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# Digital inclusion network development: A case study in Derbyshire

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# Executive Summary

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# Executive summary

The aim of this project was to investigate digital inclusion network building as a mechanism for reducing digital poverty. Analysing the specific case of a successful rural digital inclusion network in the UK, this case study provides essential insights into the experiences of those involved in the network and the steps taken to build a network that delivers digital inclusion across a region. The emphasis of this network is not on technological digital infrastructure networks such as fibre, broadband or mobile, but instead is on a network of organisations that provide social and community support through digital inclusion activities in the county of Derbyshire.

This project set out to:

- 1) uncover the drivers, benefits and challenges of creating a newly established digital inclusion network in Derbyshire, as an exemplary region with the need to address digital exclusion in both rural and urban areas;
- 2) reveal the motivations and challenges for organisations and individuals to join and be part of such a network;
- 3) reveal benefits and challenges involved in mapping digital poverty and digital training provision across the county.

This particular case study was purposefully selected due to a) its relevance to the British Academy policy insight call in relation to technology and inequalities; b) its exemplary nature, and therefore it can be considered as a paradigmatic case (Yin, 2009). Specifically, this case study investigates a local digital inclusion network that engages with the community sector across the rural region of Derbyshire, set up with the intention to reduce the digital divide in the region. What makes this study so noteworthy, and of interest to policy makers at local, regional and national levels, is the timeliness of this study which was undertaken at a time as the network itself was being developed, thus enabling the researchers to capture important insights into the network-building activities and experiences of those involved in the network.

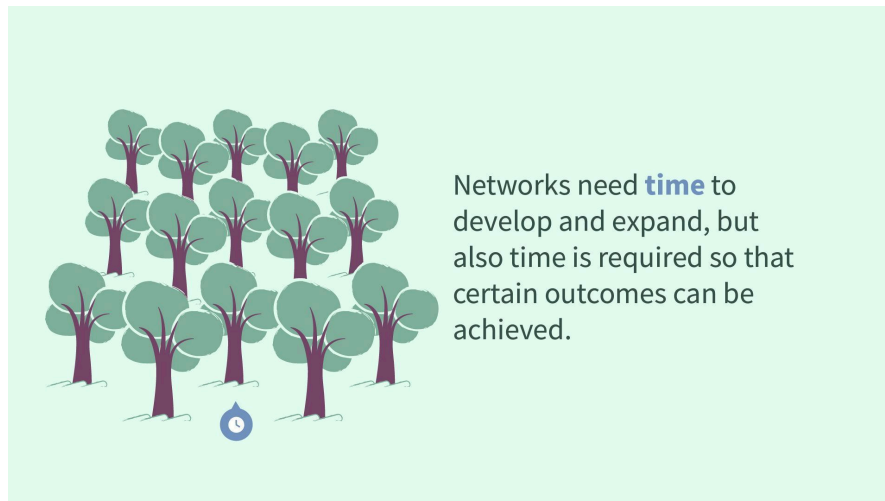


To achieve these insights, a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews and observations have been completed along with document analysis. The data collected have been analysed and presented under four core themes: Ecosystem, Place, Roles and Time (see p.19 of full report). This analysis resulted in the development of the 12 Principle Framework for developing a local digital inclusion network (see also p.34 of full report) and a series of recommendations (see also p.37 of full report), which we present below.

