Digital Inclusion in Libraries:

Framework and Practice Notes

June 2023

WSA Community Consultants
Lead Authors: Leila Baker & Wendy Sugarman

Contents

About this resource

In 2022, Arts Council England funded Good Things Foundation to work in partnership with Libraries Connected (and in co-production with library services) to:

- Understand the spectrum of digital inclusion approaches being used by library services and library branches in England
- Provide evidence that can be used for advocacy – locally, regionally and nationally – with policy makers and funders
- Develop a practically useful framework that can assist library services to think about their digital inclusion strategy and delivery as a basis for understanding how they can build on their strengths and develop their offer.

The research was undertaken by WSA Community Consultants between September 2022 to March 2023. It involved facilitated workshops and discussions with partners, advisors and library groups; qualitative interviews with 38 library service personnel and community organisation partners in 12 library services in England (selection weighted to ensure inclusion of services in areas designated by Arts Council England as 'Priority Places' and 'Levelling Up Culture Places'; a survey sent to library services in England (114 out of 151 library services took part).

The research findings are available as an executive briefing and full report, published on Good Things Foundation and Libraries Connected websites.

Drawing on the research findings and workshops, this resource provides:

- A practical framework covering five areas of library services' and branches work on digital inclusion.
- A set of framings - key words and phrases – that can be used by library services to support advocacy locally, regionally and nationally.
- A set of practice notes - one for each of the five areas in the framework. Each looks in more depth at what's involved, covering key messages, delivery and strategy (including enablers, and barriers and challenges).

Together, this aims to be a simple, non-prescriptive resource that supports libraries in their strategic thinking about, and advocacy for, the role they play alongside others in closing the digital divide. It aims to be aspirational without imposing expectations.[1] We hope this resource will be useful for:

- Heads of Library Services
- Branch managers
- Digital inclusion leads or champions in libraries (service and/or branch level)
- Local Authority commissioners, policy makers, and digital inclusion leads
- Voluntary and community sector organisations working with library services.

Further information is also provided about free support which is readily available for library services and branches provided by Good Things Foundation (through the National Digital Inclusion Network) and Libraries Connected.

Framework for thinking about digital inclusion strategy and delivery

The framework describes five areas of library services' and branches work on digital inclusion. It aims to support libraries in their strategic thinking about, and advocacy for, the role they play alongside others in closing the digital divide. For each of the five areas, there is a practice note that looks in more depth at what's involved.

Local ecosystem – place-based partnerships

e.g. relationships/partnerships with local authority, with voluntary and community sector, referrals/signposting, providing space, convening/being willing to convene with others

Digital Inclusion Support Offer

e.g. skills provision, digital support, access to connectivity and devices in the library/outside

Skills & Empowerment

- Independent learning in the library
- Bespoke learning: 1-2-1 support or drop-ins
- Supported learning in groups and classes
- Training library staff in core digital skills
- Training volunteers to be digital champions
- Training staff and public in safeguarding, privacy and security online
- Employability support
- Financial inclusion
- Health and wellbeing
- Referrals and signposting to services
- Support for small businesses

Data Connectivity

- Use of public WiFi while in the library
- Free mobile data (National Databank)
- Info, help or provision with mobile data and home broadband ('mesh networks')
- Able to connect with services that are inaccessible or clunky to use on mobile phones
- Up-to-date library computers with latest browser
- Computers and software that assure safeguarding, privacy and security

Devices

- Use of desktops or tablets while in the library
- Loaned devices for home use
- Gifted devices for home use
- Access to specialist kit (e.g. for designing games, video editing)
- Charging points for people's own devices
- Safeguarding, privacy and security measures to make loaned and gifted devices safe

Equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI)

Ensuring equity, diversity and inclusion is embedded in work on skills, connectivity, devices

Framings for a new narrative about libraries and digital inclusion

During fieldwork and workshops, participants were asked to pick out the one thing they wanted people to understand about digital inclusion in libraries. Alongside the research findings, these helped create a set of framings to support advocacy.

Positive

Place based and collaborative

Universal, free, open

Trusted and safe

Lifelong learning

Positive

Participants put forward positive framings – We are doing this, This is happening, We have the skills, infrastructure, etc. In other words, lead with the positives even though there is a key message about the need for resources to do it more, better and more sustainably.

"This happens and could happen in more places and more sustained with more resources."
"We have already got the infrastructure."
"There will always be somebody there to help you."

Place-based and collaborative

Where this is working well, library services see themselves as taking a place-based approach and being active alongside others in the local ecosystem to help build the social infrastructure needed to fix the digital divide. They span the boundaries within and between public services and community organisations.

"Place-based"
"Local eco-system"
"They deliver in parks ... in community centres ... libraries are neighbourhood hubs."

Universal, free, open

Participants built on this very important message about libraries: the universal offer. This is both about people and also about the different kinds of things people might want to do, know or find out. It is also about showing that this offer is available in the library, online, and in the community.

"We're here to help everyone, regardless of why, how, when or where you need digital support. Our aim is to support you."
"In person, online, and in the community."
"The library service doesn't judge and we just work with ordinary people."

Trusted and safe

Participants talked about libraries being places that people trust and see as places of safety, where they are treated with respect, and therefore more inclined to seek help as they don't expect to be made to feel stupid or judged for finding it difficult to navigate information or welfare applications online. Libraries were trusted partners.

