OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Getting Oxfordshire Online

Digital Inclusion for our Communities

March 2025

Contents

Executive summary

Getting Oxfordshire Online (GOO) is a countywide partnership of charities that aims to improve digital exclusion by refurbishing and distributing devices, providing connectivity, and offering support through a growing digital inclusion network of community partners. GOO was launched during the pandemic to help schoolchildren and has since broadened its focus to support communities to thrive online.

This report, funded by Oxfordshire County Council, explores digital inclusion barriers and needs in the county's 10 most deprived wards and Berinsfield. Despite Oxfordshire's overall affluence, these areas face higher than average levels of deprivation, unemployment, and health inequalities.

Digital inclusion

According to the government, digital inclusion means ensuring everyone has access to the internet and can use it confidently and safely. It depends on the availability of suitable devices and data, digital skills and support, and motivation and trust. Inclusion is not static—it changes with individual circumstances, such as age, health, income, disability or location.

Being online enhances individuals' access to education, employment, essential services, and social connections. It also enables democratic participation and can improve quality of life. However, it can also have negative consequences for individuals, such as being at increased risk of fraud and harmful content. For organisations, digital inclusion brings cost-efficiencies and improved reach but demands responsibility to ensure accessibility and user safety.

Aims and objectives

The research aimed to understand the:

- current picture of access to devices, connectivity and support
- specific needs and barriers by group (e.g. older people, young people, refugees, people with disabilities)
- the impact of digital exclusion on daily life
- the scale and nature of digital inclusion support in Oxfordshire
- opportunities to address barriers and improve digital participation.

Key findings

The research, based on interviews with ten frontline support organisations, found that:

- key needs for being online are education, employability, managing finances, accessing essential services, communication and entertainment
- having a phone of any type is the biggest priority
- access to appropriate devices is fundamental
- access to connectivity is fairly ubiquitous
- digital confidence and skills needed for basic day-to-day digital literacy, for the workplace and to stay safe online, vary widely by age, experience and support needs – with younger people generally being more digitally literate but often lacking work-related digital skills

- barriers to digital inclusion include lack of appropriate devices, devices that aren't configured to users' needs, affordability, lack of skills and confidence, fear of scams, and limited language and literacy
- motivation, particularly among older adults, can be a major barrier; some people see limited benefit in being online or are anxious about online risks. Offline solutions could be the right answer for these people
- in-person and structured group-based digital support (offered by local government services, charities focusing on specific needs and volunteer-led community organisations) plays a crucial role in providing technical and skills support but due to accessibility challenges and lack of awareness, engagement may be limited.

Recommendations

GOO will continue to provide devices, essential for digital participation and engagement. Working with the Digital Inclusion Network, we will explore support further, including the potential for:

- strengthening collaboration through the network to improve visibility of outcomes and share knowledge
- developing a "gold standard" for community support to ensure consistent and safe advice for users receiving GOO devices and to ensure that volunteer-led support groups are providing the most up-to-date advice
- measuring longer-term impact to understand user journeys beyond initial support

Final thoughts

Access to digital information and services is becoming increasingly critical for full participation in everyday life activities with more and more services going online. Local authorities, charities, community organisations and volunteers need to work together to deliver flexible, inclusive, accessible and ongoing digital support appropriate to individual needs to ensure that those who want to be online can confidently and safely make the most of the online world. For some, digital participation may not be appropriate, so it is essential that alternative forms of support are maintained to ensure these people are not excluded from accessing essential day-to-day services.

Background

Getting Oxfordshire Online (GOO)

GOO is a partnership of charities led by SOFEA and Aspire, providing three device refurbishment hubs across the county. GOO also acts as a network for "all things digital" in Oxfordshire, helping community groups, charities, public and private sector work effectively to improve digital inclusion.

GOO supports communities and groups with particular needs across Oxfordshire. Since it started in 2021, it has provided over 4800 devices including laptops, tablets, phones and accessories to organisations across the county. These support those seeking work, undertaking education and training, those who need access to essential everyday services, such as health and support services, public services, financial services, including banking and benefit access, and those who are socially isolated.

As a member of Good Things Foundation's National Databank, GOO is able to provide SIM cards with six months of free data alongside refurbished devices.

GOO's initial focus during the pandemic was on providing devices to schoolchildren to support them with remote learning. Post pandemic GOO's focus has moved towards supporting communities to thrive online (e.g. supporting adults seeking work). As part of this support, GOO has established a digital inclusion network (which brings together organisations across Oxfordshire who are helping people to get online) to understand the needs across the community, learn from each other and stay abreast of change in a rapidly changing online world.

Report remit

This report, funded by Oxfordshire County Council, aims to explore the digital inclusion barriers and needs in the 10 most deprived wards within Oxfordshire. Berinsfield was also identified as an "eleventh ward" of high need.

Despite Oxfordshire being a wealthy county, according to the 2021 census and Oxfordshire County Council's community insight reports (data-based analyses and community insight that provide an in-depth understanding of local health and wellbeing needs and community support), the 10 wards are among the 20% most deprived areas in England, and 12% of children in the county are in poverty.

