

PEOPLE, PURPOSE, PARTNERSHIPS & PLACE: LESSONS FOR DIGITAL INCLUSION FROM CUMBRIA

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Executive Summary

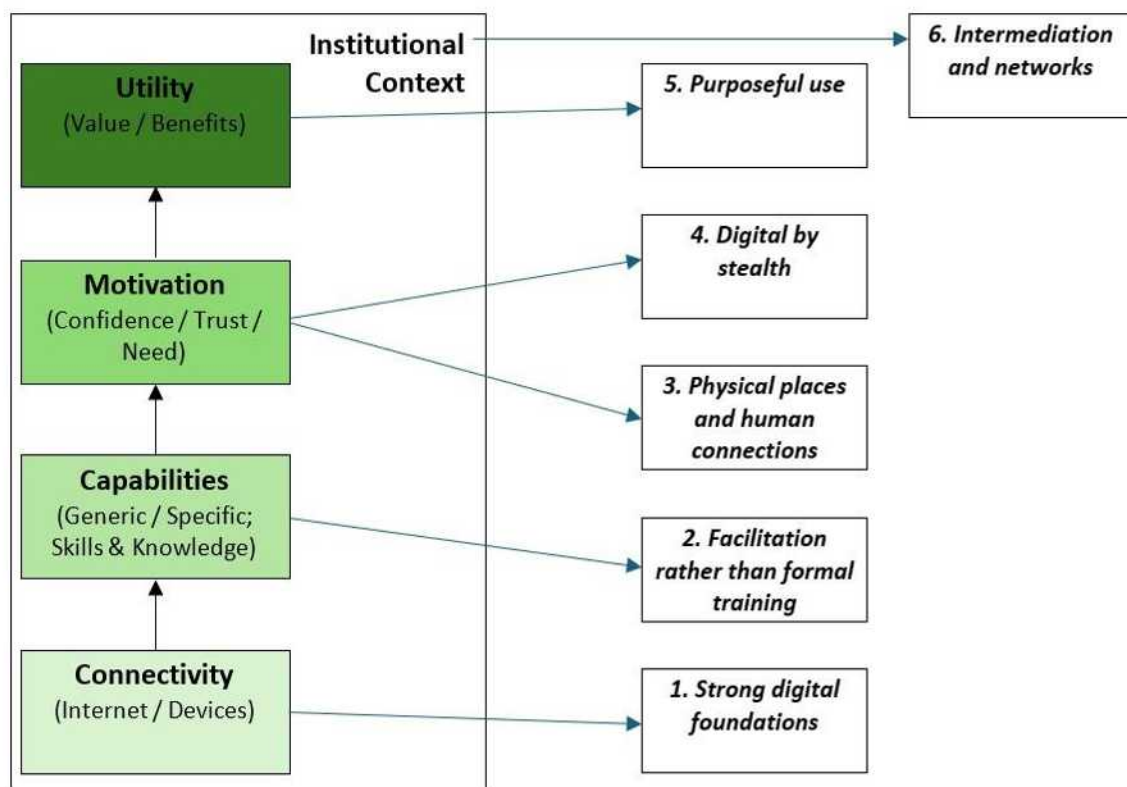
Digital exclusion remains one of the most pressing and least visible forms of inequality in the UK. This report draws on in-depth interviews with members of the Cumbria Digital Inclusion Network (CDIN) to offer lessons for practitioners, policymakers and funders working on digital inclusion across the UK. It finds that effective digital inclusion depends on **people, purpose, partnerships and place**. Support works through trust and human relationships; people engage when digital tools help them do something that matters; no single organisation can address exclusion alone; and barriers and their responses are shaped by local geography, services, history and relationships.

Context

Estimates suggest around 68,000 adults in Cumbria lack basic digital skills and over 125,000 people live in households with slow or very slow internet connections. While connectivity maps suggest a primarily rural problem, the Digital Exclusion Risk Index tells a different story: the sharpest concentrations of digital exclusion risk are found in urban, post-industrial communities. In all locations, digital exclusion affects more than just technology use but access to a wide range of services and to broader economic opportunity. As services move towards digital-by-default, the costs of exclusion are increasingly borne by individuals, families, community organisations and frontline practitioners.

Good Practices

Six good practices emerged consistently from the interviews, organised across the report's digital inclusion framework.



Effective digital inclusion is characterised by:

- **Strong digital foundations:** connectivity, devices and affordable data remain basic conditions for participation. Cumbria has important provision through infrastructure investment, public wi-fi, community access points, device schemes, National Databank provision and social tariffs, but these remain uneven relative to need.
- **Facilitation rather than formal training:** those digitally excluded are often best supported through patient, one-to-one, problem-led help. As one practitioner put it: “I’m not a teacher. I’m a facilitator”.
- **Physical places and human connections:** libraries, community centres, advice settings and social groups provide trusted and non-judgemental spaces where people feel able to ask for help.
- **Digital by stealth:** support often works best when embedded into activities people already attend such as wellbeing groups, English cafés, advice appointments, employment support or tea/coffee mornings. This connects digital help to existing motivation.
- **Purposeful use:** the goal is not digital literacy in the abstract but the ability to do things that matter: apply for work, manage benefits, book appointments, pay bills, access health services, etc.
- **Intermediation and networks:** digital inclusion in Cumbria depends on a distributed ecosystem of libraries, charities, housing providers, health services, community groups, volunteers and public bodies. CDIN plays a valued role in connecting this ecosystem and keeping digital inclusion visible.

Challenges

Six challenges were identified spanning all levels of the framework:

- **Unfinished access:** connectivity and device access remain live problems despite significant infrastructure investment, compounded by affordability pressures and the fragility of digital infrastructure in emergencies.
- **Digital-by-default services:** the accelerating withdrawal of analogue service alternatives is deepening exclusion for those who cannot keep pace.
- **Reaching those most in need:** the hardest-to-reach individuals are often invisible to digitally-promoted services.
- **Fragile provision:** the wider ecosystem is fragile; under-resourced, volunteer-dependent and held together in places by the commitment of a small number of individuals.
- **The emerging AI divide:** AI may widen inequalities unless residents and frontline organisations are supported to understand its opportunities, risks and limits.
- **Limits to agency and equity:** beyond utility, the report acknowledges an honest limit that digital inclusion cannot resolve the structural conditions such as poverty, lack of economic opportunity and political marginalisation that are the root causes of exclusion in the most disadvantaged communities.

Recommendations

A series of recommendations drawn from the research is addressed to the incoming Cumbria Mayor and Combined Authority but also has relevance to other local authorities and regions. These cover:

1. Strengthening digital foundations and infrastructure resilience
2. Developing a county-wide Digital Inclusion Strategy
3. Appointing a Digital Inclusion Lead supported by a Partnership Board
4. Launching a devices and data programme
5. Investing in a network of community digital support hubs
6. Building practitioner and volunteer capacity across the system
7. Adopting an inclusive-by-design standard for public services.

Lessons for the UK

Four higher-level lessons for a national audience are organised around the report's four themes:

- People: effective digital inclusion is a relational practice, not a technical service.
- Purpose: its goal should be life outcomes, not digital competencies.
- Partnerships: it requires ecosystem investment, not project funding.
- Place: it must be locally embedded, not nationally prescribed.

Cumbria's specificities of geography, history and institutional landscape give these lessons particular force but the evidence behind them is likely to be recognisable to practitioners and policymakers across the UK.

Main Report

Fuller details are available in the main report, accessible at:

<https://research.manchester.ac.uk/en/publications/people-purpose-partnerships-amp-place-lessons-for-digital-inclusi/>