# Our Manifesto: digital inclusion is everyone's business

Part 2: updated, Updated, wide-eyed thinking about *how* to achieve widespread digital inclusion

emma.weston@digitalunite.com

www.digitalunite.com

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# Our Manifesto

A general election approaches and the 'how to solve digital exclusion manifestos' are popping out like popcorn.  Here's ours.

**We believe digital inclusion is everyone's business and needs to be re-imagined.**

Digital inclusion is a gateway, an enabler. Modern, everyday life in all its manifestations – personal, vocational, social, civic, economic, political – requires it.

We *cannot afford* to think about digital inclusion as a 'project' (time and output boundaried) or a 'programme' (time and outcome boundaried).

Digital inclusion needs to be everyone's continuous practice, default behaviour, working assumption. It needs to be a shared endeavour. And it needs to be re-framed as investment not cost.

We've honed in on five things we believe would make a significant, sustainable dent in digital exclusion and re-frame the vital, fundamental importance of digital inclusion:

1. **Political will and political leadership**. It starts at the top.
2. **Reimagining the models, money, stakeholders**. Updated, wide-eyed thinking about how we can all contribute to and sustain widespread digital inclusion.
3. **Digital inclusion as a form of customer service** propelled by mandatory, compliant behaviours. For and in all organisations – public, private, third sector. If an organisation has people in it, and serves people/ has customers, it needs to be digitally inclusive.
4. **Building capacity, stimulating ownership**: support for, promotion and celebration of, building organisational DI capacity and essential digital skills through peer-to-peer models that embed ownership and sustainability (AKA Digital Champion models).
5. **Social value and ESG**: hard-wiring of digital inclusion commitments into social value/ ESG.

Digital inclusion is everyone's business because no one approach and no single organisation/ agency/even government can own or deliver digital inclusion. Digital exclusion is a systemic, compound and complex issue. Its salve will be a systemic, compound and conscious response and most of us have a role to play.

**This is Part 2, looking at the models of HOW digital inclusion could be delivered...**

# Re-imagining the models

Updated, wide-eyed thinking about *how* to achieve widespread digital inclusion

Our first Manifesto call to arms was about the underpinning and superstructural requirement for political leadership in digital inclusion, and a digital inclusion strategy to frame and guide it.

**Our second is for "updated wide-eyed thinking about models, money and stakeholders". It's about the How – how to deliver digital inclusion in 2024 and beyond.**

We can think about 'the How' without waiting for a strategy.  And I wonder if changing the lens, and/or re-imagining delivery could be an important part of these discussions.

It's worth reflecting also on where we've got to in the last 14 years without one. There *is* a digital inclusion ecosystem in the UK. There *are* committed people across all sorts of organisations that have filled the void – these have not been fallow years, they've 'just' been self-realised, by local authorities, community groups, charities, social enterprises. And big business, which *has* committed money, time and people to support the cause.

Despite all the activity and all the energy, we still have 18m people with low of very low digital skills. So something's not quite been working with the How, and we can't pin that all on a lack of government strategy.

The picture is complex, and I don't mean 'just' the problem, I mean also the solution. **What if we consider digital inclusion as an issue of supply and demand**? There is huge demand, and there a fair amount of supply, and both are fragmented.

The reason political leadership and government strategy is so sorely missed is *not just* because it sets the tone and compass – the recent British Academy Digital Inclusion Policy Brief's first lesson for policy makers stating that "digital inclusion provision at local and regional levels may be undermined by the lack of a nationally coordinated strategy."

*But also* because it ought to wrap arms around demand and supply and give it context (tone and compass), direction/aspiration, possibly regulation, and as a result unify. It's an imperative that could meld competition into collaboration and/or consolidation; it might even require it. The fragmented landscape becomes a more holistic one, a sum of its parts.

What might creative – and effective and efficient - digital inclusion supply look like and whose responsibility is it?

## 1. How and why classify digital inclusion as supply?

To determine who is responsible (and accountable) for UK wide digital inclusion, and who can supply it, do we first have to decide how we 'classify' digital inclusion?

Is it an end of its own, is it an enabler? Lesson 3 from the British Academy briefing encourages changing the lens: "Approaches to digital inclusion can benefit from recognising it as an intermediate policy outcome rather than an end in itself."

Is it a human right? UNESCO's Constitution includes safeguarding fundamental human rights, is as concerned about online as off-line spaces.  It urges media and information literacy and digital competencies; universal access to information and digital inclusion; digital policies and digital transformation.  Universal connectivity plays a fundamental role in achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity.

Is it as Careful Trouble's Digital inclusion: from sticking plasters to sustainable progress,  says utility: "If Internet access is a precondition of managing one's healthcare and maintaining social and economic participation, then it should be reclassified as an essential utility."

Is digital inclusion modern literacy, is it the bedrock of workplace digital skills?

