

The digital divide is holding back our communities.

Society is moving online at an ever-increasing rate, particularly in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In this context it can be easy to take Internet access, suitable devices and digital literacy for granted. However, for people who can't afford a laptop or broadband or who do not have the necessary skills to navigate the online world, it means being shut out of vital services and paying more for essentials.

Meanwhile the cost of living crisis affects us all, but not equally. The APLE Collective is concerned that people experiencing poverty will be excluded further digitally because of increased costs of energy and food. We need a system that pulls families out of hard times and that creates opportunities.

To ensure no one is left behind, disconnected and unable to participate in every aspect of life, we are asking the Government and other decision makers to work in partnership with people with lived experiences of the digital divide, to identify solutions such as the provision of free Wi-Fi for low-income households.

Who are the APLE collective?

We are a national collective of individuals and organisations with lived experience of poverty. Our aim is to create a sustainable, grassroots network across the UK to raise awareness of poverty, reduce stigma and eradicate it. As a network we promote the voices of those with lived experience of poverty and we work collaboratively with others to influence change.

You can find out more at:
www.aplecollective.com

Our Partners:

- [Good Things Foundation.](#)
- [Ada Lovelace Institute.](#)
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What is the digital divide?

The digital divide is a term used to describe the inequality of digital access experienced by people living in poverty, created through a complex and multi-faceted set of barriers. The academic Van Dijk (2020), recognising the complexity of the divide, details three elements to it: access to devices, having the skills to access the digital world and inequalities of access.

(1) Physical Access: Physical access can be broken down further into collective access and household access. Collective access includes sites such as libraries, while household or individual access is far more limited for those living in poverty. A household might have no access to digital devices and therefore be unable to access public health information online, book a doctors appointment, access support services or job search. Another low-income household might share one old laptop (with poor webcam quality) between children and home-working adults. Physical access also relates to data, data caps, broadband speed all costing money and affecting connection quality. The cost of living crisis has exacerbated physical exclusion; if you cannot afford to put money on the electric meter then you cannot access your broadband or charge your phone. With the juggling of bills putting many in the position of having to choose between food and energy, accessing data packages and/or broadband is becoming increasingly unaffordable.

(2) Skills and Digital Capacity: If people have devices then digital skills vary. These are skills not just to search the Internet but to engage fully in online life; attending webinars, meetings, completing online forms and engaging in society online are learnt through training and experience. Research has shown that those who have less digital access, such as those living on low incomes, also have less opportunity to build digital skills, including online safety skills, so are more often the victims of online scams and fraud (Ragnedda and Ruiu, 2020).

(3) Inequality of Access: This aspect of the digital divide relates to the number and quality of devices and to the quality of data within a household. Sharing one digital device that has a capped data allowance between members of a household is a very different experience compared to that of a household that has multiple devices and access to unlimited data. The functionality of mobile phones, tablets and laptops also varies depending on the age, cost and type. Laptops, for example, have much better functionality for online meeting software compared to mobile phones. However, phones may be the only device for a person experiencing poverty. Often digital banking apps require the use of a laptop to set up standing orders or direct debits, thus inequality of access directly links to physical access if people do not have a computer.

The extent of the digital divide.

The good things Foundation provides the following alarming statistics on the state of the digital divide in the uk. Source: Good Things Foundation Strategy 2022-2025.

- 2 million households in the UK struggle to afford Internet access.
- 10 million adults in the UK lack the most basic digital skills.
- In some groups, including older people and those from less affluent areas, digital engagement declined during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The lived experience of the digital divide:

Every aspect of a person's life is impacted by poverty and the digital divide. As the pandemic has played out over the last two years with lockdowns and restrictions varying across areas, one thing has remained constant: the almost exclusively digital response to communication, from Government public health messages to health services, education to local voluntary sector support. As restrictions have eased, the digital by default approach has continued. For those on a low income who might have one device but not enough data to fully participate online or no device or data, this creates barriers that can feel insurmountable. The APLE Collective have seen the digital divide become more complex and woven into the Cost of Living Crisis for people living in Poverty.

Health

Public Health Information has been largely communicated online during the COVID-19 pandemic and many GP, hospital and other appointments are now booked and conducted online. For people living in poverty this adds additional barriers to accessing both public health information and healthcare services. There is also often an expectation that households will have access to a printer to print their own blood test labels and access to a camera to email images of medical conditions.

“I recently moved and had to change doctors. They asked me to verify my identity by email with photos of a recent bill and my passport. I don't have an email let alone know how to upload a photo. I then tried to make an appointment and they said I could get one quicker if I filled in an e-consult form. Why do people seem to think everyone finds it as easy online?”

Jodie, Thrive Teesside, APLE member.

Education

Despite the removal of Covid-19 restrictions, and the return of face-to-face learning, the requirement for online access continues. Education has been overwhelmingly affected by teachers and children being off school with Covid symptoms and when off, children are expected to learn, complete and submit homework online. People living in poverty often have fewer digital devices, shared between the members of the household or have no devices at all. Accessing the right devices, data and skills to participate in online learning are extra challenges for people on low incomes.

“My grandchildren have limited access to the Internet and no access to a laptop, which now is essential for schoolwork. They have applied, through the discover digital pop-up shop, for a laptop and data dongle which will be a great improvement on how they access not only their schoolwork but will also help them to connect with their friends outside of school.”

Tracy, Stoke resident involved with APLE member Expert Citizens.

The cost of living

The cost of living is rising with inflation sitting close to 10%. People living in poverty, already juggling bills and struggling to choose between food, rent and energy bills find it impossible to cover the cost of broadband or a mobile data package.

“During the pandemic, a woman in south London tried to buy a refurbished smartphone on a very small budget. She had no fixed abode so she couldn’t open even a basic bank account and had no bank card. She used a small shop that would take cash payments but they sold her a faulty phone with no warranty. She then found out that she could have bought a new phone for a cheaper price at a high street shop, however the chain had a no-cash policy in place and she did not qualify for their credit service, making it impossible for her to shop there. Having no smartphone during the lockdowns effectively cut her off from her support network.”

ATD Fourth World, APLE member.

Social Security and Job Searching

People living on low incomes might have some form of digital device but often not one that is sufficient to complete complex online forms required for Universal Credit applications, or the capacity to write detailed personal statements required to participate in an increasingly competitive jobs market.

Job Centres might once again be open but the ‘Digital by Default’ benefit system described by Amos Toh (2019) in his Human Rights Watch report has remained.

“I always visited places in person to hand in my CV and ask about jobs. Now the only response I get is to apply online. I have an email address but never use it, I am not confident enough and would not know where to start.”

Maz, Stockport resident supported by the digital lending library at APLE member Starting Point.