

Digital Inclusion in Libraries:

Full Report

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Barnsley Library Service
Cambridgeshire Library Service
Cumbria Library Service
Leeds Library Service
Newham Library Service
Norfolk Library Service

North Somerset Library Service
Rochdale Library Service
Rotherham Library Service
Stoke on Trent Library Service
Warwickshire Library Service
West Sussex Library Service

Introduction

There is now widespread support for treating internet access as a household essential and yet the statistics show that digital inequalities remain high; for example, 1 in 20 UK households don't have internet access.¹ This report will be of interest to all those working to create the social infrastructure that will close the digital divide. Libraries are an essential part of this.

In 2022, Arts Council England funded Good Things Foundation to work in partnership with Libraries Connected (and in co-production with library services) to understand the spectrum of digital inclusion approaches being used by library services and library branches in England, and to build a more sophisticated understanding about these approaches among policy makers and potential funders.

This report sets out findings and practical tools from a research project commissioned by Good Things Foundation and carried out by WSA Community Consultants. The research helps to understand how to capitalise on libraries' appetite to close the digital divide – in ways that reflect and build on the diversity of models, places and partnerships – including with voluntary and community sector organisations and local ecosystems.

The research was carried out in three stages (September 2022 to March 2023) working closely with the partner organisations, Good Things Foundation and Libraries Connected, as well as gathering advice from Good Things Foundation's Libraries Meet-up Group and the Libraries Connected Digital & Information Universal Offer Group.

Stage 1

Facilitated workshops and discussions with partners, advisors and library groups.

Reviewed existing research, guidance and reports from both partners.

Developed a framework that describes libraries' work on digital inclusion.

Stage 2

Interviewed 38 library service personnel and community organisation partners in 12 library services in England. Library services were selected based on our knowledge of their digital inclusion offer, as well as to ensure a number were in areas designated as 'Priority Places' and 'Levelling Up Culture Places' by Arts Council England.

Facilitated workshops and discussions with partners and advisors.

Developed a set of practice notes for each area of libraries' work on digital inclusion.

Stage 3

Surveyed all library services in England to assess the proportion of libraries working across the areas of digital inclusion identified in the research.

The survey was sent to 151 library services across England, with responses received from 114, a response rate of 75%.

The five areas of library services' work on digital inclusion described in the framework (see Section Three) are: skills and empowerment, connectivity, devices, role in local ecosystem, and equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI).

A practical resource aimed at Heads of Library Services, branch managers, and digital inclusion leads or champions in libraries and local authorities is also available. This resource includes a practical framework for thinking about strategy and delivery, a set of framings for developing a narrative about the role and contribution of library services, and 'practice notes' on each of the five areas in the framework – drawing on insights and examples from the qualitative and quantitative research.

1. Digital Inclusion in Communities: Current Context



In the UK today, 7% of households do not have home internet access, and around 20% of adults only access the internet via a smartphone.² At least 10 million adults do not have the foundation-level digital skills.³ Digital exclusion correlates strongly with poverty, low literacy, and wider disadvantage across all age groups, while the single strongest predictor remains older age.⁴

Digital inclusion is about ensuring people have the digital access they need (suitable device, sufficient data connectivity) and the digital skills, confidence, understanding and motivation to use the internet safely. Building trust and knowing where to get help when things go wrong are also important. Not everyone can (or wants to) get support from family, friends or colleagues - which is why community support is vital.

Digital inclusion support is often best provided by friendly, familiar faces - 'people like me' - who are not IT experts but are expert in providing patient, personalised support that meets people's needs and interests.⁵ Such support is provided by a rich array of organisations, such as libraries, community and family centres, adult skills providers, housing associations, job clubs, local Age UK branches - all varying in size, reach, the communities they serve, and the nature of provision - from informal community learning to formal qualifications to ad hoc digital support.

This diversity of community-based provision is reflected in the National Digital Inclusion Network - a free membership network run by Good Things Foundation, offering resources and support (with devices, data connectivity, digital skills, grants and peer support) to members. It is also reflected in the diversity of support offered by local library branches within library services across the country - as illustrated by the survey findings set out in this report.

In this way, library networks are part of a rich ecosystem of public, private, voluntary and community sector groups and organisations - all playing a greater or lesser part in responding to local needs, and reducing digital access and skills barriers. The extent to which this ecosystem is coordinated, resourced, and nurtured varies widely. While the nature and extent of the wider social infrastructure in an area will vary, library services and local branches will always play an important role.

The current cost of living crisis, the accelerated pace of digitisation, and channel shift to online provision of services and information - are putting more people at risk of digital exclusion and increasing the demands on community providers, including library services and local branches. This is the context within which this research was conducted.

