ageing Together

3.4 Data is difficult to provide

Data was often problematic for local groups and organisations to supply. Groups told us they needed solutions that were easy to set up and manage and would meet people's needs for an ongoing connection, even for the short term. However, identifying affordable, accessible solutions to meet people's data needs was complex. By comparison, receiving and giving out devices was simple:

> **We did a project with a local charity which covers the whole of Huntingdonshire to get donated laptops for schools. We got 250 donated laptops refurbished, and some of them did come with data. [The] main problem isn't the equipment… I know it is awkward finding money for equipment, but [the] equipment is a relatively easy problem to solve; the issue is connectivity and data."**

Ramsey Million Big Local

As the pandemic progressed, people needed ongoing support to stay connected to the internet. But some groups found data logistically challenging to access and distribute, so they decided it was unmanageable to continue:

> **It is hard to give data: who has the contract, who's responsible? It gets very convoluted and complicated very quickly, so we've been giving people prepaid SIMs and dongles and MiFi units along with recycled laptops."**

SO18 Big Local

> **We do not offer data as we have found that the plans offered are not transparent or appropriate for the people we work alongside."**

Digital Access West Yorkshire

> **We were getting our local community online by distributing devices and data (initially), but our organisation is too small to be able to do it. It is too complex, and there is too much admin, it is just difficult."**

Rochdale Community Action

Other smaller organisations were unable to bulk-buy or negotiate contracts on a larger scale. In addition, it created challenging and time-consuming set-ups for individual provision in each household they supported, for example, where each SIM card required a different email address or a complicated process to set up:

> **The way that the data was shared were these very long voucher[s], which would require dexterity and remembering how to do things month and month...the more you give out, the more problems you have to troubleshoot."**

Phoenix Community Housing

3.5 No one-size-fits-all

Several groups also described how they had to spend time researching solutions to address other barriers individuals were facing, such as poor credit histories or lack of access to a bank card:

> **A lot of people can not commit to a contract because of the credit checks. So, it is finding data that does not need to create a credit check and that they don't have to commit to a monthly contract so they can dip in and out."**

Big Local Central Jarrow

> **Data is absolutely a challenge... there is not a one-size-fits-everyone option...some people have no option at all. We get a lot of referrals and signposting to our services from the local jobcentre... people saying that they can not afford data. We are working with a lady who does not have a bank card, so she's not going to be able to get access to the internet."**

Digital Brighton and Hove

3.6 Finding and using funding

Most organisations had secured or sought funding to support them to act. Some organisations had existing and unrestricted funding in place (for example, Big Local areas). They described the benefits of this flexibility, allowing them to choose how to use their resources to support people in their community who could not get online. They told us how it had allowed them to take risks and react to need.

People felt that greater awareness of the issue during the pandemic had allowed them to access vital financial resources:

> The pandemic has made the issue visible, so it is an opportunity to raise awareness and secure support...funders and policymakers have a greater appreciation now."

Workshop participant

But funder priorities and restrictions sometimes affected the action they could take. For example, several people could not distribute data as part of their funding agreement:

> We can get a SIM card that they can put into whatever device they're using, but we've come across all sorts of problems trying to do that. It is really difficult to give, in effect, money. It is difficult to give data to people without providing them with the devices as well, and it is very difficult to find funding to get devices...so it is been a bit of a challenge over the last year."

Women's Health in South Tyneside

To maintain their provision, people repeatedly applied for small pots of funding. Sometimes, they applied for top-up funds when people used data faster than expected. In other cases, they accessed different funding pots for different people, sometimes for one individual at a time. Many were successful in obtaining funding, but there were frustrations, including challenges for community groups' engagement with communities:

> Funding is not sustained. We step in, create trust, and then we have to take it away. Sustained access to the internet is key."

Workshop participant

> There are pockets of funding with the likes of the Carers Association, through the Prince's Trust for young people, and pockets of funding for people with learning disabilities. But my problem with all of this is if you don't fit a certain box, or you don't fit in that criteria, there is an awful lot of people out there that are really isolated and not getting the required support that they need."

Northern Rights Social Enterprise

4. What supports or hinders community-led action?

Community groups and organisations discussed the factors they felt supported or hindered efforts at addressing data poverty, and we found common threads among them. However, discussions at our workshops also highlighted how context mattered: similar actions in different circumstances could sometimes yield different results.

4.1 Digital capacity

Groups purchased and distributed devices with data, but many discovered they did not know how much data online activities consumed, and therefore how much data was likely to be enough. In addition, identifying and supplying data was complex and time consuming, and made more challenging by a lack of information explaining data purchase options, schemes and tariffs.

Local organisations with knowledge and experience of the data market – usually voluntary or public sector organisations focusing on digital inclusion – enabled some groups to identify support and advice to make informed choices about their communities' most appropriate data packages. Support from volunteers with data expertise (often from the telecoms or IT industries, according to COVID Tech Support) was valuable when it was available. A few groups also accessed pro bono consultancy support through telecoms provider initiatives, which guided them towards devices and data options appropriate for their specific needs and circumstances. While helpful, the advice didn't always match the group's

technical capacity. Without much previous experience, people spent much time setting up a few devices, which they concluded would not be a sustainable or scalable solution.