## 12 Principle Framework to build and nurture a local digital inclusion network within the digital inclusion ecosystem

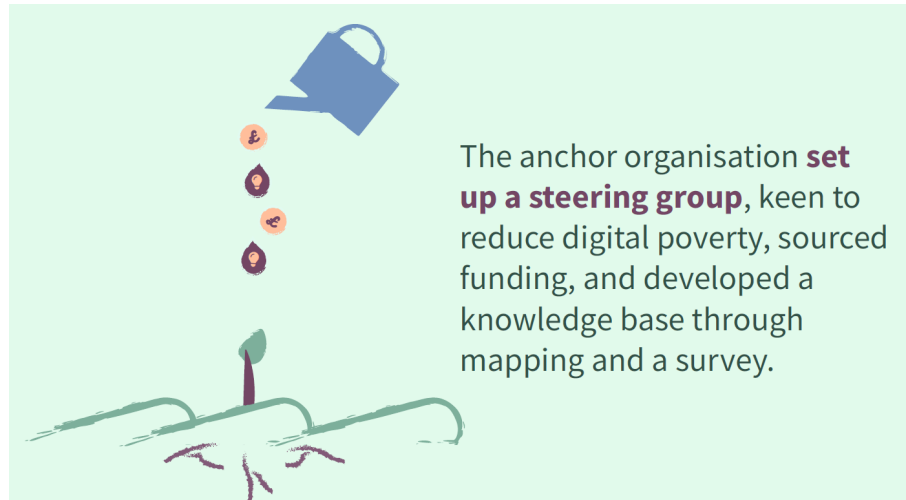
These principles could be viewed as triggers that connect network-building activities and which lead to a network that continues to grow and flourish and brings benefits to the communities it supports, the organisations themselves that make up and engage with the network, and ultimately the digital inclusion ecosystem as a whole. These principles can be adapted to different local and hyperlocal contexts and applied by organisations seeking to develop a local digital inclusion network. They also provide a framework to understand what building and supporting a local digital inclusion network may imply. We have divided these principles into two main categories according to their function for the network ('network enabler' and 'network nurturer'), and listed them in chronological order.

- 1) **(Network enabler) Catalyst moment of anchor organisation** - A well-established organisation that operates across a rural region to ensure no-one is unfairly disadvantaged because of where they live, takes the strategic decision to develop a digital inclusion network to help reduce the county's digital poverty.
- 2) **(Network enabler) Funding** - The anchor organisation is enabled to do this by applying for funding to run a digital inclusion project. Such funding is required to fund staff time, purchase devices to distribute to community organisations (e.g., Food Pantries, community organisations) and to cover costs associated with mapping and network building activities and events.



- 3) **(Network enabler) Develop knowledge base through mapping and survey** - To gain a knowledge base of the current situation across the region and working with a partner organisation, the anchor organisation organises a mapping exercise, to map the likelihood of digital poverty and existing digital inclusion delivery across the region. This reveals potential gaps in digital inclusion provision, while also highlighting opportunities to work with communities and other partners to develop and pilot new digital inclusion projects, and join up organisations who can share resources and volunteers.

- 4) **(Network enabler) Formation of steering group** - By drawing on their engagement with voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations and other services across the county, the anchor organisation sets up a steering group with key organisations across the county, keen to drive forward the formation of a digital inclusion network in an effort to reduce digital poverty. Members of the steering group (both paid and unpaid) undertake a number of roles and are pivotal in the development and maturity of the network.



- 5) **(Network enabler) Taking a place-based and space-based approach** - The network develops **place-based** interventions by working collaboratively with the people who live and work locally, which allows it to gain an understanding of the contextual conditions and needs of the community, but also of the assets, resources and geography of different localities and organisations. Both the network and organisations within it learn and develop a **space-based** approach, putting care in the design of the environment and spaces where both the network and the people they serve meet, which needs to be welcoming and conducive to socialisation, collaboration, and learning.



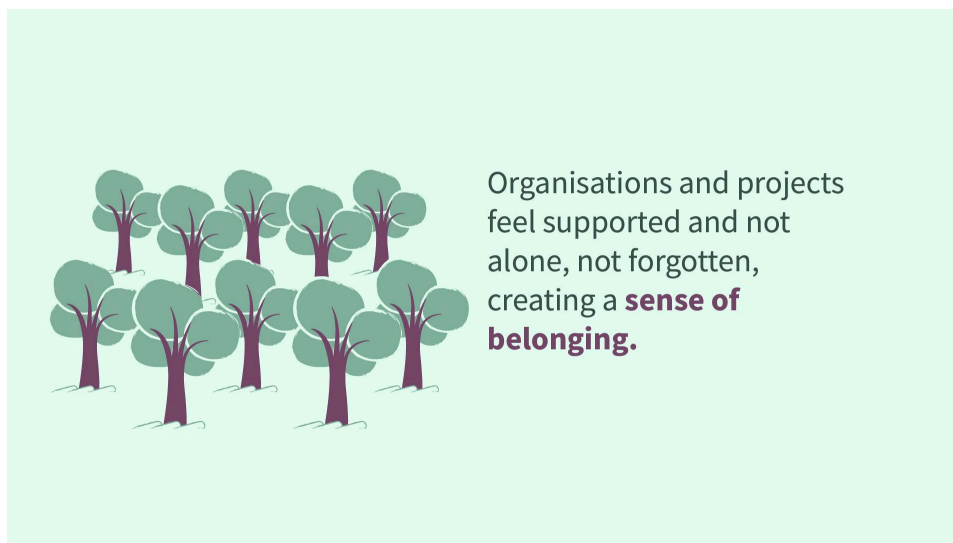
- 6) **(Network nurturer) Network engagement activities** - To build the network and enable the network to grow, the anchor organisation holds regular online meetings and sends regular email communication to share best practices and resources, to connect existing and developing digital inclusion projects within the network, to enable projects and actors to support one another, and to spot opportunities for collaboration.
- 7) **(Network nurturer) Cultivating relationships** - The anchor organisation follows up by proposing more engagement activities aimed to create more opportunities for members to meet and know each other. These may include online presentations by guest speakers or leaders in the network, e.g., by individuals delivering or designing digital inclusion activities or researchers and experts in the field. Relationships are also nurtured with key community stakeholders - or “connector catalysts”, who are able to forge links and promote participation in a hyperlocal context. Such cultivating activities enable the network to grow and flourish, and strengthen the resilience of the local VCSE sector.