The wards are spread across the county and represent a range of urban (Central Oxford and Banbury), suburban (The Leys, Barton, Littlemore, Rose Hill and Abingdon Caldecott) and rural communities (Berinsfield) each facing degrees of social and economic challenges, such as:

- higher than average levels of deprivation, unemployment and low-income households
- unaffordable housing and homelessness
- health inequalities, poor health outcomes
- concerns about access to health services, public services and transport (particularly in suburban and rural wards, such as Littlemore and Berinsfield)
- education and employment barriers
- concerns about crime, antisocial behaviour and substance abuse.

Analysis of key characteristics within the wards (Table 1), using the community insight reports, shows that the urban wards of Oxford and Banbury have young, diverse populations compared with the rural ward of Berinsfield. 75% of the wards experience child poverty levels that are at least double the average for the county as a whole.

Table 1: summary of key characteristics of the 10 wards and Berinsfield

Area	Population	Median age	Non-White British (%)	Child poverty	Not economically active (%)*
Oxfordshire	*725,300*	*39.9*	*13.1*	*10.5*	*38.7*
Abingdon Caldecott	7,900	39	20	14.3	41.1
Berinsfield	2,800	42	10.8	21	36.4
Banbury Grimsbury (includes Hightown)	10,400	32	22	21	30.3
Banbury Ruscote and Neithrop	10,300	33	29.3	21	36
Barton & Sandhills	6,200	32	48.3	24	35.6
The Leys	13,500	33	32.5	21.5	38.3
Littlemore	6,200	35	42.5	21	36.7
Central Oxford (covering St Thomas)	1,200	29.2	41.2	14	58.7
Rose Hill & Iffley	4,000	34	50.3	29	40.1

*includes unemployed, economically inactive

(Source: Data taken from the community insight reports based and areas based on categorisation used within the community insight reports where some wards are combined.)

The research outcomes will help GOO identify gaps and barriers to digital access and support within local communities, determine the best ways to support those in need, and guide our future support. This includes shaping our own support offering and strengthening our work with the digital inclusion network, ensuring a collaborative, community-led approach.

What is digital inclusion?

According to the Government's 2025 'Digital Inclusion Action Plan: First Steps', digital inclusion means ensuring that everyone has the access, skills, support and confidence to engage in our modern digital society, whatever their circumstances' (Figure 1). This can be achieved by:

- **skills development and technical support:** developing and maintaining the necessary digital skills and having access to affordable, accessible and relevant training and support for both skills and technical issues – as brought together in the Essential Digital Skills Framework
- **access to appropriate devices and data:** ensuring ongoing access to:
    - sufficient, regular (at least once a week), affordable and reliable internet connectivity both at home and in the community

- appropriate internet-enabled devices (i.e. access to a smartphone and other device – laptop, desktop or tablet that are configured to meet users' needs) through refurbishing donated devices and appropriate device configuration

- **building confidence, trust and motivation:**
  - building trust around online safety protections and ensuring people have a safe and private space for online access
  - building confidence by ensuring that people know how and where to find local digital support (both online and offline)
  - building motivation to be online by ensuring that people understand and experience the relevance and benefits of being online.

The Government report also highlights the importance of removing barriers to being online and to accessing essential digital services by ensuring:

- services, such as NHS and other public sector services, are easy to use and save people time or money
- support is provided for those who are struggling to access the internet and essential online services.

While device and connectivity access are important components of digital inclusion, without skills, support, confidence and motivation people are not able to get the most out of being online. Ensuring people have the necessary skills, and can get appropriate support, enhances digital inclusion and confidence.

