

LLEP Digital Poverty Call for Evidence Analysis

May 2021



Introduction

Digital poverty can be defined as the inability to access or utilise digital technologies effectively. It is predominantly caused by a lack of digital skills and/or an inability to access digital technology (for example, unable to afford a laptop or broadband, or live in a rural area with poor broadband).

The issue has been subject of much discussion during the past year at a national level, but local knowledge was often anecdotal or disjointed. To address this knowledge gap, the Digital Poverty Call for Evidence was requested by the LLEP Skills Advisory Panel to provide more granular data on digital poverty across Leicester and Leicestershire and ensure that any funds available, such as the repurposed Growing Places Fund, were targeted appropriately. The LLEP Digital Poverty call for evidence was launched in March 2021 and lasted for six weeks to mid-April 2021. In all, 31 detailed responses were received from a survey (see appendix for questions) and other supplementary evidence was gathered directly from partners such as local authorities, public health, colleges and voluntary groups.

Exclusion from the online world is generally a symptom of social and economic deprivation. Approximately five million adults are digitally excluded in the UK and are often marginalised with lack of education or employment, disability, or age identified as risk factors. This means that the most vulnerable individuals in society, who could see the greatest benefit from the implementation of digital public services, are typically those least able to utilise them.

Summary

Digital poverty impacts all age groups but the problems identified impact different age groups in different ways.

Young People

Digital poverty for young people came into focus during school closures when teaching was forced on-line. This created a high risk of a digital divide between 'haves' and 'have nots' - ultimately affecting pupil's ability to engage with academic work which in turn could have lifelong negative impacts. Some of the moves to digital education are becoming embedded as student's homework and other information are increasingly provided digitally.

Main issues for young people:

- Affordability (devices and data)
- Access to the right devices (sharing devices at home or only having access via a smartphone for academic work)
- Connectivity (limited access to broadband, reliance on public hot spots)

Young people were less likely to lack the basic skills or knowledge to participate digitally. However, this was identified on some occasions (for example for students with additional needs), along with lack of parental skills when help is required.

Adults

The adult group could broadly be divided into two groups: working age adults and older residents. Issues are not exclusive to each group, merely more or less prevalent.

The main issues identified with adults were:

- Basic or no digital skills
- Access to the right devices
- Affordability

Whereas barriers to education were frequently highlighted for young people, digital exclusion for adults, especially older people, meant barriers to services which are increasingly on-line, including support services. Like education, some aspects were accelerated by the pandemic but have now become embedded.

Risk factors

Groups commonly identified as being at risk of digital exclusion, include:

- Older people
- People who live in rural areas or socially isolated
- People on low incomes (Unemployed and living in social housing)
- People with low levels of education
- People with poor health/long term medical conditions/disability

Multiple risk factors can be present in the same individual or household and demographic data by geography can help identify where these risks may be higher.

Evidence

National and local evidence from external sources

It is commonly believed that everyone now has online access, but this is not the case. There is still a significant minority that are digitally excluded, and they are amongst our oldest and poorest citizens.

According to ONS¹ figures, 10% of the UK adult population (5.3 million) are non-internet users². The 2019 UK Digital Index found that 11.9 million people in the UK lack basic digital skills they need to get by in today's world. Six million people do not know how to turn on a device and 7.1 million people cannot open an app. Older people; low-income groups and asylum seekers are amongst the groups most likely to suffer digital exclusion³.

In addition, the East Midlands region is not doing as well as some other parts of England⁴:

- 11.5% of the East Midlands population are non-internet users (third highest out of nine regions)
- 71% of the East Midlands population have the 5 basic digital skills (joint lowest)
- 9% of the East Midlands population have no digital skills whatsoever (third highest)

LLEP call for evidence

The LLEP call for evidence included a specifically written survey but also asked partners to submit any evidence collected from their own service.

Digital issues for Adults

LLEP survey

The survey conducted by the LLEP included information from a range of partners which reflected the experience of a variety of service users. The responses represent issues highlighted by partners working in local authorities, voluntary sector, schools, colleges, specialist services for vulnerable people as well as other local stakeholders.