"Safe spaces."
"Trusted."
"Treated with respect."

Lifelong learning

Libraries have always been places of learning, and participants pointed out that digital inclusion is no different. Libraries (like other community organisations) are good at finding the 'hooks', or the reason to engage with digital that aren't to do with accredited learning (although that has its place) but with lifelong learning.

"A place for safe learning in the heart of the community."
"They don't want to do Word or Excel, they want to get their life online and we're perfect for that."
"... Takes away the mystery of online banking, shopping online, etc."

Practice notes

The practice notes below were developed through the qualitative research with 12 library services and supplemented by insights from the national survey. There is a practice note for each of the five areas of library services' work on digital inclusion covered in the framework:

1. **Local ecosystem and place-based partnerships**
2. **Skills and empowerment**
3. **Connectivity**
4. **Devices**
5. **Equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI)**

Each practice note looks in more depth at what's involved, covering key messages, delivery and strategy (including enablers, and barriers and challenges).

Local ecosystem and place-based partnerships

"You need to grow your partnerships and ecosystem whereby you can go out to the bodies they do engage with. You're never going to get some people to come to us, but we would love to be able to go and work through the people that they know and trust."

This note looks at the different types of relationships libraries have with people, groups and organisations in the public and voluntary sectors primarily; referral or more commonly signposting arrangements between libraries and other services; and the role libraries play in multi-agency networks and cross-departmental work within local government.

Key messages

The library is a community asset that can assist organisations in the public and voluntary sectors to come together to address the digital divide. Mainly situated 'on the high street' or in a central location, libraries are ideally placed to as a venue to convene organisations that are working in the community and want to collaborate.

"We could be their powerhouse if they gave us bodies, we would be delivering digital inclusion from 33 sites. Not all on the same day or same time, but we'd be there on the high street for the county council to increase and mop up this 30k-odd people. Not all because some will never be able to act independently but it's about getting that awareness."

- It's by bringing people together that libraries as part of a wider ecosystem can find solutions and help narrow the digital divide.
- Having library personnel who are well-connected in the communities helps get the message about libraries and digital inclusion out to them.
- The dynamic and proactive relationship between the library service and parts of local government working on strategy and delivery is critical to digital inclusion.

- Having an overarching digital inclusion strategy in place and for digital inclusion to be reflected in local priorities gives this work legitimacy.
- Community projects are funding dependent; they come and go whereas the library stays. Library services can help mitigate this with joint bids and funding applications.

Delivery

Library services and libraries are part of a live and pressing effort to create a network of digital support that will assist communities in their daily lives. They do this by working with multiple people (e.g. village agents, social prescribers, parish workers), groups (e.g. refugee or family support) and organisations (e.g. adult education, Citizens Advice) in the public and voluntary sectors; and by engaging with strategy and delivery of digital inclusion through multi-agency networks and within complex local government structures navigating county, district, town and parish councils and even in single villages or wards.

Specifically, this involves activities such as:

• Instigating and being active in networks brings together voluntary organisations or voluntary and public bodies to look at issues where digital inclusion is important (e.g. welfare and advice, cost of living crisis, community forums, neighbourhood care structures). Through these networks, library services and libraries learn about local need, bring knowledge and information about help that's available, and develop practical solutions.
• Within this, they are also being proactive within their own local government institutions, often navigating complex multiple layers of government and hierarchies in order to reach out to colleagues "to see what is possible" and reach beyond library customers to others that may need support.
• These connections and conversations have led to, for example, new initiatives in schools and prisons; being alerted to large-scale redundancies or to new welfare funds and process for applying; achieving efficiencies such as transporting devices where they are needed in transport previously only being used to move books and DVDs between libraries; or welfare advice agencies being able to concentrate on complex cases rather than routine form filling.

The intensity of these connections varies:

• acquaintances (we know who they are even if we're not in touch)
• friends (we're regularly signposting and networking albeit without formal agreement)
• partners (we have entered a formal partnership)

Most of this work is probably in the 'friends' category. Formal partnerships are less common, with examples including contracts with a public body to deliver a prescribed service such as delivering bus passes or employment support.

The types of connections associated with digital inclusion and the ecosystem also varied:

• education, including special educational needs (SEN) in schools and local authorities
• Healthwatch, social prescribing, GPs, stroke patients
• housing, homelessness (housing association, local authority, charity)
• Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) supporting in schools, families, foster carers
• adult education, adult and community learning
• Citizens Advice
• Age UK (they held the contract for Information and Guidance)
• police and probation services
• Disabled Information Advice Line (DIAL)
• Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Accelerate, work coaches
• science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) activities for children and young people
• People from Abroad Team, Refugee Resettlement Team, refugee groups

There are ambitions to forge many new links, including men's sheds, a cancer ward and the Parish Room. Some of this requires the library services to have more capacity for outreach than is currently the case.

This work may be carried out through dedicated roles to develop or champion digital inclusion or as part of generic roles that hold wider responsibilities. Working groups made up of development and delivery staff (including digital champions) appear to have been successful.

Small or village libraries may lack the capacity to engage in some of the area-wide strategic work on digital inclusion but as the only public-facing council service, these hyperlocal libraries have a critical role in delivering digital inclusion, from being the only place to print documents for a school application to getting a new bus pass. A connection between a library officer and a social prescriber can be invaluable for achieving targeted assistance in isolated areas.