Research Findings

Between September and November 2022, we conducted qualitative research with 38 library personnel and community organisation partners across 12 library services in England, with a particular focus on library services in areas designated as 'Priority Places' and 'Levelling Up Culture Places' by Arts Council England. We followed this with a survey sent to all library services across England and received 114 responses (75% response rate). In this section of the report, we analyse and discuss the findings under the following headings:

- 2a. Libraries as place-based partners**
- 2b. The libraries' offer: skills, connectivity and devices**
- 2c. Digital inclusion in library and local strategy**
- 2d. What helps libraries and what holds them back**
- 2e. Where libraries look for help with digital inclusion**
- 2f. Developing a framework for strategy and delivery**

2a. Libraries as place-based partners

Public libraries are a local government service delivered by the 151 library authorities in England. Local government has a statutory responsibility under the 1964 Libraries and Museums Act to deliver a "comprehensive and efficient" library service. There are around 2,900 library buildings in England. Each library service operates as a network – delivering support and activities across its networks of branches, and typically having more complex services on offer in their larger or central branches.

Library networks are part of an ecosystem of public, private, voluntary and community sector groups and organisations focussed on addressing digital exclusion. While the nature and extent of the wider social infrastructure in an area will vary, library services always play an important role. In 2019/20 there were 174 million physical visits to libraries, 110 million digital visits⁶, and they provided 26 million hours⁷ of supported internet access each year on 40,000 computers.

In some localities, libraries will be the leading provider of digital inclusion support and have a central role in coordinating digital inclusion responses. In others, libraries will play a supporting role – signposting people to local organisations for digital access or skills support.

"We have so many libraries across the city, we're open a huge number of hours each week but [even so] there are times when we're not the best place. Part of our offer is triaging those requests that come to us and being aware of and referring when appropriate to other providers."

A library service's role includes both strategic partnerships and locally based relationships. The more that it can develop relationships in the local area, the more opportunities it has to reach people and communities. This place-based relationship-building supports equity, diversity and inclusion, as demonstrated by examples of work with voluntary and community sector providers, who have that reach into communities. There is recognition that libraries provide a universal offer and, by working with voluntary and community groups, they can get to know the needs of specific communities:

"The libraries are ... very good at doing a universal offer but [the voluntary and community sector] are good at working with very specific needs and communities. We all need to work together to deliver the best possible service."

Library services gave examples of the current partners that they are working with locally, regionally or nationally. The most common partnerships were with organisations in the voluntary and community sector, while a common focus of partners' work was around health and employability. Partners included:

- national charities, including Good Things Foundation, Groundwork and Age UK
- schools and adult colleges
- Jobcentre Plus and the Department for Work and Pensions, as well as local charities supporting searches for work
- local businesses and business parks, including smaller private companies
- national businesses, including banks and telecoms providers
- NHS and public health bodies
- local housing providers and schemes
- other parts of the local authority, including community learning teams, adult social care and public health
- local charities and community interest companies

Library branches are conceived by many as hyperlocal community hubs. Meeting a diverse range of needs, they offer skills and learning as well as an 'open door' ethos and a safe haven for those who need it. Partnerships with voluntary and community groups and the formation of very specific projects reflect this. Examples of libraries working on a neighbourhood level include:

- a library working with a community choir with a large African-Caribbean community:
"Doing playlists on YouTube – introducing it that way ... in some of our libraries ... we offered the music group to them, tweaked it and the feedback was fantastic and they're going to try and run it again."
- local authority, health, adult education, community development and the voluntary and community sector, as well as connecting with communities at neighbourhood level:
"Each neighbourhood gets £100,000 that local organisations can bid for. Library staff are heavily involved in that process [as] part of that team that deliver it."

All library services reflected on the importance of understanding local needs, with many taking a place-based approach as mentioned above. This included building relationships with community groups around a specific library or mapping local assets or resources to look at joint approaches:

"Each community has specific needs, so if you can focus on one area of the city and get a bunch of community organisations together ... we have libraries in those areas, so we've worked closely with them on those networking steering groups."

Especially where they cover a wide geographical area, library services may encounter many different needs, based on levels of deprivation or the specific needs of diverse communities. For example, one service talked about their area including both small coastal communities as well as large towns.

Library services also talked about it being hard to keep up with understanding what the needs are. The importance of having a clear focus on inequalities and the role libraries can have in building inclusion was also highlighted; one example of this is the setting up of Warm Spaces to respond to the cost of living crisis.

Sometimes needs were identified through staff talking to community members using the local libraries. An example of this was the establishment of a project for Syrian refugees in one branch. Overall, the more partnerships, local connections and links to voluntary and community groups that library services and branches have, the better they understand community needs.

