



Our Manifesto: digital inclusion is everyone's business

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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.

Let's start at the beginning with (1) - the hot (gone cold?) potato of political will and leadership.

Political will, political leadership

The lack of leadership in digital inclusion from this government is in plain sight.

I wrote about it [here](#) and it's been the most viewed article I've ever posted, which I think is very telling: the issue resonates.

Quick summary of last 12 months: first there's a blistering Report from the Lords Communications and Digital Committee (June 2023) detailing the sustained failure of strategic leadership and political will over digital exclusion, chaired by Baroness Stowell. Then there's a 'response' to the Report from the government (DSIT Dept of Science, Innovation and Technology) autumn 2023. Then there's [a letter](#) from Baroness Stowell on 19th October in response to the response her Report got. I thoroughly enjoy it every time I read it, such a brilliant lesson in letter writing.

Since when it's all rumbled on, and if you are digitally included you can follow the sorry story through Hansard online and Parallel Parliament where all Written Questions and 'Answers' are also recorded.

You can read the transcript of the [Digital Exclusion debate in HoC on 28th February 2024](#), secured by Justin Madders (Lab) who opens with "The fact that we have so many Members here suggests that many things that we deal with as Members of Parliament are a result of digital exclusion".

Everyone has a story, context and concerns according to where and who they represent.

Rural communities, older people, rural businesses, young people, unemployed are all of particular concern.

"In 1924 the challenge of lawmakers was to ensure that everyone could read and write; the challenge in 2024 is to ensure that everyone has the digital skills they need." Chris Evans (Lab)

Kirsty Blackman (SNP) and Jim Shannon (DUP) both talk about the disenfranchisement of the digitally excluded. This is the inevitable consequence of digital exclusion which provoked me to start DU in 1996.

The Minister who had to be seen to pick up the DI pieces, Saqib Bhatti, Secretary of State at DSIT did have sensible things to say, such as "we know from key stakeholders that digital inclusion interventions work best when they are tailored to local needs and when support is provided in the community on an ongoing basis."

This is also sensible: “Digital skills permeate through every aspect of policy. I view it as part of a cross-Government agenda to integrate digital inclusion into all policy decisions, rather than a stand-alone issue.... I chair the group on digital inclusion, and I will be addressing some of the issues that have been raised there. **All Departments** (my bold) are considering the needs of people who are digitally excluded in their policymaking.”

But then (almost) nothing happens.

Almost as if the Minister is biding his time while he's still in post?

A month after the debate, consult the online record of written questions and you'll find one tabled by Chris Bryant on March 26th asking when was the last [digital inclusion] [interministerial] meeting and who was there? He also asked what budget the group had.

Saqib Bhatti replied on April 16th. “The most recent ministerial group meeting took place in March 2024, chaired by the Minister for Tech and the Digital Economy. The Department for Culture, Media & Sport, Cabinet Office, Department for Work and Pensions, and His Majesty's Treasury were also in attendance.

That's 5 Departments. Out of 24.

Re annual budget he said: “Digital inclusion is a cross-cutting issue that spans social engagement, education, employment, access to services and many more elements of everyday life. Responsibility for relevant policies, activities and budgets sit across government. For example, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology is exploring options for funding research to improve the Government's evidence base on digital exclusion.”

Is this actually an answer to the question? (Clue: No).

Whatever happens under a new government HAS to be better than this.

As to where the fabled leadership should sit. I am not entirely sure it should sit with DSIT. I think digital inclusion/exclusion gets lost in S and I and T of DSIT – the elephant in the room that someone is always frantically trying to throw a huge tarpaulin over, while canapes are served around way cool things like space growth projects, tech unicorns and quantum technologies.

How about Cabinet Office, which also holds Government Digital Services (GDS) where the government's digital transformation journey started?

In 2009 (now Baroness) Martha Lane Fox powered through Whitehall as Gordon Brown's Digital Inclusion Champion. She was pivotal in the set up of GDS, famously (and accurately) saying “it's

about the economy, stupid,” shaking the government of the day awake to the imperative and opportunity. She continues to urge the agenda on, while making no secret of her slight bafflement as to why it’s remained so stalled. “We need to push that extra bit, we need to finish the job.”

If you browse GDS in 2024 you’ll find delicious things like “We are here to make digital government simpler, clearer and faster for everyone.” GDS has priorities like user needs and accessibility baked in to the way it works, and they say of themselves “we use our unique position at the centre of government to join the dots.” Cue choirs of angels singing, non? Digital inclusion could be a good fit.

There’s currently also a very interesting parallel discussion about the future of GDS and whether local GDSes have a role to play.

To my mind this is quite a similar structural discussion as the ‘where does digital inclusion sit in government’ – both are essentially about central/local, strategic/ specific (horizontal/ vertical) models.

When something is as profound as [digital] inclusion, the model needs to be central *and* local, strategic *and* specific, horizontal *and* vertical. Digital inclusion is both a continuum (horizontal) and also needs to be properly grasped and provisioned for thematically, or in a needs-based way. These are the verticals – health, education, housing etc

Ultimately, where and how the political leadership sits is not the most important thing.

The most important thing is that it’s a long-term commitment, with a long-term vision and a strategic and structured approach to getting the thing done.

With people attached to the brief who are committed, passionate and accountable. And who can get 24 not 5 Departments to a cross govt meeting.

And, who either have money to spend making DI change happen or who are prepared and *able* to make every Department make a financial commitment of their own to it within their work programmes. Spend re-imagined as investment, not cost.

Investing in digital inclusion is one of the easiest return on investments the new government can make: for every £1 invested there’s a ROI of £9.48 and £1.4 billion accruing to the government in efficiency savings.

What can YOU do?

- Read more (than what I have to say!) and connect with others who are thinking about digital exclusion and inclusion.
- Ask those who'll come canvassing soon to be your MP how they'll be supporting digital inclusion where you live.
- Look further afield – than just the UK. We are NOT a world leader in digital inclusion; there are things we can learn from around the world. I'll be writing more about that next