The inexorable link between digital inclusion and digital skills (by which I mean 'basic' reframed as 'essential' digital skills) means that digital inclusion might really be the hungry ghost haunting all the digital skills frameworks – last updated by Lloyds in 2019 and now being vigorously rescrutinised by Futuredotnow in the context of digital skills for work. (Sign up to this and join in.)

Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS) has brought welcome, fresh thinking to the definition and valuing of digital inclusion with its UK benchmark for digital inclusion at a household level. "We define a **MDLS** as the basket of "digital goods, services and skills" that facilitate an individual's digital capabilities to effectively live a life they value." Watch Prof Simeon Yates who leads the MDLS team talk about the work in the context of workplace digital skills: "We're not yet being digital. We're not yet that digital nation."

Also echoed by Careful Trouble (as above): "Digital skills should not be thought of as a qualification or training course, but as a means to participate actively in society."

If we follow digital inclusion down this [skills] path, we will also need to re-imagine the way skills are achieved and validated and 'who's allowed to do that' and this is another super interesting debate. Being picked up at the moment by RSA and Ufi VocTech Trust in the creation of the Digital Badging Commission.  It's contemplating the stretching – evolving? Iterating? – of the way we recognise learning and where and how it happens, and the Commission will be looking at the "adoption of digital badges by accrediting bodies,

policymakers, and employers, including other micro-credentialling providers outside of our mutual networks."

## 2. And is/should DI be a public supply?

As noted in the first Manifesto article, I'd say that there's a consensus building that digital inclusion in the UK should be folded into the work of all government departments, with leadership, responsibility and accountability at both a strategic cohering/convening level (GDS being the name coming up most frequently there) and departmental level.

In terms of supply – the practical on the ground delivery and support of the DI agenda – local is key and that is also coming up time and again. County/unitary councils and combined authorities know their places, their people, their needs and are best placed to lead development of local strategy including the right collaborations. Examples of city wide digital inclusion led by local authorities and case studies from Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Wales and Scotland recently published.

People First Always looks at how a Labour government might deliver 'better, cheaper, more accessible public services' and (amongst other things) urges regional and national collaboration. The other point in these recommendations I particularly like is that of digital public service being made aspirational, valuable, and valued, because that is one of the keystones for getting aspirational, valuable and valued digital public services. (To my mind, social care is the other stand out area of public service that would hugely benefit from this paradigm shift, in both digital and non-digital ways.)

Local Government Association (LGA) + DMS Research and Consulting published a very clear report in 2023 about The role of councils in tackling digital exclusion :" digital inclusion efforts need to be woven through the core services of councils and their partners (including VCS organisations and Integrated Care Partnerships) for them to be truly sustainable. Critically, digital inclusion should be positioned as a means through which the intended outcomes of these partners and strategies can be better realised, rather than another 'ask'."

This is all echoed again in the British Academy Digital Inclusion Policy Briefing Lesson 4 "Longer-term and less prescriptive funding arrangements can enable delivery partners to provide tailored support that meets people's long-term digital inclusion needs," and Lesson 5 "Digital inclusion programmes benefit from taking place-based approaches that are tailored to local contexts and co-produced by actors at different scales."

When it comes to government investment, this would mean investment in the centre and also at a local and regional level. How much investment and against what outputs and outcomes – ah, you'd need a strategy for that.

There are also other forms of supply.

Firstly, there have always been other forms of digital inclusion supply [that were not government/publicly funded] even when there was a decent amount of government money invested in digital inclusion. Why? Because one size does not fit all supply/delivery wise, and even if there is a well-funded incumbent it may not be able to supply/deliver all that is required, everywhere. Unless we are going to start printing money, this is not going to change. And it's also probably pretty healthy too this way; it's often why, where and how new products and services get developed, can be added to the DI supply pot, and increase scope and reach for the many.

What's required to support this dynamic is more flexible funding for the public and third sector to procure digital inclusion supply as best suits them, in a way that maps to their local needs, and that aligns with the tone and compass of a national, overarching ambition and vision.

## 3. Variations of digital inclusion supply

The final point on models of supply is that the broader the church, the more eclectic the congregation and wide-ranging the services.

Part of the long-term future of digital inclusion as a supply, of being able to reach more people in more appropriate ways will be because there has been a market – or perhaps better described as non publicly funded – response. The next government should encourage and support that creativity – digital inclusion as a service - as part of the supply mix. Above all, given there's going to be a lot of demand on that woebegone-looking piggy bank, it spreads the investment AKA funding requirement.

There are many examples of this and Digital Unite is one, which is to give an example not (just) blow a trumpet.  We are not core funded. We started long before anyone had put the letters CIC together and we wrote our own constitution. We charge for our DI products and services and any profits are reinvested.

We have operated in this way for 27 years without pause, developing and investing in our own ideas and strategic priorities – and hunches.  I'm very interested in co-operative models and although our (71 and counting) clients and members of the Digital Champions Network and Inspire  don't co-own the company, when they use our products and services they are also investing in a central service offer – and its continual evaluation and evolution - they get their customised slice of.