The graph below categorises the information received into broad themes.

¹ Office for National Statistics (2019) Exploring the UK's digital divide, London: ONS

² Defined as people who have never used the internet or not used it in the last three months

³ Lloyds Bank (2019) UK Digital Consumer Index:

https://www.lloydsbank.com/assets/media/pdfs/banking_with_us/whats-happening/LB-Consumer-Digital-Index-2018-Report.pdf

⁴ ONS op cit.

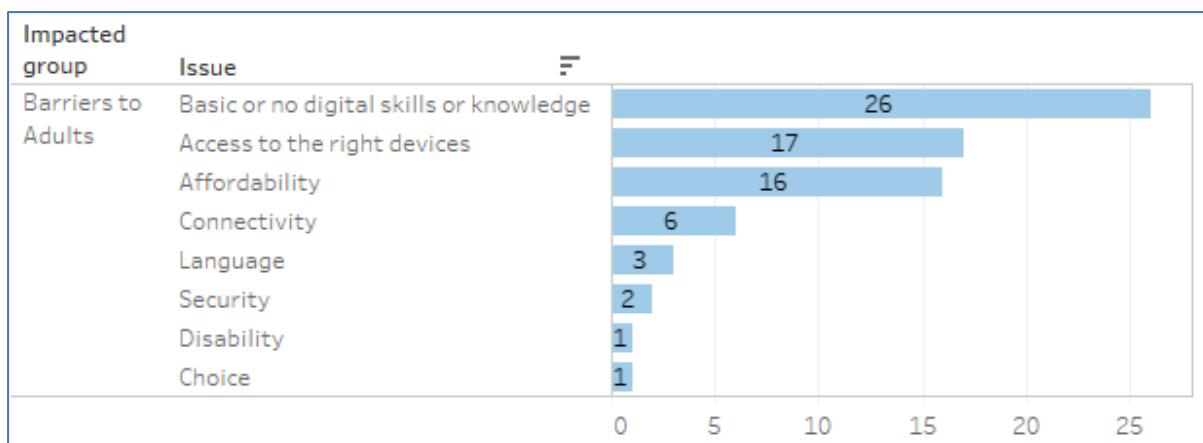


Figure 1 Responses to LLEP Survey on barriers to digital inclusion
Source: LLEP

The above problems led to several practical issues, many of which were exacerbated by life under lockdown:

- Barriers to socialising and lack of awareness of tools that may help
- Difficulty in accessing services, many of which are moving on-line
- Difficulty to engage in consultation or feedback to express issues
- Difficulty in finding and carrying out work if digital skills required

STAR evidence

STAR (Supporting Tenants and Residents) provides housing support for council tenants in Leicester, focussing on those who have been homeless or are at risk of being homeless. This is an especially vulnerable group.

STAR Digital Exclusion Data March 2020-March 2021-recorded from STAR Referral form is below. The data demonstrates how the most disadvantaged are impacted.

