

Digital Inclusion: Listening, leading, looking ahead

Sharing takeaways from our listening event held in March 2026

At the heart of this event was our desire to bring together a diversity of voices to network, reflect, and strategise for the future. We convened people from across our networks, different sectors and partnerships including people with lived experience, digital inclusion leaders and advocates from across England, Scotland and Wales.

One year on since the UK Government's Digital Inclusion Action Plan, and in the midst of debates from Digital ID to social media bans for children, what do we think are the biggest opportunities, priorities, and challenges?



Exploring 5 key themes:

Recognising the breadth of barriers, enablers and sectors where digital exclusion surfaces we centered discussions around the following themes

Skills & employability

15% of the population still lacks foundational digital skills, which remains a barrier to economic opportunity

Poverty, data poverty & financial inclusion

24% of households struggle to afford communication services, yet high digital capability saves people £815 a year

Online safety & media literacy

Almost half of adult internet users would like to see more safety measures on online platforms

AI & emerging tech

38% of adults feel less confident online since the rise of AI, even though AI use at work is growing (22%)

Public services inc. healthcare

92% of adults believe essential services now require an internet connection

Who was there

Joining us were representatives from government departments, devolved nations and public sector bodies, members of the Digital Inclusion Action Committee, our strategic partners (Accenture, Nominet, Virgin Media O2 and VodafoneThree), representatives from the private and public sector,, voluntary sector organisations (national and local), libraries and other community organisations in the National Digital Inclusion Network, alongside people with lived experience of digital exclusion.



Themes from the event

Change is fast, we need to keep up – in policy, legislation and practice we need to find ways where we can be ready, anticipate change, adapt and capitalise on the opportunities for inclusion

Responsibility and accountability – across themes, there was a strong call for clarity on where leadership lies and who can contribute the resources needed to ensure everyone can participate in a digital society

Non-digital and assisted pathways – people shared stories of those who could not or did not want to adopt 'digital first' services, and explored how responsibility for inclusion could be mandated or incentivised in all sectors

Embedding digital inclusion into service design – consensus emerged that retrofitting for digital inclusion does not work, and that more work was needed to enable digital inclusion through system and service design

What we heard: Skills & employability

Digital inclusion is essential for economic opportunity

Key stats:

- **6.3 million more people** are online now than in 2016
- **15%** of people do not have all the **foundational level essential digital skills** (no change between 2024 and 2025)

Source: Lloyds Consumer Digital Index, 2025

Policy context:

- Opening up opportunities through skills is a priority pillar in the UK Government's **Digital Inclusion Action Plan**
- The **Essential Digital Skills Framework** will be refreshed so it can better reflect changes like the rise and expansion of AI and social media
- The **Get Britain Working programme** is funding trailblazers in England and in Wales to join up local support across work, health and skills

Where are we now?

- ✓ **Greater awareness** of digital skills for employability
- ✓ **Rise of AI and online services** have put digital inclusion higher on the policy agenda
- ✓ **New funds** for employability and tech careers with an AI focus
- 🚩 **System gap:** Schools lack adequate tech and teachers for AI, computing, digital life skills
- 🚩 **Workforce risk:** AI impacts entry-level jobs, and increases the risks of workforce deskilling and digital exclusion

Recommendations

- 🎯 Secure long-term funding for localised, joined up approaches to improve employability and skills, with digital skills included
- 🎯 Ensure the schools curriculum and support to upskill teachers keeps pace with tech change
- 🎯 Harness the power of AI to help people improve their skills, and to support digital inclusion
- 🎯 Update the Essential Digital Skills framework to reflect AI skills at all levels
- 🎯 Rethink entry-level jobs where AI is driving displacement

What we heard: AI & emerging tech

New technologies can widen or help close the digital divide

Key stats:

- **22%** of the adult workforce **use AI as part of their job** (up from 12% in 2023)
- **38%** of adults feel **less confident going online** since the rise of AI tools

Sources: Ofcom, Adults Media Use & Attitudes Report, 2025. Public First polling for Good Things Foundation, September 2025.

