



Building Digital UK

Research and analysis

What happens next? Mapping the route from digital infrastructure to digital inclusion

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1. Summary

This paper presents the findings of an analysis of all social media posts generated using the hashtag #GetOnlineWeek in October 2023. It uses thematic analysis to help further BDUK's understanding of who is involved in helping overcome the digital divide.

Get Online Week is an annual national campaign held each October by the Good Things Foundation to draw attention to, and promote activity around, digital exclusion. As part of the week, public sector buildings such as libraries are encouraged to hold events promoting digital inclusion and overcoming the digital divide. The campaign uses the social media platform X to promote the activity, providing a valuable source of information on the activities and organisations involved in providing the skills and resources needed.

For BDUK, this is particularly important because 'reducing the digital divide and providing public value' is a key benefit area that we measure, and yet in order for it to take place, it requires the activity of private sector companies, public sector workers, charities, other third sector organisations, volunteers, and other individuals before it can be realised. This paper uses data from X to map the route from digital infrastructure to the realisation of that benefit. It highlights this route map using case studies from Greater Manchester Combined Authority and from Dorset, areas where public sector buildings and other premises have benefitted from BDUK's gigabit capable broadband investment programmes (e.g. Local Full Fibre Network Programme (LFFN) and Project Gigabit). The case studies explore the activities that take place in public sector libraries to address digital exclusion during Get Online Week 2023 and tells the story of who provides and who benefits from digital inclusion activity enabled by BDUK infrastructure.

This paper provides evidence of the types of activities and their intended impacts. It highlights the key demographics at risk of digital exclusion and the importance of providing digital skills, device, and support to these groups to overcome barriers to digital inclusion. It also sets out the importance of collaborative effort between public, private, and third sector organisations. Libraries, community groups, and volunteers play a crucial role in delivering services, and this paper highlights the need for a coordinated approach to effectively improve digital inclusion.

2. Background

Get Online Week is an annual national campaign held each October by the Good Things Foundation, a UK charity tackling digital exclusion. Its goal is to encourage and support more people to use the internet and develop basic digital skills through free community events and taster sessions. As part of the week, organisations such as libraries and community groups host introductory activities and drop-in sessions aimed at addressing the five barriers to digital inclusion identified by the organisation. These activities include providing digital devices to those who do not have them, using computers and browsing the internet, setting up email accounts, and sessions aimed at understanding online safety.

The aim of the week is both to highlight the breadth of impact of being digitally excluded and to foster a community of advocates who are involved in addressing it.

3. Literature Review

Understanding the digital divide, its causes, and how it affects people is crucial for BDUK to appreciate the benefits of subsidising digital infrastructure in underserved areas. By ensuring gigabit-capable broadband is available, BDUK helps to address one of the first major barriers; access to decent and reliable internet connectivity. To deepen this understanding literature on the digital divide was also reviewed. This enhanced comprehension and emphasised the significance of digital inclusion efforts during Get Online Week 2023 in creating benefit realisation pathways. It informed the social media content categorisation and analysis.

3.1 Impact of COVID-19 on the digital divide

Being unable to access digital services can negatively impact on the health, social inclusion, financial stability, education, employment opportunities, and citizen participation of the person affected (Carmi et al 2020). Those at high risk of digital exclusion often already face barriers to social inclusion through virtue of their age, education, income, disability, or employment status (UK Government 2023) meaning that the lack of access to digital spaces has the potential to widen the gap between those who are empowered to participate, and those who are not (Holmes and Burgess 2022). This gap has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Baker et al 2020). The requirement for social distancing and working from home led to the rapid digitisation of a wide range of services and outlets, including work platforms, health and social care, education, sports and fitness, and goods and services (Amankwah-Amoah et al 2021). Whilst the pandemic has abated,

this widespread digitisation has embedded itself and remains central to the operation of a wide range of businesses and services (Eurofound n.d.). Lack of access has the potential to disadvantage citizens by excluding them from the provision of essential services.