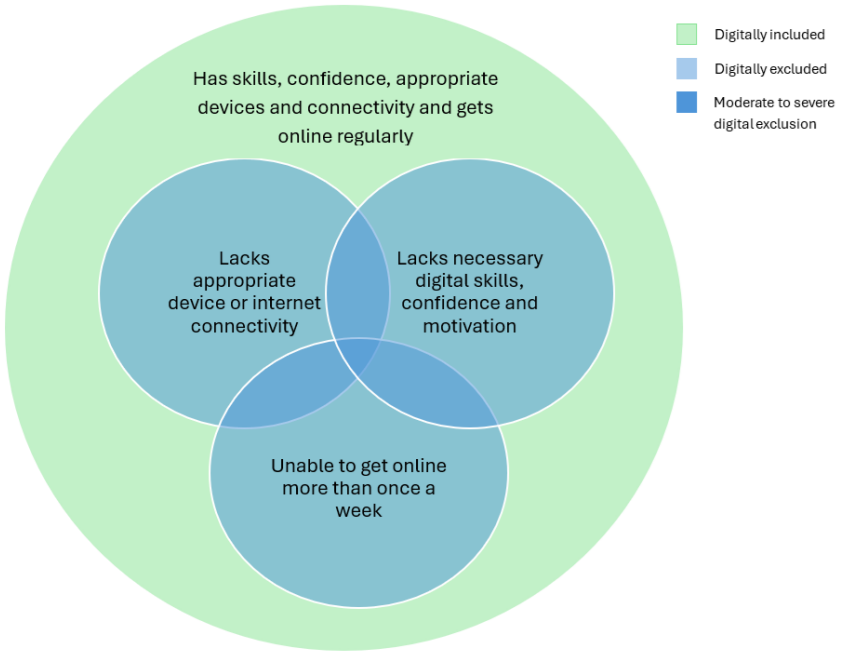

Figure 1: digital inclusion versus digital exclusion

Digital inclusion isn't static and may vary over time according to the changing needs, circumstances and motivations of individuals (e.g. due to age, income, disability and location).

As shown in Figure 2, people may gain or lose access to devices and connectivity, skills, support and confidence due to changing needs, circumstances and motivations.

Figure 2: digital inclusion is dependent on individuals' changing circumstances

The importance of digital inclusion

According to the Government's 2025 'Digital Inclusion Action Plan: First Steps' and the 'Lloyds bank consumer digital index report' 2024, 1.6 million (3%) adults aged 18+ are currently living offline and 23% of the adult population aged 18+ (12.1 million) have low digital capability and may struggle to interact with online services.

Applying this to Oxfordshire's adult population (aged 18+) of c.598,000 people, around 18,000 people in the county are currently living offline, and 138,000 people may be unable to carry out essential online activities due to low levels of digital skills.

It is important to address this as being digitally included not only provides opportunities for individuals to transform their lives, through education and employment, but in an increasingly digital and technology-driven world, it is also a necessity for essential everyday tasks, such as accessing healthcare, education, banking and shopping services. Digital inclusion enhances:

- **Education and learning:** by providing opportunities, such as online courses, and educational resources so that users can learn at any time, from any geographical location and at their own pace to further their educational goals and get qualifications which can lead to work or better pay
- **Employment:** in a world where the majority of job applications and networking opportunities, and remote working all require online access, digital inclusion provides individuals with the skills and devices to pursue and maintain employment opportunities, with the additional benefit of financial independence
- **Access to essential services (e.g. healthcare and banking):** increasingly essential services, such as health and wellbeing services, are moving online. Digital inclusion allows individuals to access essential services, such as GP appointments, public services (social

services, benefits, housing and income support), ongoing support services (e.g. mental health) and energy provision

- **Social connection:** individuals can connect not only with family and friends wherever they are in the world but also with those who share interests – building a sense of belonging and combating social isolation
- **Democratic participation:** people can register to vote, apply for photo ID (required to vote) and stay up to date with trustworthy sources of news.

Digital inclusion also brings benefits to business and organisations, such as the NHS, in terms of cost savings and efficiencies enabling them to improve service quality. However, digital inclusion can also have harmful consequences, such as:

- increased exposure to scams and frauds for those people who are more vulnerable online (e.g. older people and those with learning or non-visible disabilities)
- increased risk of downloading malware and vulnerability for those who are less confident or don't have appropriate devices
- increased exposure to harmful content including misinformation.

It is therefore important that individuals are aware of these harms and are able to make safe and informed decisions online and are not coerced into operating online if it isn't appropriate for them.

As part of its Digital Inclusion Action Plan the government has set out five action steps in relation to funding local initiatives to remove barriers and increase digital participation, developing skills to get online safely and with confidence, piloting a device donation scheme that repurposes government laptops, and making digital services easier to use. In addition, they will set up a new Digital Inclusion and Skills Unit, a ministerial group on digital inclusion and Digital Inclusion Action Committee to tackle digital exclusion.

Barriers to digital inclusion

Table 2: Common barriers to digital inclusion

	Barriers to digital inclusion
Devices	Access to unsuitable devices, such as outdated, broken or inadequate sized screens, limiting functionality. Lack of device access due to unaffordable purchase or repair costs. Access to devices that lack necessary configurations (e.g. accessibility)
Internet connection	Lack internet connection due to cost Unreliable or limited access to internet through mobile data or public Wi-Fi, particularly in rural areas
Skills	Insufficient digital skills to perform essential tasks (e.g. day-to-day and in the workplace). Barriers to skills development (e.g. language or literacy barriers, mental health) Limited access to support – lack of motivation, opportunities for skills development or awareness of available skills support
Support	Lack of support (from family or friends or support organisations) and awareness of other available support Unsuitable support is inadequate or inaccessible in terms of level, delivery medium, type or lack of personal networks.

