

# Digital exclusion is hurting the life chances of millions in Britain

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I welcome your article on the digital divide (What's it like to be a refugee in the UK without internet access? Mostly impossible – and often unbearable, 13 March). Our charity started as a small team of volunteers building a wifi network for refugees and support workers in the Calais “Jungle” encampment – connecting and helping more than 5,000 people. Equality and equity are not possible without equal access to the internet. About 92% of jobs are only advertised online, and the government ambition was for 75% of adults in England to be using the NHS app by March 2024. Even access to news requires the three Ds: digital confidence, data and devices – a term I coined for a digital inclusion programme with BT in 2022. According to the Digital Poverty Alliance, millions of people in the UK are affected by digital exclusion. As well as a rights and social justice issue, digital inclusion makes economic sense. A report by the Centre for Economics and Business Research finds that “investment of £1.4bn could reap economic benefits of £13.7bn for UK plc”. All parties and government departments need to send representatives to the all-party parliamentary group for digital inclusion. The next meeting – a roundtable on a long-term settlement for digital inclusion – will be chaired by Julie Elliott MP and take place on Wednesday 20 March. As a member, I can testify that scant few MPs attend these sessions. The House of Lords currently has more to say on digital inclusion than our elected government representatives. Our next government needs to put a digital strategy, including the (soon to be published) first set of minimum digital living standards, by Prof Simeon Yates with teams at Liverpool and Loughborough universities, at the top of its to-do list. Claire Marshall Director at Jangala, a tech charity • Your article highlights the increasing exclusion of many poorer people from digital access (Nearly half of UK families excluded from modern digital society, study finds, 17 March). It rightly describes the enormous damage that this does to life chances and the ability to function successfully in 21st-century society. Something the piece fails to mention is the impact that austerity and the brutal destruction of the public libraries network has had on this issue. Tony Blair's People's Network project in the 1990s made public libraries a free and trusted point of access for those unable to afford connectivity in the home. This became a core service until the 2010 coalition took power and dismantled the role of libraries as key community hubs, providing many services including access to books, computers and activities. Millions of people will continue to be extremely deprived long after this dreadful government is replaced. We need a strategy to quickly reconnect them to mainstream society, and properly funded libraries are the perfect way to do this, Kathryn Davidson Dundee