Strategy

Outreach – service delivery and strategic networking – takes time. This means that core salary costs are key to operating across the local ecosystem. Library services are already running a dispersed service across their networks of libraries even before they take that service out to other kinds of venues and community groups. Senior staff with development roles spend a considerable amount of time attending meetings:

"I have more meetings than anyone else because digital is the platform that everything is built on now."

Funding for digital inclusion projects or services are sometimes ringfenced. What libraries want is funding to deliver a more holistic, universal offer to help bridge the digital divide and support people.

"...They want to do their life online, they want to do shopping, they want to surf the web, they want to do social media, they want to attach a photograph to their email, they want to Ask My GP."

Enablers to providing a successful strategy

- A digital inclusion strategy where the links to key priorities are clearly articulated and leadership support at county or district level makes a considerable difference to the legitimacy and profile of work on digital inclusion.
- A "softly, softly" approach and perseverance enable library staff to raise awareness of the digital inclusion offer, begin conversations within local government, build connections and get invited into existing networks:

"It's about not being shirty with them but gently leading them to the point where at the end of the last meeting I was in they'd signed up for our library newsletter that goes to 30,000 residents. They'd signed up to use e-books, e-newspapers. They then become mini-advocates for us ... It's softly, softly really."

- Using social media to promote what libraries offer so third parties who are plugged into these platforms can reach those who are not via word of mouth.
- This was particularly the case in relation to areas of high deprivation, issues around literacy, new communities and people seeking asylum.
- Attending network or forum meetings build connections and are time savers for library staff who can efficiently gather a great deal of information instead of having to pull it together themselves.

Barriers and challenges

- Poor communication between different parts of local government can lead to duplication of effort or sudden increases in demand for digital support, often when a new benefit or way to access a service is introduced.
- This is frustrating for vulnerable and worried residents whose requests for help take the libraries by surprise, and stressful for library staff who may be the only public-facing part of the council to which residents have access.
- The drop in volunteer numbers has affected the way libraries can position their work in the wider ecosystem because of its effect on the reach and spread of their capacity to provide outreach.

How we developed this note: Cambridgeshire and North Somerset Library Services contributed to our research in this area; including library personnel with development and local or district roles in digital inclusion as well as a community partner. Additional insights were gathered from the other library services that took part in this piece of work.

Skills and Empowerment

"One thing leads to another, so the more digital skills they learn, the more competent they become and as that improves, that will help them in everyday life with a whole number of things, for all age groups."

This note covers a range of approaches to learning that empower people by increasing their confidence and wellbeing, and assisting them with their lives online. As more and more services move online, digital skills have become essential.

Key messages

A library service's digital skills offer works best when their staff and partners have good people skills, show flexibility and understand the needs of their local community.

- Library staff and volunteers bring an ability and willingness to engage with people who are lonely and isolated, and may be affected by issues like insecure housing or mental health issues.
- Some of these people are learning digital skills out of necessity; they need to access services which are increasingly only available online. This shift can be a springboard into learning digital skills that can enhance quality of life.
- Providing support that is tailored (ideally one-to-one) and delivered in ways (and locations) where people feel comfortable helps make skills work effective.
- Telling positive stories about what people have gained from learning skills helps promote the offer to those who need it most and may not be hearing about it through the usual routes. The most persuasive stories are about mental health and wellbeing, contact with friends and loved ones, and dispelling fear and myths around the online world.
- This work needs to be underpinned by suitable IT infrastructure and dedicated staff time (including for training), with the backing of local authority strategy and leadership.

Delivery

Libraries do a tremendous amount of work as the main, accessible face of public services within communities, becoming the 'default' provider of support in accessing a range of council and other organisations' services. However, reaching those in greatest need can be a challenge.

Ensuring library staff have the skills and confidence they need

All frontline staff, not just digital champions, have a role in delivery, referral and signposting, whether in branches, or in people's homes (online or on the phone). They may be able to refer people for a one-to-one booked session for access to structured learning that they can do at home, in the library or elsewhere. Many learning and employment services (Department for Work and Pensions, Working Win, Adult Learning) also deliver digital skills in library branches.

Practical and life skills

"They don't want to do Word or Excel. They want to get their life online, and we're perfect for that. I don't think anybody does that better – and it's all free."

Skills delivery was focussed on meeting practical and life skills – particularly for those who don't have connectivity, devices or digital skills – and to enable people to pursue their interests, which also helped with outreach. Activities included:

- assistance with accessing and understanding council and other services (housing, Universal Credit, 'blue badge' applications, school applications or free childcare)
- Digital Health Hubs, which provide devices and/or support with skills to help people access NHS online, make GP appointments online and take part in 'virtual wards' initiatives

- National Databank initiatives for refugees and other groups with need
- support to long-serving prisoners due for release – including online wellbeing tools
- employability-related digital inclusion skills development (CV surgeries, work coaches) for youth and people whose digital skills gaps exclude them from jobs they could previously do
- small business support, including database access to resources for funding, business management, business planning, etc
- family and youth-focussed activities such as 'Maker Spaces', Science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) activities, 'rhyme time' and code clubs

Improving the skills of those who need it most

Many services acknowledge that the bulk of their intelligence on the scale, type and depth of need, and where this need is located is anecdotal, coming from frontline staff and what they see 'coming through their door'. They recognise that some of the most digitally excluded are potentially being 'left out' as the libraries don't have enough resource or appropriate strategies in place to reach them.

