

Debate Pack
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Debate on digital exclusion

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Digital exclusion in the UK

A Westminster Hall debate on digital exclusion has been scheduled for Wednesday 28 February at 4.30pm. The debate will be opened by Justin Madders MP.

Policy regarding some aspects of digital exclusion (such as skills) are devolved. Others (such as telecommunications and equality law) are reserved to the UK Government. This debate pack focuses on the UK Government's policy approach.

1.1

What is digital exclusion?

The House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee has defined digital exclusion as “sections of the population not being able to use the internet in ways that are needed to participate fully in modern society”.¹

In an increasingly online and connected society, digital exclusion affects people in many ways. Individuals who struggle to access or use the internet may, for example:

- Miss out on employment opportunities. A 2019 study for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport found that 82% of job adverts required digital skills and that they paid 29% more than those that did not.² Over 90% of jobs are advertised online only.³ A survey for telecoms company Virgin Media O2 found that 31% of UK believed they had missed out on promotion or pay rises because they lack digital skills, and 22% say they would struggle to take part in an online interview.⁴
- Struggle to find or apply for government support and services, including health services, social housing, and benefits. Research by Age UK found that a third of London councils did not offer a way to apply for housing benefit or council tax reductions offline.⁵
- Struggle to access services and sources of advice that are moving online, such as banking. The Lords Communications and Digital Committee noted that customer helplines are being replaced by chat services,

¹ House of Lords Digital and Communications Committee, [Digital exclusion and the cost of living](#), HL Paper 219, 29 June 2023, para 6

² Burning Glass Technologies, [No Longer Optional: Employer Demand for Digital Skills](#) [PDF], June 2019

³ House of Lords Digital and Communications Committee, [Digital exclusion and the cost of living](#), HL Paper 219, 29 June 2023, para 24

⁴ Virgin Media O2, [Get Online Week: Digital skills shortage costs the UK economy and workers £12.8 billion as Brits grapple with higher bills during the cost-of-living crisis](#), 18 October 2022; Good Things Foundation, [Recent polling reveals the reality of the digital skills challenges faced by the UK population](#), 23 November 2023

⁵ Age UK, [Access denied: accessing council services without the internet](#), 16 January 2023

online FAQ pages, and email contact forms, “leading to poorer service for those unable to use them”.⁶

- Miss out on educational opportunities and resources. According to Ofcom, around a fifth of secondary school children do not have consistent access at home to a device they can use for schoolwork.⁷
- Pay more for goods and services because they cannot access price comparison sites or shop around for deals. Research by the Centre for Social Justice has found that customers who cannot shop online pay 25% more on average for a range of products including insurance, food, and mobile services.⁸
- Be at greater risk of loneliness and social isolation.⁹

Economic modelling by the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR), commissioned by Virgin Media O2 and the Good Things Foundation, found that investing £1.5 billion in basic digital skills over 10 years would result in £12.2 billion in net benefits to the UK economy.¹⁰ Most of the economic benefits (£8.1 billion) would be felt by individuals in terms of higher income, time saving, and savings from online shopping. The government and businesses would also benefit from service efficiencies, higher tax revenues, and filling vacancies that require digital skills.

1.2

Causes of digital exclusion

Ofcom, the communications sector regulator, conducts ongoing research into the extent and causes of digital exclusion. Its March 2022 report, [Digital exclusion: A review of Ofcom’s research on digital exclusion among adults in the UK](#), defines ‘digital exclusion’ in terms to three inter-related aspects:

- Access – people may be digitally excluded because they do not have adequate internet access at home or elsewhere.
- Ability – people may lack the skills, confidence, or physical ability to get online and navigate the online environment safely and knowledgeably.
- Affordability – people may struggle to afford access to the internet or an internet-enabled device (such as a PC or smartphone).

⁶ House of Lords Digital and Communications Committee, [Digital exclusion and the cost of living](#), HL Paper 219, 29 June 2023, para 24

⁷ Ofcom, [Adults’ Media Literacy Core Survey 2023 Data Tables](#) [PDF], 18 January 2024, Table 15

⁸ CSJ, [Left out: how to tackle digital exclusion and reduce the poverty premium](#), August 2023, p17

⁹ Good Things Foundation, [How do we prevent a ‘loneliness pandemic’?](#), 4 May 2021

¹⁰ CEBR, [The economic impact of digital inclusion in the UK](#), July 2022

These aspects are inter-related and often affected by other factors including age, socio-economic status, and disability.¹¹ While age is an important factor, the Digital Poverty Alliance say that it should not be assumed that young people are unaffected by digital exclusion, “with factors such as employment status, education, disability, income, and self-confidence cutting across age”.¹² Digital exclusion can also be an expression of wider barriers to participation in society, such as language barriers and lack of trust in social institutions.¹³

Access

Absolute internet access

Ofcom’s [2023 Technology Tracker](#) estimated that 7% of UK households did not have internet access at home.¹⁴ The proportion of people not online has fallen from around 11% in 2020 and 24% in 2011.

