

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) sets out that every child has the right to education, to culture, to information, and to be heard. And yet, here in the UK, the increasingly digital world we live in does not offer equal opportunities to realise these rights. Digital exclusion is holding back children in some of the most marginalised situations, including the poorest children and those living in remote rural locations, from developing to their full potential and enjoying the highest standard of wellbeing. **Inequality is deepening as digital inclusion increases in importance.**

All this was true before the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic in 2020, though the pandemic shone a spotlight on the challenges faced by digitally excluded children. As the UK moves cautiously down the roadmap to recovery and begins to ‘build back better’ from the pandemic, **this spotlight must not be lost.** Taking action now to close the digital divide will not only help children and young people to realise their rights under the UNCRC; it will also help to address broader issues of inequality and ensure equitable access and social justice for all.

A STORY OF INEQUALITY

Even before COVID-19, the myth of children as digital natives permeated media narratives, driving children without access and skills further out of the spotlight. This narrative, coupled with the challenges of the at-pace development of digital technologies and limited use of a child rights framework, meant that the additional challenges presented by the pandemic arrived at a time of already-established need.

While a large proportion of children and young people can access digital devices, **8% of children aged 5-15 do not have access to an internet-enabled desktop computer, laptop, or netbook at home.** These children represent those who already experience compounding disadvantage due to their socioeconomic status and are consequently at risk of falling further behind their peers. Without access to the internet at home, these children and young people are not only missing opportunities to realise their rights under the UNCRC, but are

also unable to develop their digital skills to the same degree as their peers. **This could, in turn, hold back their engagement in the Fourth Industrial Revolution and reduce their future opportunities.** At the same time, their ability to access critical social services to support their wellbeing is limited, further embedding their level of disadvantage.

In addition to unequal access to the digital world, legislation to develop a safe online environment was limited before the pandemic. Though efforts were in train, the need for stronger online safety resulting from the impacts of COVID-19 remains outside of the scope of current legislation or guidance. But without a safe online environment, children and young people are unable to fully realise their rights in the online world.






THE RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Since the pandemic began, there has been widespread and increased awareness of digital exclusion, particularly the importance of digital access for children and young people. **The UK Government took welcome steps to address this issue at the height of the emergency response.** Indeed, as of 11 May 2021, over 1.3 million devices, over 76,000 wireless routers and over 33,000 increases to mobile data plans have been provided to support children’s learning. **Communities across the UK similarly stepped up support at rapid pace to the benefit of thousands of children.**

However, while both necessary and welcome in its ambition and speed, **the rollout of support was not without challenges.** These included delays in delivery, lack of skills and support for educators, safety and security issues, challenges with the responsible engagement of businesses, and a lack of at-home support and space. These gaps are understandable, given the unfamiliarity of the situation and the scale of need. But **understanding these challenges, and identifying solutions for future planning, is critical to securing a comprehensive programme of digital inclusion in the future.**

HOW CAN WE DEFINE DIGITAL INCLUSION?

Currently, there is no nationally agreed definition of digital inclusion, yet understanding and defining the concept is critical. It is widely recognised that being digitally connected is not as simple as owning any internet-connected device. Rather, **digital inclusion requires 5 key components, all of which taken together should inform the definition of 'digital inclusion'**. The five components are:

-  **A device:** one computer, laptop or tablet per child or young person in education with licensed word processing software and appropriate safeguarding software with any additional equipment required to meet accessibility needs.
-  **A strong connection:** a connection to the internet through home broadband, a wireless router or other connector with a minimum download speed of 10 Mbit/s and an upload speed of 1 Mbit/s.
-  **Skills and support:** the skills and support to effectively participate online as active, critical, and engaged digital citizens. This means the skills to contribute through video call; upload, create, and consume age-appropriate material online; communicate with friends and family online; and explore online leisure opportunities safely and securely.
-  **A safe online environment:** an online environment that is safe for children and young people, free from bullying or abuse, fraud, or misinformation.
-  **Sustainability of access:** digital devices and connections that work reliably and are maintained and upgraded as technology progresses.

These **5 key components of digital inclusion are designed to describe the type of inclusion which ensures that children and young people are fully included in the digital world, both for the purpose of educational outcomes and their broader development and wellbeing.**

These components, however, are not enough to secure an adequate definition of digital inclusion. **A definition of digital inclusion must also be agreed in partnership with the involvement of children and young people themselves, as well as school staff, parents, support organisations, other relevant third sector organisations, and technology companies.** This should include a **measurable baseline for inclusion**, related to each of the five components.

HOW DO WE MEASURE DIGITAL INCLUSION?

