Digital Inclusion in Libraries

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Libraries play a vital role in supporting digital inclusion - both as an individual service offer and - more importantly - as part of a wider ecosystem of support for communities.

Good Things Foundation and Libraries Connected collaborated to research libraries' role in digital inclusion, with support from Arts Council England. These are the key findings and our recommendations for action.

Findings

- Libraries play a vital role in the ecosystem of digital inclusion support in communities. They are positive, trusted, universal, and free.

- Provision varies between and within library services. Some support is delivered directly; some through partners.

- Collaboration is key. Partnerships were commonly with the voluntary and community sector to reach communities or meet specific needs.

- Over 80% of services were at least partly confident they were meeting needs. Not everyone feels comfortable using a library; some needs may be hidden.

- There was appetite to develop support, innovation (e.g. a mesh network to offer free connectivity), and early adoption (e.g. using the National Databank).

- Some libraries have growing demand for help with online form-filling - such as for health, benefits, or council services.

- Limited staff, volunteers, funding and, for some, outdated IT infrastructure - limit what libraries can offer.

- Half of library services did not have a digital inclusion strategy; those which did found it useful.

Defining digital inclusion:

'A minimum digital standard of living includes, but is more than, having accessible internet, adequate equipment, and the skills, knowledge and support people need. It is about being able to communicate, connect and engage with opportunities safely and with confidence'. Minimum Digital Living Standard definition (www.mdls.org.uk)

Good Things Foundation

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The UK's Digital Divide

In the UK, around 10 million adults lack foundation-level digital skills; around 2 million households have no home internet access, and at least 2 million households struggle to afford broadband or mobile data connectivity. (Sources cited in Digital Nation 2022).

Recommendations

For government

- Department for Culture, Media and Sport and Department for Science, Innovation and Technology should work together and with others - including the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to:

  - Develop a new digital inclusion strategy for England

  - Recognise the role of libraries, community organisations, and others as critical social infrastructure for digital inclusion.

For local authorities

- Take active steps to promote the existing role of libraries and local voluntary and community sector organisations as part of digital inclusion strategies.

- Embed digital inclusion in wider strategies, such as economic growth, learning and skills, health and wellbeing

- Coordinate local ecosystems of support for digital inclusion - map what is on offer, listen to local expertise, and tap into national networks and resources

- Support library services with information, as well as funding, so they can better respond when asked for help with online transactions

"Every session isn't just about digital inclusion, it's about their whole inclusion in life."

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

"Part of our offer is triaging .. being aware of and referring when appropriate to other providers."

All library services provide access to **free public WiFi,** some for anyone, some for members only

8 in 10 library services support people with using the internet for **basic digital skills,** hobbies, and work - delivered directly or by local partners

7 in 10 library services use **Learn My Way** to help people learn basic digital skills

Recommendations

For library services

- Use the Framework for Digital Inclusion in Libraries to identify whether / how to evolve the service's digital inclusion offer

- Develop a digital inclusion strategy – if not already in place – to set a clear direction for delivery and partnerships

- Use funding opportunities (such as Arts Council England's National Lottery Project Grants programme) to evolve and embed digital inclusion provision

- Partner with community organisations and others – locally and nationally – and coordinate efforts on digital inclusion, playing to respective strengths

For Good Things Foundation and Libraries Connected

- Harness the appetite of libraries to do more, and respond to their interests to evolve their digital inclusion provision

- Support sharing of library innovation and good practice – between libraries and more widely

- Advocate nationally for more funding for libraries, community organisations and other providers – so they can better meet local needs for free internet access and help to build digital skills and confidence in communities

"We're part of the National Data Bank initiative. That's been a fantastic resource for us in libraries."

"We see digital, both inclusion and skills, being part of the service we offer."

"One thing leads to another, so the more digital skills they learn ... that will help them in everyday life with a whole number of things, for all age groups."

"Staff training is important ... when offering IT assistance to the public and working in our Fab Lab."

6 in 10 library services are developing or want to develop their offer of **data connectivity**

6 in 10 library services are developing or want to develop schemes to loan **or give people free digital devices** - some signpost to others

2 in 10 library services provide **information on home broadband** - such as discounted social tariffs

A framework for digital inclusion delivery and strategy

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

More information

The research report and a resource for library services were done with WSA Community Consultants. Available at: www.goodthingsfoundation.org.uk

Statistics about service provision are based on analysis of an England-side survey sent to 151 library services in March 2023 as part of this research, with a response rate of 75%.

Statistics about digital inclusion are from multiple sources cited in Digital Nation 2022.

Find out about Good Things Foundation, National Digital Inclusion Network, National Databank, National Device Bank, Learn My Way on www.goodthingsfoundation.org or hello@goodthingsfoundation.org

Find out about Libraries Connected, the Universal Library Offer on Information and Digital, Libraries Basecamp and e-learning on www.librariesconnected.org.uk or infor@librariesconnected.org.uk