"Group of knitters in and a group of teenagers, so the teenagers learned how to knit and then showed the knitters how to use smartphones. All about working with our partners and listening and getting out into the community."

In another local authority, Covid was a game-changer, shining a light on digital exclusion and inequalities – notably access to information about the virus, food banks and government grants. A working group was put together to look at digital exclusion, which resulted in funding libraries and two community and voluntary groups to do work focussing on digital inclusion during the pandemic.

2b. The libraries' offer: skills, connectivity and devices

The research confirmed that library services are offering a blend of support with skills, connectivity and devices. This section looks at each element of this offer.

Skills

Support for skills development varied, at least in part, according to the size of the library branch. More comprehensive offerings – including courses, programmes and drop-ins – were available in larger and main library branches, while in smaller branches the support offer might be limited or more ad hoc and limited to what could be provided by staff or volunteers.

Flexible, informal and adaptable methods of delivery appear to be more effective in reaching and engaging people with no or low digital skills or confidence, who are heavily reliant on the engagement and relationship-building abilities of library staff. A range of offers (varying in pitch and structure) are required to meet diverse and ever-expanding needs.

“I think that every session isn't just about digital inclusion, it's about their whole inclusion in life. It's so tailored here, it's so unique.”

“Our doors are open to anybody. If somebody needs help with whatever it is digitally, we would never ask anyone how vulnerable they are, if they're low income, do they live in social housing – we don't ask those questions. The library service doesn't judge and we just work with ordinary people.”

Skills in digital inclusion are often acquired through necessity (people needing access to services that are no longer available to them in alternative ways). Although this shift to digital skills can be frustrating for users, it also has the potential to be a 'springboard' into more structured and broader learning, with the possibility of impacting greatly on quality of life, employability and social inclusion.

“[Giving people the opportunity to] try something at their own pace ... to interact with the modern world. Suddenly you can fill out an online form and it takes away the mystery of online banking, shopping online, etc.”

Support for learning to use the internet is available in a range of ways, with varied offers and levels of support ranging from ad hoc support and signposting by staff, to regular courses or drop-ins covering many skills and topics. Some libraries commented that even where they do not offer a specific programme (e.g. on health), they may still be addressing this through their informal or ad hoc individual support.

“They don't want to do Word or Excel. They want to get their life online, and we're perfect for that. I don't think anybody does that better – and it's all free.”

The table below shows the responses from the survey around the range of skills support offered:

8 in 10 library services support people with learning basic digital skills, accessing help with employability and getting online to pursue hobbies.

7 in 10 library services support people to use the internet for information about their health

6 in 10 library services support people to use the internet for help around financial inclusion

4 in 10 library services are developing or would like to develop their offer around financial inclusion

In all skills categories, nearly all of the library services that do not already provide support would like to do so, with fewer than 2% stating that they are not currently interested.

Figure 1: Range of skills support library services offer

Skills	Yes have in place – no. (%)	Currently developing no. (%)	Would like to have in place – no. (%)	Not currently interested – no. (%)	Total respondents
<i>Use internet to learn other basic skills</i>	92 (81.42%)	8 (7.07%)	12 (10.62%)	1 (0.88%)	113
<i>Use internet for employability</i>	91 (80.53%)	9 (7.96%)	12 (10.62%)	1 (0.88%)	113
<i>Use internet for hobbies</i>	88 (79.28%)	8 (7.21%)	13 (11.71%)	2 (1.80%)	111
<i>Learn how to be safe online</i>	85 (75.89%)	10 (8.93%)	15 (13.39%)	2 (1.79%)	112
<i>Use internet for health</i>	77 (68.14%)	15 (13.27%)	19 (16.81%)	2 (1.77%)	113
<i>Use internet for financial inclusion</i>	67 (59.82%)	14 (12.50%)	29 (25.89%)	2 (1.79%)	112

As mentioned above, there was a distinction between support offers at larger or main library branches versus smaller branches. When library services were asked to comment on how many of their individual branches were offering this support, 41% said all branches, 27% said most branches, 25% said some branches and 7% said just a few branches.

A number of library services (17) provided additional qualitative information about other ways that they have found to increase their digital-inclusion skills offer, such as gaming, robotics, coding and VR/AR workshops to attract people, in some cases specifically young people.

Because the digital skills and confidence of library staff and volunteers are critical factors in making the digital skills offer effective, it relies on staff receiving adequate training. In some library services, staff are supported by digital inclusion volunteers but some also spoke about challenges in their capacity to recruit, train and support volunteers and/or the availability of a pipeline of volunteers interested in the role, especially since the pandemic.