Policy context:

- Joining up is starting across AI and digital inclusion, despite the links not being made in the **Digital Inclusion Action Plan** or **AI Opportunities Action Plan**
- The **AI Security Institute** has been set up by Government to minimise AI risks
- **AI displacing jobs** is a major concern for the public, government, and industry

Where are we now?

- ✓ **Early benefits:** AI can save time, costs, unlock knowledge and opportunity for those who are able and willing to use it
- 🚩 **Digital divide:** AI widens the gap and increases fears for people facing digital barriers, adding to what community organisations need to support people with
- 🚩 **Change is happening fast:** Lots of us are struggling to keep up
- 🚩 **New risks:** Such as deep fakes, biased data, impact on entry level jobs, local authorities and others struggling to keep pace

Recommendations

- 🎯 Introduce stronger legislation and regulation on AI ethics and implementation to reduce risks
- 🎯 Consult with people with lived experience of digital exclusion when developing policies and interventions
- 🎯 Policy and interventions should combine AI, digital, and media literacy, and digital inclusion
- 🎯 Explore more use of agentic AI as a “leveller” to make essential online services more accessible
- 🎯 Regulate for AI platform design and use to be digitally inclusive

What we heard: Poverty, data poverty & financial inclusion

Affordability is a barrier to access and use of online services.

Key stats:

- **24%** of households **struggle to afford** communications services
- People with **higher digital and financial capability** save **£815** more per year.
- **£24 billion** in income-related benefits and social tariffs is estimated to be unclaimed in 2025/2026.

Sources: Ofcom, Communications Affordability Tracker, October 2025. Lloyds, Consumer Digital Index, 2025. Policy in Practice, Missing Out 2025.

Policy context:

- Tackling data and device poverty is a priority pillar in the UK Government's **Digital Inclusion Action Plan**
- **Voluntary social tariffs** for broadband and mobile connectivity are available but take-up is still low (9% as of 2026)
- The UK Government's **Financial Inclusion Strategy** was published in 2025 and includes a chapter on digital inclusion and access to banking

Where are we now?

- ✓ **Engagement** with the Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS), awareness of affordability barriers and the 'online poverty premium' are growing
- ✓ **Learning is being shared** across local authorities and others
- 🚩 **Accountability gap:** still a lack of accountability and funding from government to address the affordability barriers
- 🚩 **Offline isolation:** Digital first services ignore offline needs; social tariffs are not meeting the needs of some excluded groups

Recommendations

- 🎯 Treat digital connectivity as the essential service it now is
- 🎯 Provide free connectivity for people with no other option as part of a range of approaches
- 🎯 Strengthen links across financial and digital inclusion strategies, and regulatory frameworks
- 🎯 Ensure and encourage the use of equality impact assessments to identify and mitigate digital exclusion risks

What we heard: Public services including healthcare

Initiatives like Digital ID and the NHS 10 Year Plan need to have digital inclusion baked in, not bolted on

Key stats:

- **74%** of patients **used an online GP service** in the last 12 months (69% in 2024)
- **92%** of adults believe **most essential services** now require an internet connection to use them

Sources: NHS, GP Patient Survey, 2025. Public First polling for Good Things Foundation, April 2025.

Policy context:

- Breaking down barriers to digital services is a priority pillar in the UK Government's **Digital Inclusion Action Plan**
- The UK Government is pursuing a '**digital-first**' approach to service delivery to bring efficiency savings plus more convenience and ease for the user
- The **NHS 10 Year Health Plan for England** commits to '**analogue to digital**' as one of three big shifts for better health care access and delivery

Where are we now?