Some organisations recognised the need to upskill their staff to support others – an essential element of ongoing support that community groups need. But formal training was not the only solution. In several workshop conversations, community group members described how they received support and motivation from opportunities to meet others working on similar issues. During an emergency response, when people focused on getting their communities online as quickly as possible, they described feeling alone and aware of their limitations. There had been few opportunities to share ideas, discuss common challenges and learn from others working elsewhere, so bringing people together in workshops or events was valued highly. People felt that peer learning and support would be an important factor in future.

4.2 Co-production, community embeddedness and community volunteers

Several community-led interventions built on the foundations of the lived experience of data poverty – through co-production and qualitative research approaches. Groups felt that this enabled more profound understanding of the problem's dimensions and people's needs, which helped them shape more responsive and tailored solutions. Also, groups and organisations with established and ongoing engagement with their communities were more able to identify community segments to whom they needed to listen.

Many community-led initiatives relied on volunteer support, with volunteers from private and public sectors supporting community action. Volunteers provided enormous additional capacity for which community groups and organisations were hugely grateful. However, finding volunteers with appropriate skills and knowledge was often difficult.

4.3 Partnerships

Several groups described how taking a partnership approach to addressing data poverty had brought multiple benefits: to their organisation, to the project and, importantly, to the community. They said collaborations had brought diverse perspectives to the project, ensuring challenge and robust decision-making. Bringing people together around shared objectives enabled them to build a more coherent plan. It created momentum and visibility for the project and made the community voice more influential at a higher strategic level. Vitally, the groups and organisations who found collaborations and partnerships helpful described how a coordinated approach reduced duplication of effort, ensured greater effectiveness and built the community's capacity to address data poverty.

We also heard about less positive experiences, where partnerships lacked shared objectives and partners' contributions were not valued equally. People described how their group's goals were compromised or derailed by a partner's agenda – often caused by a power imbalance exacerbated by the community's reliance on the partnership for resources and funding. Groups also said collaborations had created unnecessary red tape that slowed progress and limited effective action. However, workshop participants felt that composition, set-up, the group's willingness to share power and co-create objectives, and recognising partners' diverse knowledge and expertise about the community were behind successful partnerships.

Community example: SO18 Big Local

SO18 is leading a project with the Clinical Commissioning Group around digital isolation in Southampton. Volunteers run the project with no budget and aim to give residents the opportunity to be more digitally included by removing barriers to being digitally connected – devices, skills and data. But there are multiple challenges around providing data and understanding people's data needs, especially when the affordability of sufficient data is often entangled with broader barriers to digital access.

We've funded a pilot study that is geographically focused rather than on particular groups of people. The aim is to increase skills and access in three ways: loan of equipment, provision of data and the provision of a mentor, so we can get people online doing the things they want to do. It is all led by what they want to do so that they have the opportunity to try; great if they want to access their GP online, for example, but if they don't want to and they just want to go on Facebook, that is fine."

Untangling data needs from 'tech' needs and support needs is a bit tricky – for some people, they're all tied up. But when the project has progressed, it should be possible for us to understand more – whether affordability of data was the barrier or if it was something else (or multiple things). For example, we had a couple of people during [the] lockdown, who had been lent laptops by schools but needed dongles from us, as they just didn't have and weren't able to get internet access."

We can help people get online and improve their skills, but if they can not afford the ongoing data costs, we can not say they need to sign up for a contract because that is not fair. We gave the SIM cards because it was a quick solution, but it is not a long-term solution."

We don't come at it from a data angle exactly. We can give data, but it is hard to give data: who has the contract, who's responsible? It gets very convoluted and complicated very quickly, so we've been giving people prepaid SIMs and dongles and MiFi units along with recycled laptops. But we worry about what happens long term."

We're mid-evaluation we've come up with a series of questions to ask people at the start of the project, and then, when they have been involved for a period of time, we ask a similar series of questions to gauge what they can access now that they could not before, how the project has helped them etcetera."

Community example: 100% Digital Leeds

100% Digital Leeds focuses on digital inclusion. The team, which Leeds Council employs, works with voluntary sector organisations and communities across Leeds, helping accelerate digital inclusion through a range of cross-sector partnerships, funding programmes and support.

Over the last few years, 100% Digital Leeds has run a tablet-lending scheme with a data package. However, during the pandemic, it became oversubscribed, and data poverty emerged as a core component of the team's work to get people online:

During the pandemic, 100% Digital Leeds has distributed £130,000 of equipment and data to community organisations – often grassroots ones – to enable them to get equipment and data. But providing sufficient data to meet people's needs is challenging:

> **Everything we've been saying for the last two or three years has been brought into sharp relief over the last 12 months. We always said that people lacked motivation to go on online because they didn't think it was for them. But what I've seen over the last 12 months is that the big issue is a lack of sustained access due to the unaffordability of data. Data poverty is a big problem for the bottom 20% of the population in terms of their wealth."**