Demographic factors influence how likely a household is to have internet at home. For example, 18% of households in [socioeconomic band DE](#) say they don’t have internet access at home, compared to 2% of AB households. 23% of households with an annual income under £10,400 do not have internet at home, compared to 1% of households earning over £26,000.

Ofcom’s survey found that 71% of households without internet access said that they were unlikely to get it in the next 12 months.¹⁵ The majority of these (65%) said that they were not interested or had no need to go online. Others gave reasons relating to the cost of purchasing a device (11%) or the cost of a broadband contract (13%). 1% said that broadband was not available where they live.¹⁶

Relative internet access

The Digital Poverty Alliance, an advocacy group, argues that absolute measures of on- or offline are now less relevant than relative differences in digital access:

In highly digitised societies like the UK, differential or relative access – such as differences in speed, reliability, and hardware have a significant impact on an individual’s degree of digital inclusion or exclusion.

¹¹ House of Lords Digital and Communications Committee, [Digital exclusion and the cost of living – written evidence DCL0052 Digital Poverty Alliance and British Computer Society](#), March 2023

¹² Digital Poverty Alliance, [UK digital poverty evidence review 2022](#), September 2022, p21

¹³ House of Lords Digital and Communications Committee, [Digital exclusion and the cost of living – written evidence DCL0083 BT](#), March 2023

¹⁴ Ofcom, [Technology tracker 2023: data tables](#) [PDF], 8 June 2023, Table 62

¹⁵ Ofcom, [Technology tracker 2023: data tables](#) [PDF], 8 June 2023, Table 78

¹⁶ Ofcom, [Technology tracker 2023: data tables](#) [PDF], 8 June 2023, Table 79

... Today's bar for access to connectivity and devices is higher than ever before because the digital world is more pervasive and demanding than ever before. A 10 Mbps connection speed is sufficient for doing e-mails and loading most static websites, but to livestream a Zoom call, connections need to be much faster; to conduct several Zoom calls simultaneously in the same household requires a connection that is faster still. This level of connection is not a luxury. It is increasingly required to access online learning, interview for jobs, and more.¹⁷

The table below shows data from September 2023 on the percentage of premises in UK countries able to access fast broadband, broken down into urban areas and rural areas. 'Gigabit' broadband is capable of download speeds over 1,000 megabits per second (Mbps). 'Superfast' broadband can reach speeds of around 30 to 80 Mbps.

Data for constituencies and small areas can be viewed on our interactive dashboard, [Constituency data: broadband coverage and speeds](#).

Broadband coverage in the UK, September 2023					
Percentage of premises; rounded to the nearest percentage point					
Measure	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland	UK
Gigabit broadband availability					
Urban areas	82%	79%	69%	96%	81%
Rural areas	44%	32%	40%	81%	44%
Total	77%	70%	63%	91%	76%
Superfast broadband availability					
Urban areas	98%	99%	98%	99%	98%
Rural areas	88%	78%	86%	93%	87%
Total	97%	95%	96%	97%	97%
Unable to receive 10 Mbps from fixed broadband					
Urban areas	0%	0%	1%	1%	0%
Rural areas	5%	12%	8%	4%	6%
Total	1%	2%	2%	2%	1%

Source: Ofcom, [Connected Nations 2023, Interactive report, page 6](#)

Ability

People who lack the digital skills to use the internet safely and knowledgeably may be digitally excluded even if they can access the internet. For its [annual surveys on adult media use](#), Ofcom asks people about the tasks they do online, such as online banking, applying for jobs, and watching

¹⁷ Digital Poverty Alliance, [UK digital poverty evidence review 2022](#), September 2022, p37

entertainment content.¹⁸ In 2023 Ofcom found that almost a third of internet users are ‘narrow’ users, meaning that they have only ever undertaken any four of the thirteen tasks Ofcom asked about.¹⁹

Another survey, Lloyds Bank’s Digital Index, looks at how many people can complete the tasks set out in the Department for Education’s [Essential Digital Skills framework](#). The framework has three components. The ‘foundation’ level consists of eight basic digital skills, such as connecting to wifi, opening an internet browser, and finding websites. The ‘life skills’ and ‘work skills’ components cover tasks in five skill areas:

- Communicating, such as setting up and using email or other messaging apps.
- Handling information, such as recognising trustworthy information, downloading or streaming content, and accessing information across different devices.
- Transacting, such as buying goods and services online and using online banking.
- Problem solving, such using search engines and work-related software.
- Being safe and legal online, such as recognising suspicious links and controlling privacy settings.²⁰

Lloyds’ [2023 Digital Index](#) found that:

- 16% of UK adults (around 8.5 million) do not have all eight foundation level skills. 2% of adults (1.3 million) do not have any.
- 8% of UK adults (around 4.6 million) do not have essential digital skills for life, meaning that they cannot complete at least one task in all five skill areas. 3% of UK adults (1.5 million) cannot complete any of the life skills tasks.
- 18% of UK adults in the labour force do not have essential digital skills for work, meaning that they cannot do at least one task in each of the skill areas. 5% of the workforce (1.9 million) cannot complete any of the 20 tasks, while 46% can complete all of them. The task that most people

¹⁸ The tasks are: 1. Online banking or paying bills. 2. Paying for council tax or another local council service. 3. Looking for public services information on government sites. 4. Finding information for work/business/school/college/university. 5. Looking or applying for jobs. 6. Finding information for leisure time. 7. Completing government processes. 8. Signing a petition or using a campaigning website. 9. Using streamed audio services. 10. Listening to live, catch-up or on-demand radio through a website or app. 11. Watching TV programmes/films/content. 12. Watching or posting live stream videos. 13. Playing games online.

¹⁹ Ofcom, [Adult media use and attitudes](#), 29 March 2023, p4

²⁰ Lloyds Bank, [Digital Index 2023](#) [PDF], November 2023, p72-74

struggle with is using digital tools such as workload planners to aid productivity: around 31% of the labour force does not know how to do this.

The report found skills gaps based on age, education, social grade, and work status. For example, 92% of labour force adults with a degree have essential digital skills for work, compared to 50% of adults without a formal qualification.

In all areas the level of digital skills has shown an improvement since the previous report. In 2022, 20% of UK adults (10.2 million) were unable to complete all eight foundation level tasks and 4% (2.4 million) were unable to complete any.²¹ However, the Digital Policy Alliance has argued that it is a “misconception that time will solve” digital exclusion caused by lack of ability and motivation.²² The CEBR has estimated that around 5.8 million people will remain digitally excluded by 2032 without “further intervention” in digital skills training.²³

Further discussion of digital skills can be found in the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology briefing, [Developing essential digital skills](#) (May 2021).

Affordability

Since 2020 Ofcom has monitored the [affordability of communications services](#). It conducts quarterly surveys asking people whether they had struggled with ‘affordability issues’ (such as changing or cancelling a service, or having to reduce spend elsewhere to keep it).

According to its [Communications Affordability Tracker](#), 30% of UK households (approximately 8.5 million) had struggled to afford their communications services in October 2023. The figure includes affordability issues relating to any communications service: broadband, mobile, landline, on-demand streaming, and pay TV. Around 10% of respondents (equating to around 2.4 million households) reported that they had struggled to afford their broadband service. 9% struggled with their mobile service.

The Lloyds Digital Index reported that in 2023, 36% of people (19 million) said that the cost of living had impacted their ability to go online.²⁴

Households in different income groups spend similar amounts (in nominal terms) on telecoms services. As a result, lower-income households spend a higher proportion of their income on the service. Ofcom has estimated that, in 2020, the median household spent around 1.2% of its disposable income

²¹ Lloyds Bank, [Digital Index 2022](#) [PDF], November 2022

²² Digital Poverty Alliance, [UK digital poverty evidence review 2022](#), September 2022, p21

²³ CEBR, [The economic impact of digital inclusion in the UK](#), July 2022

²⁴ Lloyds Bank, [Digital Index 2023](#) [PDF], November 2023, p31

on broadband. For households in the lowest income decile, average monthly spending on broadband represented 4.2% of their disposable income.²⁵ Separately, Ofcom has estimated that a £27 per month broadband contract would cost an out-of-work Universal Credit claimant 8.3% of their disposable income.²⁶

Consequently, affordability issues are more prevalent among disadvantaged demographic groups, including those on means tested benefits (14% struggled to afford broadband in October 2023) and households with an individual with a limiting condition (17%). A separate survey for the Independent Age charity found that almost half (48%) of low-income pensioners in England struggled to afford broadband in the first six months of 2023.²⁷