"Obviously there are people that don't see IT and digital as part of their life. I don't know how you bridge that, perhaps with community engagement and other agencies to target them. Some people you'll never get onto one of these courses no matter how much you try."

Outreach to schools, family centres, groups and venues such as food banks, parish halls, care-home facilities and inpatient hospital settings all extend the reach of the services. Some offers that have worked are:

- 'Tea and Tablet' sessions were especially useful in rural areas.
- Visits to schools gave children their first library cards and introduced them to their local library's offer.
- Pop-up events and participation at larger city-wide events and digital 'festivals' showcased technology people might not otherwise have access to.

Promoting activities that interest digitally excluded people can serve as a 'hook':

- The popularity of 'find my past' type ancestry and local history sessions are important socially and attract many (often older) learners who then go on to access other digital support such as 'Learn My Way'.
- Similarly, hobbyist groups like 'Knit and Natter' use digital to access patterns and other resources, leading on to other types of digital engagement.

"There are still some people who aren't linked into any organisation. How do you reach them without doing a maildrop, other avenues like radio or newspapers? I think it's very key, how to reach people."

Libraries are often the venue for provision of English as a Second Language (ESOL) classes. There were examples of bespoke support offers aimed at specific communities. These often arise quite informally and spontaneously out of relationships between the libraries and other local authority services, be these in adult learning, children's and family services, health services or housing-related support.

Strategy

"Libraries have a massive role to play in supporting residents to get online and to understand how to be safe online, and to give them the skills and confidence to be able to navigate the online world."

Recognition of the importance of the role of libraries in relation to digital inclusion can only increase, so more data on its impact will need to be gathered on project and job roles to present a firmer case for onward funding than currently available.

"Digital – everything's going online and that train is not getting stopped. The council are desperate to have more people go online."

Inter-agency groups that look at digital inclusion, both locally and nationally, are a valued resource in promoting joined-up thinking, shared good practice, keeping abreast of funding opportunities, and getting 'advance notice' of changes that may impact on needs, demand or partnerships.

Enablers to providing a successful strategy

- Staff with appropriate level of training, skills and confidence.
- Community engagement and understanding of need through individual conversations (staff rapport and listening skills).
- Strategy and action-planning that supports and drives innovation and creative, timely and flexible responses to growing and shifting need.
- Budgets and strategies that support targeted promotion and awareness-raising activities to reach those in the most desperate need.
- Effective partnership working, helping services understand the complex needs and vulnerabilities and integrate these perspectives into strategy, planning and frontline staff approaches.
- Regular updating of appropriate IT infrastructure.
- Library spaces themselves for learning to take place and encounters to happen.
- Devices – in libraries and for loan or gifting.
- Learning resources such as 'Learn My Way.'
- Time – some learners need a lot of time invested in them.

Barriers and challenges

Insufficient research, impact data and evidence at a local level to help understand local need and the barriers that prevent people accessing support so that libraries can work out how to widen engagement.

- Cost of living crisis, increasing demand and local government restructures leading to even less capacity.
- There is a tension between councils wanting to encourage people to access their services online and libraries who find themselves doing the work to make this happen.
- Raising awareness for the services available with those groups facing dire need: "If we could afford to put our offer on the side of buses – we'd be golden."
- The location of the support (the library) is not always where it is needed.
- Fear around Covid-19 is still impacting, particularly for those with health inequalities.
- Ensuring staff's skills and confidence levels keep pace with the rapidly evolving role of libraries, as well as providing them with skills like mental health awareness to cope with users' needs and issues.
- Embrace of the new remit of libraries in relation to digital by decision-makers.

How we developed this note: Rotherham, West Sussex and Norfolk and Norwich Millennium Library Services and Barnsley Library Services contributed to our research in this area, including digital inclusion and library services leads. Additional insights were gathered from the other library services that took part in this piece of work.

Practice notes

Connectivity

"I've met people who can't afford new clothes ... so internet is a low-down priority. If they can come to the library where they're not charged ... and use the internet then I think that's an invaluable resource."

This note on connectivity includes public WiFi and up-to-date computers in the library, and free mobile data, information and help around home broadband and mobile data, and engaging and being safe online.

Key messages

Work on connectivity is inextricably linked to support for people and communities affected by social and economic deprivation. The passion and commitment of library digital leads has helped drive progress not only within their own organisation but also the wider ecosystem.

"So it's all about getting people comfortable, really, on that very initial part of their journey and then signposting them on you know, that there are other things that you can do now, to progress in the digital world."

- Libraries are working with vulnerable groups in order to offer them connectivity to access public and other services, which are increasingly moving online.
- Libraries are perceived as safe spaces where people can get online, gain confidence and develop digital skills.
- There are excellent schemes to broaden connectivity within the community, including a 'mesh network'1 set up in areas of high deprivation including housing associations to promote digital inclusion.
- Mobile data, such as that provided through the National Databank, also enable a range of people including vulnerable groups to get online. These schemes are popular and in high demand.

'Connectivity' is often delivered as part of a package of training, digital connection, and community partnerships.

