SPORT ENGLAND

Good Things Foundation

Exploring the links between digital inclusion and physical activity: desk research

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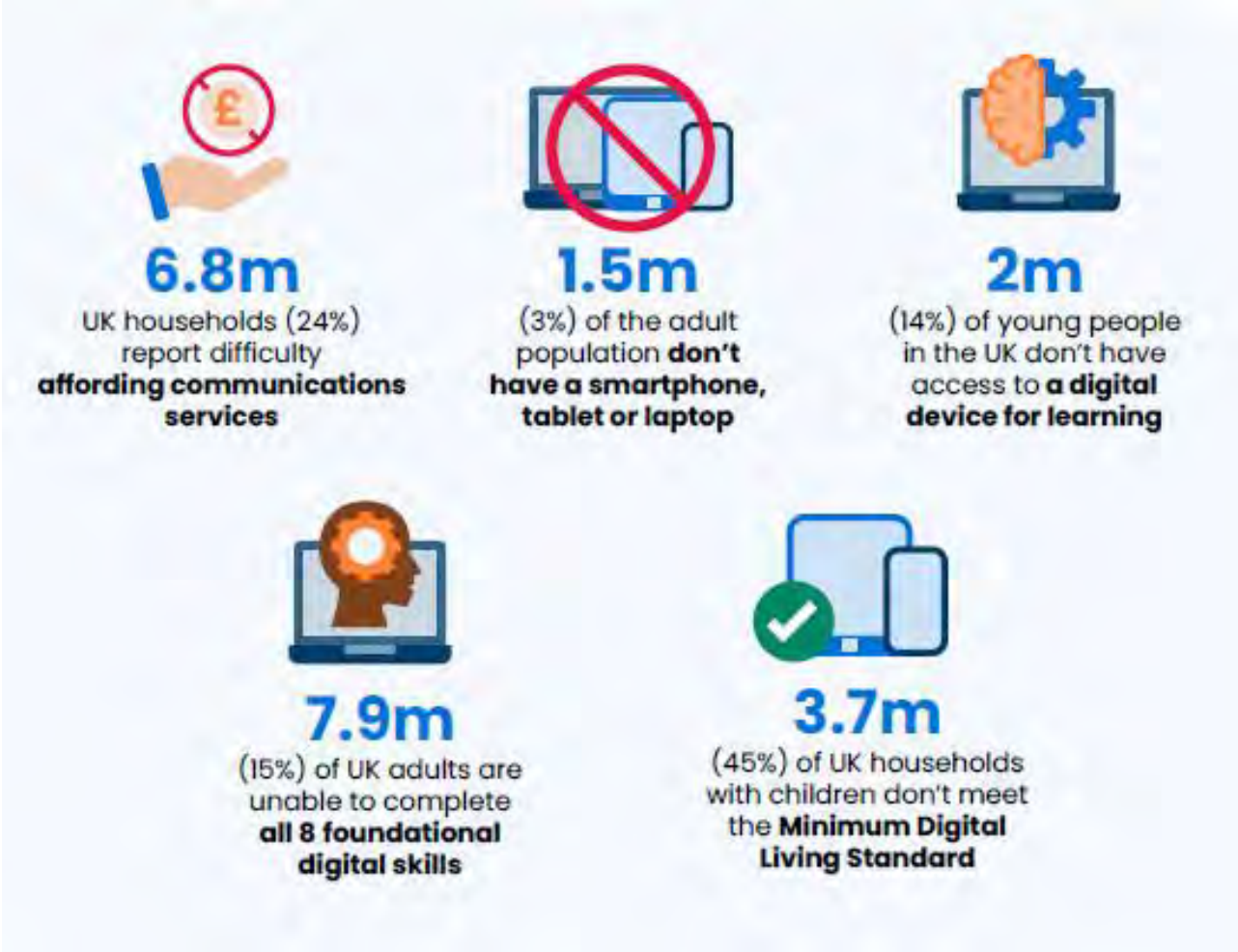
Contents

Executive summary

There is good evidence and understanding of the audiences that face barriers to digital inclusion and being able to benefit fully from digital technology in everyday life, and to being physically active. However, what has been less well understood is how these two dimensions intersect and the role(s) that digital inclusion might play in shaping whether and how people participate in sport and exercise.

Through desk research, we set out to explore and understand the **intersections between digital inclusion and participation in physical activity**. Through this, we aimed to identify opportunities for Sport England to support digital inclusion across the sector, as part of the efforts to increase engagement in sport and exercise, particularly amongst those who face the most barriers to getting active.