In supporting people to develop their online skills, library staff may also be assisting them to do an online transaction that will enable them to access welfare benefits or public services. A couple of library services highlighted enabling the public to connect with staff as a key part of their strategy. This was a theme running through the research for local authority based libraries. A number of the library services offered access to wider council customer services through either joint staffing or other initiatives:

“The library is one of the few areas the county council has where a customer can walk in and talk to directly to a council member of staff.”

There was wide recognition that there needs to be flexibility around the digital inclusion offer. Being open to a variety of needs and offering one-to-one support was something that is commonplace for digital inclusion in libraries. As one service said:

“Things like blue badges, doctor’s appointments, TVs. People have to use a digital way rather than it being for pleasure or a need to upskill because you want to know more – it’s a necessity. It’s not a choice.”

Connectivity

Framing connectivity in the context of people who have limited or no access to the internet and can only access certain digital services highlights the importance of having options for digital connectivity. Library branches are often the first point of contact and therefore play a key role in universally offering free WiFi, with a majority also providing library computers with up-to-date browsers. In reality, people need to feel confident that connecting digitally works; the following example relates to council services but can also apply to a range of other important services:

“[People need] confidence that ... the system works. If people type in their query to the council, press send, there is still a part of their minds of ‘Is it going to be read? Will it arrive? Will they get a response...?’ It’s about building up people’s confidence that the council is receiving those enquiries digitally and responding as fast as they can.”

Given the fact that most public services are now designed to be accessed digitally, having access to a person who can help and provide support was seen positively:

“Libraries are one of the remaining few face-to-face contacts now, because the majority of council services have gone online.”

All library services offered free public WiFi in all or most branches:

9 in 10 library services offered free use of library computers with the latest browser

Around 3 in 10 library services offer free mobile data

Around 6 in 10 library services are developing or would like to develop an offer of free mobile data

Around 2 in 10 library services had information on home broadband or mobile data (e.g. social tariffs)

Library services were interested in improving access to free mobile data and information about home broadband or mobile data with over 6 in 10 library services saying they were either currently developing these services or would like to have them in place.

Figure 2: Support library services offer with WiFi, broadband or mobile data connectivity

Connectivity	Yes have in place – no. (%)	Currently developing no. (%)	Would like to have in place – no. (%)	Not currently interested – no. (%)	Total respondents
<i>Use of the public WiFi while in the library</i>	114 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	114
<i>Library computers with the latest browser</i>	104 (91.23%)	7 (6.14%)	3 (12.63%)	0 (0%)	114
<i>Access to free mobile data (National Databank)</i>	31 (27.68%)	23 (20.54%)	40 (35.71%)	19 (16.96%)	113
<i>Info about home broadband or mobile data e.g. social tariffs</i>	19 (17.12%)	20 (18.01%)	43 (38.74%)	29 (26.13%)	111

The biggest area of development raised through the survey’s open feedback comments on connectivity was WiFi printing. Out of 26 library services mentioning development areas in connectivity, half of these specifically mentioned WiFi printing. WiFi printing enables people to bring their own device, making printing at the library simpler.

An offer around connectivity can include establishing schemes in the community, such as mesh networks, SIM cards with pre-loaded data and MiFi, to expand access. One library service talked about being involved in establishing a mesh network in areas of high deprivation to enable people to get online for free. This is an open-source system that currently reaches 3,000 homes.

Devices

Many library branches offer PCs, access to a public network and printers. Public networks are still seen as important for people to be able to access online services, such as NHS appointments, council services or job applications. All devices within a branch gently encourage digital confidence:

“It starts on a very small level. If people come into the library with a query about IT and we can answer it, that builds up confidence. If they can use self-service machines, all of these things normalise using technology...”

The need for newer technology puts funding pressures on libraries; often, schemes for devices were funded from additional projects. Several libraries emphasised how important it was to keep up with the latest technology as, apart from constant updates, devices quickly become out of date and need reinvestment:

“We need the devices. Our devices – we need them to be current and up to date because there’s no point in us having antiquated things that haven’t got the latest software to be able to do what the customer wants to be able to do.”

Provision of desktops or tablets in libraries is commonplace with nearly all library services providing these. In addition:

9 in 10 library services provide charging points for devices

Around 3 in 10 library services run device lending or gifting schemes.

6 in 10 library services are either currently developing or would like to have such schemes in place.