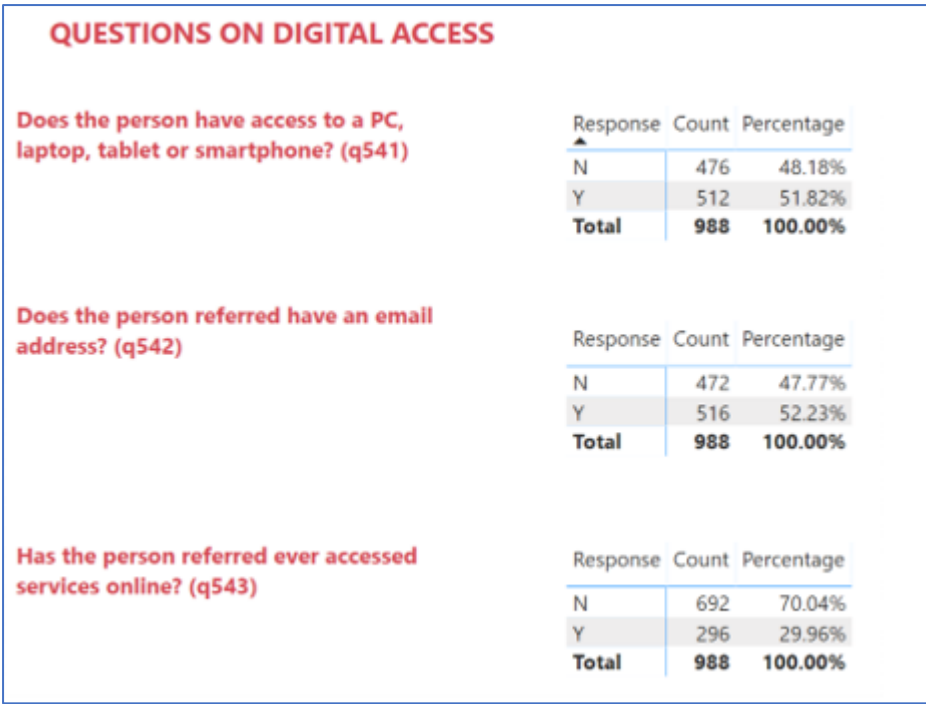


Figure 2 STAR Digital Access
Source: STAR

STAR commented that the service uses considerable resource to combat digital exclusion, although this is not the main focus of the service.

GREAT Project

The GREAT Project (Getting Ready for Employment and Training) aims to help mainly out-of-work parents move towards work and training. A survey found that between 10-30% of people had some limitations on digital access that could inhibit work or access to services:

Hardware:

28 out of 35 had good and up to date hardware

Access to Hardware:

21 out of 35 own computer and don't need to share

Access to smartphone:

32 out of 35 had access to a smartphone

Access to wi-fi:

30 out of 35 had good access to wi-fi

Leicester Health and Wellbeing Survey (2018)

The Leicester Health and Wellbeing survey was conducted in 2018. Although this is older data, the survey included 2224 response in a survey by Ipsos and provides good local insight. The survey found that:

46% of 65+ year olds don't use internet compared to 11% overall. The figure dropped from 59% in 2015 and it is fair to assume the figure has further dropped since 2018. However, the numbers are very high for a significant proportion of the population.

Issues affecting children

LLEP call for evidence

The chart below categorises responses into broad themes:

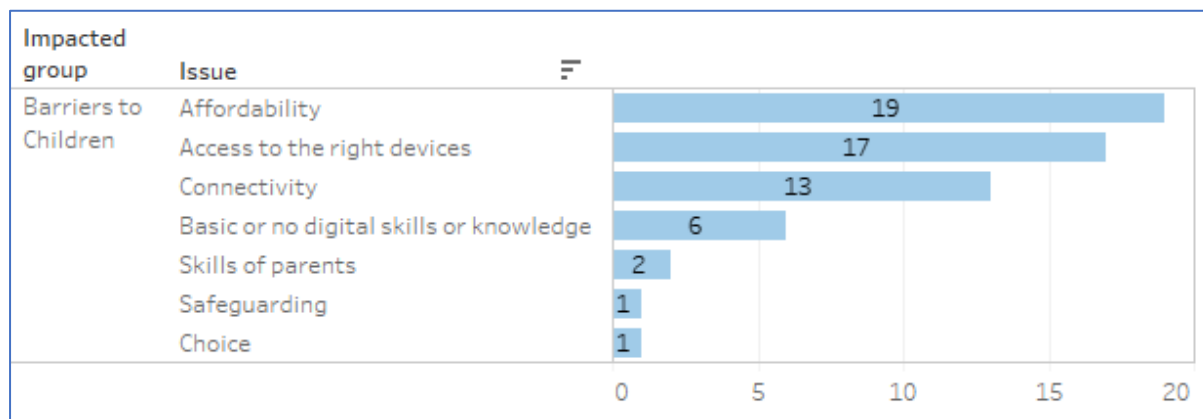


Figure 3 Digital exclusion for young people

Digital exclusion for young people has become a high-profile issue during the Covid-19 pandemic as education moved on-line for young people from reception age to university.