Digital exclusion in numbers:



This research set out to explore the following hypotheses and learning questions:

- **Hypothesis one:** Audiences who are impacted by digital exclusion are also those who participate less frequently in physical activity.
- **Hypothesis two:** Digitally delivered physical activity opportunities enable some audiences to be more physically active.
- **Hypothesis three:** Digital access and skills are often essential in order for people to engage with sport and physical activity opportunities.
- **Question one:** Where in a user's journey does digital play a role in relation to access to physical activity?
- **Question two:** What best practice examples are there, including from sectors beyond sport and leisure, of where services are being designed to address the impact of digital exclusion?

While combined data sources are limited, the available evidence and data tells us that:

1. Sections of the population who are **digitally excluded are very similar to those with the lowest activity levels and those facing health inequalities**; including older adults, disabled people, people experiencing poverty and people living with long-term health conditions. Therefore, promoting participation in physical activity by supporting digital inclusion may have positive impacts for people experiencing worse health outcomes.
2. Whilst digital exclusion is a barrier against some people's ability to access and engage with physical activity opportunities, **there are likely other more influential factors shaping people's activity levels**. But this doesn't mean it shouldn't be a key consideration when designing new services to engage under-represented audiences.
3. **Digital inclusion can be an important enabler for participation in physical activity** and effective for **removing barriers to participation for some groups.**
4. **Digital access, skills and accessibility shape people's journeys to being physically active**. Growing reliance on digital platforms for accessing leisure and sport services means it is increasingly difficult for those without digital connectivity, devices and/or skills to engage with these services.

5. **Digital tools such as apps, wearable devices, online platforms and activity trackers can be effective in promoting and increasing physical activity in some audiences.** However, **some groups may benefit more from digital tools than others.** Without additional digital inclusion support in place, this may exacerbate existing inequalities.
6. **Lessons can be learned from other sectors** (such as health, and library provision), which are relevant to shaping policy and practice in the sports and physical activity sector. These include the effectiveness of place-based, localised interventions delivered in trusted, community-based spaces, the need to embed digital inclusion into service delivery by co-designing with users, and the importance of improved data on digital inclusion and exclusion to make the issue more visible.

The report includes:

- four user journeys developed to illustrate the different ways in which digital access, skills and accessibility can shape people's pathways to being more physically active
- a range of case studies highlighting examples within and wide of the sport and physical activity sector where services are being designed to address the impact of digital exclusion
- top tips to consider when designing programmes to offset the impact of digital exclusion.

1. Background

Sport England recognises it has a key role to play in tackling inequalities for people and communities that are underserved, who may have the most to gain from being active, by helping to remove the barriers to engage in sport and physical activity.

This research set out to explore the role digital inclusion could play in increasing people's activity levels and the opportunities for Sport England to support digital inclusion across the sector. We aimed to understand the roles that digital in/exclusion play in people's participation in physical activity and sport.

Who are Good Things Foundation?

Participation in modern society to its fullest extent increasingly requires individuals to be able to engage with products and services online. Good Things Foundation is a UK charity that believes digital inclusion can be a significant enabler across all aspects of people's lives. Over two decades, Good Things Foundation has helped more than 4 million people gain access to skills, data, and devices to become digitally included. Our vision is a world where everyone benefits from digital; and our mission is to fix the digital divide for good. Through the National Digital Inclusion Network of over 7000 community organisations, we provide digital inclusion support to adults, to help them do more online.

We also aim to create meaningful impact through direct support and robust research, advocacy, and thought leadership. Increasingly, individuals and groups who are facing inequalities and disadvantages find it hard to access the equipment and support they need to enable them to be online. These communities are often deprived, have lower education levels, and include people who are not working and older people over 65.

What is digital exclusion?

Digital exclusion is about not having the access, skills and / or confidence to use the internet and benefit fully from digital technology in everyday life. There is no single definition of digital exclusion but the many frameworks that have been developed largely coalesce around similar themes. (See DSIT, 2025; NHS England, 2024; Good Things Foundation, 2024a).

Digital exclusion and digital inclusion are not 'fixed' states. People may face one or more digital barriers, to different degrees, at different times, and related to other vulnerabilities or life events. People may gain or lose access; gain or lose skills and confidence; gain or lose support.

It helps to think of **digital exclusion** as a spectrum along which people move; this includes:

- People who are offline and have never used the internet (offline)
    - Some may ask others they know to go online for them (proxy users)
    - Some may be offline but previously used the internet (lapsed users)
- People who use the internet for one or very few things (low or limited users)
- People who use the internet for several things but lack the access and/or skills and/or motivation and/or trust to engage fully with opportunities (limited users).