According to a survey for Citizens Advice, up to a million people in the UK cut back or stopped spending on broadband in the year to May 2023. 16% of Universal Credit claimants said they were behind on their broadband bills, and 6% of claimants said they had stopped spending on broadband altogether.²⁸

The cost of devices also affects whether and how people can access the internet. Ofcom's 2023 adult media use report found that almost one in five internet users only have access via a smartphone. The regulator noted that "as some devices are less well suited to certain online activities, such as filling in forms, users who exclusively go online via a smartphone can face a risk of digital exclusion".²⁹

²⁵ Ofcom, [Affordability of communications services](#), July 2021, paras 3.28-3.35

²⁶ Ofcom, [Affordability of Communications Services: Summary of research findings and update on availability and take-up of broadband social tariffs](#), 15 February 2022, paras 4.8-4.18

²⁷ Independent Age, [Older people struggling to pay for broadband at risk of further financial losses](#), 13 July 2023

²⁸ Citizens Advice, [One million lose broadband access as cost-of-living crisis bites](#), 18 May 2023

²⁹ Ofcom, [Adult media use and attitudes](#), 29 March 2023, p2

1 Social tariffs

Social tariffs are discounted tariffs for broadband and mobile services that are made available to consumers on low incomes or with special social needs. There is at present no mandatory requirement for broadband or mobile providers to offer social tariffs. Ofcom maintains a list of [social broadband and mobile packages](#) currently on the market. The available social broadband tariffs cost £12-22 per month, around half the price of an equivalent commercial tariff.

Take-up of social tariffs is low as a proportion of eligible households. Ofcom estimated that as of September 2023, 8.3% of households on Universal Credit were on a broadband or mobile social tariff.³⁰ However, Ofcom notes that take-up has increased “substantially”: in February 2023 around 5.1% of eligible households were on a social tariff. In February 2022, just 1.3% were.³¹

Social tariffs may still be too expensive for some, such as households on zero income Universal Credit. The Digital Poverty Alliance has said that, for this group, “there is an argument for fully subsidised device, connectivity and skills support”.³² Enders Analysis, a consultancy, have argued that the wide eligibility of social tariffs limits service providers’ willingness to promote social tariffs and offer deep discounts.³³ BT’s evidence to the CD Committee said that if the 6 million potentially eligible households took up social tariffs, it would cost the industry £1 billion per year in lost subscriber revenues. It said that if the government was committed to boosting uptake, the industry would require support.³⁴

1.3

Digital inclusion policy

Ofcom states that the varying reasons that people have for being offline means that they will need different types of support:

there are those who are not online and don’t want to be, but may need support to avoid being left behind in an ever-digitised world; there are those who want to be online but may need support in overcoming barriers to access

³⁰ Ofcom, [Pricing trends for communications services](#), 23 January 2024, p50-51

³¹ Ofcom, [Affordability of communications services: April 2023 update](#), 24 April 2023

³² House of Lords Digital and Communications Committee, [Digital exclusion and the cost of living – written evidence DCL0052 Digital Poverty Alliance and British Computer Society](#), March 2023

³³ Enders Analysis, [Social tariffs: on the edge of reason](#), 21 July 2023

³⁴ House of Lords Digital and Communications Committee, [Digital exclusion and the cost of living – written evidence DCL0083 BT](#), March 2023

such as cost; and there are those who are online but lack the confidence to navigate the online world safely and may need support in building their online skillset.³⁵

Promoting digital inclusion is therefore a cross-cutting issue. The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) is responsible for coordinating the government's digital inclusion policy.³⁶ DSIT "works with the rest of government to ensure departments take digitally excluded people into consideration when delivering public services".³⁷

There is at present no UK Government strategy specifically on digital inclusion. The last [digital inclusion strategy](#) was published in 2014, with a target completion date of 2020.

Viscount Camrose, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at DSIT, said in a February 2024 debate that "ensuring that no one is left behind in the digital age is a priority" and that the government "consider that credible steps have been taken to offer needed support".³⁸

On the issue of access, he pointed to Project Gigabit, the government's £5 billion programme to subsidise the rollout of next generation, full fibre broadband to hard to reach areas in the UK.³⁹ He also highlighted the universal service obligation for broadband, a legal right to request a decent and affordable broadband connection.⁴⁰ 'Decent' is currently defined as download speeds over 10 Mbps, although the government has published a consultation asking whether that is sufficient for modern needs.⁴¹ Finally, he said that public libraries in England received public funding to provide free wifi and computer use.