3.2 Furthering our understanding through balancing benefits with harms

There are numerous ways by which citizens can experience digital exclusion. The Digital Poverty Alliance (2022) understands these exclusions to happen in five different arenas:

- devices and infrastructure
- affordability
- capability
- motivation
- support to participate

Lack of access in any one of these areas can prevent citizens from taking part in online spaces, and those experiencing multiple barriers face a complex route to inclusion online. The diversity that exists within peoples' experiences of exclusion requires a multi-faceted response that acknowledges the complexity involved. In addressing these, however, Blank and Lutz (2018) argue that the benefits of being online need to be balanced with the harms of doing so. To only focus on the benefits of providing digital access is reductive of online experiences and fails to acknowledge some of the harms that digital spaces can inflict. The British Academy (2022) argues that addressing digital exclusion involves more than providing access to digital spaces. Interventions must ensure that citizens are aware of the risks and potential harms that they face online and there is a great deal of work that needs to be done to instil this confidence in those who are not widely experienced in navigating online spaces.

3.3 The role of BDUK in addressing digital exclusion

Building Digital UK plays an essential role in addressing one aspect of the digital divide. BDUK's flagship programme, Project Gigabit, is tasked with providing gigabit-capable broadband to communities that are identified as 'very hard to reach,' thereby providing fast, reliable broadband connections to communities who might otherwise have struggled to be connected. The measure of the success of the programme is through programme

evaluations carried out by independent research. A key metric to measuring this success, however, is through the benefits framework used by the organisation to identify tangible ways in which connectivity has improved the life of those who have received connections. One of these metrics is address the digital divide and provide public value, which is assessed through programme evaluation and through research conducted by the organisation.

3.4 The role of the public sector in tackling digital exclusion

Such is the nature of digital exclusion, a diverse range of public sector sites are involved in addressing it. Libraries Connected (2023) argue that libraries play a crucial role in promoting digital inclusion, enhancing health and wellbeing, and supporting children's literacy. Ruiu and Ragnedda (2016) examine the multiple ways by which libraries can provide digital skills and devices to those who struggle to access online spaces, and this utility is reflected in projects such as the Oxfordshire Digital Inclusion Project (Allman et al 2021). Despite this, however, there are still several needs that require addressing if libraries are to fully adopt strategies to overcome digital exclusion in the UK. Libraries Connected (2023) suggest that that, whilst public sector connectivity is one of the key enablers of the work that needs to be done to tackle digital exclusion, the demand is such that a collaborative approach is needed to comprehensively tackle the nature of digital exclusion in the UK.

4. Methodology

4.1 Aims, objectives, and research questions

While understanding the public sector connectivity is key to tackling digital exclusion, it is also crucial to explore the necessary collaboration that will enable improving digital infrastructure access in the communities supported by the public into onward local social and economic impacts. The literature shows that BDUK plays a key role in providing digital infrastructure to underserved communities but needs a range of additional effective programs and resources to maximise the benefit that can be realised through improved digital connectivity. The Good Things Foundation identifies infrastructure as just one of five barriers to bridging the digital

divide. This project aims to enhance our understanding of what steps are needed after BDUK provides infrastructure to effectively address these barriers.

This research has the following objectives:

- Identify types of activities that are taking place to provide digital access.
- Understand more about who is providing these activities and in what capacity.
- Learn more about where such activities might take place.
- Understand more about what is needed to enable the BDUK infrastructure to address the digital divide and provide public value.

To address these aims and objectives, Get Online Week was chosen as a site of study. The campaign promotes the benefits of being online to access services, save money with discounts, and stay connected. It also raises awareness about the scale of digital exclusion in the UK and barriers some face getting and staying online. Partners are provided resource packs to help plan and promote their local Get Online Week events. First launched in 2007, it continues as a major initiative bringing digital skills training to communities in the UK as well as raising awareness of the impact of digital exclusion. As such, it can provide exploratory data that gives insight to the types of activities that are needed once infrastructure is in place to reach BDUK's benefit area of 'tackling the digital divide and providing public value.'