To become **digitally included,** people need **access** (device, connectivity) and **skills** (to use devices and to engage online). The **Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS) definition** reflects that all are needed in combination:

> *"A minimum digital living standard includes accessible internet, adequate equipment, and the skills and knowledge people need. It is about being able to communicate, connect, and engage with opportunities safely and with confidence."* (Good Things Foundation, 2024b)

Barriers and facilitators to digital inclusion

There are many barriers that present themselves for digital inclusion. Some of these can be solved if they are designed into services such as provision of equipment, some require structured support and some can be addressed through softer support and relationship building over time. These are:

- Access
- Skills and confidence
- Support
- Motivation
- Trust
- Space (physical)
- Independence, choice and control

Access

Not having a suitable device or reliable, affordable connection to the internet are common barriers to being digitally included. By putting some or all of the following in place (alongside having the skills and/or support to use the internet safely and confidently), this would allow people to access the online world and become digitally included:

Device - People need access to a suitable device. Access may be personal, shared, or public. Suitability varies by needs and uses (e.g. assistive tech to support use by someone with a visual impairment; or a larger screen to support use for school) and consideration of other supporting equipment such as a printer should be made.

Connectivity - Engaging online requires an internet connection and data. People benefit from personal or household access to both mobile and broadband. Public wifi is less secure. Connectivity is also about reliability and quality. The amount of connectivity varies; e.g. a family with children at school may need more data or faster speeds than a retired adult living alone. Online services vary in how much data they use.

How many people does this affect?

According to Ofcom, an estimated 6% of the UK population did not have access to the internet at home (Ofcom, 2024a) – around 1.7 million households.

According to Nominet, 15% of young people did not have access to broadband at home, and 14% of young people did not have access to a digital device for learning (Nominet, 2023).

Skills and confidence

People need a range of skills (literacies, knowledge, capabilities) to use devices and data, and to engage online safely, confidently, in a way that supports wellbeing and brings benefits. New technologies (like AI) and changing uses of digital shape the skills people need. There are overlaps with other literacies - such as basic literacy and numeracy, language proficiency, financial, health, and media literacy (e.g. staying safe, recognising mis- and dis-information), and the confidence to apply these skills in real world settings.

The skills required are articulated in a number of frameworks and surveys. The **Essential Digital Skills framework** groups skills into three areas: Foundational; Skills for Life; Skills for Work. The foundational level digital skills required to be online include:

- Turning on a device and entering account information
- Using the controls on a device
- Adjust the settings on a device for accessibility
- Find and download an app, programme or platform
- Opening an internet browser to find a use websites
- Set up a wifi connection on your device
- Keeping your login information and passwords for a device safe and secure
- Updating and changing your password when prompted

The **Minimum Digital Living Standard** also articulates the minimum practical and functional skills needed within a household (with children), to use digital devices and resources, plus the critical skills needed for understanding and managing digital risk.

How many people does this affect?

The latest progress tracking against the UK Government's Essential Digital Skills framework highlights 15% of the UK adult population, 7.9m adults who are unable to perform all 8 foundation level digital skills (Lloyds, 2024).

1 in 4 households with children have parents missing critical skills for understanding and managing digital risk, and 18% of households have secondary school aged children missing functional digital skills (Good Things Foundation, 2024b).

Support (social and specialist)

People may need support from others to apply basic access and skills; to keep up with change; to use online services (especially at times of vulnerability); and to access opportunities. Having a social network who can help support and reassure around digital tasks can impact positively on internet use and confidence. **People facing digital barriers** may be the least able to get help from family, friends or work, for example people living alone in older age, or disabled people. This means that having access to free, local support is essential for inclusion.

Digital inclusion support can be effective when delivered in-person, in local, trusted spaces, such as community centres, lunch clubs, carers' groups, homelessness hostels, libraries, care homes, and other public spaces. Knowing where to go to access available support is another key factor. This might be through referral arrangements between organisations, or through co-location with other services. Awareness about available support may be low among those groups that could benefit the most.

How many people does this affect?

A third of people would like to get support for **digital skills locally** e.g. at a community centre or library, 62% would like this support to be face to face (Lloyds, 2024).

Of those who are offline **52% ask someone to use the internet for them** (Ofcom, 2024b).

Motivation

People cite a range of reasons why they have low motivation to use a digital service or tool, including concerns about the practicalities and difficulties of using digital services:

- Concerns about digital services replacing face-to-face or phone in general
- The belief that it is harder to build connections and/or communicate fully about your needs using digital tools
- Concerns about losing the option to access/revert to face-to-face support
- Lack of confidence to use a digital service, and use it correctly, safely and independently (e.g. in case you don't have access to support when needed)
- Lack of belief that the digital service will deliver a better or faster outcome
- Lack of support - impacting on confidence and belief in the value of digital or places increased burden on those who support you
- Not seeing why the internet could be helpful or relevant to you.