Safety, trust and confidence	Lack confidence and trust due to media influence or past experiences with scams and online risks Lack of a safe, private space for handling personal information or online video calls
Motivation	No perceived need or interest – prefers offline living, has a proxy for online tasks or sees no benefits of being online Values in-person interactions over digital alternatives

Current digital inclusion support in Oxfordshire

GOO's provision of devices has introduced us to more than 200 organisations that offer some level of digital support. The provision across the county appears to be relatively small in scale and fragmented, with digital support generally a part of an offering with a particular focus, for example:

- **charities focusing on specific needs** – such as Age UK, AbilityNet, My Life My Choice, Read Easy, My Vision, SOFEA, Aspire, Mind and Oxfordshire Youth.
- **local government-led services** – such as county libraries with digital drop-ins, schools, social services, NHS including digital cafés, the prison service, housing associations, the Pause programme
- **community organisations** – such as community centres, churches or faith groups, larders and mutual aid organisations or digital-focused projects like Astons Online where volunteers support their communities.

GOO's Digital Inclusion Network has taken first steps to bring the digital leaders in these organisations together, to collaborate and improve visibility for those seeking help or hoping to support others.

Research across the most deprived wards

To gain a comprehensive understanding of specific digital needs and challenges across the most deprived wards within the timeframe, we selected a small number of support organisations (listed in Table 3) who work with a range of people, including older people (over 65), working-age adults, vulnerable adults, and young people and children. Interviews with representatives from the organisations explored digital needs and individual barriers to digital inclusion, such as age, disability, ethnicity, housing and homelessness, employment status and geographical location across these groups. Organisations were chosen based on characteristics for the 10 wards drawn from the community insights reports.

Interviews

Face-to-face interviews via Teams were carried out with representatives from support organisations (Table 3) who work closely with clients on an ongoing basis and who are responsible for providing ongoing support, including digital support. As such, they have the most detailed picture of digital barriers and needs for each group.

Table 3: Organisations who took part in the research

Organisation	Groups supported
Age UK, Oxfordshire	Older people (over 65) including those with disabilities
SOFEA	Working-age adults (aged 16 to over 50s) seeking employment (including those with English as an additional language)
My Vision	Older people (over 65) and working-age adults with visual impairment
Aspire	Adults facing homelessness, poverty, addiction or mental health difficulties seeking employment and housing support
St Mungo's	Adults experiencing homelessness or those at risk of homelessness seeking employment
Oxfordshire Mind	Adults (aged 18–65) in transitional housing (after having been in hospital) to develop essential life skills and manage daily tasks
HMP Bullingdon	Prison leavers (aged 20–50) seeking employment
Pause project	Women (aged 18+) who have experienced repeated removal of their children from their care
Oxfordshire Youth	Young people aged 18–25, vulnerable girls aged 11–18 and young people aged 11–16 in education

Aims

The main aims of the research were to develop an understanding of digital inclusion by:

- determining current access to digital devices, connectivity and support (technical support and skills support)
- understanding the needs for being online across different groups of users and the relative importance of these needs on individuals' daily lives
- identifying the barriers to getting online or being more digitally active to determine:
    - the impacts (e.g. what people aren't able to achieve and how it is holding them back)

    - how the barriers can be addressed for those who want to be online or more digitally active
    - the most appropriate opportunities for addressing them
- understanding the scale of digital exclusion and digital inclusion to determine the level of impact on different groups, individuals and communities
- understanding the current provision of digital inclusion support services provision (i.e. types of support, who is supported, scale of existing support and access to support)
- understanding the challenges and individual barriers (such as age, disability, ethnicity, housing and homelessness, employment status and geographical location) of those groups at risk of digital exclusion.

Findings

Current picture of digital inclusion

Devices and connectivity

The research shows that across the groups, access to a mobile phone is the biggest priority. For example, 88% of young people surveyed by Oxfordshire Youth had their own smartphone. The type of phone, smartphone versus non-smartphone, is dependent on the purpose for which the phone is needed, age and skill level. For some groups, where the primary purpose of a phone is communication (e.g. prison leavers, some older people and victims of domestic abuse) access to a 'brick' phone is sufficient. Individuals on support programmes have often purchased their own phones or have been provided with them as part of the support programme.

Across most groups, people usually only have access to one device and do not have a second device (e.g. a tablet or laptop). Charities, such as Getting Oxfordshire Online usually donate second devices (laptops mainly) to help people take this next step. In the case of older people, some charities (e.g. Age UK, My Vision) offer devices on a loan scheme. With young people, where there is access to a laptop in the house, approximately one third of them had to share access to it with their parents and siblings.

Access to connectivity through mobile data, broadband or Wi-Fi is fairly ubiquitous. For example:

- Wi-Fi is provided as part of accommodation packages for homeless people or people in transitional housing for mental health
- women working with the Pause program use pay as you go top-ups as an affordable way of getting data on their phones
- 95% of the young people surveyed by Oxfordshire Youth had broadband at home
- only 15% of requests for devices from GOO also ask for provision of data.

Young people seeking employment have more limited access to connectivity with only around 50% likely to have Wi-Fi at home and they are therefore reliant on public Wi-Fi in cafés or libraries.