As part of the campaign, the Good Things Foundation encourage participants to promote their activity on X, using the hashtag #GetOnlineWeek. The hashtag is a way of collating events and campaign actions that are taking place throughout the week, and in doing so provides a snapshot of the activities that take place. This creates a repository of data that can be explored and analysed to find out more about how communities and groups are engaged in overcoming digital exclusion. As part of this project, this data has been collated and analysed to address the research questions:

- What can BDUK learn about how public sector connectivity is addressing the digital divide from X activity generated around Get Online Week?
- What can this data tell us about what is needed to happen after BDUK have provided infrastructure for it to be used to address the digital divide and provide public value?

4.2 Data collection and analysis

To be included in the data, posts were required to have been generated because of participation in Get Online Week 2023, using the hashtag #GetOnline Week. All postss that were found using #GetOnlineWeek as a search term were recorded in a spreadsheet that captured the date, the account name, the organisation type, the content, and any further links that were included. Data was analysed used mixed methods content analysis, a research method that involves the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). It is widely used in various disciplines, including social sciences, humanities, and health sciences, to explore the underlying meanings, motivations, and contextual factors associated with the data (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

4.3 Limitations and scope

The research presented is limited to #GetOnlineWeek and might not be representative of entire sector. The choice to use Get Online Week was a logistical one as it provided a clearly delineated set of data attached to a specific hashtag. This limits the findings to participating organisations and the findings should be understood in the context of being organisations willing and able to participate in the campaign. The results presented here should be considered indicative and exploratory rather than holistically representative of work being undertaken in this area.

4.4 Ethical considerations and consent

Although this project has gathered publicly available data, there are still some ethical questions surrounding privacy and consent that need to be addressed. As this project gathers content generated by other people, there is no way of gathering informed consent for this project directly. Whilst it is published on a public platform, it is an assumption that the individual who posted online has sought informed consent for the images and stories to be shared, and it is not possible to verify that this is indeed the case. This is of particular concern when people are being encouraged to share stories about their vulnerabilities, such as experiences of loneliness, exclusion, or isolation by virtue of their age, disability, or migrant status. In response to this, this report does not disclose specific details gathered from the data itself. The data is also stored in a secure location with limited access to the personal data gathered there.

5. Findings

5.1 Types of activities and the benefit areas that they promote

Prevalence of Get Online Week 2023 activity promoted in social media data:

The types of activities that are being highlighted through the week demonstrate the breadth of interventions being made to address the digital divide. Event types were coded into four distinct categories: Promotional activity, campaign activity, event, or community building.

Promotional activity refers to events and activity designed to draw attention to existing services and organisations who work towards addressing digital exclusion. This includes organisations explaining their contribution to providing digital skills and devices or signposting specific events or courses that are being run to address these deficits.

Campaign activities are conceptualised as any event, digital or otherwise, that is designed to encourage action to address digital exclusion, whether that is from central government, local authorities, third sector organisations, or citizens. Types of activities included:

- creating web content designed to encapsulate the extent of the problem or to spur people to action, participation in further discussion around the capacity of the digital divide to exclude and disempower people
- participation in further discussion around the capacity of the digital divide to exclude and disempower people, such as participating in podcasts or radio broadcasts
- engaging in lobbying elected officials such as MPs, members of devolved governments, or local councillors
- using storytelling as a way of highlighting the extent of the problem and the impact it has on communities, families, and individuals

Events refer to specific activities that were organised for Get Online Week itself. They are specifically designed to coincide with the week but are not necessarily one-off events. In some cases, sessions that provided digital

skills and support as part of a wider programme offered in the local area would hold acknowledge Get Online Week during their usual activities and would use the opportunity to highlight the work that they were doing through the year.

Community building indicates any activity that is designed to promote collaboration, participation, and facilitate introductions across sectors and organisations to create a wider sense of community around the issue. This included organising social and community groups to bring people together to learn or to provide peer support. The concept of a 'tea party' is one that recurs throughout the data set as a way of making sessions more accessible and less intimidating to participants.