These concerns can be addressed through a supported digital inclusion service that helps people build confidence and capability over time.

How many people does this affect?

Of the 1.6 million people who are offline (Lloyds, 2024), **69%** said that they **did not want or need to be online** (Ofcom, 2024b).

Trust

People cite a range of reasons why they lack trust in digital services or tools:

- Low trust or mistrust of the organisations providing the service, with concerns about:
    - Who has access to data
    - The accuracy of data collected in digital systems
    - Digital services replacing face-to-face or phone services
- Low trust or mistrust of technology generally, with concerns about:
    - Surveillance technology, cybersecurity risks
    - How personal data will be used, shared and kept safe
    - Technology going wrong
    - Misinformation and disinformation, fraud and scams
- Low trust in one's own abilities to use technology, especially where access to tech support is limited and/or would have to be paid for.

These concerns can be addressed through a supported digital inclusion service, helping reassure people about data security and building people's confidence and capability to stay safe online.

How many people does this affect?

Among **people with broadband access, 62% worry that their personal details will not be secure online** (Public First polling data, 2024).

19% of adults with low internet usage are **not confident in their ability to stay safe online**, compared with 10% of adults with high internet usage (Ofcom, 2024c).

Trust is a barrier for 7% of those who are offline (Lloyds, 2024).

Space (physical)

Access to a private and/or safe and confidential space to use the internet is an important factor for people feeling comfortable to use online services, for example to do an online health consultation, or for remote monitoring of a health condition

Factors impacting negatively on this include:

- Not having a personal device with sufficient mobile data, meaning someone needs to rely on public wifi
- Reliance on using a shared device kept in a public or common area
- Living in overcrowded housing or housing with limited private space
- Living in an abusive home environment
- Temporary or transient accommodation (impacts on data connectivity).

How many people does this affect?

There is limited quantitative data on this requirement but qualitative data points to this as a core need.

"I would not like to try to book an appointment using a PC in a library; not open all the time, not private enough and no good if you are not well."
(Healthwatch Leeds, 2019).

Independence, choice and control

Access to digital tools, skills and confidence can support individuals to take a more active role in managing their own lives and making their own choices:

- Enabling greater independence by reducing reliance on others
- Enabling better use of people's time and money by reducing unnecessary travel and allowing people to access services at times that suit them
- Supporting self-care - for example through remote monitoring devices.

But not everyone will want to, or be able to, use digital tools and services safely. Everyone can experience times of greater 'vulnerability' to online harms (for example, at times of stress or life transition). Also, many people reply on 'proxies' (e.g. family, friends, carers acting on someone's behalf) to access digital services and do online transactions. This carries implications for:

- Data privacy and security
- Choice and control, and decision-making and consent.

Keeping all channels open is essential to avoid discriminating against people who lack the access, skills, trust and support to use digital services.

How many people does this affect?

Of the 1.6 million adults who are offline, **just under half have difficulty engaging with organisations digitally**.

Council and Government services are rated highest as the most difficult to deal with by those offline **(33%**) (Lloyds, 2024).

2. Exploring key hypotheses and questions

Good Things Foundation's evidence and experience resonates with Sport England's assumption that a lack of access to digital due to skills, connectivity or accessibility impacts Sport England's target audiences (those facing the greatest inequalities) from being active. Good Things Foundation's Digital Nation 2024 summary highlights the extent of the UK's digital divide and who is most affected.