One of the many challenges in the effort to ensure that all children and young people are digitally included is quantifying how many children and young people do not have 'adequate digital access' and therefore could not be seen to be sufficiently digitally included. A consistent, accurate, and regular system of data reporting on the level of digital inclusion amongst children and young people is thus essential moving forward. The design of the system for data reporting should be aligned with the definition of digital inclusion – that is, it should be based on the 5 key components outlined in the definition of digital inclusion. This should be monitored through two new mechanisms:

- 1. A national measure for digital inclusion:** A regular, robust and reliable form of measurement that indicates the proportion of children and young people in the UK who are digitally included – that is, those that have adequate digital access based on the definition and measurable minimum standard.
- 2. A local authority- level digital inclusion tracker:** A regular and consistent way of identifying those children and young people who are not digitally included at a local level, recognising that this is something that can change over time.

Together, these elements allow for a comprehensive and evidence-based approach to closing the digital divide in the UK, for all and for good.

THE ROAD AHEAD

If digital exclusion is not tackled effectively, **there is a risk that technology will continue to deepen inequalities**. There is widespread agreement that technology was essential to delivering education during the Coronavirus pandemic, but there is less clarity on how this approach will be used in the long-term. As the pandemic subsides, the need for technology will only grow – in turn demanding a long-term approach that delivers digital inclusion as a key enabler to realising children’s rights to education, information and to leisure, play and culture.

A successful long-term approach requires proactive interventions, collaboration and leadership to ensure resilience is built into the UK’s education system. **A fully funded, long-term strategy to tackle digital exclusion for all children and young people must include clear actions, targets and timelines, and must be established in partnership with children and young people themselves, families, educators and third sector organisations.** Concretely, the strategy should:

- Set out the ambition and vision for digital inclusion;
- Include measurement and accountability with clear departmental responsibilities;
- Be developed in partnership with children and young people, families, teaching staff, educational representatives and digital inclusion organisations;
- Support the responsible engagement of businesses, including in relation to procurement and infrastructure;
- Align with wider educational and social ambitions including the literacy strategy and anti-child poverty strategies;
- Be costed to ensure that it provides the resources and support that are required;
- Set out clear commitments and timelines for eliminating digital exclusion including the scheduling of regular updates on progress; and
- Be evidence-based, building on the interventions deployed prior to, and in response to, COVID-19.

Critical to the successful implementation of the long-term strategy and its components is the ability to identify and measure success. A simplistic analysis, such as exam results or hours spent learning online, is tempting but presents a narrow understanding of the multitude of benefits the internet has to offer or the importance of other factors in determining outcomes. Instead, the measurement of success of the long-term strategy should cover:

- The **additional number of children** with adequate access to the internet;
- Improvement in **academic engagement and outcomes**, measured in terms of hours spent in online lessons or completing online assignments and academic attainment;
- The **young person’s confidence online**, including in relation to accessing resources and accurate information; and
- The **young person’s experience online** in terms of their positive mental health and wellbeing and their ability to play and engage in entertainment.

THE 10-POINT ACTION PLAN

Truly ending the digital exclusion of children and young people in the UK will require a strategic and comprehensive approach; one that responds to the digital needs of children as a core foundation of social justice. To guide this work, this report sets out a 10-point Action Plan that the Department for Education can and must complete, in coordination with other departments and partners, to close the digital divide for all, and for good. This Action Plan sets out a comprehensive roadmap to ensure no child has their future hopes, opportunities or potential held back by exclusion from the digital world.

A 10-POINT ACTION PLAN TO CLOSE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

1 Undertake a **comprehensive review of online safeguarding and privacy guidance** for educators and schools, updating the relevant policy accordingly.



2 Undertake a **comprehensive review of online safeguarding and privacy legislation for education technology companies**, utilising the Online Safety Bill to further reduce the possibility of harm to children and their rights.



3 Undertake a **comprehensive and public review of COVID-19 emergency initiatives** to gather lessons learned and inform best practice for the future.

4 Work with teachers and education staff to **identify gaps in skills and support**, using this to revisit national teacher training requirements and curricula, develop Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities for educators to strengthen their digital skills and pedagogy, and improve support to schools.

5 Work with children, young people, parents, school staff, civil society, and technology providers to **establish a shared definition of digital inclusion** including a measurable minimum standard, and commitment to a regular review process.



6 Establish a **consistent, accurate and regular system of data reporting** on the level of digital exclusion amongst our children and young people in the UK.



7 Undertake research to **better understand the drivers of digital exclusion and how to address these**, with a focus on key data gaps including experiences of young people with disabilities and young people from ethnic minority communities.



8 Develop guidance and resources to **establish a local authority level digital inclusion tracker** which identifies digitally excluded children and young people.

9 Deliver a **fully-funded long-term strategy** for how the Department for Education will work across Government to tackle digital exclusion for all young people with clear actions, targets and timelines.



10 Work with children, parents, school staff, social workers to **develop a monitoring and evaluation framework** for the long-term strategy that addresses the additional number of children online, academic outcomes, and children's confidence and experience online.