On the issue of affordability, Viscount Camrose said that the UK's competitive telecoms market kept prices low. A wide range of cheaper 'social tariffs' are available to customers who receive Universal Credit and other means-tested benefits (see Box 1 above).

Finally, on the issue of skills, the Secretary of State for DSIT, Michelle Donelan, has highlighted government initiatives ranging from [Essential Digital Skills Qualifications](#), which are available free of charge for people with

³⁵ Ofcom, [Adult media use and attitudes](#), 29 March 2023, p25

³⁶ [PQ 190835 – Digital Technology: Coventry](#), 28 June 2023

³⁷ [PQ 5447 - Internet: Disadvantaged](#), 25 May 2022

³⁸ [HL Deb 8 February 2024 vol 834 c1835-1842](#)

³⁹ See House of Commons Library, [Gigabit broadband in the UK: Government targets, policy, and funding](#), 3 July 2023

⁴⁰ See House of Commons Library, [The Universal Service Obligation \(USO\) for Broadband](#), 7 March 2022

⁴¹ DSIT, [Reviewing the broadband Universal Service Obligation](#), 2 October 2023

low digital skills, to doctoral scholarships for high skill jobs in the digital sector.⁴²

2 Local and voluntary digital inclusion initiatives

Work to tackle digital exclusion often takes place at the local level and through projects involving the public, private, and third sectors. Stakeholders told the Lords Digital and Communications Committee that trusted local organisations are often better placed to engage digitally excluded individuals.⁴³

The Good Things Foundation supports local ‘digital inclusion hubs’ through its [National Digital Inclusion Network](#). The [Digital Inclusion Toolkit](#) provides advice and guidance to local authorities on setting up digital inclusion programmes.

Initiatives to help people get online include projects addressing affordability, such as:

- The Good Things Foundation’s [National Databank](#) provides free data, donated by mobile companies, to people in need.
- The [National Device Bank](#), also run by the Good Things Foundation, provides refurbished devices to people without internet access.
- [GetOnline@Home](#), run by the Digital Poverty Alliance, Currys, and Computer Refurbishers UK, offers discounted refurbished devices to vulnerable or digitally excluded individuals.
- Internet service provider TalkTalk works with the Department for Work and Pensions to offer [six months’ free internet access to jobseekers](#) whose digital exclusion is preventing them from gaining employment.

1.4

Equalities law and digital accessibility

The government has sought to create specific accessibility requirements for public sector websites and mobile applications. It has also previously

⁴² House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee, [Oral evidence: Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology](#), 6 February 2024, Q15

⁴³ House of Lords Digital and Communications Committee, [Digital exclusion and the cost of living](#), HL Paper 219, 29 June 2023, para 154

committed to considering the potential inaccessibility of private sector websites.

Accessibility of public sector websites

[The Public Sector Bodies \(Websites and Mobile Applications\) \(No. 2\) Accessibility Regulations 2018](#) build on the Equality Act 2010's [duty to make reasonable adjustments for people with the protected characteristic of disability](#). They require public sector websites and applications, save those expressly exempt by the regulations (for instance, public service broadcasters), to:

- Meet the [international Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\) 2.1 AA accessibility standard](#).
- Publish an accessibility statement that explains how accessible the website or mobile app is.

According to these regulations, a website must be “perceivable, operable, understandable and robust” to be accessible.

Some content is expressly exempt from this requirement, including archival material, live media and some content in office file formats published before 23 September 2018. Furthermore, it does not apply in circumstances where a public sector body determines that compliance with the accessibility requirement would impose a disproportionate burden. However, in both cases, a person may request that exempt information is provided to them in an accessible format.

A failure by a public sector body to comply with the accessibility requirement will constitute a failure to make a reasonable adjustment, as defined in the Equality Act 2010.⁴⁴ Similarly, a failure by a public sector body to provide a satisfactory response to a request to provide information in an accessible format will also be treated as a failure to make a reasonable adjustment.

The Regulations are enforced by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC). If a person believes that a website or mobile application of a public sector body has failed to comply with the accessibility requirement, they should notify the organisation. If the person is dissatisfied with its response, they can complain to the EHRC.

Accessibility of private sector websites

The government published [the National Disability Strategy](#) in July 2021. In a 16 December 2021 written statement, the then Minister for Disabled People,

⁴⁴ More information about this duty can be found in the Library's briefing [Disability discrimination](#), published 4 January 2023.