Skills and digital confidence

Skills levels vary according to individuals' needs, age, disability and language:

- Younger people, across all groups, are more digitally literate and confident than older people – even those older people of working age tend to be less confident.
- Younger people have the necessary skills to get online, access social media and do essential tasks but they may lack online skills related to specific contexts, such as work-related skills (e.g. being able to send emails and use word-processing, spreadsheet and presentation software) and online etiquette.
- Working-age adults, who have been out of society for any period of time (e.g. carers or prison leavers) may lack up-to-date digital skills, and those who have previously not had access to digital devices or internet (e.g. some refugees) may also have limited or no skills.
- People with visible and non-visible disabilities (such as anxiety and learning disabilities) and those with English as an additional language can be hesitant or anxious to get online or engage online.

Support for skills and technical queries

Informal support may be provided by more digitally literate friends and family members where individuals have such support available to them.

Charities supporting individuals often provide a large amount of the individual digital support (device provision, data provision, skills and technology related support) that clients need initially and on an ongoing basis as part of the client's support programme. Where they are unable to provide support, and where they are aware of existing services, they refer onto other organisations for specific training or support. At the end of the support programmes, some organisations will continue to provide support for clients who have completed the programmes on an ad-hoc basis or signpost them to other support.

For example, those seeking employment (and who are digitally excluded) that are supported by the SOFEA No Limits programme are provided with digital devices and data. As part of their one-to one support they are also provided with digital skills and tech support in relation to employability. As the programme progresses and when they have completed the programme, individuals are also encouraged to attend drop-in sessions at the libraries for ongoing support.

Currently:

- The Pause programme is supporting 32 women who receive one-to-one support at least once a week.
- SOFEA currently supports around 450 people a year on their employability program. While the number of sessions varies dependent on the participant's needs, individuals currently receive up to 30 hours of one-to-one support, including digital support, during the programme. However, this support is subject to ongoing funding.
- St Mungo's has one full-time employment specialist working with a purely Oxfordshire based cohort and can therefore support a maximum of 25 clients at any one time with weekly or bi-weekly support sessions. Employment support is provided for up to 12 months.

Both Age UK and My Vision offer free skills and support sessions as one-to-one services, workshops and drop-in sessions:

- Age UK, Oxfordshire:
  - provides digital skills support for older people to help them build their skills and confidence through one-to-one home visits and drop-in sessions at libraries, assisted living accommodation and care homes
  - provides predominantly one-to-one support in people's homes.
- My Vision:
  - operate a 'Tech Buddy' program which matches individuals with a volunteer to provide ongoing tech and skills support
  - hold one-to-one training skills support sessions (covering equipment demonstrations, carrying out online activities such as emailing, online shopping, communication with family, and adapting devices for individuals' accessibility needs (e.g. font size, size of icons, font size, colour contrast, magnification and speech).
  - hold online workshops covering topics such as, mobile and tablet devices, accessibility software, deciphering online jargon, and what you can get out of the internet. (Although at the time of writing, there don't appear to be any scheduled between March and end of May 2025).

As part of Age UK's national Digital Champion Programme, between June 2022 and November 2023, to recruit and train volunteers, raise awareness of the benefits of being online, provide digital skills support sessions and provide technology and connectivity where needed, Age UK Oxfordshire:

- recruited and trained 25 digital volunteers
- reached 1,230 older people through digital awareness activities
- supported 235 people with digital skills sessions
- delivered 298 digital skills sessions (95% of the sessions were one-to-one sessions in people's homes as the programme in Oxfordshire was focused on people who lived alone)
- identified that the main skills that people wanted to learn were 'Device Basics' and 'Making your device accessible'
- provided on average two support sessions per person – with most people needing help with one specific issue rather than ongoing digital support
- loaned 23 tablets to participants – less than expected as most people owned their own technology and needed support to use their own technology.

(Source: Age UK, Oxfordshire Digital Champion Programme: End of Programme Summary Report)

Currently (March 2025), Age UK Oxfordshire has 19 active digital volunteers, of which 12 are active on a regular basis, and have supported around 150 clients with approximately 200 home visits since the beginning of 2024. They are currently seeking volunteers in Bicester and Kidlington.

Online safety

Online safety in relation to online scams and cyberbullying is a concern across all groups, especially for those who have experienced scams or cyberbullying and those from vulnerable groups are more at risk. Young people may avoid online interaction to safeguard their own mental health (i.e. to avoid seeing harmful or inappropriate content posted by their own peer group).

> "One of my lads who's in his late 20s recently showed me a picture of his new girlfriend. She was extremely attractive. Straightaway, I questioned whether she was really his girlfriend. [After some probing] it turns out that she's this non-existent Eastern European woman, probably in America or China with a chap sat behind it. And he's been sending money to her. Young people, especially if they're neurodiverse, are … much more comfortable having online relationships than they are relationships with people in person."
>
> *SOFEA employability programmes*

> "The young people that took part in our research were quite aware about the safety issues of being online and they don't want to see stuff, which prevents them from going online so it's an active decision to not go online."
>
> *Oxfordshire Youth*

> "A client of working age came to us, having received a laptop via a community group, to help build confidence after group IT skills classes hadn't suited them. After an evening exploring their new online world, during which they reflected that they'd made unwise choices about the websites they'd visited, they had fallen for a malicious scam pop-up and called a hacker who asked for bank details and stole money."
>
> *Getting Oxfordshire Online*

Motivation

Whilst it's been difficult to establish precise figures for our community, our research suggests that a lack of motivation to be online is a significant factor, particularly among older people for whom the complexities and risks of going online outweigh the benefits. Older people also often benefit from human interaction in everyday transactions, such as visiting the post office or calling the GP.