The main benefit area that is being addressed is clearly 'reducing the digital divide and providing public value.' In this context, reducing the digital divide is understood to be activities that overcome the numerous gaps that exist, which will be addressed in the following section. Providing public value is understood to be an activity that enables citizenship and participation, tackles loneliness and isolation, and promotes economic activity. Sessions identified in the data included those that helped people access local digital government services, using social media and communication platforms such as Zoom to contact friends and family, and provided support for employment and work skills development.

Enabling public sector efficiency is also a key area that is addressed. The data demonstrates several ways in which public sector digitisation is enabled through fast, reliable broadband which in turn contributes to our evidence base in this area. Key interventions include GP surgeries using digital technology to triage their workload and direct patients to the appropriate service, the use of applications and platforms for health and fitness monitoring (particularly in cases of chronic or lifelong conditions), accessing local and central government services, or accessing e-books and audiobooks from the local library.

Although these benefit areas are the primary ones addressed through Get Online Week activity, it should also be noted that there is consistent reference to the ways in which public sector connectivity can help drive growth in the economy. The data highlights a few diverse ways in which it is being used to provide skills sessions such as using Microsoft or email, as well as support in job searching, completing job applications, and taking part in digital job interviews. There are also numerous support sessions giving education and training to small businesses, including digital marketing and communications.

5.2 Who benefits?

The analysis provides a clear picture of who is at risk of digital exclusion and contributes to our understanding of some of the needs of high-risk groups. 'Digital exclusion' within this data set is understood to have four main contributing factors:

- lack of access to connection, through lack of infrastructure or affordability
- lack of access to devices
- low digital skills, including understanding of how to use and navigate online platforms, the internet, and poor understanding of staying safe online
- low confidence through lack of support or lack of practice

As an understanding of digital exclusion, it is commensurate with the definitions and understandings given by academics and campaigners. It is important to note that these categorisations are seen as generic and can apply to (or indeed impact) any member of the population. However, there are some key demographics who are addressed in Get Online Week activity, whether this is because they are seen as particularly high risk or because the solution to providing them with connectivity is seen as attainable by the organisations who take part. One of the key demographics who are addressed in the activity are older people, who are often identified as having poor digital skills and low confidence in navigating online spaces. Interventions in these spaces addressed providing digital skills to participants who needed them but were also engaged in the more complex work of building and maintaining confidence through peer community support, interventions such as 'tea parties' to make the sessions seem less intimidating, and ongoing support sessions to provide opportunities for skills to be practiced once they have been learnt.

The following graphic demonstrates the variation in the focus given to each of the benefit areas within the framework. The primary focus given to 'reducing the digital divide and providing public value' is not surprising given the purpose of the data. However, it raises some interesting questions about the complexities found within it. As has been discussed, the concept of the 'digital divide' is multifaceted, and to think of it as a homogenous experience is reductive. The data was able to provide a great deal of information about who received aid through the activities captured within this data.

5.3 Figure 3: Benefits areas addressed in the data

Chiefly amongst these were the needs of children and young people are addressed through various interventions aimed at providing skills and devices to those who may not have regular access to them. In doing so, they support emerging academic resistance to the concept of 'digital

natives' which is the assumption that all young people are brought up with digital devices. Lack of access to devices or infrastructure is largely seen as the cause of this, and public sector connections along with device lending libraries are presented as solutions to allow young people to complete school, college, or university work that requires broadband connection. As such, they are also part of a wider concern about the lack of connectivity available to low-income families, who are seen as excluded by either not having access to devices or access to affordable subscriptions. Children and young people are conceptualised as being at an educational disadvantage if they do not have access to getting online. They are seen as not being able to develop their digital skills to prepare for the job market, and as being excluded from certain professions or sectors by not having early access to digital spaces. This is particularly true for young people expressing an interest in creative careers. Connectivity is seen as a means by which they can express themselves and have fun, but the skills that are developed through doing this are also seen as a catalyst to careers in the creative industries.