Although young people are regarded as part of a 'digital generation'. A number of issues were highlighted:

- Young people are often familiar with particular apps or websites but this may not extend to other software which may be required for education for example
- Young people often access services via phones, which are not ideal for prolonged digital learning. This also requires data, which can carry a cost or require visiting a digital hotspot for a public network
- There is not a digital 'level playing field' for young people. Broadband connectivity, access to devices and parental knowledge can all significantly impact a young person's experience and ultimately life chances.

Loughborough College and Education

Loughborough college provided the following information in the call for evidence:

More than 900 students aged 16-18 and 90 adults are in receipt of a bursary from the college due to low income.

A survey by the college showed that:

- 70 students indicated that they did not have a reliable internet connection at home.
- 75 students indicated that they had no access to a device to access online learning.
- A further 200 students indicated an issue with accessing online learning due to a number of factors, including: having one device in the household with other household members, broken devices, only access only via a mobile phone, having

an old device unable to support new technology, no WIFI, access only to mobile data etc.

- 128 students with an EHCP, 65 of whom are high needs, many of whom experience difficulty accessing digital learning independently.

There are 4 FE colleges and several sixths forms in the LLEP area and this is only a sample from one institution. Other anecdotal information has frequently mentioned post-16 course drop out (including Adult Education and job skills schemes) when students have been unable to fully participate due to digital barriers of connectivity, equipment or skills.

Issues for Business

LLEP call for evidence

The call for evidence also considered the impact on business. However, it must be noted that the vast majority of responders were not employed in private business but were providing responses based mainly on opinion or anecdotal information. The strongest overall themes related to the disruption to business with additional skills and costs being required to meet the transition.

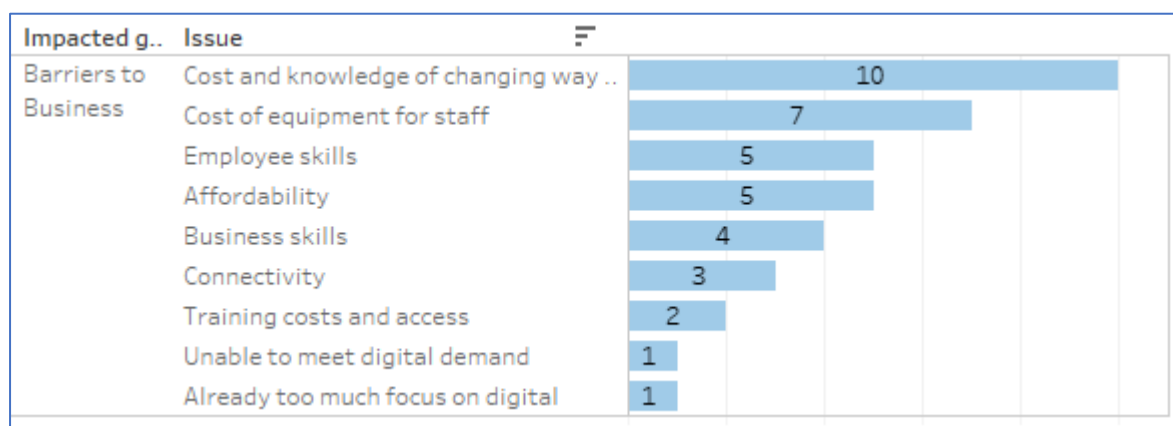


Figure 4 Impact of digital poverty on business
Source: LLEP

Business Tracker survey

The Business Tracker survey was conducted by the LLEP between December 2020 and January 2021. This provides information about how digital poverty could have an impact on job seekers and the pool of labour available to local businesses.

- In the last year, 64% of businesses have had staff working from home who don't usually
- One third of businesses can operate with a substantial proportion of staff working from home
- Pre Covid, 64% of businesses had **no** provision to work from home

- 60% of businesses are planning to offer more flexibility in the future

The clear implication from both the call for evidence and the Business Tracker survey is that any prospective employees will need at least a basic level of digital skills. There may also be a requirement for employees to have adequate connectivity and knowledge to work independently.