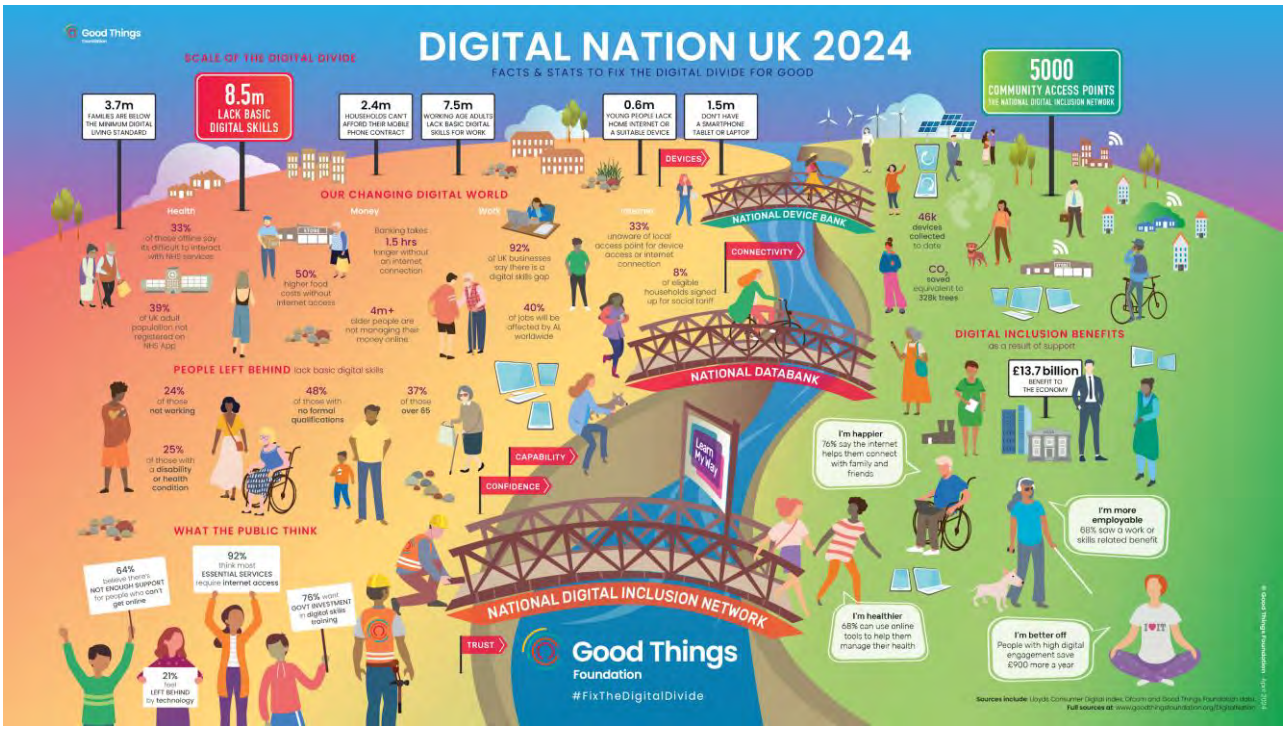


Figure 1: Good Things Foundation, Digital Nation 2024

As we have shown above there are a range of barriers and facilitators to digital access directly impact people's ability to discover, engage with, and participate in society fully. To explore how these might influence people's access to and engagement with opportunities for physical activity, we have sought to test three hypotheses and answer two questions:

- **Hypothesis one:** Audiences who are impacted by digital exclusion are also those who participate less frequently in physical activity.
- **Hypothesis two:** Digitally delivered physical activity opportunities enable some audiences to be more physically active.
- **Hypothesis three:** Digital access and skills are often essential in order for people to engage with sport and physical activity opportunities.
- **Question one:** Where in a user's journey does digital play a role in relation to access to physical activity?
- **Question two:** What best practice examples are there, including from sectors beyond sport and leisure, of where services are being designed to address the impact of digital exclusion?

3. Testing hypothesis one: Audiences who are impacted by digital exclusion are also those who participate less frequently in physical activity

To explore this hypothesis we identified three different perspectives for exploring the data:

- Digital exclusion (as evidenced in the previous section)
- Low levels of physical activity, and
- Health inequalities, including among disabled people and people with long-term health conditions.

Our inclusion of health inequalities in our analysis is in recognition that being disabled and having long-term health conditions are significant indicators of digital exclusion and lower physical activity levels. Populations who face social exclusion, wider disadvantage and some health conditions experience poorer health outcomes than the general population. Sport England's strategy highlights the importance of "*strengthening the connections between sport, activity, health and wellbeing so more people can feel the benefits of, and advocate for, an active life*". Given the links between physical activity and improved health outcomes the addition of the health inequalities lens provides a useful additional perspective on target populations where wider attention and investment is being made.

Whilst there is a wide variety of datasets that explore populations who are digitally excluded, who are least active and who are most impacted by health inequalities, it is important to note that there is limited evidence on the interplay of these three characteristics in a single data set. Therefore, looking at the overlap of digitally excluded populations and those who are less physically active necessitates comparing different data sets and populations impacted rather than drawing insight from a single source.