Chloe Smith, described the strategy as having set out “over 100 wide-ranging practical actions to improve the everyday lives of disabled people”.⁴⁵ One of the actions included in the strategy was a commitment to consider the potential inaccessibility of private sector websites:

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) will build the evidence base about the nature and scale of the inaccessibility of private sector websites, and explore how the government can effectively intervene including possible legislative options, reporting back by spring 2022.⁴⁶

Chris Philp, then Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, provided an update on this in response to a written question on 3 February 2022:

We are aware that for people who have a disability, inadequate design of apps or websites - which does not take disabled users into account - is a significant issue. As part of the commitment made in the government’s National Disability Strategy 2021, DCMS commissioned an internal study into the nature and scale of the inaccessibility of private sector websites; the first stage of which was completed in late 2021.

The conclusions of this study are currently being considered by policy teams in collaboration with the government’s disability unit. DCMS is using this evidence to explore how the government can make effective interventions in this space. We aim to conclude our findings and options in spring 2022.

This work will complement the government’s 2018 publication of the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) Accessibility Regulations (opens in a new tab). Led and monitored by the Government Digital Services (GDS), these regulations require UK public sector websites and apps to be made accessible, unless it would be disproportionate to do so.⁴⁷

On 25 January 2022, the High Court’s judgment in [R\(Binder & Others\) v Secretary of State for Work and Pensions](#) declared the National Disability Strategy to be unlawful. The High Court found that the Secretary of State “took on a duty to consult which she did not properly discharge”.⁴⁸ This was principally due to faults with the UK Disability Survey which had informed the strategy.

In a 13 June 2022 written statement, the then Minister for Disabled People, Chloe Smith, stated that certain policies from the strategy had been paused whilst the Department awaited a decision on permission to appeal the High Court’s decision.⁴⁹ In an 8 September 2022 response to a written question the Minister confirmed that work on the potential inaccessibility of private

⁴⁵ [HCWS498, 16 December 2021](#)

⁴⁶ Department for Work and Pensions, [National Disability Strategy, Part 1: practical steps now to improve disabled people's everyday lives](#), July 2021 (accessed 15 December 2022)

⁴⁷ [PQ 113202 – Internet: Disability](#), 3 February 2022

⁴⁸ *Binder & Ors v Secretary of State for Work And Pensions* [2022] EWHC 105, [77]

⁴⁹ [HCWS93, 13 June 2022](#)

sector websites had been paused.⁵⁰ A 27 September 2022 letter from the Minister to Virginia Crosbie MP, provided more detail on the status of this particular policy:

The requirement for all websites to be accessible is covered under the Reasonable Adjustment Duty in the Equality Act 2010. There is considerable guidance available to assist companies to ensure their websites are accessible. Including guidance on GOV.UK around public sector website accessibility which highlights many areas of good practice ensures this can be used by companies to maximise access to the estimated £274bn represented by the ‘purple pound’.

In addition, DCMS will continue to engage and coordinate HMG digital inclusion policy with the aim of improving people’s skills and access to digital to ensure they can make the most of a digital future.⁵¹

On 11 July 2023, the Court of Appeal ruled that the National Disability Strategy was lawful. In a written statement on 18 September 2023, Tom Pursglove, Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, set out how the Government now proposed to take forward the 14 commitments that were paused to comply with the High Court declaration.⁵² The commitment to build an evidence base about private sector websites “will need to be reviewed...to ensure that this activity sits with the most appropriate department”.⁵³

It has since been confirmed that private sector website accessibility falls within the remit of Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. This action remains ongoing and has yet to be fully implemented.⁵⁴

1.5

Calls for a Digital Inclusion Strategy

One of the main recommendations in the Lords Communications and Digital Committee’s report was that the government should publish a new digital inclusion strategy. In its evidence to the inquiry, the Digital Poverty Alliance said that the “lack of joined-up policy” was one of the main obstacles to greater digital inclusion.⁵⁵ The Good Things Foundation said that the government had failed to recognise “the scale and significance of digital

⁵⁰ [PQ 47712 – Disability](#), 8 September 2022

⁵¹ [DEP2022-0786 \(National Disability Strategy\)](#) (PDF), p4

⁵² [HCWS1038, 18 September 2023](#)

⁵³ [DEP2023-0744 \(Update on the National Disability Strategy\)](#) (PDF), p7

⁵⁴ [PQ 189791 – Department for Science, Innovation and Technology: Disability](#), 26 June 2023

⁵⁵ House of Lords Digital and Communications Committee, [Digital exclusion and the cost of living – written evidence DCL0052 Digital Poverty Alliance and British Computer Society](#), March 2023

exclusion, and to recognise that this issue will not go away or be reduced without policy intervention and investment”.⁵⁶