Qualitative evidence

The call for evidence collected many examples of how issues identified translated to practical problems for LLEP residents.

Reaching People worked with the city council to deliver Easter food and activities to disadvantaged families. Within this single example, much of the statistical data is brought to life with real world examples, transferable to different scenarios.

Easter food activities

– “...the needs are much bigger than I thought and we have not had this kind of evidence of need before.” Jenny Hand Reaching People

Issue identified	Real life example
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital Skills and Knowledge • Affordability / connectivity 	<p>Registering children for the scheme:</p> <p>“..parents struggled with a form that required them to scroll down to enrol more than one child – so things we might think easy and clear – are a struggle or slow to come through if you don’t have the data so you give up before you get to the end.”</p> <p>This is how access to services can be restricted.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language barriers 	<p>In Belgrave and Highfields there was a clear issue of translation and huge area of need – phones can translate using google but not everyone has mobile data – they use phones for free communication WhatsApp or Zoom for free for 40mins so the skills together with language are absolutely critical plus the access to data. (this scheme had 600 children a week)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital Skills and Language 	<p>More than 200 had to be registered while they were in the queue as they had not been able to use the online form.</p> <p>This highlights where human support is still required to access services in some cases.</p>

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STAR (Supporting Tenants and Residents)

STAR also provided real-life examples:

"I manage a service, STAR which supports vulnerable and excluded tenants. Every task made digital is another task my Housing Related Support Workers need to support vulnerable tenants with. We need 'digital buddies' for vulnerable people to sit with, in Libraries, or to support people at home after Covid. Most of the people we work with will not attend training, they need one to one support for practical tasks, like setting up an email address etc.

We are one of the few services that ask for any data about digital exclusion. Our data shows 50% of vulnerable tenants do not have devices, if they do poverty may mean they have little data,

over 50% do not have email addresses-crucial in accessing services, a further 70% do not access online services.

They also are not accessing online services without support. These are some of the most excluded groups who are excluded further due to the move to online services".

Cath Lewis STAR

Potential solutions

Overarching themes from the evidence

Three strong themes emerged repeatedly in the evidence as factors to address digital poverty:

Ability to access the internet for free

- Via public buildings e.g. libraries, clubs and other public buildings
- For school aged children
- Data provided for those who need it to access services

Skills and training

- Basic training available on how to access services and socialise online
- Community courses and bespoke 1-2-1 help where required
- Targeted towards job seekers, parents of school aged children, job seekers
- Support, rather than training, to help with basic helpful tasks

Access to equipment

- Equipment loan schemes for students and job seekers
- Laptops and equipment provided at no cost or low cost
- Better use of 'old' equipment via refurbishment and recycling

Less common than the three main themes, an alternative view was also presented...

Less reliance of Digital Services

Although the survey was strongly targeted at increasing digital literacy and access, a small number of respondents were sceptical of the digitalisation of society. This is included concerns such as:

- 'Digital only' removes personal choice and preference
- A proportion of society who cannot participate digitally are at increased risk of further exclusion
- Young people are already living in a highly digitalised world and more balance to 'off screen' life was required

Ideas of how the main themes could be implemented:

The table below shares some of the ideas from partners about how digital poverty could be address in practice across Leicester and Leicestershire. These ideas are not intended to be proposals but may provide some inspiration for future work:

Idea to address Digital Poverty	Issues addressed and groups benefitting

<p>Target interventions to areas of food poverty as the two issues are often co-existent, thus taking solutions to the community.</p>	<p>Economically disadvantaged groups</p>
<p>Tablets and large screen devices could be targeted towards older users for ease of use, boosting opportunities for social interactions (popular apps are usually more secure than internet searching and emails). This could extend to greater awareness and use for less mobile users to control household tasks like lighting, heating and other devices by voice controlled technology.</p>	<p>Older citizens at risk of loneliness or isolation</p> <p>Improve quality for older residents</p>
<p>Buddying schemes to connect low-skilled users with more digital savvy helpers – tapping into the rise in volunteering experienced during the pandemic. This could include remote support and accommodate different languages.</p>	<p>Help anyone who is digitally excluded across all age and social groups.</p>
<p>Internet access for all had several suggestions such as: internet access via equipment in libraries and other public buildings but also hot spots and 5G connectivity for users own devices.</p>	<p>Disadvantaged groups would benefit the most including job seekers and those trying to access digital services.</p> <p>Young people able to access school and college work.</p>
<p>A voucher system for job seekers and students who require internet access.</p>	<p>Mainly disadvantaged groups who do not have broadband access at home.</p>
<p>An equipment loan system to provide equipment for job seekers, workers or students (a pilot scheme may already be in place in parts of Leicester). This could also be tied to training courses.</p>	<p>Those trying to find work or stay in work.</p> <p>Families where children cannot participate fully in education due to lack of equipment.</p>
<p>Recycling and refurbishment of IT equipment in a co-ordinated way, via a recycling hub or commercial innovation could increase the supply of affordable devices.</p>	<p>Primarily of benefit to economically disadvantaged groups.</p> <p>Also of benefit to the environment and potential to generate income.</p>

Integrate digital skills into ESOL courses	Overcomes language barriers involved in accessing online services.

Some responses suggested more specific projects which could be considered in further detail if funding became available.

Projects already in place

A number of projects addressing digital poverty are already operating in Leicester and Leicestershire. The following were highlighted in the Digital Poverty call for evidence. This is not intended to be a fully comprehensive list of activity in the area.

Moneywise Plus - Reaching People project

Projects aimed at the economically inactive, unemployed and job seekers. Providing financial and digital skills to help people access employment and training opportunities.

Free internet access in community

For example, the Mario Tinenti centre in the Hastings ward of Loughborough as well as libraries across the county.

Digital Inclusion Project

To loan devices for up to 12 weeks for digitally excluded in Highfields and St Matthews area of Leicester city (Leicester City Council project)

Leicester Ageing together

Providing a range of support for older people in the city only.

National and corporate schemes

A variety of national and corporate schemes were mentioned including Department of Education support for schools and schemes by Barclays and the Knightsbridge Building Society.

Mobile phone data distributed via schools during lockdown learning.

Support directly from schools and colleges

This has included the loan and distribution of equipment as well as facilitating free data SIM cards from mobile phone providers.

Appendix A – Digital Poverty survey questions:

Name - Name
Email address - Email
Organisation name (if applicable) - Organisation
Generally speaking, how do you access online services? - online access
In your view, what are the main digital poverty issues for these groups in Leicester and Leicestershire? - digital issues - adults
In your view, what are the main digital poverty issues for these groups in Leicester and Leicestershire? - digital issues - YP
In your view, what are the main digital poverty issues for these groups in Leicester and Leicestershire? - digital issues - business
What infrastructure is needed to help close the digital poverty divide? - close digital divide - adults
What infrastructure is needed to help close the digital poverty divide? - close digital divide - YP
What infrastructure is needed to help close the digital poverty divide? - close digital divide - business
Are you aware of any projects / programmes (current or future) designed to support those in digital poverty, (for example, access to devices, digital skills support, etc) - digital support programmes
Project / programme 1 - Project name 1
Project / programme 1 - Provider 1
Project / programme 1 - Audience 1
Project / programme 1 - Duration 1
Project / programme 1 - Objectives 1
Project / programme 1 - support 1
Project / programme 1 - area 1
[Option to add details on up to 5 projects)
Please share any data or supporting evidence you may have on digital poverty in Leicester, Leicestershire, or a local district area. - digital poverty data upload



Contact Details

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Leicester and Leicestershire Enterprise Partnership Limited (LLEP)
City Hall, 115 Charles Street, Leicester, LE1 1FZ



+44 (0)116 454 2917



admin@llep.org.uk



@LLEPNews



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