The data also revealed the impact of digital exclusion on unemployed or underemployed people who are trying to improve their employability skills through courses and training sessions. This includes achieving qualifications or addressing specific competency with digital packages such as Microsoft. Within the analysis, this is one of the key ways in which economic inactivity is addressed, and overcoming digital exclusion is presented as a solution to help people into work or improve their employability. The findings from this research demonstrate how public sector organisations such as JobCentre Plus and public libraries are using social media to highlight the ways in which they can assist people who are looking to improve their employment through offering skills classes, practice sessions, access to online resources such as tutorials, and offering desk spaces to complete application forms. However, it also demonstrated that third sector organisations such as the Pure Project are using public sector facilities to deliver sessions to unemployed and underemployed people. Such findings demonstrate the collaborative approach advocated by Libraries Connected and the complexity of providing these skills to people in need.

People with disability, healthcare, or additional learning needs are seen as higher risk because of the specificity of their needs. As such, grouping them together seems reductive as it risks overlooking each the complexity of those needs, but at the same time, each individual case represents a number of interlocking needs that should be addressed to assist people online, whether this is adjustments to devices, digital literacy, or specific apps and platforms that can be used to manage chronic conditions. However, it is also clear that digital connectivity is playing an increasing role in the provision of health services, from accessing consultation and appointments to managing chronic conditions such as diabetes. The analysis presented here suggests that the adoption of digital strategies such

as using apps to monitor blood glucose levels and record routine physical health observations is intended to reduce the need for patients to attend in-person appointments at their local healthcare centre or clinic. This in turn allows patients a greater deal of autonomy in managing their condition, reduces the amount of time spent attending in-person appointments, and has an impact on the workload of service providers.

5.4 Who provides?

5.5 Breakdown of sector involvement in delivering Get Online Week 2023 activities

Provision of skills is through a combination of private, public, and third sector organisations. The data set does not give an enormous amount of information about what is happening in the private sector, which is as likely to be related to the design of the campaign itself as anything else. However, there is evidence of widespread collaboration between the public and third sector to ensure that all aspects of digital exclusion are being addressed.

Within the public sector, the majority of buildings providing these skills are libraries. The data indicates a change in function for libraries as public buildings, as they seek to accommodate many of the citizenship needs of the people who use them, and since the government has adopted a 'digital first' approach, they have become by default organisations that are organised around citizenship and participation as well as lending books. There is also a great deal of information about the role the third sector play in meeting citizens digital needs which is perhaps not currently reflected in our thinking around this subject. In the data set, there are a wide range of organisations who are involved in advocating and campaigning, providing digital skills, and supporting people who are digitally excluded.

Mostly importantly, the data demonstrates how the provision of services to address the digital divide relies upon volunteers. Within the data set, volunteers are shown to provide services such as providing or supporting digital skills sessions, providing tea and coffee, or being a friendly and approachable face to service users who are nervous or unsure. They are often given names such as digital champions, tech mates, or angels etc. There is also a great deal of collaboration noted in the data. Services were provided by a wide range of organisations often working together to meet users' needs and provide the skills and devices needed to help people get online.

5.6 Cross-organisational collaboration to meet digital needs

The data demonstrates some of the ways in which organisations addressing the digital divide are collaborating to provide services. One of the most prevalent forms of this is the way in which third sector organisations use public sector spaces, such as libraries and community centres to deliver services. Another is the way in which public sector organisations recruit volunteers to help provide services. There is also collaboration between public sector services, such as between educational organisations and libraries to provide services.

There are several distinct types of organisations that are providing services, all of which are similar. There is evidence of cross-collaboration amongst all these types of organisations to meet citizens digital needs. The classification of organisations was taken from the organisations own self-description. Where there were multiple legal organisations all under one umbrella, the primary aim of the organisation was taken to indicate its main funding structure.

Organisations include:

Public sector organisations, including libraries, public educational institutions such as schools and colleges, and local authority buildings such as council buildings.

Private enterprises who are operating as a limited enterprise or as a multi-national organisation, such as a network provider.

Charities: To ensure that charities fulfil their intended purposes while adhering to legal obligations, they can often have complex legal statuses. To address the digital divide and provide support on digital inclusion this can mean operational challenges of managing both charitable and non-charitable activities. Charities involved in this area, may also run as a limited enterprise to enable them cover non-charitable aspects of their business.