Data on populations that are digitally excluded

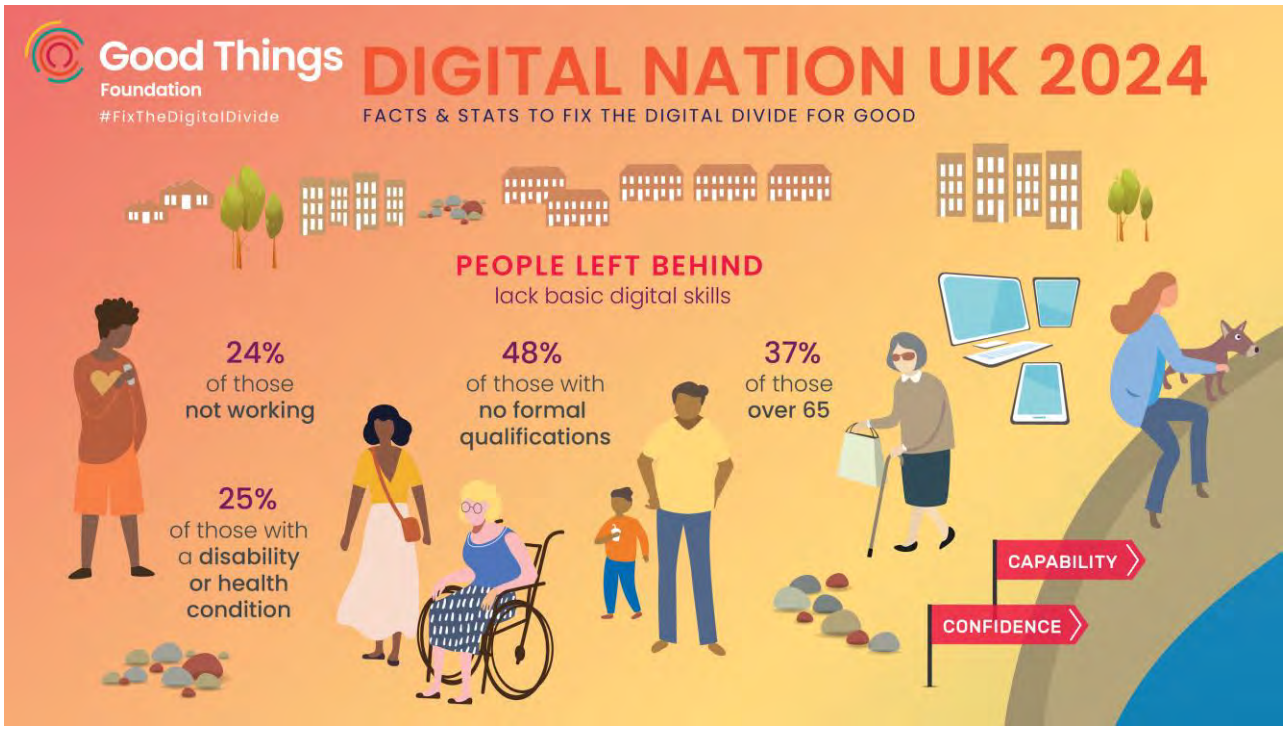


Figure 2: Good Things Foundation, Digital Nation 2024

Over recent years, available data from Ofcom, the Office for National Statistics, Oxford Internet Institute, the Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS) and the Lloyds Banking Group Consumer Digital Index (CDI) has consistently revealed clear correlations between **digital exclusion and social exclusion**. A quarter of UK households report difficulty affording communications services, 3% of the adult population don't have a smartphone tablet or laptop, and 15% of UK adults are unable to do the foundational digital skills.

Digital exclusion intersects with other inequalities and protected characteristics.

- **Older age** is a key predictor of digital exclusion, especially for offline, never used, and 'lapsed' internet use. This is strongest for people aged over 65 years old.
- **Poverty** (often assessed using proxies like means-tested benefit use) is a key predictor of digital exclusion. This applies both to access and skills; skills decrease with reduced use. Digital exclusion can also make it harder to get out of poverty.
- **Long-term health and disability** - Disabled people and those with long-term health conditions tend to have lower levels of digital skills and face affordability issues for their connection or device
- **Intersectionality** with other characteristics, e.g. ethnicity, education, economic activity, housing, area deprivation, is a key feature of digital exclusion.

Table 1 demonstrates the breadth and depth of data that shows how the core barriers to digital inclusion are demonstrated amongst these groups.