- 8) **(Network nurturer) Capacity building** - The evolution of the network fosters a synergistic environment where interconnected organisations collectively enhance their strength, enhancing their capacity to promote digital inclusion. This is achieved through the collaborative sharing of knowledge and resources, which enables the capture of the plurality of their voices. This also has the potential to enable organisations to access more individual funding, as they share information and know-how on grants and application, and experiences of delivering funded projects.
- 9) **(Network nurturer) Dynamics of the network** - The evolution of the network also means starting to gain an appreciation that the network is not static and changes over time. Member organisations will come and go as the network grows and shrinks; fragmentation of the network develops as organisations leave, do not feel part of it anymore, or decide not to join it. It is not realistic to think that all projects and organisations delivering digital inclusion in the region will want to associate with the network, as they may feel they have different goals, agenda, not enough time and resources, or that they are not a good fit for the network. External factors such as

competition for funding, cost of living crisis, reaction to post Covid conditions, staffing also impact the membership and dynamics of the network.

- 10) **(Network nurturer) Capturing the specific characteristics of the organisations within the network** - As the network comprises organisations of differing sizes and models (some staff-led, some volunteer-led, some both), where digital inclusion is either the main goal or, more often, one of many social activities that they provide, it is important that the network develops a good understanding of their specific needs, priorities, strengths, ways of working, and even feelings - as some may participate in the network for different reasons, with differing levels of frequency, and can bring different strengths to it.



- 11) **(Network nurturer) Developing sense of community within the network** - As the network matures, organisations and projects feel supported, not alone and not forgotten. This creates a sense of identity and belonging. At the same time, this helps the network to keep sharing information and help organisations improve access to resources and funding.
- 12) **(Network nurturer) Being responsive and innovative to the needs of the network** - Being in the network allows organisations to be aware of the latest digital inclusion resources, approaches, methodologies, and ways to evaluate and capture data. It is also a 'conduit' that facilitates connecting needs and resources within the network and with wider networks as well. This may involve linking civil society organisations with organisations that provide sustainable solutions to organisations, such as the provision of donated or refurbished digital devices. Essentially, the network acts as a bridge, fostering collaboration and synergy between different entities at different levels, and linking together organisations that would not have been able to connect otherwise.

## Recommendations for policy

We provide a list of recommendations that support effective digital inclusion provision and network development. These recommendations highlight avenues for both local and national governments to invest in, facilitating the achievement of public objectives while mitigating rather than worsening existing inequalities. These recommendations are specifically designed for policy makers at the local, regional and national levels, and in developing them, we have considered aspects of feasibility, need and desirability.

**Local-level digital inclusion networks, guided by the 12 Principle Framework we propose, should be viewed as an effective strategy for diminishing digital poverty and digital exclusion.**

- These networks have the capability to connect local support and knowledge with larger regional and national networks, as well as with organisations and intra-government agencies working in this domain. The implementation of the principles should be achieved by regional and local governments (Mayoral Combined Authorities, City Councils, etc.), and it necessitates the financial and organisational support from the national government.

**Local digital inclusion networks made up of community and civil society organisations can be used to effectively distribute the provision of donated or refurbished digital devices as they understand the local need, have local contacts, and can distribute effectively and at speed.**

- This requires local and regional partnerships between 1) industry actors (such as equipment retailers and service providers, to provide equipment, data plans and after care), 2) local authorities and 3) civil society organisations (the last two to identify beneficiaries and distribute devices).