Delivery

Work on connectivity had been going on for about 20 years but the pandemic provided the impetus to do even more to improve connectivity in areas of digital exclusion. That funding (or its impact) is running out and new investment is needed in order to keep both equipment and staff up to date.

Libraries are often a first point of contact for people who need support to access services online, some of whom may have no / limited access to the internet elsewhere. Those people need to feel confident that digital services are as responsive to their needs as face–to–face services:

"It's about building up people's confidence that the council is receiving those enquiries digitally and responding as fast as they can."

Key activities in connectivity include:
- providing fast WiFi and internet access points within libraries alongside a package of support and training to get people online and digitally confident
- establishing schemes in the community, such as mesh networks, SIM cards with pre-loaded data and MiFi, to expand access
- support in working with online formats, including form filling and accessing digital services
- resources such as 'Zoom rooms', which can be used for employability (training, job interviews) or community meetings

Libraries as safe places to connect with essential services

Library officers in areas of high social deprivation, with many people digitally excluded, said that people seeking online services may be in a stressful situation or have high needs:

"A lot of people come to me in crisis. They think they're going to get sanctioned, accessing the universal credit account. You want to teach them digital skills but you've got sort out what they need now. So we apply for the job, and then do a bit of learning as well."

Working with people to provide support to set up email accounts, submit applications or access services is time consuming, and branch staff often don't have the time to provide this support. There was an especially high need for form-filling:

"We could as a council employ somebody who just filled in forms for people, that's a massive need. People with poor literacy skills, people who can't afford classes, people who simply don't understand the form."

Even if people access the internet through their mobile phones, they often don't own a home PC or laptop, and are not necessarily able or confident to access services. Branches offer much-needed WiFi, computers and specialist staff to provide support, or signpost to courses such as 'Learn My Way' to improve their skills.

Connectivity in the community

Many library services realise that outreach and improving connectivity in the community is the only way to make a significant impact on digital exclusion. In areas where specialist ICT/librarian staff were available, outreach focused on specific vulnerable groups; for example:

"[Library digital officer] is working with [a local] Health Centre. It started with doctors' surgeries trying to get patients to access online services. Altering their prescriptions, making their appointments, understanding what you can do online without sitting for 30 minutes on the phone waiting for the receptionist to pick up."

This outreach work relies on good local connections and partnerships with community-based organisations and social and health services to access those who most need to get connected.

Several schemes had been particularly successful in this. SIM cards, pre-loaded with internet, such as through the National Databank, were very popular and provided vital connection, especially during the pandemic. These often worked alongside device loaning schemes (covered in 'Devices') and associated training and support and, as such, provided a comprehensive package of support to vulnerable communities and individuals. Schemes which were library-run

could simply use the library management system to check devices with data in and out. These pre-loaded SIM cards also overcame barriers to accessing the local authority's public network, such as security concerns.

"Obviously, we're part of the National Data Bank initiative. That's been a fantastic resource for us in libraries."

One library service has established a 'mesh network' in an area of high deprivation, working in partnership with a housing association. This was not delivered in isolation – the digital support officer was on hand to provide a package of support for the residents affected by digital exclusion, encouraging people to get online, develop confidence, and use the internet to develop themselves in whatever way they define.

Keeping safe online

For those with little experience or understanding of the internet as an open and accessible place, there may be limited skills in staying safe while online, so with increased connectivity comes a requirement to enhance skills in online privacy and security.

Several areas were doing specific training – either in-person or online – on keeping safe online. This training was in high demand, with organisations often contacting the digital lead to request further training. Areas that had digital inclusion staff, such as a digital lead, could develop specific training for organisations. Groups reached included parents, organisations working with vulnerable adults and care leavers, among others.

Strategy

Depending on the specific needs of the user group, connectivity without access to a device can be limited in its usefulness. For some, access to branch computers may not be possible and not all areas/services have provision for this. However, for others, branch-located WiFi or support in using a mobile device to connect to services may be invaluable.

Enablers to providing a successful strategy

- Willing and enthusiastic staff, digital champions and partnerships.
- Highly motivated specialist ICT/librarian staff, or digital champions (often volunteers) with the capacity to support this labour-intensive work.
- Demand for services related to connectivity was high, meaning that digital officers did not have to invest too much in outreach to drum up business.
- Word of mouth and key links with the right agencies brings in more than enough clients for digital support teams, though many acknowledged that with more staff they could better meet demand.

- Having staff such as digital leads who could 'make the case' for connectivity; negotiating and influencing council-wide agendas, highlighting the importance of libraries in the local ecosystem, and advocating for funding including capital investment (crucial to IT infrastructure and sometimes overlooked).
- By working in partnership, libraries were helping achieve more equitable distribution of resources for helping with connectivity.

"Having a digital lead in place within our structure has been essential. [They] pull it all together."

Barriers and challenges

- Staffing presented the major barrier for further work on connectivity.
- Many libraries said that they had not recovered footfall since being closed during the pandemic, and were facing staffing crises, reorganisations or library closures.
- This put further pressure on library staff workloads to be able to support digital issues, which was increasingly becoming a part of all librarians' jobs.

How we developed this note: Rochdale and Stoke Library Services contributed to our research in this area, including library personnel with development and local or district roles in digital inclusion. Additional insights were gathered from the other library services that took part in this piece of work.