Around 1 in 10 library services currently provide access to specialist kit for designing games or editing videos

Figure 3: Support offered with devices (e.g. laptops, tablets, specialist kit)

Connectivity	Yes have in place – no. (%)	Currently developing no. (%)	Would like to have in place – no. (%)	Not currently interested – no. (%)	Total respondents
Use of desktops/ tablets while in the library	108 (94.73%)	2 (1.75%)	3 (2.63%)	1 (0.88%)	114
Charging points for devices	98 (85.96%)	7 (6.14%)	8 (7.02%)	1 (0.88%)	114
Access to device from home use – loan service	24 (21.62%)	16 (14.4%)	44 (39.64%)	27 (24.30%)	111
Access to device from home – gifted	16 (14.29%)	12 (10.71%)	48 (42.85%)	36 (32.14%)	112
Access to specialist kit, e.g. for designing games; video editing	16 (14.16%)	17 (15.04%)	46 (40.71%)	35 (30.97%)	114

There were good examples of 'hublets' (a small tablet with an internet connection, but to be used on-site) being used to increase people's access to online resources within the library itself.

Libraries are now moving towards enabling people to come in and use their own devices. Simple interventions such as plugs with a USB connector mean that people can charge and use their devices in a library setting.

As noted above, the number of services that are involved in gifting devices is low. One respondent commented that **"We did have tablet loans in during Covid, however it was hard to evidence ongoing need."** However, another observes that the low take-up was because the **"cost of connectivity at home was an issue."** Others work with charities (such as Age UK or Good Things Foundation) to provide devices to gift, though almost half of respondents would like to have a system of gifting in place.

Upgrading devices is another development area for some services, including refreshing equipment and adding tablets and laptops to offer alongside desktops. One service talked about looking to have Macs rather than PCs; others were looking at specialist equipment such as large tablets to provide a virtual newspaper experience and a microfilm reader.

When asking about whether the devices are available across branches, 66% of services had them in all branches, 17% in most, 8% in some and 6% within only a few branches.

2c. Digital inclusion in libraries and local strategy

Digital inclusion in libraries needs to be underpinned by suitable IT infrastructure, dedicated staff time and the backing of local authority strategy and leadership. Sometimes that strategy is a written document; there were some strong examples of strategic plans and action plans.

Covid accelerated the development of local digital inclusion strategies in some areas. One library service talked about their area experiencing high levels of poverty and deprivation. During Covid they identified a need around social isolation and vulnerable groups. They are now developing a digital inclusion strategy to link digital inclusion to local priorities such as improving health and wellbeing, and access to resources and support for employment.

"We try and give people as much information as we can and by enabling people to access that information digitally, it opens up a whole new way of accessing information. It's far more beneficial to people."

When considering digital inclusion strategies:

Around 4 in 10 library services have some kind of digital inclusion strategy typically tied into the local authority strategy

Around half of library services have no digital inclusion strategy

Figure 4: Does your library service have a digital inclusion strategy?

Digital Inclusion Strategy	% of library services	No. of library services
No digital inclusion strategy	46.49%	53
Digital inclusion strategy tied into the local authority strategy	29.82%	34
A digital inclusion strategy not tied to the local authority strategy	6.14%	7
Other	17.54%	20
Total Respondents		114

In different library services, digital inclusion outcomes or aims are embedded in different strategy documents, including business plans, learning plans and audience engagement plans. Having an overarching digital inclusion strategy gives this work legitimacy. Without a corporate strategy behind them, as one library service described, digital inclusion can feel like “pushing the elephant up the hill.” Many services mentioned the need to ensure that strategic objectives were properly resourced.

One library service started a programme called 100% Digital Leeds – recognised as an example of best practice in digital inclusion. In 2021, the programme team moved to the council’s Integrated Digital Service to continue to lead digital inclusion for the city. This move led to discussion around the library service’s role going forward:

“When the 100% Digital team moved over to the digital team, there was a conversation about what that role would be vis a vis what the library role was. That role is really much more of a coordinating role across the city about coordinating partners and working with third sector. Whereas we’ve still got that key role around providing infrastructure to support people to develop their digital skills.”

Another service spoke about their library strategy covering digital inclusion in relation to the offering of digital hubs:

“Library strategy states we’re community and digital hubs. We see digital, both inclusion and skills, being part of the service we offer.”

Aside from written strategies, other strategic areas highlighted include providing access to council staff, understanding local need and building strategic partnerships.

The research found that library services are being asked to support corporate initiatives from bus pass applications to welfare assistance. These are not generally formalised arrangements enshrined in policy or strategy but there is enough of a pattern to be able to say it is fairly common.

“Access to public services which have shifted to digital by default. We see those who have been left behind by this. Accessing support, responding to processes; understanding, coaching, encouraging and reassuring them is a huge part of this.”

Strategic partnerships

Libraries described a range of ways that they build stakeholder involvement or partnerships from neighbourhood groups, where the library could link with others through to district- or county-wide groups that can look strategically at reducing the digital divide. We also gathered examples of regional gatherings or bodies bringing together heads of services, including one example for Yorkshire where digital inclusion is a regional priority.