Older age		
Internet use	**Access**	**Skills**
Over 65s are **6 times more likely to be limited internet users** compared to extensive users. (Yates, 2023)		Among people unable to do any of the most basic Foundation Level Digital Skills: **77% are over 65 years old**. (Lloyds, 2024)
Poverty		
Internet use	**Access**	**Skills**
Low income households are **5 times more likely to be limited users than extensive users**. (Yates, 2023) Those who have not used the internet in the last 3 months are more likely to be **earning under £35k per year**. (Lloyds, 2024) Social grades DE are **2.1 times less likely to meet MDLS** than social grades AB. (Yates et al, 2024)	23% of young people in receipt of **free school meals** lack home broadband. (Nominet, 2023) Difficulty **affording communications services** is most likely to affect households in receipt of **means-tested benefits** (37%) or eligible for a **social tariff** (34%). (Ofcom, 2024b)	Among people unable to do any of the most basic Foundation Level Digital Skills: **46% are in social class DE**. (Lloyds, 2024)
Disability or Long term Health Condition		
Internet use	**Access**	**Skills**
	Difficulty **affording communications** services is most likely to affect households with a resident with a **life impacting or limiting condition** (39%). (Ofcom, 2024b)	Among people unable to do any of the most basic Foundation Level Digital Skills, 69% have an **impairment such as a disability** or health condition. (Lloyds, 2024)

Table 1: Summary of data on key determinants of digital exclusion

Ethnicity and digital exclusion

Good Things Foundation delivers a wide range of services for adults who are digitally excluded. Evaluation of this delivery highlights those populations most likely to access services including the National Databank, the National Device Bank and Learn My Way (an online digital skills platform). This data provides us with additional insight to that available in published data sets, indicating that those seeking digital inclusion support are much more culturally diverse than the general population (see Figure 3). So, whilst in national datasets, ethnicity is not seen as a core indicator of digital exclusion, there is clearly a significant need amongst this population and they are actively seeking support to become digitally included.

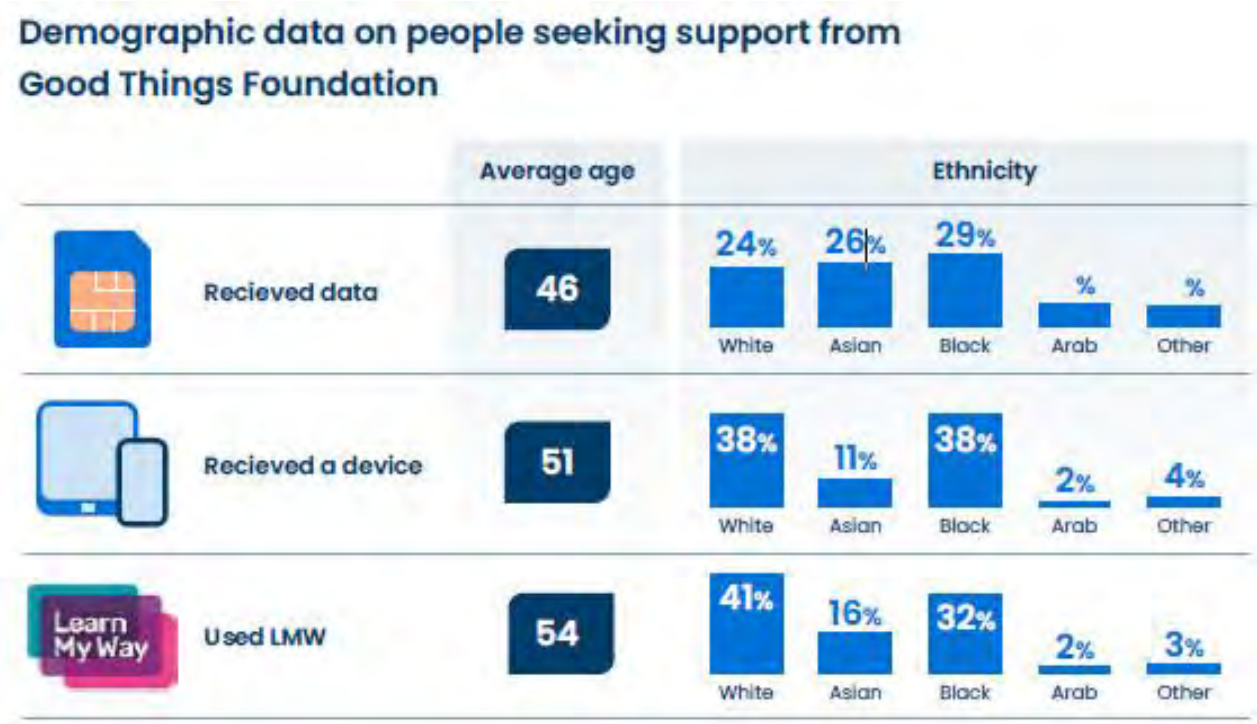


Figure 3: Summary of demographic characteristics of people receiving digital inclusion support through Good Things Foundation services in 2024.

Whilst in national datasets, ethnicity is not seen as a core indicator of digital exclusion, there is clearly a significant need amongst this population and they are actively seeking support to become digitally included.