Devices

"In a few years' time, you will have people taking out their phone, looking something up and saying, 'I'm using my local library' and that will be as valid as someone walking through the door. The library will have as much of a digital presence as a physical one."

This note covers access to devices while in the library, such as desktops, tablets and charging points, as well as support with devices for use at home, including schemes that lend or gift devices.

Key messages

Schemes for lending (or gifting) devices have proved to be an excellent way to reach people and communities affected by digital exclusion; and also to deepen the role played by libraries in the local ecosystem. Through these schemes, libraries have shown that they can innovate and adapt their work in order to help support complex needs and become centres of digital learning and community engagement.

- Services have managed to overcome barriers such as internet security requirements from local authorities to launch device loan schemes.
- There is a high degree of innovation in devices, but library services can be reluctant to 'make the first move' to invest unless there is demonstrable effectiveness.
- Libraries have often begun by lending small devices but have learned that it works best to be able to offer a range; when applying for a job, for example, it's more useful to have a laptop.
- Work on devices needs substantial investment; not just in tech, but in IT/library staff time to support clients to use digital tech while still running a variety of library activities.
- In many cases, project-based funding and staff goodwill and enthusiasm led to a scheme's success. While this has got the work on devices established, this places staff and schemes in a precarious position.

Delivery

Work on 'devices' is varied and innovative. It includes:

- specialist IT/library staff providing on-hand support to enable people to access and use (their own, loaned, gifted or Library) devices
- device loan schemes, mostly focused on tablets but also now including laptops
- high-tech devices that encourage creativity and innovation, such as 'Let's Make' clubs and 3D printers or Virtual Reality (VR) headsets
- access to private rooms with PCs set up for online job interviews and meetings
- devices such as 'owls', which can be used for high-quality video conferencing

Delivery - Devices facilitating digital inclusion

Work on devices was viewed as important for addressing social isolation, and social and economic deprivation. By enabling people to get connected online, libraries were supporting them to access learning, apply for jobs and take up other opportunities.

Many libraries are the public's first point of contact – often the only remaining face-to-face contact – with council schemes and services. The work with devices can broaden their reach, including with isolated populations, and entice people into the library.

Delivery - Libraries as digital hubs

Library branches have offered PCs, access to a public network and printers for many years. However, libraries are now moving towards a more comprehensive digital service offer. Librarians emphasised the importance of the 'basics': a good, fast internet connection, accessible PCs and ad hoc advice and training. They view all devices within the library as gently encouraging people to become more digitally confident:

"It starts on a very small level, if people come into the library with a query about IT and we can answer it, that builds up confidence. If they can use self-service machines, all of these things normalise using technology…"

Simple interventions such as USB charging ports and WiFi enable people to come in and use their own devices in a library setting.

Access to online resources such as Encyclopaedia Britannica, online driving tests, journals and newspapers are prohibitively expensive, so branches provide these for people on PCs and devices such as 'hublets' (a small tablet with an internet connection, but to be used on-site) to increase people's access and use of online resources within the library itself.

Other innovations include a 'tiny tablet' – a large-scale tablet with a big enough screen to engage multiple viewers – for a variety of community-based activities. For hybrid events, an 'owl' (360-degree cameras and a microphone) can be used for mixed in-person and remote meetings.

Broadening reach in the community

Much of the digital support offered by the library service is encouraging people to get more familiar with using devices. This often affects the older generation:

"A lot of people get given a tablet by their grandchildren that they've got no idea how to use. We're there for that, we don't charge anything."

Tablet loan schemes were developed under Covid; for instance, in Cumbria they were essential to reach a socially isolated rural population. People were offered small tablets with SIM cards pre-loaded with data. Initially, the impetus was to keep people socially connected but they also allow users to 'test drive' devices.
The devices are a way for people to get online and learn how to use digital services, but they also shift the perception of libraries to promote them as digital hubs:

"The novelty factor: a lot of people still expect libraries to be staid, old-fashioned, and home delivery is the most modern thing we offer… When it comes to events in libraries, it generates interest and gets people coming in, when we can explain to them how to get involved."

Device loans and some gifting schemes have rapidly evolved. In several areas, tablet loan schemes had highlighted the need for access to more advanced laptops, which in some cases were designed to go alongside citizens' advice services or jobseekers support. Schemes to promote the growth of local businesses link well to device loan schemes, so that people can learn, set up businesses and promote these online all in one place, which is vital for promoting the local economy:

"The economy is fragile, we've got lots of young people who are looking for work and unless we can develop skills and help them develop businesses and industries locally, there will be a massive brain drain from the county and that will exacerbate problems."

There were many examples of libraries providing very advanced technology catering to specific client groups. One area has been providing VR headsets during outreach sessions, particularly for older people in care homes. These devices are meant to spark memories from their youth, which keeps them mentally agile. 'Let's Make' clubs use a 3D printer, coding and Lego to work with adults and children to build mini devices.

Strategy

Both staffing and the need for newer tech put funding pressures on libraries. Schemes for devices were often funded from add-on projects, and specialist-focused staff were not deemed 'core' library staff. In several cases, demand or IT support was much higher than staff capacity to respond.
Several libraries emphasised how important it was to keep up with the latest technology. Apart from constant updates, devices are often quite quickly out of date and need reinvestment:

"We need the devices. Our devices … we need them to be current and up to date because there's no point in us having antiquated things that haven't got the latest software to be able to do what the customer wants to be able to do."