Educational institutions and service providers other than local authorities, including further and higher education organisations. In many cases, these are providing supplementary skills and include digital skills specifically or provide education and training to specific communities (such as language skills for migrant communities) and

have included digital skills under their provision of essential and basic skills.

Community groups. There is a wide range of community groups who provide skills training and support to the digitally excluded. There are varying legal status held by these groups, including Community Benefit Society, Community Enterprise, Community Interest Group, or Community Trust, each reflecting a slightly different emphasis and legal status of the groups.

Housing groups. There are also a few housing groups present in the data, reflecting the need to be online to manage housing needs. These include Housing Associations, Tenant Groups, Housing Trusts, and Tenant Organisations.

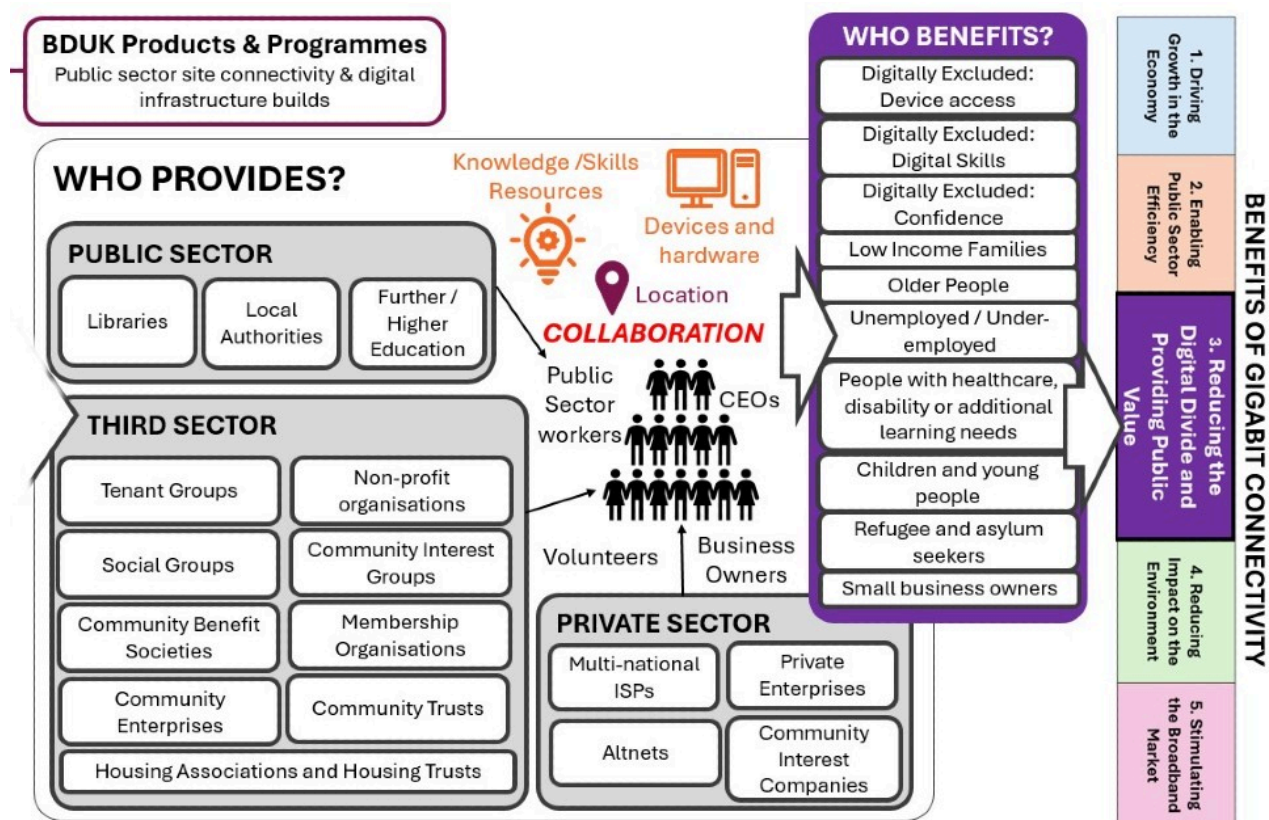
Non-government organisations. There are wide range of non-governmental organisations that play a role in addressing the digital divide, including social groups, membership organisations, volunteer organisations, and non-profit organisations.