While it acknowledged the range of initiatives that successive governments had introduced, the Committee said that without a strategy there was “no coherent approach” to these activities.⁵⁷ The Committee argued that the absence of a strategy showed that government had “taken its eye off the ball” on digital exclusion concluding that it had “no confidence” that digital exclusion was a priority.⁵⁸ The government said in its response to the Committee that it did not believe a new strategy was needed:

The principles underpinning the 2014 digital inclusion strategy continue to inform our current thinking in so far as access, skills, motivation and trust remain key barriers facing digitally excluded people. The Government does not consider digital inclusion as a stand alone issue, but rather something that is considered in all policy areas where applicable.⁵⁹

It said that a new cross-government group would be set up to “drive progress” on digital inclusion:

The Government will continue our work to ensure all Departments are considering the needs of people that are digitally excluded in their policymaking. We will set up a dedicated cross-Whitehall ministerial group chaired by the Minister for Tech and Digital Economy. It will include key departments such as Department for Work and Pensions, Department for Education, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and Cabinet Office. The group will drive progress and accountability on digital inclusion priorities across Government, setting clear objectives, monitoring delivery, and engaging with relevant sector experts to seek input and advice.⁶⁰

In the House of Lords debate on the Committee’s report, Viscount Camrose confirmed that the ministerial group had been established. It is chaired by Saqib Bhatti, Minister for Tech and the Digital Economy. According to Viscount Camrose, at the group’s first meeting in September 2023 “departments agreed to undertake departmental mapping exercises to drive work on digital inclusion”.⁶¹

⁵⁶ House of Lords Digital and Communications Committee, [Digital exclusion and the cost of living – written evidence DCL0042 Good Things Foundation](#), March 2023

⁵⁷ House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee, [Oral evidence: Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology](#), 6 February 2024, Q14

⁵⁸ House of Lords Digital and Communications Committee, [Digital exclusion and the cost of living](#), HL Paper 219, 29 June 2023, paras 6-8

⁵⁹ House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee, [Government response to the Committee's report 'Digital exclusion'](#) [PDF], 20 October 2023, p2

⁶⁰ House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee, [Government response to the Committee's report 'Digital exclusion'](#) [PDF], 20 October 2023, p3

⁶¹ [HL Deb 8 February 2024 vol 834 c1835-1842](#)

The group will meet every six months. Peers questioned whether this is sufficient. Closing the debate, Baroness Stowell said:

we expect this ministerial group to drive action. Any committee that is responsible for driving progress and action does not meet only twice a year—it meets more often than that. I urge my noble friend, following this debate, to take back the message to the department that the emphasis we have put on the need for progress is because we want the Government to deliver on the ambitions that they have set out. We know how important this is. As my noble friend Lady Harding said, this is about prioritising addressing digital exclusion because it makes economic, social and political sense. It is critical to everything that we are trying to achieve.⁶²

⁶² [HL Deb 8 February 2024 vol 835 c1842](#)

2 Parliamentary material

2.1 Debates

Lords debate - [Digital Exclusion \(Communications and Digital Committee Report\)](#)

HL Deb 8 February 2024 | Vol 835 c1808-

[\[HL 219 2022-23\]](#)

[\[Government response\]](#)

Westminster Hall debate - [Broadband: Rural Communities](#)

HC Deb 13 December 2023 | Vol 742 c325WH

Westminster Hall debate - [Access to Broadband Services](#)

HC Deb 6 September 2023 | Vol 737 c156WH-

2.2 PQs

[Public Services: Access](#)

Asked by: The Marquess of Lothian

To ask His Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to ensure that everyone has fair and equal access to essential public services, and that older people and those with disabilities are not adversely affected by the digitalization of public services; what assessment they have made of Age UK's campaign 'Offline And Overlooked'; and what plans they have to publish an updated digital inclusion strategy to support people of all ages to get online.

Answering member: Viscount Camrose | Department: Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

The Government is committed to closing the digital divide and meeting the commitment that nobody should be left behind in the digital age. The Government is working to remove barriers and ensure that online services

are as inclusive as possible by making public sector websites accessible to as many people as possible.

The accessibility regulations ensure that websites and mobile apps are designed to be perceivable, operable, understandable and robust. Furthermore, assisted digital support services aim to increase digital inclusion for those online users who lack digital confidence, digital skills or access to the internet.