Needs for being online

Figure 3 outlines the key needs and outcomes of digital inclusion:

Figure 3: What digital inclusion looks like

> "Referrals from a GP surgery to online courses for cessation, such as smoking, weight loss or physio are usually sent a link for Teams or Zoom but they often don't know how to do it"
>
> "A lot of people that are housebound have carers who put them to bed at 7 o'clock. Their TV's downstairs, they get shoved upstairs at 7 o'clock, that's it then until 7 am the next day so a tablet's great, as they can have ITV hub, BBC iPlayer, BBC Sounds; they can FaceTime the family from bed."
>
> *Age UK, Oxfordshire*

> "For those that have anxiety going out, online interactions allow them to do online grocery shopping, access support from GPs and mental health practitioners, because they don't have to put their face out there"
>
> *Oxfordshire Mind*

> "For the women whose children are in foster care, they get invited to review meetings quite regularly and that would be a video call and they may also need to attend court hearings via an online call"
>
> *Pause programme*

Barriers to digital inclusion

As discussed on page 6, digital inclusion isn't static and may vary according to changing needs and motivations. Barriers can therefore change depending on needs, circumstances and motivations. For example, as found in the research, the support needed for connectivity and skills, in many cases reduces in intensity over time (i.e. from more intensive support initially to top-up support over time).

The research identified the following barriers to digital inclusion: Device (appropriateness, affordability and set-up), concerns about online safety, access to and awareness of support, language barriers, and motivation).

Devices

Appropriateness

While a smartphone is considered to be the priority, it is often inappropriate for users' needs. Oxfordshire Youth's 2025 digital inclusion research with secondary school pupils (in Years 7–9) found that just over a third of students are using a smartphone to do their homework.

Due to the constraints of the screen size, smartphones present barriers to:

- carrying out many essential tasks (such as completing online job applications, completing Universal Credit journal, doing schoolwork (a large percentage of which is online))
- those with disabilities (e.g. visual impairments)
- older users who find the icons too small or overwhelming.

In addition, broken devices, such as cracked screens, and obsolete devices impact on users' digital experience and functionality.

> "Broken devices also hinder or prevent access online access and as such may be discarded. Quite a lot of young people have a computer but if it doesn't work, they end up having to go back to [doing things on] their phone."
>
> *Oxfordshire Youth*

> "[In terms of employment] everything is online – it's not a case of physically handing out your CV these days. With 'ban-the-box' job applications, they need to be able to apply for it themselves [on their own device] because otherwise it defeats the point … as employers can see the application is coming from [my email address at] the prison. So, a lack of appropriate devices [for completing job applications] can have a real impact"
>
> *HMP Bullingdon*

> "Phone screens are small, so they often struggle to complete necessary online interactions, such as their UC journal. If the screen is cracked, it can result in a difficult and frustrating online experience and people give up. Those provided with a laptop have an improved experience."
>
> *Aspire*

> "Our women need an appropriate device to complete forms and applications, such as the housing register, job applications and UC applications, which are hard to do on a phone, but also because they need to be able to access and attend essential social care meetings, such as foster care review meetings, and court hearings, a lot of which are online and also hard to do on a phone."
>
> *Pause programme*

Device affordability

Individuals may be unable to afford devices that are appropriate to their needs (for example, Apple devices are more appropriate for those with disabilities but are costly to purchase, especially if users have reservations about the benefits they will bring).

They may also be unable to afford devices, or be able to afford to repair devices, at a particular point in time or due to circumstances and other individual barriers. For example:

- prison leavers who no longer have a smartphone, are often unable to afford to purchase a device until they have received financial support
- young people seeking employment may not be able to afford to purchase a device until they have secured income.

Configuration and set-up

Even where users have devices and are getting online, they may not be configured to support their needs, preventing them from having an optimal online experience or leading them to give up using the device and accessing online services. For example:

- older users or those with disabilities may not have accessibility functions (e.g. screen magnifier, screen reader) optimised and may struggle with setting up apps, passwords and face ID

- working-age adults who have received a laptop, and who may have learning disabilities, may struggle initially with setting up the devices independently.

> "We had an 84-year-old who needed a new phone but was concerned about not being able to see the buttons, so we supported them to get an iPhone and provided coaching, training and support to show them how easy it was to use Siri to make calls."
>
> *My Vision*

> "There was a lady with learning needs who picked up her own device and had trouble setting it up and getting it all sorted."
>
> *Pause programme*

The NHS app set-up was cited as a particular challenge:

Example of digital exclusion: the NHS app

Getting started with the NHS app has been cited as a challenging experience for both older people and prison leavers (who are reintegrating into society).