6. Visualising complexity

The analysis presented here demonstrates the complexity that is involved in providing digital skills after the provision of infrastructure. It can highlight how public sector connectivity is able to play a vital role in addressing digital exclusion. The activities highlighted here provide rich detail on the specific and targeted ways in which many diverse types of digital exclusion are being addressed. It helps unpack the generalised term 'digitally excluded' and details on the unique needs of populations and communities who are part of this umbrella term. This in turn gives the organisation a selection of starting points from which evaluation work and benefit detection can begin to take place to contribute to the evidence base that plays a vital role in the decision-making within the organisation.

Most importantly, it gives the organisation vital information about what is needed to address the digital divide and provide public value after connectivity has taken place. BDUK plays the vital role of providing gigabit-capable infrastructure to communities in poorly served areas. However, the pathway to benefits is complex and contingent on participation by the public sector, third sector organisations, and individuals for those benefits to be

realised. The following illustrations demonstrates that complexity based on the analysis presented here and is a helpful way to explain the resources and input needed to realise those benefits. A further description of the diagram is provided below.



The route from digital infrastructure to benefits realisation

The system diagram shows:

Public Sector Connections and Access to Internet: For a BDUK funded public building this access to gigabit capable connectivity on site enables both the public service and a means by which digital inclusion activity can take place on site. This activity does not only happen at BDUK sites, but across the country, and access to the internet is one of the fundamental barriers related to digital inclusion; often these sites can provide access where this is not possible in the home or elsewhere.

Who provides? From public sector organisations such as Libraries, Local Authorities, and educational establishments, to a diverse range of third sector organisations including tenant and social groups, community trusts, membership organisations, non-profit organisations, and community enterprises. There are also examples of private sector involvement through telecommunication suppliers (internet service providers or ISPs), as well as other private enterprises and companies with a community interest. These all draw on a pool of staff, business owners and CEOs as well as volunteers. This also involve access, use and sometimes provision of devices and hardware as well as the development and delivery of

knowledge and skills resources. It can also provide a location for events or classes to take place. All these elements will often result in collaboration between organisations.

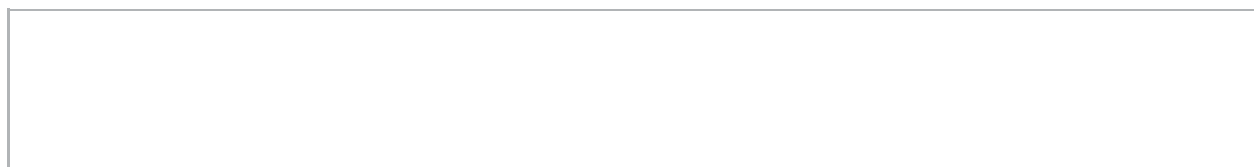
Who benefits? 10 groups were identified through the analysis, all of these were either specific focus of digital inclusion activities, mentioned as one of several groups, or were recorded as having benefitted from the activities. Individuals participating in Get Online Week activities in 2023 will not necessarily fall neatly into one of the separate groups but may have issues across several of the groups. These separate groups may experience different barriers or similar barriers differently, and as such require varying approaches to enable their digital inclusion.

Benefit of the activities: Get Online Week activities will help participants become more digitally included, thereby addressing one of the benefits associated with gigabit connectivity as set out in BDUK's benefit framework: reducing the digital divide. However, this system diagram indicates that contributions from various stakeholders are needed to tackle the broader issues arising and persisting from digital exclusion among diverse groups. Events and activities like those during Get Online Week can foster development and progress in bridging the digital divide, not only in terms of access but also in effective use of connectivity and its subsequent benefits.