Libraries have noticed that getting people through the door and equipping them with devices has a positive knock-on effect to enable them to find ways to improve many areas of their lives.

Enablers to providing a successful strategy

- Staff knowledge and zeal for promoting device use and digital inclusion were said to be essential:

"Passionate, well-informed staff. IT is not going to work unless the person delivering the session is passionate and well educated about it. If you have someone just droning on in jargon, people aren't going to dig that."

- Partnerships – with employment agencies, care leaver, housing and refugee support groups – clearly evolved quickly once device schemes were in place and staff could envision how these could be used to address people's complex needs.
- Partnerships also allowed libraries to pool resources. In several areas, devices were gifted to voluntary community-based organisations who then were able to run IT training, device loan and other schemes, broadening their reach.

Barriers and challenges

- Even 'basic' services, such as helping a client use a small tablet, can take hours.
- In the medium term, more sustainable approaches to staffing and know-how need to be planned and resourced.
- Aside from funding, the IT security and concerns around compliance with local authority policies often delayed any loan schemes; however, these concerns were often about local perceptions of the schemes rather than an actual technical issue.
- In most areas this barrier was overcome by using SIMs with pre-loaded data not connected to the local authority's internet, and wiping devices once they have come back in.
- Thefts or non-return of devices appeared to be minimal and easy to absorb into the cost of the scheme.

How we developed this note: Cumbria and Warwickshire Library Services contributed to our research in this area, including digital inclusion and library services leads. Additional insights were gathered from the other library services that took part in this piece of work.

Practice notes
Equity, diversity and inclusion

"All the activities like Black History Month, everything we celebrate here, we encourage people to come and feel free that they understand we are diverse."

This note focuses on ensuring that equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) is embedded in work on skills, connectivity, devices, confidence and wellbeing. This includes building relationships and convening groups, providing space, developing skills to find answers, to be able to inform life choices and decisions, diverse ways of working and cultural awareness.

Key messages

Strategic partnerships and a library's role and position in the local ecosystem are critical to building inclusion and helping bridge the digital divide. The more libraries can develop relationships in the local area, the more opportunities for reaching people and communities. Many of the examples of work with community groups, specific outreach approaches and links that local librarians make could be built on further and captured to better understand changes and/or impact.

- The role of the library or library service within the ecosystem – and specifically within place-based approaches – is clearly linked to EDI in this context.
- Libraries are working with communities and voluntary and community sectors to specifically support different community groups' digital inclusion.
- Libraries are a universal service – free, open and accessible to all. Staff reflect the community, and this makes them more relatable to those accessing them. However, there are still communities that don't make use of libraries or the services they offer.
-

"The libraries are there to help VCS – but recognising that we're very good at doing a universal offer but VCS are good at working with very specific needs and communities. We all need to work together to deliver the best possible service."

Delivery

In services feedback generally, all staff are expected to be involved in digital inclusion in some way, whether responding to enquiries or running sessions. Some branches shared a base with local authority customer service officers, which could put pressure on services and there may be challenging behaviour (such as health and mental health-related issues) that staff may not feel equipped to deal with.

Open door around a wide range of digital support areas

Libraries provide a universal offer and deal with a wide range of enquiries around a whole range of issues. Often these are walk-in enquiries, though the more complex ones may need an appointment. Enquiries cover a number of digital support areas that directly affect EDI, from support with online job, housing or benefits applications, to WiFi access and printing.

"We look at each individual situation and help them out, our aim is to digitally help them and for them to get something out of that, we want it to be purposeful."

Spaces and approaches for specific community groups

Many library services have space for specific community groups, which might be open to all or specifically for that group. Examples of the use of these spaces included welcome sessions for asylum seekers and refugees, a deaf digital inclusion group, and an open-to-all drop-in digital inclusion session run by a Filipino women's group. Libraries also provided a point of reference for recent Ukrainian arrivals:

"We might differ in our offer between here and Ukraine but people understand the basics of how a library operates, a place they can access computers. It's not unusual for it to be a real focal point for people who are refugees and asylum seekers to find their way to."

Delivering in the community

This ranged from working with specific community groups to one service working with a local prison on a scheme with people due for release from long sentences. One service talked of using media – music, collaging, health and wellbeing, reminiscences – that interested the community group to build trust. One project looked at building playlists through working with a community choir:

"We did that in some of our libraries and went to groups that were holding regular sessions in those areas, Chapeltown, for example, in Leeds has a very large African-Caribbean diaspora who have a regular choir group, we offered the music group to them, tweaked it and the feedback was fantastic and they're going to try and run it again."

In addition to going out into the community and delivering services, another service also talked about having an outreach approach to bringing people into libraries:

"In Newham we've got neighbourhood link workers. They are adult social care staff partially based in the libraries. One of their roles is where they find isolated and vulnerable people, listening to what they want to do and where it's appropriate bring them into the library."

Accessible spaces

Provision of accessible spaces is also something that was discussed. Examples included:

- height-adjustable chairs on wheels and/or height-adjustable tables
- rollerball mouse and/or larger keyboards
- language pack to enable people to access their first language on their PC
- provision of English as a Second Language (ESOL) classes

"For people with disabilities, we print out the keyboard layout and that helps calm them down, those types of things, we help them with their fears, we show them, in all different ways we learn."