> **SIMs with preloaded data are expensive, but contracts aren't accessible to people, and organisations don't want to take on the responsibility of contracts. And trying to apply for funding is difficult because funders always ask, 'How are you going to make this sustainable?' That is the crux of the problem.**

> **We might be able to get data packages out to people, but they're just for six months, or 12 months. We can administer all of that, but we need some sort of bigger solution, like a social tariff or something like that. Data poverty is a societal thing. It is not something we can just solve in Leeds."**
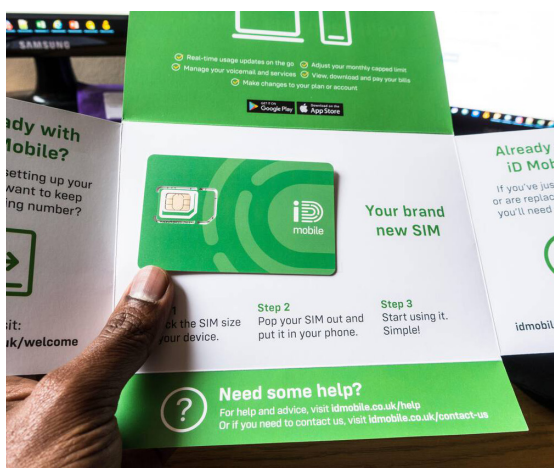
Community example: MyClubmoor Big Local

MyClubmoor Big Local in Liverpool has worked with local people without internet access throughout the pandemic, providing them with devices and data to get online. The group secured small pots of funding from multiple sources to fund the schemes but feels frustrated that its efforts have had limited reach and impact.

> "We identified that there were children and some local vulnerable elderly people who haven't got any access to the internet, so we worked closely with the schools and with people we knew didn't have any equipment and had been providing tablets with prepaid SIMs. We identified whether they needed a tablet, whether they needed a SIM or whether they needed both."

> "Next, we found some budget within our plan that we could allocate to this issue. But it is just touched the surface. Originally, we identified £10,000. Then we worked closely with our local councils – they gave us £3,000, which [could] give to the schools and a few local people."

> "Initially, we agreed to pay for the wifi for 12 months, but obviously, it is gone on longer than we thought, and it is still going on. So, we've identified another £10,000 from our budget, and we've given each school £2,000. The local councillors match-funded that with us, so we [could] give them a fair bit between us and the council we could give them a further £4,000."

> "Look, we know it is just really touched the edges; it has not really done a lot."

> "And what is missing, as far as I'm concerned, is something nationally. The government needs to really take stock here because it is so sad. You don't realise, until you start this work, just how many people are out there in need. It is something you just take for granted, either on your phone or a computer at home, but how many people out there are missing this? So, that is all we've been able to do so far, but we'd love to do more."
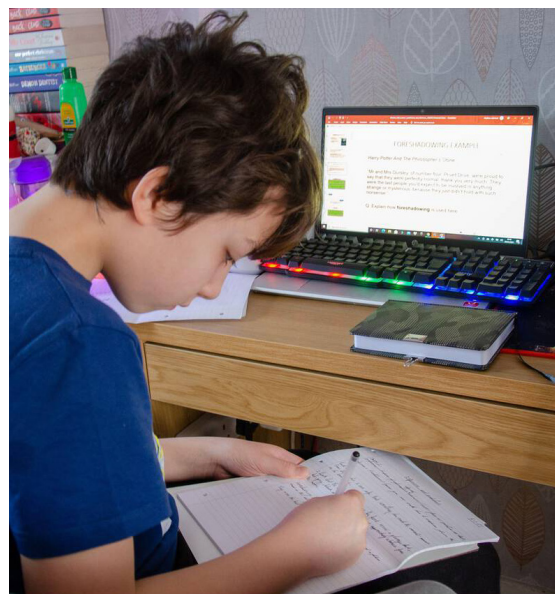
4.4 Flexibility of funding

Most community-led action was funded (or part-funded) by charitable bodies or local authorities. Some organisations, including Big Local groups, secured large pots of flexible funding before COVID-19, so they could determine how to allocate it. But many communities and organisations relied on multiple small pots of funding for specific interventions or community donations comprising money, devices or data. Long-term, flexible or unrestricted funding helped groups be agile and responsive to their communities' needs. They could also adapt their plans iteratively as they gathered insights.

Communities described how flexibility and support from funders brought additional strengths to their projects. One example was investing time in researching data and digital needs, and changing tack during implementation, based on their findings. Positive funding experiences also often emphasised the quality of the relationship with the funder – the extent to which it felt like a partnership, based on mutual understanding, two-way conversation, trust and transparency.

Smaller groups and organisations, with fewer resources and capacity for rapid income generation, found it challenging to find appropriate funding to address data poverty. Others described how their funding only covered material costs and little if any staff resource, although project planning and coordination took considerable time. This was especially problematic for those whose core remit fell outside data poverty and digital inclusion, for example, a carers group or domestic violence support service. Often the funding that groups had secured was short-term and meant that, while it enabled groups to purchase and supply devices, data purchases were inevitably temporary.

Funder priorities and restrictions sometimes affected the actions groups could take. Often, funding was provided to tackle digital exclusion rather than data poverty specifically. Combined with the complexities of giving data, some groups felt they had no option but to shift their focus to devices and skills. Many also found they could not distribute data as part of their funding agreements.