7. Case Study 1: Greater Manchester

The Greater Manchester area has received connectivity through the LFFN programme, launched in 2017. The Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) have initiated organisations such as GM Digital and Let's Get Digital Manchester, and the Greater Manchester Databank. Participation in Get Online Week includes a wide range of activities, such as TechMate Tea Parties (which are held in collaboration with Digital Wigan) and provide support and mentoring for people with low confidence in their digital skills.

An example of such activity are the skills sessions provided by a collaboration between the North Community Partnership and service provider VM02. VM02's Connect More Digital Skills programme was piloted in collaboration with GMCA and saw volunteers from VM02 deliver digital skills in public libraries in the area to address the identified need for greater skills provision in the area. Such sessions were highlighted by a quote from the Manager at North Manchester Community Partnership, who says:



“ Internet access is essential for the people we support, so they can navigate everyday life and support their mental health and wellbeing. Nowadays appointments, interviews, and children’s homework are completed online so without access individuals are excluded from society. ”

The pilot was successful and is now being implemented in 7 other cities across the UK.

GMCA has also developed a Digital Skills Map to help people across the city region find places where they can access skills courses and devices. The activities offered are collaborations between private, public, and third sector organisations, often using public sector buildings to deliver skills sessions and support. Figure 6 is an image capture of this digital map and demonstrates the breadth of these activities.

Information from the posts associated with Get Online Week give us a better idea of the types of collaborations that are taking place. A good example of this are the training events held by Starting Point, a social enterprise in the Greater Manchester area who collaborate with local authorities such as Manchester City Council and Stockport Council to deliver digital skills sessions. During Get Online Week 2023, they delivered events at public libraries throughout the area and continue to work in partnership with public and third sector organisations throughout the year to plug the vital gap between infrastructure and benefit realisation.

8. Case Study 2: Dorset

Dorset has received connectivity through the RGC programme and through Project Gigabit, and its Digital Champions programme was awarded the Digital Skills award at Connected Britain 2023. The Digital Dorset initiative is delivered through Dorset Council Digital Services and provides skills programmes and coding camps to people living in the area. Crucially, the service collaborates with local organisations to find new venues in which they can provide digital skills. The Digital Champions programme use libraries and public buildings to deliver training and support to citizens who need support getting online. It relies on a network of volunteers who sign up to become Digital Champions and provide help in setting up devices, downloading apps, or accessing online services. The service also includes a Digital Hotline, whereby people can contact volunteers by phone for fast advice if they are struggling with any aspect of digital connectivity. However, Dorset’s Digital Champions are not the only ones who are providing these sessions. The CRUMB project is a charity that provides skills and training sessions to young people with disabilities, mental health conditions, stabilised addictions or acquired brain injuries. As part of Get Online Week

2023, they used public libraries to provide digital skills session specifically aimed at people with learning disabilities, to enable them to build their confidence online. They highlighted the collaboration with the libraries, saying in a post:

“ The CRUMBS Project trainees have been getting out & practising their digital skills in the community. Well done! A shout out to the team from @bcplibraries for your support. ”

This example highlights how public buildings, and crucially the people who work in them, are collaborating with third sector organisations to meet the specific needs of a group who are a higher risk of digital exclusion.

9. Recommendations

- Understanding the complexity of delivery after BDUK has provided infrastructure gives some valuable information about the timescales required for benefit detection. This allows the organisation to improve the evaluation work and benefit monitoring that takes place. It also provides a road map for understanding areas where benefits may not realise as expected. *Understanding these crucial elements improves the organisation's ability to detect and map benefits as they become apparent.
- The research presented here also opens new areas of inquiry for improving BDUK's conceptualisation of benefits realisation. Public sector digitisation, and in particular the resulting digital citizenship that is shaping the interactions of people and the state, is an area in which would benefit from further research as the organisation connects more public sector sites. This will contribute to the evaluation work that is possible at these sites and make improvements to the evidence base that form the foundation of our understanding of benefits in those areas and improve how BDUK make decisions as an organisation.
- The data gathered here offers the opportunity to employ storytelling techniques as a way of developing case studies that further highlight the findings presented here. A narrative analysis of the data may provide further useful findings that contribute to the organisation's understanding of the benefit areas discussed here.



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