The (deservedly) oft-quoted LocalGov Drupal is a brilliant example of a cooperative digital supplier and Will Callaghan is an inspiring man.

Have a listen to Matt Masters podcast on LocalGov Drupal which he describes as "the epitome of the potential of local government. Instead of each council reinventing the wheel, via collaboration they are saving councils time, money and the isolation of tackling IT challenges

alone. What Will Callaghan, Co Founder and Product & Project Lead and his team have created is an inspiration. The profits that come from the group go back into the platform. LocalGov Drupal is the publishing platform created by councils, for councils. It has 44 member local authorities across the UK and Northern Ireland ."

We Are Group, Upskill Universe and Mortar are all examples of independent digital inclusion suppliers, responding to what they've seen as specific market needs with their own interpretations of enhanced supply.

Then there are the digital agencies and product and service designers who make digital products, platforms and design digital service for the public sector and government. Digital inclusion is creeping into their lexicon and their services offerings; it is not the same thing as 'accessible service design'. It is about designing digital public services for users who may have all sorts of other hurdles to jump through to use them (such as challenges relating to confidence, literacy, skills, socio-economics, connectivity, attitudes, language, ethnicity, culture etc). Digital inclusion is not 'just' or 'only' an accessibility challenge

DXW are sponsors of UK Charity Camp and also now Digital Inclusion Toolkit.

TPX Impact and, AND Digital are both members of Tech for Good Alliance.

The Tech for Good Alliance is a cross-UK initiative of the not-for-profit Scottish Tech Army . It provides a framework to both encourage and enable the development of skilled tech volunteering programmes, as part of tech companies' social responsibility activities. The Tech for Good Alliance's three focus areas for the programmes and projects are: social justice, inclusion, and equality; environment and climate change; and skills and talent development.

There is an abundance of digital health products suppliers, and while I do not have extensive experience of this area, the work of folk such as Tiny Medical Apps for example is intriguing and encouraging.

If digital government should be a valued and valuable area to work in, so should creative, independent digital inclusion supply.

## 4. Lessons from the digital inclusion world stage

This is a digital world and no-one is an island, even when they are an island. Let's look also further afield.

For example the recent publication of the excellent Open Access book of international research and policy on digital inclusion from Professor Simeon Yates and Elinor Carmi.  It is a really interesting piece of work with a range of examples across a range of countries and contexts. 'This volume offers research findings and policy case studies that explore digital inclusion from

the provision of basic access to digital, via education and digital literacy, and on to issues of gender and technology. Case studies are drawn from varied sources including the UK, Australia, South America, and Eastern Europe, providing a valuable resource in the pursuit of social equity and justice.'

Have a look at the work of unconnected.org, a British based charity which "focuses on connecting students, refugees, women and underserved communities. We are able to do this with the help of our donors, sponsors, and other organisations." It connected 2.5M people to the Internet in 2023, and is working with 200+ NGOs to this end.

The World Economic Forum ('the international organisation for public-private cooperation') birthed the EDISON Alliance in 2021 as the Covid pandemic threw global digital exclusion into even sharper relief.

The thinking big on digital inclusion panel at Davos 2024 is worth a watch.

It's an illuminating discussion on what universal digital literacy could look like, including achieving that 'last mile' in digital inclusion. One of EDISON's Lighthouse Countries, Rwanda, has all (100+) its public services are online and there is a citizen smartphone offer at $16 a handset and $1/ month thereafter.

Most striking for me is how unanimous the panel is on the absolute necessity of digital inclusion being a shared agenda requiring partnership and the flexibility to adapt to and produce solutions that meet specific and contextual needs, with a range of stakeholders who all have shared – and vested – interests.

A government has a leadership, convening and accountability role in that and it also has to think beyond itself in terms of delivery.

Consider Rwanda – from a digital inclusion perspective. The Rwandan Minister for ICT Paula Ingabire is emphatically clear that "when governments box themselves in with policies and regulation and government alone we thwart the speed of progress" Robert Smith CEO of Vista Equity partners adds "private sector and government has an interest in a digitally literate citizen [...] **it takes an ecosystem** (my bold) [...] to create self-sustaining communities."

Hans Vestberg, Chair of EDISON and CEO of Verizon sums it up: '**this is not philanthropy this is business'.**

While we haven't had a UK digital inclusion strategy, the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office FCDO published a pretty well considered report on digital inclusion at international level, wrapped in the Digital Development Strategy 2024-2030: "The UK will lead the way and partner with countries around the globe so no-one is left behind in a digital world. sets out how the UK will lead the way and partner with countries around the globe, so no-one is left behind in a digital world." Perhaps the FCDO's recommendations could be taken up at home before any leading abroad is done?

**What can YOU do?**

- Change the lens. Does thinking about digital inclusion as supply and demand offer us new ways of thinking about the How?
- Look beyond the UK both on a digital inclusion project/ case study level and at the collaborative, strategic work being done internationally.
- Ask questions, get involved! Of and with digital inclusion service providers, digital government and digital agencies: see if you can get