Community example: Big Local Central Jarrow

Central Jarrow is an area with high levels of digital exclusion. Big Local Central Jarrow has developed a programme to help get people online by providing data and devices, which it is rolling out at a small scale to test how the solutions meet local needs. Implementing the pilot has not been smooth sailing. The team has concerns about scaling the solutions to provide sustainable, affordable, ongoing access to the internet to its community.

We are very conscious that digital has massive implications and in Jarrow, eighty-six per cent of the population of residents is withdrawn. Part of that percentage is people who have the internet in their home but only use it for TV and nothing else. It is a massive, massive issue, and it is not an easy fix."

We've been working with communities who might not get online because they haven't got the data or the skills or the equipment. So, I've been ringing people up in the community to see how we can reach them and support them to find out what support they might need. And we're making community links with GP surgeries, so they can help us target people as well."

Our partnership board is committed to improving digital technology, but we don't want to rush into just running out, buying a lot of equipment and giving it out. So, we have set up a task group and will be running a small pilot. We've

identified partnership board members and a couple of the residents that have come to our coffee mornings every week, who, during [the] lockdown, have had issues getting online because they live in sheltered housing, so the internet's very intermittent. If it goes off, they have to wait till somebody from the Housing Association comes in and gets them reconnected, which sometimes can take a week."

We've partnered with Good Things Foundation, signed up as a learning network, and they have provided us with a mentor from BT, who has identified equipment – a device and data – that we can use for the pilots: the best cost for the best data package. [We find] a lot of people can not commit to a contract because of the credit checks. So, it is finding data that does not require a credit check, and that means they don't have to commit to a monthly contract, so [that] they can dip in and out."

We'll start with this small pilot with four to six residents we know, and they will give us feedback. And then, we will work with our GP surgeries, which have link workers attached, to identify patients that live in our area who don't have access to the internet. Then we will do another small six-month pilot and evaluate whether the devices and routers are suitable. Our board has committed quite a bit of money across the next two years to try and improve things."

At the moment, the pilot is one device and router per household, but each router will cater for up to eight connections via the BT mobile network. We've just purchased our first lot of devices, data, and routers – we are trying small wifi routers with 20G data and a Fire 7 tablet. I must admit, I don't like any of them, though. I spent two full days last week setting up four but connecting it to the data is a problem because every single SIM has got to have its own email address."

The other thing is that the tablets are OK for social media internet searches etcetera, but there is a worry that people could be lured into purchasing big time off Amazon due to all the adverts that pop up. We may need to invest in spending the additional £10 to have tablets without the adverts. It isn't an easy fix, which is why we've gone cautiously. Once we are happy with the equipment or have identified alternatives, we will work with groups and partner agencies to identify those in need of support."

We'll want to look at how we sustain it in the future and how people can maintain that level of connectivity. We don't want to give people data and devices for six months, and then after six months, they haven't got anything. Initial findings from my perspective, after setting up the tablets and routers, is that managing the data package on a larger scale will be unmanageable – we are using a Smarty data group plan – so we may revisit getting on board with Hartlepower's [Get Connected Community wifi]."

Community example: Hartlepower's Get Connected community broadband

Hartlepower is a Hartlepool-based social enterprise that has innovated 'Get Connected,' a wifi solution for those who cannot traditionally access broadband contracts.

Until recently, Hartlepower's focus was helping around 1,200 residents a year save money on energy bills by keeping their gas and electricity supply active, finding the correct tariff and managing bills. Then it became apparent that local people were facing similar challenges with broadband supply. Hartlepower responded by developing Get Connected, which is enabling people to access affordable data. As Hartlepower Director Paul Hewitson explained:

The work we started around broadband was connected to my career, as I had been working in the telecoms industry since the '90s until very recently. We joined up with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which supported us as part of its 'get connected' research group. Working with different community groups and our local authority, we worked out who is not connected and understood that the way people pay for and manage their energy currently is different to broadband. People who could not afford broadband at all were managing to pay for their gas and electricity through prepay, which means no contracts and [it is] easier to manage your payment.

We designed a broadband product that was easy to subscribe to, easy to install, and worked with Three mobile – our broadband is based on and uses the 4G mobile network – and Three hosts the network. We researched widely and decided on a router that is a 'broadband in a box' solution: it is shipped to the customer, is easy to connect…as long as it is near a window in your house, and you've got a reasonable mobile phone signal, you will get a wifi connection. It is £20 a month, which is as affordable as we can make it at the moment. There is no contract, people pay for the month ahead, and if they want to suspend and take it back up again, later, they can. We think it is quite a good deal, as you can not get broadband without a contract anywhere else really.

Our internet access is based on 600G of data a month. It's not unlimited, but if you get through 600G of data a month, you are using an awful lot of internet. People can order on our website, but local authorities and different community groups have the option of subsidising the cost for users. "We're flexible – we can tell

from the system what credits are being applied, so if you wanted to have 50 customers paying for the service at £10 a month, we could do that. So, we can completely tailor how it is paid for.

