

What makes a 'good solution' to data poverty?

CHES: Co-defining what counts as a 'good' solution to data poverty

Executive Summary

Data poverty is a component of the digital divide. It is defined as: "Individuals, households or communities who cannot afford sufficient, private and secure mobile or broadband data to meet their essential needs" (Lucas et al., 2021). Through our Data Poverty Lab with Nominet, we're seeking sustainable solutions to help eradicate data poverty.

Since October 2021, we've co-hosted a series of workshops with people with lived experience with APLE Collective and Friends, Families and Travellers. We did this to ground the Data Poverty Lab in people's experiences and ideas; we believe understanding and acting upon these helps to design more effective, sustainable solutions. With APLE Collective, we identified five dimensions of what makes a 'good' solution, framed as a CHES board to support discussions. The main insights from workshops, and some implications which follow, are below; the rest of the paper outlines the analysis and methods.

CHES: Co-defined dimensions of a 'good' solution to data poverty

Cheap – is it genuinely affordable - not just at the start but over time?

Cost emerged as the single most important issue in the workshops - but what counts as 'affordable' was felt to vary widely. For some, a 'social tariff' (£10 - £20 per month) is still out of reach. Some were wary of offers linked to state benefits. Considering entry costs as well as costs over time and contracts is important.

Handy – is it easy to find out about? Is it easy to apply for and access?

Accessing the internet at home, away from home, and on the move matters more now, requiring a mix of mobile data, broadband, public wifi - and wifi on public transport and other settings. A 'handy' solution is inclusive by design - easy to use, jargon-free, with minimal bureaucracy to navigate, and addressing language barriers.



Enough – does it allow me to meet my essential online needs? Is it fast enough? Is there enough data?

People felt accessing online 'essentials' should be free - and also asked who decides what is 'essential' or a 'luxury' or 'enough'. Ideas included 'freemium' models for internet access (drawing comparisons to accessing TV channels). People talked about the cost of data-hungry apps such as video calling - which have become widespread.

Safe – does it ensure my privacy is protected, and I'm not at greater risk of harm?

Online scams, privacy and security were frequently raised - with some people making a direct link between experiencing data poverty and their confidence to use the internet. While free public wifi was valued as part of a spectrum of solutions, public spaces were felt unsafe and unsuitable for some things, such as banking and health.

Suitable – is it suitable for my circumstances, and flexible if these change? Will I feel stigma or loss of pride?

Solutions need to be designed in ways which don't feel stigmatising to apply for or use - many were critical of solutions tied to receiving state benefits. Solutions need to flex around changing circumstances, rather than require commitments with penalties. Some are locked out of affordable solutions due to personal housing circumstances.

Implications for solving data poverty

There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Some solutions (such as free public WiFi in community centres or libraries) will score well on some dimensions, and less well on others. A spectrum of solutions is likely to be needed. **CHES is a valuable check on the strengths and limitations** of a policy, product or service, helping to identify where to improve or what else may be needed for the solution to work well for people facing data poverty.

Public wifi and **free internet access in public spaces** continue to have an important place in the spectrum of solutions to data poverty, but the accelerated shift to online services (such as health, banking, government services) have increased the need for secure connectivity and privacy, as well as the need for digital and online safety skills. Public wifi is 'cheap', sometimes 'handy', but not always 'safe', 'suitable' or 'enough'.

1.2%

Estimated take-up of broadband social tariffs amongst eligible households (Ofcom, 2022)

The importance of **reducing additional barriers** - avoiding jargon, tackling stigma, information in community languages, designing a user journey that works for people with low digital skills, low literacy, disability-inclusive - sits alongside promoting support and encouraging **take-up with dignity among target groups.**

Ofcom estimates that only 1.2% of eligible customers have taken up social tariffs for fixed broadband. Insights suggest that **very low take-up of social tariffs for fixed broadband** may reflect a mix of factors in addition to those cited by Ofcom (low awareness and lack of promotion), for instance: wariness about solutions tied to DWP and receipt of benefits; stigma or loss of pride; and experiences of red-tape or delays.

The new **National Databank** was welcomed as a concept for providing free, safe mobile data connectivity, donated by three telecoms providers, and not requiring proof of benefits, income status or residence; 'handy' is the main dimension to improve. Data gifting by individuals was suggested for further exploration.

A universal offer of free internet access for basic needs has appeal, but quickly raises hard questions about what is 'enough' or 'essential' and who decides. Research to establish a benchmark - a **Minimum Digital Living Standard** for the goods, services and capabilities households need in the UK today - will provide a benchmark, involving members of the public to reach consensus on an acceptable minimum.

[Read the full report on our website](#)



References

Lucas, P., Robinson, R. and Treacy, L. (2021). 'Data Poverty in Scotland and Wales.' [online] Available at: <https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/data-poverty-scotland-and-wales/> [Accessed 8 November 2021].
Ofcom (2022). 'Affordability of communications services: Summary of findings and update on availability and take-up of broadband social tariffs.' [online] Available at: https://www.ofcom.org.uk/___data/assets/pdf_file/0016/232522/Affordability-of-Communications-Services.pdf [Accessed 7 March 2022].

Author

Tom McGrath – Policy and Research Officer, Good Things Foundation

Editors

Dr. Emma Stone – Director of Evidence and Engagement, Good Things Foundation; Hannah Whelan – Advocacy Manager, Good Things Foundation; Jane Mackey – Senior Evaluation and Research Manager, Good Things Foundation; Dr. Katy Goldstraw – APLE Collective/Senior Lecturer, Staffordshire University.

Acknowledgements

With thanks to the members and staff at APLE Collective and Friends, Families and Travellers, for co-producing this research with us; to Nominet for funding the Data Poverty Lab and for their feedback and guidance; and to the team at Good Things Foundation. Executive summary design by Tom McGrath.