- Firstly, for those without photo ID, it involves obtaining photo ID – an online process which presents issues for those without online access.
- It also involves providing personal details to the app which people may be hesitant about because of security concerns.
- Finally, it requires other steps such as face or ID verification which can be barriers to access.

Research has indicated that there is lack of support with this process from GP surgeries and it falls outside the remit of existing support services:

> "GP surgeries are pushing for the NHS app to be set up, but the process is far too complicated and it needs photo ID and verification for individuals to set it up. We are a light touch support service and don't really have the time to be supporting set-up"
>
> *Age UK, Oxfordshire*

Skills

Older people who have previously not had access to devices lack basic digital skills (e.g. turning on a device, using WhatsApp) and may be fearful of doing things online due to lack of skills and fear of making mistakes.

Young people often lack work-related digital skills, which they have not learnt previously. Skills development may also be limited by other individual barriers, such as language or literacy barriers (see page 20) and disabilities (e.g. anxiety and learning disabilities).

> "It never crossed my mind looking at a young person who's on their phone all day that they weren't digitally competent, and that they didn't know how to use digital."
>
> "Because young people interact socially through digital now … there isn't necessarily a consciousness of formal workplace interaction with digital as opposed to social interaction with digital – not only in terms of how to communicate formally also checking and responding regularly to your email."
>
> *Employers who took part in Oxfordshire Youth's digital inclusion research*

Support

While there is a range of in-person support (both one-to-one and drop-ins) available across the wards and Oxfordshire as a whole, this isn't accessible to all individuals, due to:

- visible or invisible disabilities making it difficult for them to them to attend (e.g. housebound adults, visually impaired adults or those with severe anxiety)
- location, which is dependent on availability of transport to the venue
- a lack of resources (e.g. volunteers) within the supporting charities to meet the demand for support or provide the level of one-to-one support currently offered on a sustained basis
- a lack of awareness by individuals and supporting organisations of the range of support available.

> "The Digital Champion Programme identified an overwhelming need within Oxfordshire for one-to-one home support because people in more rural areas [who live alone] couldn't get to venues where support sessions were held."
>
> *Age UK, Oxfordshire*

> "Anxiety often gets in the way of doing things and preventing them from seeking external support."
>
> *Oxfordshire Mind*

> "While some clients may use the library support, this can be a major barrier especially for homeless people who may lack self-confidence."
>
> *St Mungo's*

Support from families and friends is dependent on their availability and location, and some groups, such as vulnerable adults, may lack a network of family and friends. Also, support from family and friends can have a negative impact on old people's confidence.

> "The problem with family is that they show older people something and then convince them they can do this and that, but it frightens the life out of them. They then don't want to bother their family as they're 'too busy to help me'."
>
> *Age UK, Oxfordshire*

> "Our clients don't have friends and family to provide support if they're having technical problems for example."
>
> *St Mungo's*

Safety, trust and confidence

- Older people, or those new to the digital world, are often apprehensive, lacking trust and confidence to do things online for fear of scams or fear of making mistakes.
- People who have been the victim of an online scam or online bullying may also be fearful of interacting online.
- Adults with specific vulnerabilities (e.g. neurodiversity and mental health difficulties) may be more susceptible to online harm and be less aware of the risk and consequences of online interactions and behaviour.

> "I handed a digital device to someone a few months ago and I gave them about half an hour on it … and I've tried to signpost them to a few things but this person's never had a laptop… I'm really uncomfortable about … what we're potentially exposing them to in terms of risk"
>
> *SOFEA employability programmes*

Motivation

Older people who are still able to do things offline, enjoy physical interaction with others, have a proxy (to do essential online tasks for them) and don't see the benefits of being online may be reluctant to get online as they don't perceive there is a need to be online and therefore don't see the benefits of being online.

"For some, going out once a week to the bank or to the shop is the only time they get out [and interact with others]."

"Some older people are reluctant to get online as they don't see the benefits. It can be difficult to get across the benefits … when older people have a lot of other areas of their life to manage"

Age *UK, Oxfordshire*

"Some of the older population, let's say in their 50s to 60s range, don't like the digital thing. They like going to a shop or bank and doing their own thing. They like the old ways of doing things, and it's hard for them to transition into the new ways of doing things at times."

Oxfordshire Mind

"There is a large proportion of those (mainly older people in 80s) who don't want to be online and don't see the advantages of being online. Some of these people can be convinced but equally some can't.

We had a lady who had a tablet and needed help with reading letters, so we showed her how to use magnification and voiceover on the tablet to read out the text. However, she still couldn't get on with her tablet so resorted to an offline Hark Reader instead."

My Vision

Language

Refugees and migrants with English as an additional language, depending on their circumstance, may have previously had limited or no use of devices and internet and as a result of language barriers often struggle to understand online forms and terminology, which can present barriers to accessing financial support (e.g. benefits and UC) and employment.