❝ We've connected people that didn't have broadband before, over 200 connections in Hartlepool for local families. And our local authority has allocated a budget for connecting 200 more residents – that is to fund the router and three months of internet access.

❝ [The] Joseph Rowntree Foundation has been fantastic, supporting us through the first year to get the project off the ground, providing funding to develop all of the back-end systems and the support service we've put in place. It took a lot of time and effort, and research to get the systems right – things like content filtering that you just take for granted when you've got a broadband connection. We were really conscious that this was going out to vulnerable people and children, or people who have never used the open internet.

❝ What I will say to other groups taking action [to get people online] is, I wouldn't recommend what we did if you haven't got telecoms experience; it is very complicated. When you try to negotiate deals with big telecoms providers, they just want to see cold hard cash, and they are risk averse. We had a lot of meetings and did a lot of work that went unpaid – the time it took to negotiate the terms of the contract etcetera. We need strength in numbers of the customer to negotiate, and with no customers, it was very hard. On the positive side, the support that we have had from Three and from [airtime provider]

Mobius, who we've been working with, has been nothing short of fantastic. I am quite proud of where we've got to with such a small team – there is only half a dozen of us [at] this point.

❝ Now we've got an established community broadband service that can supply to any address in the UK, and we have the capacity to scale the social enterprise. If we can get good numbers, we can renegotiate our wholesale terms and pass those savings on to the customers. But if we break it up and encourage groups to replicate what we've created with Get Connected, it will dilute it, and we will never achieve the scale and cost-saving.

❝ It is been a good year, but there is a lot more to do, and we've plans to offer different types of service. There is a huge change in the broadband industry going on across the UK. We need to be in at the front, making sure that people can afford to get a service at a fair price and not disenfranchised [and] left behind. If community groups, trusts and local authorities can join, it can be scaled, and we can do something about data poverty. There is an awful lot of talk about the digital divide. We've got a real cracking solution. It would be good to get people to use it because it is been designed by the community for other communities."

Interview in May 2021

5. Looking forward: What works, what is missing and what is being planned?

5.1 What we know about the scale and success of actions to date

People did not prioritise evaluation because most actions were emergency-led. While communities reported positive experiences, few programmes or projects included formal approaches for assessing reach, uptake and impact. When planned, the evaluation typically focused on the number of devices and data distributed or whether they moved people from offline to online. So we don't know which solutions met people's needs. We heard of one example where an evaluation plan included frequency of access and types of online activities. Most projects focused on broader digital inclusion, addressing multiple barriers to getting online without distinguishing the individual elements. The most common offer combined devices, data and skills training, but the data element was often smaller or less visible within the larger scheme. Therefore, it is difficult to say how many people were provided with a solution to data poverty.

Action tended to focus on digitally excluded groups at greatest risk of social exclusion and people on low incomes. Community organisations typically focused on priority groups, including families with school-age children, older people and others at risk of social isolation. Other groups and organisations who already worked with specific populations, such as carers or disabled people, acted on existing service users' needs. It is likely that other people were also in need but may not have benefited from support. Our earlier research suggests that larger households are likely to have larger data requirements, as are those who have high data needs for education or employment (Lucas et al., 2021). Project reports cannot tell us what proportion of people in data poverty have been reached by existing schemes.

Our current research, presented in this report, highlights innovative and inspiring practice, but we cannot be sure which approaches have effectively reduced data poverty in their communities. Nevertheless, such evidence will emerge over time and will be an important element of projects in the future.

5.2 What are community groups' views of the gaps in provision?

Participants identified supporting community members to access affordable data as one gap in provision. And identifying the most appropriate deals is challenging because the information is inaccessible and difficult to compare:

> The packages and offers from mobile providers are fragmented too: O2's is X, Vodafone's is Y, and that makes it hard to communicate what is available to people. There is stuff we need to do nationally because it is not going to be solved by Salford CVS and a few charities working on patches locally."
>
> Salford CVS

Groups recognised that their circumstances restricted individuals' choices, which prevented them from accessing the best deals.

> **Data is a massive problem… [especially] getting a contract with a financial issue or history. So, that is a massive barrier for people. Even if we – which we often do – fund people to get data out of our own discretionary pot of funding, they can not get a contract."**
>
> Northern Rights Social Enterprise

Community groups wanted a knowledge hub to help their communities find the 'best' and most appropriate data deals. Groups do not feel equipped to offer this advice, and Financial Service Authority regulations prevent them from doing so. There was a clear call for telecoms companies to provide more transparent information about pricing and data deals and advertising of social tariffs. For groups and organisations providing data packages to people, this was not a sustainable solution.

Participants felt some actions were vital but impossible for community groups to implement. For example, groups are calling for better access to pooled or shared data. One suggestion was that every local authority should have a data bank, and community organisations should bulk purchase data on behalf of their community. Community-led groups also call for the internet to be recognised as an essential utility and for action to equalise access, with free public wifi and free or no tariff access for those on low incomes.