Finally, there are examples of setting up jointly funded work to bring digital inclusion more widely into the community: in one case, a jointly funded NHS and local authority post involving communities in addressing digital inclusion; in another, very clear strategic partnerships:

“We currently have agreements in place with our Public Health team to deliver IT learning support and Mobile Services Outreach. Focus is on improving the health and wellbeing of residents by facilitating access to health information and online services as well as combat social isolation... We work with the Rehabilitation Officer for people with visual impairment, to support digital inclusion using Access apps and software.”

2d. What helps libraries and what holds them back

What each library service offers and the approach they take will vary, because of their size or local infrastructure around them, for example. Nonetheless, it's been possible to identify some common barriers and enablers that are relevant across most or many of them. Often the same issues are coming up as both barriers and enablers. Across all these barriers and enablers, three themes or factors stand out as critical to work on digital inclusion:

- Awareness of the offer: library services suggested the need to reach 'a critical mass of awareness' of the offer to reach and encourage diverse groups to take it up.
- Staff skills, capacity and willingness are key. What that means is that the digital offer is vulnerable to any knocks to library staff capacity.
- Partnerships and relationships with community partners and local government departments help library services with reach, capacity, awareness-raising and resourcing digital inclusion.

Barriers

Staff time is critical to work on digital inclusion. Where they are being asked to assist members of the public with completing long and complicated online forms, this can be a real challenge. The drop in volunteer numbers that libraries have experienced compounds this pressure on staff time. Some learners need a lot of time – “it can take hours” – something that volunteers may be able to commit but staff often cannot. While a lack of staff buy-in – or more often uneven buy-in – was also a barrier in some library services, any work to improve this also needed to be mindful of staff training requirements.

Library services find their positioning as part of local government both a positive and a challenge. Real challenges arise where senior leaders lack understanding about the role libraries are playing in joining up public services that have become largely digitised, from the issuing of bus passes to claiming hardship payments. Library services talked about poor communication between departments and uneven awareness of digital inclusion leading them to devote considerable time to joining multiple meetings and forums to express their needs as well as explain their offer.

Some challenges link back to earlier findings about the way library services are often asked to support corporate or public initiatives. Short or no notice at all of changes to application processes or the introduction of new benefits placed considerable pressure on libraries to respond without much chance to prepare for the increased footfall and requests for help. In particular, library services said it was problematic where there was “a lack of joined up working with monolithic organisations” like the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) or NHS.

The absence of a district- or county-wide digital inclusion strategy was cited as a barrier. Where this sort of strategy wasn't present, this seems to have played into challenges with understanding the diverse types of local needs and ways of addressing them. Detailed research on the scale and type of local needs may be lacking or there is no mechanism for understanding why different groups do or don't

Enablers

Libraries are seen as places where people feel safe and that they can trust the people who work there. It was thought that this made them feel less stigmatised or judged for seeking help with digital skills and assistance with transactions like applying for welfare support.

Working in partnership within local government and with community organisations is positive for libraries in their work around digital inclusion. Making time for network and forum meetings and for joining other departmental meetings brought them intelligence about local needs and enabled them to raise awareness and 'sell in' digital inclusion. By turning up and listening (and taking a 'softly, softly' approach), as well as contributing or leading these sorts of meetings, library services found they were able to persuade local government departments to engage with them and that community partners become 'third party advocates' for the digital offer as well as potential partners for joint delivery. In turn, partnering in delivery helped library services ensure a more equitable distribution of resources than they might have achieved alone.

Understanding local needs – where they possessed this information – enabled library services to flex and respond to them. Partnership working, strategy and leadership from the centre at local government level, and having staff with connections in the local community (including language skills) all helped with this, even where no comprehensive research or strategy exists. A digital inclusion strategy, leadership support within the library service and local government, as well as the necessary budget, were also important.

use the digital offers. Library services were also aware that their footfall hasn't recovered since the pandemic started and that this may be another factor holding them back from reaching some groups.

While libraries benefited from being part of the local government IT infrastructure, that also presented difficulties when they wanted to make changes that might benefit the public, such as introducing WiFi printing, or device giving or loaning schemes because this may be seen as presenting security difficulties (depending on the local authority).

Finally, library services underlined that there are still many people who find the 'digital world so daunting'. The most common examples given were older people and some of their own staff, who are broadly reflective of the local population.

The role of digital champion (in the context of digital inclusion) usually focuses on supporting people with digital skills and is often a voluntary role. Where the role is performed by people from within the community – whether as paid staff or volunteers – that can help build trust and confidence to seek help. Paid staff in digital champion roles said that they can also cascade information 'down' and pass issues and ideas 'up' in ways that help promote and share practice.