Inclusive classes and drop-ins

A key point raised was the advantage of having library staff that reflected the community it serves. As a universal service, this is a vital aspect of successfully building inclusion. We discussed this in depth with two services, one of which gave considerable feedback on the diversity of the people attending its digital inclusion course. There was also a reflection on the power of supporting people to learn, and the satisfaction that gives to all involved:

"When I teach some people, you see their satisfaction, just us typing a word is nothing much but when they manage to do it themselves, which at the age of 75, they didn't think they'd ever manage to achieve that, you feel proud and we are making them happy."

Strategy

The library space can be a real asset for building inclusion as a community hub and can act as a one-stop shop for a range of issues. Providing a space for community groups to meet and run activities means there are often activities that people can be signposted to.

"There's many activities happening in this library, Adult Services, regular events for people with learning disabilities, so many community events and we signpost people to those as well."

Getting recognition for digital inclusion in libraries is key. In one authority it was the library staff who asked questions about digital exclusion when the council was discussing its digital strategy. In another, their main initiative, 100% Digital, came out of the library service. This has now been mainstreamed across the authority, with the library service retaining a clear and important role and working in partnership:

"We retain the key role around providing infrastructure to support people to develop their digital skills. Just being that first port of call."

In another authority, Covid-19 shone a light on digital exclusion and inequalities, notably access to information about the virus, food banks and government grants. A working group was put together, which resulted in funding libraries and two community groups to do work focussing on digital inclusion during the pandemic.

Having a flexible approach that builds on the needs of people and communities was seen as key. Sometimes there are things that library services struggle to do, and the challenges of corporate IT were flagged as integral to this.

Accessible spaces

- Community relationships
- Outreach
- Understanding the demographics
- Being flexible to community needs:

"We had an offer a few years ago that was very consistent across the city and it consistently didn't work because it wasn't what people wanted…. The digital one to one offer we have now, we were confident that it better met what people wanted and that's been backed up."

- Having the infrastructure of a network of libraries, place-based relations at local levels and links to voluntary, community and other services
- Council investment in EDI
- Staff reflecting the community and so being representative of the population:

"A number of staff live in the borough and are representative of the communities there, and speak a large number of languages between them … this helps us with all aspects of the library service."

Barriers and challenges

- Capacity and reduced staffing
- How to reach everyone (including the digitally excluded) and promote the offer
- Staff levels, confidence and not all being at the same level
- Ensuring that the digital inclusion support offered is good and at the same level
- Libraries being recognised as providers of digital inclusion services
- Myths around libraries:

"It's the myths that surround libraries are really hard to move away from… A lot of people wouldn't know you can get the help with digital support. It's the challenge of getting that message out."

How we developed this note: Leeds and Newham Library Services contributed to our research in this area, including library personnel with development and local or district roles in digital inclusion as well as a community partner. Additional insights were gathered from the other library services that took part in this piece of work.

Free support for library services and local branches

Good Things Foundation

Good Things Foundation is the UK's leading digital inclusion charity.

Library services and local branches located anywhere in the UK can join the National Digital Inclusion Network for free.

Membership provides access to a range of free resources:

- **Libraries Meet-up Group** - an online peer support network aimed at digital inclusion leads and champions in library services and local branches. Co-chaired with library representatives, this provides a valued, informal space for peer support and information sharing about supporting digital inclusion.

- **Learn My Way** - an online learning platform designed for use in community settings (such as libraries) to help people learn basic digital skills. Bite-sized topics cover skills such as using a touchscreen, setting up an email account, online safety, and using the internet for health, money, and benefits.

- **Session plans and learning resources** for use by digital inclusion champions, and anyone providing one-to-one or group support to people wanting to learn how to use the internet safely and confidently for what matters to them.

- **National Databank** - an initiative to provide free mobile data connectivity to people who need it with SIMs donated by O2, Vodafone and Three. Library services and branches can apply to become a local databank partner.

- **National Device Bank** - an initiative to provide free refurbished devices to people who need them through National Digital Inclusion Network members, so local organisations can gift these to people they support who need them.

- **Digital Inclusion Capability Grants** - a rolling small grants programme run by Good Things Foundation. Network members can apply for small grants to build their confidence and capability around supporting digital inclusion.

- **National Digital Inclusion Network Map/Directory** - an updated map showing the location of members of the National Digital Inclusion Network and what they offer (skills, devices, connectivity) to make it easier to find local support and to help strengthen local ecosystems of digital inclusion support.

To find out more about joining the National Digital Inclusion Network:
Email: hello@goodthingsfoundation.org

To find out more about the Libraries Meet-up Group:
Email: louise.branch@goodthingsfoundation.org

Libraries Connected

Libraries Connected support libraries and library staff through their four <u>Universal Library Offers.</u>

To help libraries provide quality information and digital support, Libraries Connected offer training, resources, and guidance through the <u>Information and Digital Offer</u>.

Support includes two online training modules: Key Digital Skills and Media Information Literacy.

Courses are freely available to people working in public libraries in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Crown Dependencies.

For more information and enrolment keys please contact: info@ <u>librariesconnected.org.uk</u>

Further support for Library Services can also be found in the toolkits section of Libraries Connected's website: www.librariesconnected.org.uk/toolkits

Acknowledgements