> **There is a big gap here: we need to have either a group effort that enables people to bulk buy for people in need or a cheaper product on the market like SIM cards or wifi for people in need. I think that is what we're missing."**
>
> Leicester Ageing Together

While community groups are well-placed to help alleviate data poverty, they know addressing the causes of data poverty needs action at a different level. This distinction was implicit in much of what community groups told us but making it explicit will be helpful in the future. Community action should be directed to deliver benefit, supported by government, industry and civil society action on the upstream drivers of data poverty.

5.3 What actions are planned to continue or begin in the future

Our survey and workshops identified new activities started during the pandemic, although groups were also helping to increase digital skills or access before COVID-19. Many people said they hoped and planned to continue at least some aspects of their current provision in the future. While some had plans, others were considering whether the need would be ongoing and what more extended conditions might comprise:

> **We created this project as an immediate response to local needs. However, it may now become something of a dependency for families or a larger project that we need to address."**
>
> Survey respondent

Groups often built plans on insights gathered through earlier work. Planned activities included house audits to identify underused equipment or data in people's homes, such as broadband for internet TV. Several groups plan to trial new training and support models, and a few have plans to increase community provision of data via hubs, community wifi schemes, or community packages:

There is a housing estate in our community where a lot of people cannot afford data, and we are planning to create a trial of an internet hub there for a year to see how it will benefit people."

William Morris Big Local

Others told us their work on data poverty during the pandemic would shape their ongoing work more broadly:

As we're moving forward, we're building the cost of data into our projects – data and the tech to go with it. So, whenever we're writing a project at the minute, there is an element of funding request for data to go into the community."

Community Roots CIC

Others were concerned that data poverty awareness might disappear again:

I think that is one of those things where the issue will potentially fall off the radar for a lot of people. It will be associated with those few months where there was awareness of it – and awareness of such a targeted bit of it [home-schooling], rather than it being the broader issues around digital access."

Home-Start Camden and Islington

Communities all agreed they were right in the short-term to protect people from data poverty during the crisis but were less clear about their long-term role. Those that were continuing support anticipated challenges in meeting data needs and worried about the sustainability of community-led action. Data poverty is so widespread that

simply providing data does not address its affordability. Community groups can provide simple solutions like dongles and SIMs, but they know this approach is limited.

Community data pools (broadband or mobile) have potential down the line but need technical and financial know-how to act. Several groups planning community hotspots were considering making them password-protected, but others seldom considered these features of data provision. There are privacy differences between individual, household or community level schemes. Internet banking, for example, requires private and secure access. Public wifi is not an appropriate solution. Household devices are, by their nature, shared, not personal resources. While groups recognised that some people have greater data needs, including socially isolated people and people seeking employment, this was rarely explicit in their thinking about the future.

At a macro level, there are various actions that are out of communities' reach. For example, telecom providers control pricing transparency and low-cost, contract-free deals, perhaps with intervention from governments. Similarly, large public wifi projects and zero-rating of content must be brokered at a scale. So the focus must now shift to how civil society can support communities to develop more sustainable responses to data poverty.

6. Conclusions and next steps

Community-led action has played a vital role in reaching those experiencing data poverty and digital exclusion throughout the pandemic. Communities are proud of the measures they took to provide people with the data and devices they need to get online, and grassroots organisations will be pivotal as we move into the recovery phase after COVID-19.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the emergency necessitated a crisis response, and sustainability is an issue. Communities want to continue to lead action on data poverty and wider digital inclusion but recognise their limits. They do not think it is their role to solve the causes of data poverty, which requires system-level change. Support and action from civil society, government and industry are urgently needed if communities continue playing a much-needed role in addressing the complex challenges of data poverty.

This research has deepened our understanding of the challenges the community groups face in tackling data poverty. We cannot be sure which of the approaches we describe have helped reduce data poverty, but we have identified what helped community groups to act. We do not know yet what the right solutions are, but we know what should be considered when taking the next steps. We must focus on longer-term solutions that can be implemented in a more planned and sustainable way. We need to gather evidence of what works, for whom, and in which circumstances.

6.1 What is next for community groups?

Community groups are well placed to understand local context and needs and lobby for the right actions in their areas. Data poverty is a new term that is neither well understood nor funded. Community groups must take time to understand what unaffordable, insufficient data means for their members to create solutions that are responsive to people's needs.

Community groups could:

1. **Listen to the lived experiences of people experiencing data poverty.** Then groups can understand how people experience data poverty and identify who is in need.

2. **Think about prioritising dimensions of data poverty.** Aspects of data poverty include affordability (the internet is unaffordable for your income), sufficiency (you frequently run out of data), privacy (you do not have private access when needed), security (you can not make secure transactions, such as banking), and relative to essential needs (your needs may be higher than others). Understanding people's needs will highlight which of these dimensions to prioritise when designing solutions.

3. **Ensure there is no one-size-fits-all solution to data poverty.** People may need different amounts of data or have other access requirements. Instead, think about solutions that respond to the different dimensions of data poverty and local needs.

4. Consider where partners can add value. Recognise the assets and skills within the organisation and community and identify missing knowledge and skills. It can be valuable to work with partners with expertise and resources who value the community and support and share decision-making.

