

The digital divide is holding back our communities.

Society is moving online at an ever-increasing rate. 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.

At the same time, income is failing to keep pace with inflation. 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.](#)
- [Trussell Trust.](#)
- [APPG Poverty](#)
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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. Furthermore access to faster Fibre Optic broadband that allows better connectivity for work, education and leisure is too expensive for those on a low income. Frequently broadband speeds in rural areas sit far below those of cities. A two tier system is emerging with those on a low income locked out of faster, better quality digital connectivity.

The extent of the Cost of Living and the Digital Divide

The Good Things Foundation provides the following alarming statistics on the state of the digital divide in the uk.

Source: www.goodthingsfoundation.org/digital-nation-2022-sources/

- 1 in 20 UK households have no home internet access.
- 2m UK households struggle to afford internet access.
- 7m low income households in the UK are going without essentials.

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 few years and the Cost of Living Crisis has hit low income communities, one thing has remained constant, the almost exclusively reliance of government, health education and charity sector reliance on digital communication. As society re-opened post-covid, 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

Post- Covid, many Health services have remained largely online; many GP, Hospital and other appointments are now booked 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 phoned the doctor for an appointment and was told to send him a photo of my growth by email. Then he would decide if he would see me or not with a face to face meeting but my mobile phone has no camera or internet access and even if i could take a photo i would not know how to upload it to my computer, luckily my daughter did it for me on her computer or else the consequences would have been serious as I would not have followed it up, I realised issues like this need to be highlighted and rectified. It is digital exclusion".

Caroline, Poverty Truth Community, APLE Collective member.

Education

Despite the return to face to face learning for most schools and Universities, the expectation of online access remains embedded in learning and teaching responses. Children are expected to learn and complete 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. Having the right broadband speed to download practice exam papers, participate in online learning quizzes relies on having good quality data.

"When children reach school age it is increasingly becoming essential for them to have access to the ever changing world of technology! This used to be the case when they reached high school, but now we find that it is expected of children from nursery age up to have access to a laptop or tablet, data and printers to be able to keep up with their work and homework! As you know, access to these things has never been cheap and seem to get more and more expensive every day.

It is estimated that it costs around £120,000 to raise a child to the age of 18! £120,000 is a lot of money for any household, but if you find yourself unfortunate enough to be at the bottom of the economic scale it becomes even more difficult to provide the basic essentials for that child to flourish. The DWP only provides around two thirds of this amount, and yet, these people are expected to be able to keep up with everyone else. If you can't keep up it's because you didn't try hard enough, or as some people would have us believe, choose to live like that! A lot of families, in reality, have very few choices. Some families have a disability, learning difficulty or mental health issue, some have to cope with all of these things as well as raising a child to the best of their abilities. Even if you have been lucky enough to get a diagnosis for these things, there is little support, and in some cases none at all!

Without access to laptops, tablets, printers and the data and knowledge to use them, children can quickly fall behind with their work and the gap between what they and their peers can achieve grows ever wider. Enter the cost of living crisis and the cracks that were already there, become chasms that are swallowing families up! What seemed unattainable before, now disappears into the sunset along with their dreams and potential! Our safety net is threadbare, out of date and in dire need of replacing. We must recognise that access to the internet is now an essential, not a luxury, if our society does not start to reflect that then the ever widening chasms will become canyons creating further disparity.”

Tracy Knight, Expert Citizens, APLE Collective member.

The cost of living

The cost of living is rising, 2023 ONS Data suggests inflation is now at 6.5%. 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. As we move into Autumn / Winter of 2023 with high energy prices, increasing food prices and no government help on offer the cost of living for those living on a low income continues to be affected by the poverty premium, making the cost of living worse for those on a low income.

We are currently facing a cost-of-living crisis – this is not new; it merely exacerbates ongoing difficulties and challenges. Low wages, access to support, meagre benefit entitlements and debt deductions from benefit entitlements are unfortunately par for the course in our low income, left behind communities.

“As I look at the money in my hand, it shrinks with every passing day, the dole and the politicians do not understand, so I will sit here and slowly fade away”.

-Poetry from Thriving Teesside book.

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.

“For a good deal of my life social security hasn't been available, either you haven't been eligible or your circumstances has meant you have fallen through the net. Like many within learning disability and autism , mum and dad have provided the only safety net, and for some parents it's a lifelong commitment. The manta has always been, social security is bad and should be cut regardless of the consequences. Only just recently the question of are people still fiddling the system arose again in the media. The truth is welfare is horrible and the move to online portals has just compounded existing problems. The social security system should be about helping lives to live again and restart their journey in life. It should be the road out of poverty.”

-Christopher Burns, APLE Collective Member.

The APLE Collective is concerned that people experiencing poverty will be pushed further into digital exclusion and isolation because unavoidable spending on energy and food will take up the lion's share of their budget. Internet access will continue to be seen as a luxury rather than what it is, an essential in the modern-day UK- **and that's just not right.**

In the **short term**, we believe that steps can be taken to tackle this digital divide by:

- Encouraging the telecommunications industry to **lift the data caps** on a pay-as-you-go and rolling pay monthly tariff.
- Making mobile 'hot spots' available **free of use and accessible to all.**

In the **longer term**, we ask for participation, voice and connection.

We ask for **free Wi-Fi for Low-Income Groups.**

The opportunity to discuss how people with lived experience of socioeconomic disadvantage and who directly face this challenge of digital division are able to ensure support packages to build skills, knowledge and confidence are designed to the best effect.