Finally, the way library services work in person-centred ways enabled them to overcome some of the barriers discussed above. By focusing on finding the 'hook' (a hobby, being in touch with loved ones) that will make learning around digital worthwhile, libraries can help people move past finding the idea too daunting to try.

The ability to purchase and renew devices, and upgrade software regularly was a big advantage. As mentioned above, being part of a council-wide IT infrastructure contract has its downsides, such as where digital security is an issue. In these circumstances, instead of attempting to change the way their IT infrastructure works, some library services have chosen to focus on workarounds such as offering SIMS with preloaded data not connected to the local authority internet and wiping loaned devices when they come back.

2e. Where libraries look for help with digital inclusion

Libraries are accessing a range of support and resources in order to raise staff awareness about why digital inclusion is important; to keep abreast of innovation and good practice; to train and inform staff as well as library customers; and to 'sell in' ways of addressing digital exclusion to their local partners.

Figure 5: Library services accessing Good Things Foundation and Libraries Connected resources

National Resource	No. of library services accessing resource (%)	No. of Respondents
Online basecamp network (Libraries Connected)	97 (85.09%)	114
E-Learning modules (Libraries Connected)	92 (80.70%)	114
Learn My Way (digital skills) (Good Things Foundation)	77 (69.37%)	111
Online centres network (now called the National Digital Inclusion Network) (Good Things Foundation)	74 (66.67%)	111
National Databank (free mobile data) (Good Things Foundation)	42 (37.84%)	111
National Device Bank (free devices; rolling out in 2023) (Good Things Foundation)	4 (3.60%)	111

Libraries Connected's basecamp was a popular way for managers to keep up with what other libraries are doing, while Good Things Foundation's Digital Nation Graphic was described (in respondents' additional comments) as a useful tool for highlighting to colleagues the importance of work on digital inclusion.

“Supervisors and managers hook up to basecamp, a benchmark tool, an innovator’s network – share good practice and information and initiatives nationally.”

Learn My Way from Good Things Foundation is a free digital skills learning platform, which is well used and well embedded in the way many libraries approach digital inclusion, some having been using it 'for years'. It is their 'go to' resource before trying other options and is popular because it allows learners to work at their own pace.

“Learn My Way is an absolute fantastic resource. Our digital champions, our volunteer digital champions use that on a daily basis. We find that Learn My Way is so interactive, and it’s fantastic for the first-time user, as well.”

Also mentioned were paid-for resources such as those created by Digital Unite as well as smaller numbers accessing sector-specific resources (e.g. Healthwatch resources to assist with the NHS App or Ask My GP).

One library wanted help with teaching resources. They were aware of good resources (e.g. Essential Digital Skills by Gateway Qualifications) but said that they are too expensive because of having to pay a joining fee in order to use them.

2f. Developing a framework for strategy and delivery

Drawing all these strands together, we have developed a framework to support thinking about digital inclusion strategy and delivery by library services. The framework (see below) describes five areas of library services' and branches work on digital inclusion:

- role in local ecosystem
- skills and empowerment
- connectivity
- devices
- equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI)

The framework aims to be a simple, non-prescriptive tool that supports libraries in their strategic thinking about, and advocacy for, the role they play alongside others in closing the digital divide. It aims to be aspirational without imposing expectations.¹ It provides some examples of the kinds of activities associated with each area. This framework is developed further in an accompanying resource, along with a practice note for each area that looks in more depth at what's involved.

Local ecosystem place-based partnerships

e.g. relationships/partnerships with local authority, with voluntary and community sector, referrals/signposting, providing space, convening/being willing to convene with others

Digital Inclusion Support Offer

e.g. skills provision, digital support, access to connectivity and devices in the library/outside

Skills & Empowerment

- Independent learning in the library
- Bespoke learning: 1-2-1 support or drop-ins
- Supported learning in groups and classes
- Training library staff in core digital skills
- Training volunteers to be digital champions
- Training staff and public in safeguarding, privacy and security online
- Employability support
- Financial inclusion
- Health and wellbeing
- Referrals and signposting to services
- Support for small businesses

Data Connectivity

- Use of public WiFi while in the library
- Free mobile data (National Databank)
- Info, help or provision with mobile data and home broadband ('mesh networks')
- Able to connect with services that are inaccessible or clunky to use on mobile phones
- Up-to-date library computers with latest browser
- Computers and software that assure safeguarding, privacy and security

Devices

- Use of desktops or tablets while in the library
- Loaned devices for home use
- Gifted devices for home use
- Access to specialist kit (e.g. for designing games, video editing)
- Charging points for people's own devices
- Safeguarding, privacy and security measures to make loaned and gifted devices safe

Equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI)

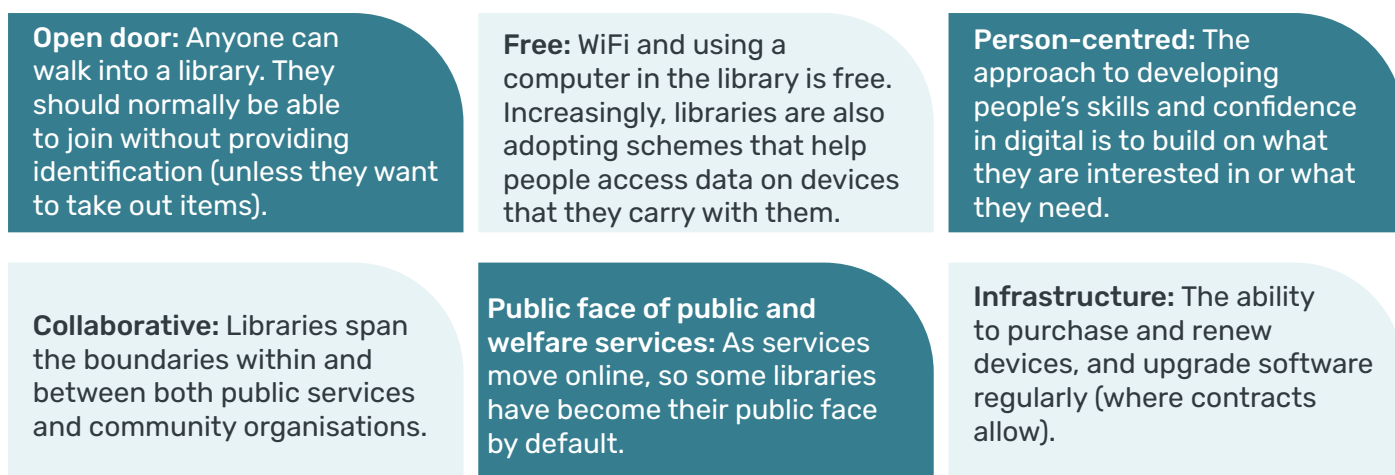
Ensuring equity, diversity and inclusion is embedded in work on skills, connectivity, devices

Conclusions

In this report we have presented our research findings and developed a framework setting out five areas of library services' work on digital inclusion. The framework, alongside a set of framings for talking about the role and contribution of the libraries sector and a set of practice notes to accompany the framework are also available as a separate resource.

Our findings provide an analysis and examples of the broad and varied role that libraries play in closing the digital divide and the way they approach this role alongside their local government, public and community partners. This report also seeks to deepen our understanding around how libraries work in this space and celebrate their contribution. While their role and approach vary, there are some common features that most libraries share; we summarise these in the table below.

Figure 7: Key features of libraries delivering digital inclusion



The evidence presented here points to the value of having a local digital inclusion strategy, something that we found many libraries lacked. It also highlights the critical importance of partnership working within the local ecosystem alongside voluntary and community sector organisations and other agencies; and of ensuring that equity, diversity and inclusion underpins this work. One way of bringing all of this together is to borrow from the idea of 'place-based'⁸ approaches to change. Place-based approaches deliberately concentrate on building connections and taking action in order that people experience a better quality of life.

References

- ¹ Sources with explainer available here: <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/digital-nation-2022-sources/>
- ² Adults' Media Use and Attitudes Report 2023 (Ofcom) <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/adults/adults-media-use-and-attitudes>
- ³ UK Consumer Digital Index 2022 (Lloyds Banking Group) <https://www.lloydsbank.com/banking-with-us/whats-happening/consumer-digital-index.html>
- ⁴ See Digital Nation 2022, analysis by Prof. Simeon Yates using Ofcom 2022 data <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/digital-nation-2022-sources/>
- ⁵ Future Digital Inclusion: Delivering basic digital skills to those in need (Good Things Foundation) <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/insights/digital-skills-for-those-in-need/>
- ⁶ CIPFA 2019/20 <https://www.cipfa.org/about-cipfa/press-office/latest-press-releases/cipfa-comment-uk-library-income-drops-by-almost-20m>
- ⁷ Public Libraries, the Case for Support, CILIP and Big Issue 201 https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.cilip.org.uk/resource/resmgr/cilip/information_professional_and_news/press_releases/2019_10_report_case_for_support/public_libraries_-_the_case_.pdf
- ⁸ There are many definitions and explanations about place-based change, including Good Things Foundation's [How-to Guide: Place-based collaboration for digital inclusion](#). Also Renaisi's [What do people mean when they talk about place based change?](#)