People with English as their primary language but with special education needs or lower educational attainment may also struggle with digital literacy and with online communication, as may older people, who are unfamiliar with digital terminology.

"One of the biggest things is the language barrier because it's often difficult for them to understand what the online form is saying and what the form needs them to do."

SOFEA employability programmes

> "In training and conversations with those who are reluctant to be online, we simplify language, remove technical terms and even avoid the use of the term 'online'."
>
> *My Vision*

> "The language used to promote digital support and inclusion to older people needs to be accessible and easy to understand for an audience that may not be used to technology. This includes not using jargon or words such as 'tablet' which could be misunderstood."
>
> *Age UK, Oxfordshire*

Challenges and individual barriers of digital exclusion

Specific challenges and barriers to digital inclusion, faced by individuals, due to circumstances and other factors include:

- age and disability which may prevent or inhibit online interaction due to devices not being configured or optimised for use
- a lack of confidence, due to anxiety, or other circumstances, such as being homeless, which may impact an individual's ability to access in-person digital support services
- location and disability which may impact access to in-person drop-in support services
- limited income, so they may prioritise spending on a smartphone which may not be appropriate for all the user's digital needs
- language barriers which may inhibit digital skills development and limit access to essential online services.

Developments in technology

Most of the groups taking part in the research felt that the people they supported weren't really aware of the development of AI because it didn't currently impact them.

> "Older people hear about AI and their kids are probably talking about it, and it's on the news, but they're not going to see the benefits. The only reason they'll see it as a benefit is if it's affecting their medical treatments (e.g. if it is used for triaging)".
>
> *Age UK, Oxfordshire*

Young people were currently using AI not only for homework but also for advice and guidance on decisions.

Conclusions

The findings to date from our research show the complex and evolving nature of digital inclusion within Oxfordshire. Despite the county's overall affluence, digital exclusion persists due to a range of barriers, including affordability, lack of skills, limited access to appropriate devices, connectivity issues, and a lack of confidence in navigating the online world, with barriers being common across different groups within the research.

Access to a mobile phone is the biggest priority across the different groups. However, the type of phone, smartphone versus non smartphone, is dependent on the purpose for which the phone is needed, age, skills level and affordability.

Access to appropriate devices is also fundamental to digital inclusion. While many individuals have access to smartphones, these devices are often inadequate for essential digital tasks such as job applications, online learning, and accessing essential online services, and they may not be configured optimally to meet users' specific needs. Providing appropriate devices, such as laptops for job seekers or devices optimised for individuals' needs (e.g. for those with disabilities), along with ongoing support are essential to ensure digital participation.

A broad range of skills, which vary depending on personal circumstance, degree of digital interaction and confidence, are needed for digital inclusion – from basic digital literacy (device operation, navigation and communication), and education and work-related digital skills to financial and transactional digital skills (online banking and government or healthcare services), and the behavioural skills to avoid threats and stay safe online. An ability to resolve basic technical problems and an understanding of assistive technology (e.g. magnification settings, screen readers) can further help users engage confidently. As such, there is a need for more targeted and bespoke skills development, particularly for older adults, individuals with disabilities, and people seeking employment.

Support networks, including government services, charities and community organisations, play a crucial role in providing both technical support and skills development through in-person support and structured group-based sessions. However, awareness of available services remains inconsistent, and accessibility challenges—whether due to disability, anxiety, or geographical barriers—limit engagement for some individuals.

Digital inclusion is not static; needs and barriers are dynamic so support services need to be flexible and able to support this.

Achieving secure, ongoing digital inclusion requires a holistic approach that goes beyond providing devices or initial support sessions, to include ongoing support that develops and maintains skills, helps with unexpected issues, and provides continual development of safe online behaviours.

To make a difference to people's lives and to the community, a coordinated effort between local charities, public services and policymakers across the county is essential to ensure everyone can find the right support for them and that support groups learn and work together in a fast-changing and evolving digital world. It must also be acknowledged that some individuals would be best served by remaining offline and being supported in other ways.

Next steps

The findings from this research will help us focus our own services and work with the Digital Inclusion Network. The following areas stand out as opportunities to help more people and ensure benefits are sustained:

- Working with the Digital Inclusion Network to develop a “gold standard” for our county’s community support. This could be guided by existing schemes such as the digital champions network, and would help ensure those supporting vulnerable people or referring them for devices from GOO have appropriate knowledge to help their clients thrive and stay safe online
- Sharing impact information with our partners, to understand what’s working and to what scale across the county. We will also benefit from sharing knowledge as technology changes
- Setting up longer-term impact measurement to understand people’s journeys after they’ve received initial “get online” help or a device – do they continue to develop and find more benefits? Does the laptop go on the shelf once they’ve, say, used it to get a job? Do they run into trouble and not know who to get help from so stop using the internet?

We look forward to working with our community in Oxfordshire and further afield to help people make the most of the online world.