

Executive summary

**Local communities and  
the internet ecosystem:  
Scaling solutions to data  
poverty in the UK**

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# Foreword

**The Data Poverty Lab is imagining a world where everyone has the internet access they need.** In this world, anyone in the UK can pick up a phone, tablet or laptop and be connected. They don't start a video call with their GP and find out drops out mid-conversation. They don't walk to a friend's house to apply for jobs. They don't stand next to a chicken shop to check maps using the free WiFi. They have access to essential UK services. They connect with family and friends. They participate and thrive in our modern world.

**This report is a provocation.** It offers a snapshot of current and emergent ways of tackling data poverty, their pros and cons, and ways to scale solutions within the complex ecosystem of internet access.

**There are many ways our future could unfold.** We face a critical moment in the wake of a global pandemic and the midst of economic challenges, where we can shape the future horizon of digital equity in the UK.

**Interventions which tackle data poverty will help level up UK society.** Data poverty is best understood as a cause and a consequence of social inequality. It is my hope these recommendations to scale solutions will mean more UK citizens get the internet access they need.

**I set out to find place-based pioneers and ways to scale community-led solutions.** What became abundantly clear is that the local cannot be disconnected from the national. In this complex ecosystem, community work is inextricably tied to a national and international ecosystem.

**Across the four nations, I found brilliant examples of determined yet modest community leadership.** From foodbank workers giving out SIM cards to start-ups developing new technologies, there are incredible pockets of determined people making change happen across the UK. The case studies throughout this report give a glimmer of what goes on behind the scenes.

**I also found huge amounts of goodwill and collaboration.** Telecommunications companies teamed up with housing associations; Local Authority teams joined forces with charities and social enterprises. This is a space full of energy, vibrancy and urgency.

**Communities know their local people better than anyone.** As we build towards a more equitable and inclusive digital future, we cannot rely on communities finding workarounds to gaps in national policy and provision. We must create locally-driven, nationally supported solutions. We must build funding, structural support and a coherent national strategy.

**This is a journey towards a new horizon.** Fifty years ago, no one could have predicted what a smart phone might mean to daily lives. We can't know the future but we can decide, right now, to bring everyone with us.

**UK life exists online.** Over two million people are disconnected from the internet, and so our society. We must tackle data poverty with the urgency it demands, to build a world where everyone has the internet access they need.



# Executive summary

The Data Poverty Lab is run by Good Things Foundation, a national digital inclusion charity. They commissioned this report – one of three fellowships – to explore solutions to data poverty across the UK. This research takes its North Star from Good Things Foundation’s 2022-25 strategy; imagining a world **where everyone has the internet access they need.**

## Aim of report

This research explores what data poverty is, how it manifests in the daily lives of people living in the UK, the current solutions available and how we can collectively scale these solutions across government, business, the third sector and communities across the UK.

This report offers a pragmatic approach to comparing interventions and some practical next steps to tackling data poverty. It offers a few paving slabs on a long pathway to building a more equitable digital future. It is a provocation for charity workers, policymakers, Local Authority teams, academics and beyond to consider our next steps in taking collective action. What can we do, together, to make data poverty a thing of the past?

## Methodology

The findings in this report are drawn from interviews with more than 85 individuals, spanning frontline workers, people with lived experience of data poverty, telecommunications workers, policy experts, politicians, trade industry representatives, academics, IT experts and digital inclusion experts. Alongside desktop research, this forms a snapshot of data poverty as it appeared in the Summer of 2022.

Throughout the report, you will find case studies from different parts of the UK and quotes. These illustrate both the reality of living with data poverty and how communities and organisations are building solutions. I recommend browsing the quotes and case studies of this report; they breathe life into a complex subject.

## Structure

Part 1 explores what data poverty is and why it matters. Part 2 looks at existing solutions, their advantages and disadvantages and how they might be scaled.

Part 3 considers the wider ecosystem and how we can build a future-proof approach to digital inclusion and equity.

# Findings and insights

Five key findings emerged from this research:

- 1** | Data poverty in the UK excludes people from access to essential services and participating in UK society.
- 2** | Data poverty disproportionately affects people who already face social inequality and deepens their disadvantage.
- 3** | Affordability and accessibility is a central challenge.
- 4** | Strong solutions to data poverty exist in the UK and some are ripe for scaling.
- 5** | Community-led solutions can only be understood and scaled within the context of a wider ecosystem.

A key output of this research was [The Periodic Table of Internet Elements](#), a graphic which lays out different elements of how the internet is used by UK citizens. This graphic captures what has long felt intuitive; that internet access is essential, a human right and spans essential needs, identity, self-expression and connection. If we are not online in today's world, we are excluded from UK society.