5. Plan how to evaluate what works to tackle data poverty. It is important to think about what to measure and monitor to see if action made a difference: to what extent have the data needs of specific communities been met? Has the project achieved what it set out to do – can more people access affordable tariffs and private and secure connections?

6.2 What is next for civil society?

COVID-19 has made visible changes that were already under way: much of our lives is now digital by default. Access to the internet is now as essential as access to other utilities but recognising this means changing how civil society operates. For example, charities should expect to be running services digitally, but it is imperative to check that everyone can afford the data they need to engage in this way. Data poverty should be considered for every project and event, and community groups will need support to achieve this.

Civil society could:

1. Support community groups to identify appropriate data options for their members' needs. Community groups cannot be expected to develop the expertise required to decide which data interventions are most suitable and affordable for different needs. Civil society needs to help groups navigate the complex data landscape.

2. Recognise that data poverty is an essential but distinct element of digital exclusion that requires specific action and support. Funding and programmes need to provide sufficient clarity to enable communities to plan and deliver targeted action across data poverty's dimensions.

3. Listen to voices with lived experience of poverty and data poverty and engage in co-production. Co-production between community members and project partners needs to be prioritised as an equitable and effective way to create solutions that reflect lived experience and need. Co-production distributes power, giving all partners an equal voice in decision making and enabling everyone to make a meaningful contribution.

4. Identify options for data pooling/ sharing at the community level. Civil society organisations could use their collective power to enable data sharing and pooling through schemes like a national data bank or bulk data purchasing to deliver truly social tariffs for people in data poverty.

5. Commission or conduct evaluations of data poverty initiatives. In the absence of an evaluation of reach and impact, we cannot know which practices effectively reduce how many people experience data poverty or the negative effects of data poverty on their lives.

6. Lobby government and industry. Community groups and civil society are plugging a gap in essential services. Charitable trusts are being used for what is now a basic need, and charities and civil society should come together to present a collective voice to lobby for action by those who provide and regulate these services.

6.3 What is next for government and industry?

The public and private sector must recognise that the shift to digital does not create a new group of people left behind and disadvantaged. We believe the problem of data poverty will increase and broaden. As more and more services, information, and socialisation occur online, the need for affordable access to large amounts of data will increase. Where essential services are online, inequalities will increase vastly unless those in greatest need of public support have sufficient, private, secure and affordable access to internet data.

Government and industry could:

1. **Make pricing less confusing and more transparent.** People are confused about finding reliable and comparable information about different data options or how much data they might need. Therefore, telecoms and internet service providers (ISPs) must provide clear and transparent information, and the government must regulate the process.

2. **Commission research to build the evidence on data poverty.** We need to know who is data-poor, explore the drivers of data poverty and quantify the scale and nature of data poverty. We need excellent evaluation and monitoring to build evidence of what works, for whom, and in which circumstances.

3. **Understand the minimum data requirements of 'digital by default'.** The government must consider how it can fully understand the consequences of 'digital first' policies for people's data needs and ensure people get sufficient data to access essential services online.

4. **Create scalable, inclusive solutions that do not deepen inequalities.** Solutions for data poverty need to act at scale and reach the most marginalised. To ensure that nobody is excluded, different approaches will be required: people who are online but struggling with affordability and those experiencing the deepest or most entrenched levels of data poverty will need other support.

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Further information and inspiration

Good Things Foundation: Online centres network

Supported by Good Things Foundation, the Online Centres Network is a completely free membership network which is open to grassroots organisations, charities, training and local service providers anywhere in the UK. The network is aimed at any organisation - big or small - which works to tackle digital and social exclusion in communities, by providing people with the skills and confidence they need to use the internet. Members include community centres, local support hubs, carers' groups, libraries, housing associations, hostels, and local branches of national organisations (such as Age UK and Citizens Advice). Some operate out of cafes or launderettes; some are mobile, taking digital support out to people in care homes or tenants' associations.

Good Things Foundation runs webinars, supports good practice sharing, and provides free resources and training - including support to use the free resources Learn My Way and Make It Click - co-designed with community organisations for them to use when supporting others in their local communities to get online. Members of the Online Centres network can also apply to be part of Everyone Connected - a COVID-19 response programme providing devices and data.

It is easy to join the Online Centres Network and members gain access to support, advice, training and funding opportunities. Want to find out more? Give them a call on 0114 349 1666 or email hello@goodthings-foundation.org.

onlinecentresnetwork.org

learnmyway.com

@online_centres

Good Things Foundation Data Poverty Lab

Good Things Foundation campaigns and collaborates for change to close the digital divide - using research, advocacy and partnership working. Building on emergency responses to data poverty that have emerged in this pandemic, Good Things Foundation has set up a Data Poverty Lab with support from Nominet. This will provide a focus for convening, collaborating and amplifying the voices of people who experience data poverty - in order to design more sustainable solutions to end data poverty.