- ✓ **Rising use of online services** in the NHS and public sector
- ✓ **Growth in partnerships** for digital inclusion between public, private, and voluntary sectors
- 🚩 **False assumptions** about digital capabilities leave people struggling when using services
- 🚩 **Huge variety of platforms, apps and interfaces** is confusing, and makes it harder to give support
- 🚩 **AI amplifies risks of bias** in decision making and services

Recommendations

- 🎯 Legislate for digital inclusion to be built into public services and the rollout of significant changes affecting millions, like Digital ID
- 🎯 Regulate for the use of simpler, standardised interfaces, identity checks, and safety features in essential services
- 🎯 Maintain non-digital pathways for people that need them
- 🎯 Provide multi-year funding to community hubs, libraries and others to provide local support acting as 'digital A&Es'

What we heard: Online safety and media literacy

Supporting people to protect themselves in an ever changing online world. Identifying risks and knowing how to respond

Key stats:

- **Almost half** of adult internet users (48%) would like to see **more safety measures in place** on online platforms
- **73%** of adults feel **confident in judging** whether something they read online is **true or false** (80% among adults in highest socio-economic group, and 61% among adults in lowest socio-economic group)

Sources: Ofcom, Online Nation, 2025. Ofcom, Media Literacy Tracker, 2025

Policy context:

- The **Online Safety Act (2023)** is now in force with expanded duties for Ofcom to promote online safety and media literacy
- The independent **Curriculum and Assessment Review** is resulting in more focus on digital media literacy, including critical thinking, in schools
- The UK Government's new **Media Literacy Action Plan** recognises the needs of both adults and children, and the value of supporting people 'where they are'

Where are we now?

- ✓ **Increased public awareness** via media coverage of deepfakes, dis/misinformation, scams, and social media harms
- ✓ **Online Safety Act** is now in force
- ✓ **More alignment** across digital, media, AI literacy, and inclusion
- 🚩 **Eroding trust online:** AI is now enabling more sophisticated scams and mis/disinformation
- 🚩 **Failing to keep pace:** Legislation and regulation lag behind tech advancements; organisations of all kinds are struggling to upskill and benefit from emerging tech

Recommendations

- 🎯 Globally: an agile, international policy, legislative and regulatory environment that protects and empowers internet users
- 🎯 Nationally: Implementation of system-level protections for internet users of all ages, with strong enforcement of the Online Safety Act
- 🎯 Minimise harms by design rather than relying on an underfunded safety net of VCSE organisations
- 🎯 Gather better data on specific harms and who is impacted, and use this to improve design

Charting a path for partnership in an AI-driven world

Reflections on what we heard, and where we need to go together
Vicki Sellick MBE, Chief Executive, Good Things Foundation

Good Things is proud to partner with a network of 8,000 members across the UK, industry partners, charity sector peers and government, working together to ensure nobody faces digital exclusion. This collaborative spirit was evident in the room in March too – people from different sectors, geographies and experience sharing their stories of what has worked to date and what is needed for the future.

There has been much progress in the last few years. More households than ever are connected (Good Things helping to connect 600,000 alone), there's more awareness of the need for skills content to give adults confidence and increase safety online, and the Government's landmark Digital Inclusion Action Plan set out strategic intent for the field.

But as technologies rapidly evolve and AI becomes more present in our lives, the numbers who report feeling digitally confident is growing not shrinking – 38% of adults feel less confident online due to the rise of AI, accelerating the divide for the 15% of people who do not have foundational digital skills. Clearly there's more to do.

Digital inclusion is everyone's responsibility. We need better design of services, better provision of skills training, better funding of support and more. And that will only come when we combine the insights, skills and resources of many. This event began to surface what is possible when we come together across sectors and geographies to imagine a new future. Now the challenge is to turn words into action, together.



Thank you!

We would like to extend our thanks to all of those who joined us on the day, including:

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Businesses including: BBC, BT, Deloitte, FutureDotNow, Google, Impact Match, Lodestone, People's Partnership, Post Office, Reconome

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