UK citizens who have experience of being in care, claim benefits, are refugees, have a disability or long-term illness, are fleeing domestic violence, or face other forms of social disadvantage are more likely to face data poverty. Lack of good internet access makes their situation worse. In times of crisis or cycles of struggle, access to the internet is all the more vital.

The cost of living crisis and the impending recession is forcing families to choose between rent, bills, food and internet. Affordability is key, but it is closely accompanied by accessibility. Citizens are not always aware of cheaper options, nor do they feel empowered to access them, due to fear of being disconnected, accessibility barriers and the complexity of switching when life is already a tangle of complicated threads.

This research details nine solutions to data poverty, offering their pros and cons and how they might be scaled. It offers a [framework for comparing solutions](#), specifically focused on the needs of individuals disproportionately affected by data poverty. This framework can help us understand solutions now and in the future, as technology evolves.

The ecosystem of internet access is complex: telecommunications companies, government at all levels (local, regional and national and central Government), regulation, global investment, local communities, philanthropy and the individual intersect to create access to what has become a human right. The internet is now equivalent to a utility, a pipeline to essential state-delivered services, like the NHS. Community interventions are vitally important, but they are liberated or hindered by the wider conditions. To scale up community-led solutions, we have to look at the wider ecosystem and conditions for a sustainable future.

# Recommendations

This report offers three overarching recommendations:

## Recommendation 1

**Focus collective effort on scaling solutions for reaching people who need internet access the most.** The three solutions identified as most ripe for scaling are:

- A WiFi in a box:** this relatively cheap technology uses mobile signal to provide home WiFi. This is a quick fix to get people and households internet access now. It is more suitable and sustainable than other quick-fix solutions. The case studies featured in this report show how.
- B Social tariffs:** affordable tariffs for people claiming benefits in the UK is a core, scalable solution. Work must be done collaboratively with industry to scale up adoption. This could be via automatic enrolment, switching support, awareness raising and other methods. Central Government subsidy will be important to make this truly affordable to everyone who needs access to essential services.
- C Community fibre providers:** are organisations who put community needs as a central mission of their work. Altnets who advocate on behalf of their communities will be crucial in getting rural areas the fibre infrastructure needed for long-term connectivity. Market conditions, regulation and subsidies must continue to support these organisations

## Recommendation 2

**Continue to build a collaborative effort across the ecosystem, harnessing goodwill to develop appropriate regulation and government support.** Getting everyone the internet access they need has to be a collective effort. The UK infrastructure backbone comes largely from private investment. There is much goodwill amongst telecommunications companies to address data poverty, but they have a responsibility to make a financial return to keep that investment coming. The UK needs this investment, to keep up with future infrastructure needs.

Market forces have helped us bring the overall cost of internet down; it is relatively cheap compared to many other countries. In tackling data poverty – those being left behind by this system – regulation and subsidy must work collaboratively with industry to harness market forces and find a delicate balance that services all UK citizens. This will help us move into the future and bring everyone with us.

## Recommendation 3

**Politicians and public policy makers need raise the level of prioritisation of digital inclusion.**

Data poverty is inextricably tied to digital skills, devices and confidence. It affects the success of every government department – health, work, energy, enterprise, housing, education, benefits, migration, tax – at every level of government. All of these elements of our lives and of government require good internet access in the modern age.

The impact and budgetary pain of data poverty is felt by all departments, but the responsibility is not shared by all. This report recommends:

- A** A new and unifying Digital Inclusion Strategy from Central Government, with buy in across government departments
- B** Manifesto commitments to prioritising digital inclusion
- C** Independent research which quantifies the productivity and economic losses of data poverty

# Limitations and further study

This report offers a snapshot of data poverty and its solutions as it was in the Summer of 2022. Technology evolves ever faster; some solutions were not selected as ripe for scaling due to issues of privacy and net neutrality. A person who finds internet unaffordable or who struggles to access internet should never pay for that access with their privacy or rights. In future, evolutions in implementation or technology might address these issues, in which case these reservations will be rightfully out of date.

The Periodic Table of Internet Elements and the overview of solutions are not exhaustive. Social inequalities and social barriers are not homogenous; the different people I spent time with had vastly different experiences. What is attempted here is to bring together commonalities in experience which can help guide decision makers and passionate people tackling this issue make challenging choices. More research is needed on the impact at a larger scale, the variety of experience in urban, coastal and rural areas, the intersectional nature of inequalities and the environmental impact of these solutions.



# Conclusion

Lack of good access to the internet is both a cause and a consequence of social inequality. In the UK, it affects access to essential services, our ability to express ourselves, how we connect with others and participation in society. The scalable solutions identified here offer a next step towards a future horizon, where data poverty is a thing of the past. This research is inspired by tangible examples of how collective action across the four nations is making progress; the case studies here show that we are already finding a way forward. The challenge is how we bring everyone with us into that inclusive digital future.