The Government also understands the impact of poorly designed apps and websites, which do not take people with disabilities into account. That is why the Cabinet Office's Central Digital and Data Office regularly monitors compliance with the regulations for the accessibility of public sector websites.

Training is available for elderly people wishing to acquire essential digital skills. The Government has introduced a digital entitlement for adults with no or low digital skills to undertake specified digital qualifications, up to level 1, free of charge. Essential Digital Skills Qualifications (EDSQs), introduced alongside the digital entitlement, are based on new national standards which set out the digital skills people need to get on in life and work. We also support the provision of essential digital skills training in community settings through the Adult Education Budget.

We also recognise that ongoing support is essential to overcome barriers of access. Through DCMS, our network of 2,900 public libraries across England provide a trusted network of accessible locations with staff, volunteers, free wifi, public PCs, and assisted digital access to a wide range of digital services. Charities such as Age UK and AbilityNet play an important role in assisting people with access to technology and the internet. The Government welcomes Age UK's continued efforts to bridge the digital divide, especially with regards to the vulnerable and elderly.

The 2014 Digital Inclusion Strategy, and the four pillars it sets out, remains as relevant today as it was when published. These principles were further echoed in the Government's UK [Digital Strategy](#) published in 2022, and our vision to enable everyone from across the UK to benefit from all that digital innovation can offer.

The Department has noted the recommendations made in the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee's report on digital exclusion and cost of living and will formally respond this month.

HL Deb 18 October 2023 | PQ HL10414

Digital Technology

Asked by: Monaghan, Carol

To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, whether she plans to publish a revised Digital Inclusion Strategy.

Answering member: George Freeman | Department: Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology is committed to closing the digital divide and meeting the government's commitment that nobody should be left behind in the digital age. The 2014 Digital Inclusion Strategy, and the four pillars it sets out, remains as relevant today as it was when published. These principles were further echoed in the Government's UK [Digital Strategy](#) published in 2022, and our vision to enable everyone from across the UK to benefit from all that digital innovation can offer.

The Department has noted this recommendation in the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee's report on digital exclusion and cost of living and will formally respond this month.

HC Deb 11 September 2023 | PQ 198196

Electronic equipment: Government Departments

Asked by: Monaghan, Carol

To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, if he will take steps to encourage Departments to donate electronic devices that are no longer in use the National Device Bank.

Answering member: Paul Scully | Department: Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology is committed to closing the digital divide and meeting the government's commitment that nobody should be left behind in the digital age. Reflecting the four key pillars set out in the government's Digital Inclusion Strategy, we recognise that access to safe and suitable devices remains a key barrier facing digitally excluded people. Device donation initiatives are a significant and valuable contribution to supporting people to overcome this obstacle and I would encourage all private and public sector organisations to consider the feasibility of doing this.

The Department has noted this particular recommendation in the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee's report on digital exclusion and cost of living and will formally respond later this month.

HC Deb 14 September 2023 | PQ 198371

Digital Technology: Older People

Asked by: Bhatti, Saqib

To ask Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, what steps the Government is taking to develop the digital skills of older people, particularly those who may be at risk of digital exclusion.

Answering member: Paul Scully | Department: Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

To improve access to digital skills, the government has introduced a digital entitlement for adults with no or low digital skills. This allows older people wishing to acquire essential digital skills to gain specified digital qualifications, up to level 1, free of charge. Essential Digital Skills Qualifications (EDSQs), introduced alongside the digital entitlement, are based on new national standards which set out the digital skills people need to get on in life and work. We also support the provision of essential digital skills training in community settings through the Adult Education Budget.

Assisted digital support is available to help older people access online services. Around 2900 public libraries in England provide a trusted network of accessible locations with staff, volunteers, free DCMS-funded wifi, Public PCs, and assisted digital access to a wide range of digital services. The Government is working closely with the third sector to support older people getting online. Charities such as AgeUK and AbilityNet play an important role in providing help with technology and the internet.

HC Deb 27 February 2023 | PQ 147315

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News items

Computer Weekly

21 November 2023

[Government response to digital exclusion recommendations lacking, say Lords](#)

Rural Services Network

13 November 2023

[Digital divide between rural and urban areas is growing](#)

Cities Today

1 November 2023

[Social tariffs insufficient to tackle digital exclusion, Manchester pilot finds](#)

Age UK press release

22 September 2023

[Age UK launches offline and overlooked digital campaign](#)

New Statesman

18 August 2023

[Digital exclusion is leaving coastal communities behind](#)

Guardian

29 June 2023

[UK government allowing 'millions to fall behind' due to digital exclusion](#)

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