**Efforts to reduce digital poverty by digital inclusion networks, and those organisations managing and/or operating within a digital inclusion network, need to be recognised and valued by local, regional, and national policy makers in the digital inclusion realm, and they need to be embedded in future digital inclusion strategies in local, regional and national level policies.**

- The initial step should involve consultations aimed at directly involving these stakeholders in the development of digital inclusion initiatives and projects both at the national and the regional levels. In addition, considering the focus of such consultations (digital inclusion, and local nuanced needs), national policy makers can showcase their commitment and their acknowledgment of such local efforts by conducting consultations locally, through in-person visits, rather than centrally (London-based) or online.

**Whether a network is successful or not hinges on the longevity of the network and its maturity.**

- Networks need time to develop, identify synergies, and expand their reach. This temporal dimension is crucial for achieving specific outcomes, as it allows for the development of impactful results over time. In essence, the financial and organisational support extended to these networks should be long-term to allow networks to come to fruition and achieve sustainable benefits. Similarly, local organisations should be enabled to spend for their local needs and with as limited as possible constrictions: funding that is ring-fenced for specific activities, materials, or directed to specific categories of people is often problematic to respond to on the ground long-term needs. Besides funding, other long-term forms of support include opportunities for (continuous) training and for cross fertilisation of ideas and insights, whereby network actors can come together and discuss common challenges and possible solutions, with each other as well as with policy makers, who can extend their support.

**Referral mapping exercises need to be promoted as tools to leverage the collective knowledge of networks' members.**

- It is paramount to design mapping tools and processes that are sustainable, i.e. tools and processes that have the resources and can be easily and frequently updated, and, thus, reflect the dynamic nature of the network and its resources availability - or needs - in real time, so to avoid them becoming quickly obsolete. This recommendation is more relevant to local authorities and organisations, but we find that often this is easier done when such mapping takes place as part of a partnership between e.g., local authorities, charities and higher education institutions, as a diverse skill set is required.

**Place-based interventions need to be developed by working collaboratively with the people who live and work locally and who already have an understanding of both the contextual conditions and needs of the community, and of the assets, resources, and geography of a locality.**

- While mapping exercises and big data analyses can be useful, they can only provide a general, macro level overview of the local needs; on the ground, at the micro level, such needs can vary significantly - and often do. We recommend national and regional policy makers to work closer to 'the grounds', and embrace more qualitative, nuanced methodologies for identifying needs and interventions that can address them. This is typically acknowledged by local governments. However, this work is resource-intensive and costly for local authorities. We therefore recommend national policy makers to support such qualitative work with dedicated funding.



**For third sector organisations and the voluntary sector, attention and care in designing and organising the place and space where organisations and people gather is an integral part in fostering networks and helping digital inclusion.**

- The design of spaces should prioritise being welcoming to people, facilitating interpersonal interactions, and ensuring inclusivity. Funding for such spaces should be facilitated by national and regional governments as part of digital inclusion networks and initiatives. Local governments should prioritise maintaining these dedicated and curated spaces. .

**For regional and local governments, rather than addressing digital poverty in a vertical, siloed way, we recommend planning across operational and strategic units of local authorities following a 'horizontal' approach.**

- This would enable work of separate units to be cross fertilised and tackled using fewer, but better orchestrated, resources. This will reduce the load on volunteers, create synergies and efficiencies, and embed accountability and responsibility.

**Network-enabled digital inclusion requires identifying ways to provide long-term support, so that they can build up and sustain digital inclusion in place.**

- Digital inclusion champions (paid and unpaid), volunteers, funding, places, spaces and resources need to be available over a longer period of time to accommodate multiple and repeating sessions, to meet the digital needs of citizens that may be changing in different phases of their lives and with the continuous technological advances. The over-reliance on volunteers within digital inclusion activities leads to fragmented efforts, as ultimately there is no one person responsible or accountable for carrying forward initiatives. We recommend more national, regional and local level funding to be dedicated to permanent digital inclusion roles at the local levels.

At a time where organisations delivering digital inclusion activities have had to constantly adapt their practices, as a legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic (Mathers et al., 2020), and in response to the cost-of-living crisis, this research will have significant implications for policy and practice, and contribute to academic research.