The Data Poverty Lab has only recently been set up, and will build on the research shared in this report. If you want to keep informed and get involved, you can sign up for the newsletter (The Digest) or email research@goodthingsfoundation.org

As well as the Data Poverty Lab, Good Things Foundation campaigns to #FixtheDigitalDivide and to deliver partnership programmes and grow the evidence base on digital inclusion in the UK. Insights from research and evaluations are freely available on the Good Things Foundation website - covering issues such as: digital and health inequalities; digital skills for employability; online safety and digital inclusion; older people and digital inclusion; blending digital skills with ESOL provision - and more!

goodthingsfoundation.org/data-poverty-lab

@goodthingsfdn

Operation Wifi Alliance

#OperationWiFi is a growing alliance of over 100 organisations from across the public, private and voluntary sector, making three 'asks' to ensure that the five million people who are disconnected, due to low income, can get online.

1. To ensure those on the lowest incomes can get access to data

2. That no person is without a device to access the internet

3. No person is left behind due to the lack of skills of how to use their device

The starting point for the #OperationWifI campaign is to push for a 'CitizenSim' where users can donate their unused data to a 'databank' which can then be issued to those on low income or unable to afford data. This is not a new concept and is successful in Australia through telecommunications provider Optus. To demonstrate the potential power of a CitizenSim, according to Uswitch there was 650 million gigabytes of unused data in June 2020 – this equates to 400 hours online browsing for the five million people who are disconnected.

Get involved

The #OperationWiFi campaign is strengthened by its members. You can get involved in the campaign by becoming an alliance member or a campaign supporter.

An **alliance member** is an organisation that is actively pursuing the aims of #OperationWiFi, either by delivering a solution for affordable and accessible WiFi in their communities or have an idea for a solution.

A **campaign supporter** is an individual or organisation that supports #OperationWiFi and is happy to share key messages, gather stories from those affected by digital exclusion and recruit new supporters.

operationwifi.wordpress.com

@OpWiFiAlliance

Hartlepower - Get Connected community broadband

Hartlepower is social enterprise and charity based in Hartlepool. They offer a voluntary development agency service, support to business and enterprise and develop and deliver digital, community, environmental, transport and educational projects. Get Connected Community Broadband is one of their digital projects, which offers affordable community broadband to individuals, community groups and organisations across the UK. To find out more:

01429555994

Individual customer enquiries
hello@get-connected.org.uk

Organisation enquiries
accounts@get-connected.org.uk

hartlepower.co.uk

@HartlePower_CIC

Jangala

Jangala enable low-cost, easy-to-use internet access that can be deployed quickly in challenging, emergency and development situations around the world, aiming to support people in need of urgent humanitarian aid or longer-term development assistance. Their 'Big Box' internet access systems have connected people all over the world and began in the Jungle Refugee Camp, Calais, France. In the UK, Janagla are supporting shelters and other multiple occupancy households to have access to affordable broadband through deploying their 'Get Box' technology.

janga.la

@jangalawifi

info@janga.la

Project Reboot - Nominet

Reboot is an interactive platform, provided by Nominet, which provides practical steps which enables schools, charities and community groups to set up their own device distribution programme. A free guide explains how to collect, restore and rehome devices, to give them and their new owners a brighter future. Project Reboot's goal is to equip schools, charities and community groups with the ability to unearth the thousands of unused devices from cupboards, storerooms and lofts across the UK to help those in need in their local area.

The website invites people - whether they represent a business, community group or school - to say who they are and what their budget is. Information about a cost-effective, practical and environmentally friendly way to set up a redistribution programme is then provided for free.

Website: https://rebootproject.uk/

Email: reboot@nominet.uk

#ClickZero

ClickZero is a campaign calling for essential online public services to be provided free for everyone. #ClickZero believes that you shouldn't have to pay through your data to access universal credit, that you should be able to access public health information via the NHS regardless of your data allowance. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some essential online services have been zero-rated. ClickZero is campaigning for this to be permanent.

clickzero.uk

Ofcom

Ofcom is the regulator for the telecommunications industry. Ofcom produces research about internet access and use, and has published research on data affordability and on 'vulnerable consumers'. Ofcom's website contains some consumer-facing information, which might be useful for individuals or for community organisations and charities supporting them. This includes some tips for how to get the best deal for broadband, mobile and landline services.

ofcom.org.uk/phones-telecoms-and-internet/advice-for-consumers

Research to understand more about data poverty

What is data poverty?

This report by Nesta and YLab explains data poverty and explores it in Scotland and Wales. Through a consultation with stakeholders from both countries to understand and measure the barriers people face to accessing the data they need and the impacts this has on their lives.

nesta.org.uk/report/what-data-poverty

Data Poverty in Scotland and Wales

This research report focuses specifically on this issue in England. With the help of Survation, Nesta commissioned demographically representative polling of over 2,000 people in Scotland and Wales in late January 2021. Using telephone interviews, they asked a representative sample of adults about barriers to going online and whether they were experiencing data poverty. They then interviewed people struggling to afford the data access they needed, to give more in depth and identifiable stories in a series of case studies. This is the first study that we know of to attempt to describe the extent of data poverty.

nesta.org.uk/report/data-poverty-scotland-and-wales

About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision-making into the hands of local communities, to enable them to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live. We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding through our work supporting local communities make their areas better places to live, and to draw on the learning from our work to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

localtrust.org.uk

🐦 @LocalTrust