



Beyond the Pandemic. What should we do? #2 Tackle the Digital Divide

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Increased working, learning and interacting online during the pandemic has widened the gap for those who lack digital skills or access, writes Gemma Burgess, an expert on social inequality and housing in the UK. She suggests strategies to tackle the digital divide and avoid millions of the poorest in the UK being left even further behind.

Throughout the crisis, we have heard stories of great courage and community spirit. But we have also heard of poverty, hunger, abuse and despair on our local doorsteps, all over the UK.

While we might all be experiencing the same storm we are not all in the same boat – and perhaps one of the most obvious manifestations of this has been in how the pandemic has changed the way we interact.

For some, the new norm might mean running a Zoom meeting from a makeshift home office, accessing education online and having a virtual GP appointment. But, for the 22% of people in the UK who lack digital skills or access to the right technology, this increased shift towards the digital world has excluded them yet further. Not all households have internet access, not all children can learn online at home, not all adults can send an email.

Of the eight million in the UK who don't use the internet, 90% suffer from other kinds of economic or social disadvantages. They are also more likely to be in the lowest income bracket and/or be disabled with long-standing health conditions.

"The statistics showing the extent of digital exclusion in the UK are shocking in themselves. But the situation is now worse. The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted and worsened an existing problem"

For the past four years, we've been researching digital exclusion at the Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research (CCHPR). We know through our research with New Horizons, a one-to-one coaching programme for people experiencing financial issues in the East of England, that digital exclusion creates additional problems for people already experiencing poverty: putting together a CV, applying for jobs, managing and keeping track of money, and applying for Universal Credit.

We've seen that when people spend all of their time worrying about money, how to feed their family, how to pay their rent, they have no 'mental bandwidth' left for training, learning new digital skills, searching for jobs.

We've recently highlighted that the public health crisis currently gripping the UK stands to make the impacts of digital exclusion worse for the millions of people affected, with the poorest hit the hardest.

Can we take what we've learned to create strategies that will help to heal the digital divide before it worsens yet further?

New horizons in social inequality

Even before COVID-19, digital exclusion was a reality for a fifth of the UK's population of all ages. But, as one New Horizons coach explained to us, the tasks that were once difficult for the digitally excluded are now closer to impossible in the context of coronavirus.

New Horizons is run by Cambridge-based housing association CHS Group together with seven other partner organisations. Over the past three years, the project has helped over 500 men and women across Cambridgeshire to feel in control of their money, to get online and to get back into work. My team helps with the design and evaluation of the programme as it progresses, and develops tools to assess the scale of issues faced by each participant.

In recent months, the pandemic has stressed an already fragile situation for many of the people on the programme, increasing financial hardship and causing the impacts of poverty to be felt by some for the first time.

Job searching has become even more challenging for those with health conditions, or with caring responsibilities for people with health conditions or young children. For these people, New Horizons coaches have focused on ensuring that they have the food, medication and social contact that they need to survive. The impacts of the digital divide are felt even more at this time.

"We're absolutely skint. Absolutely skint. I'm living, basically, on a pension anyway. And obviously I've got a daughter who's been laid off work because of the coronavirus, so I'm obviously supporting her... We were jogging along, living on the breadline. But then when all this lockdown kicked in, the breadline was taken away from us."

Former New Horizons participant

We've seen through New Horizons that Cambridgeshire's highest-scoring reason for deprivation is housing affordability and homelessness. An insufficient supply of affordable housing in the UK has contributed to a decline in home ownership, growth of the insecure private rented sector, rising waiting times for social housing and the threat of homelessness.

The programme is therefore aimed at the people who are most vulnerable to running up rent arrears, to not managing their debts, to facing the prospect of a downward spiral towards homelessness. Increasing people's digital skills has proved crucial to getting them back on track.

Meanwhile, my research with Cambridge's Centre for Digital Built Britain has shown that digital skills are important for another reason: a key part of solving the housing crisis will be to shift from conventional house-building towards more innovative digital approaches. Data-driven 'building information modelling' and off-site manufacturing will take us closer to an industry in which houses are built in weeks or even days and at far lower cost.

But uptake of these approaches in the housing sector remains low. Why? Principally because of the low level of digital skills among house builders and their numerous suppliers.

And so, in many respects, we face a social deprivation vicious circle: the digital divide that has widened with the pandemic, and insufficient digital literacy skills in the UK to solve the affordable housing crisis. Without action, inequality will get worse.

Where should we go from here?

Our research shows that strategies are needed to make sure we don't leave the digitally excluded behind as we become a highly digitised society. We must prioritise the people and places who have, for many years, been left behind.

We need to put tackling poverty at the heart of our post-pandemic recovery. We should make the benefits system less punitive. Increasing benefits, particularly for families, will help to alleviate the worst stresses of poverty, giving people the 'mental bandwidth' to tackle learning new skills.

We need equal access to the internet across all geographies and social groups. If access to the internet is a universal entitlement, this means that access cannot be left to the market. National and local government must find ways to ensure that all areas have equal broadband access and that internet access is subsidised or provided free for the households who cannot afford it.

We need to raise digital awareness for people who cannot afford the internet, or do not understand its benefits, or are intimidated by a digital world. We need to remember the role that libraries, community centres, education settings, volunteers and local digital champions can play in providing digital access, and ensure this support is protected and funded.

We need to fund more programmes like New Horizons that seek to tackle the intertwined challenges of digital exclusion, money management and moving into employment.

As we invest in a digital built Britain, we should focus our digital innovation in construction in areas of post-industrial decline. Areas left behind by regional inequality and the impact of multiple recessions are where we should invest in digitally enabled manufacturing and construction, in modular factories, and in courses in digital skills and innovative construction methods.

What's next?

Digital exclusion is a new form of social deprivation, exacerbated by existing lines of inequality and poverty, and as the world gets 'smarter', the divide gets wider. What does it mean to live in a Smart City if you are digitally excluded? How do you benefit from the Internet of Things if you cannot afford to access the internet?

And so, as we 'build back better' and build digital, we have an opportunity to take account of the unintended consequences of digitalisation and tackle it now, before it becomes an entrenched part of the already unequal social fabric of the UK.

The pandemic has already changed the way we interact: it looks set to have a lasting effect on the way we communicate.

By putting improving digital skills at the heart of post-COVID recovery plans in the UK we have the opportunity to not only boost national productivity, but also to

improve the lives of millions of households at risk of being left behind in a digital world.

By tackling the inequality in digital capabilities, we are future-proofing our national skill set and creating resilience against poverty, exclusion and the impact of future pandemics.