Young people and digital exclusion

Children and young people are not typically seen as a priority group within digital exclusion data, and fall outside the scope of the support and services that Good Things Foundation provides. However, we do know that some groups of children and young people face barriers to getting online, largely driven by deprivation which limits digital access. While 15% of all young people are without broadband access at home, this rises to 23% among young people in receipt of free school meals (Nominet, 2023). 14% of all young people lack access to a digital device for learning, rising to 20% for young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) (Nominet, 2023). Furthermore, 45% of households with children in the UK do not meet the Minimum Digital Living Standard, driven largely by poverty (Good Things Foundation, 2024b).

There is less data available on the barriers children and young people face in relation to digital skills. Research from the Minimum Digital Living Standard shows that 18% of households have secondary school aged children missing functional digital skills, and 32% of households have primary aged children missing functional digital skills (Good Things Foundation, 2024b). From our internal evaluation work, we hear that some young people - particularly those who are not in education or employment - are in need of support with core skills such as using word processing software, and searching and applying for jobs online. Groups of young people such as care leavers and unaccompanied migrant children may be particularly vulnerable to digital exclusion via access and/or skills, due to deprivation and other intersectionalities. However, there is little quantitative data at scale to illustrate this.

Whilst children and young people are typically not considered as priority groups in relation to digital exclusion, deprivation can be a factor limiting young people's access to digital connectivity and devices, and for some, functional digital skills. However, there is also a lack of data on the groups of children and young people most vulnerable to digital exclusion.

Data on populations who have lower physical activity levels

Physical activity plays an important role in improving mental and physical health, supporting an individual's development, fostering social and community engagement and contributing to economic growth. As evidenced in the recent Active Lives Adult Survey (22/23) (Sport England, 2024), just over a quarter of adults did less than 30 minutes of exercise every week.

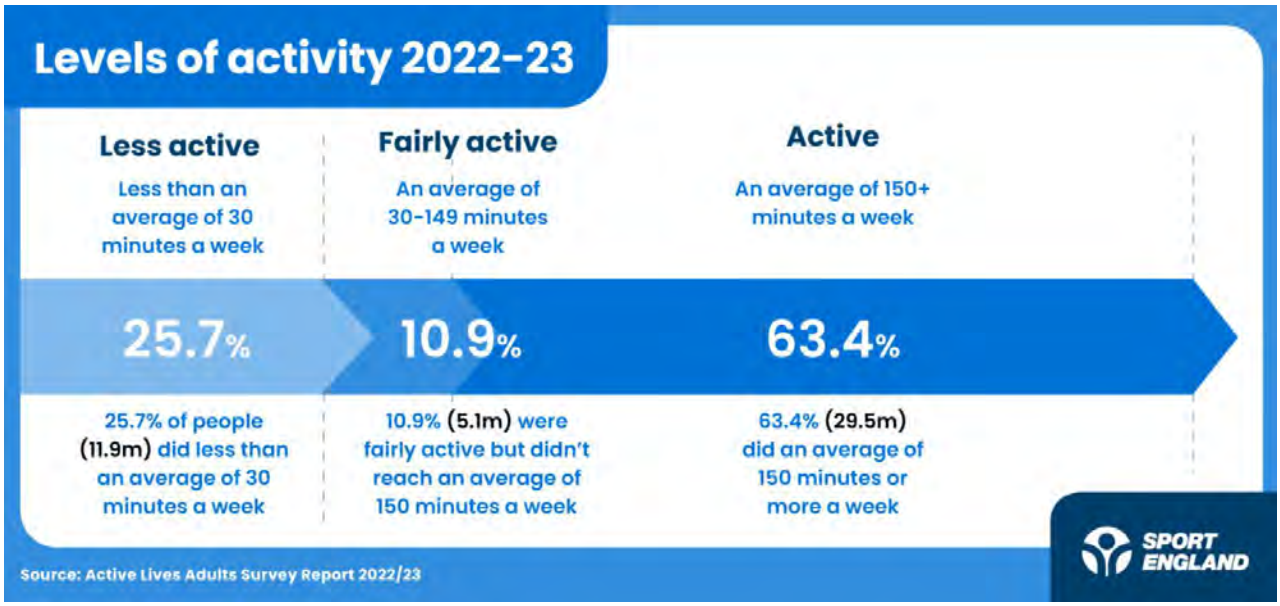


Figure 4: summary of levels of activity from 22/23 Active Lives Adults Survey (Sport England, 2024)

Activity levels vary significantly by demographic sub-groups. The segments of the population that tend to be more active are younger, in higher socio-economic groups and without a long-term health condition.

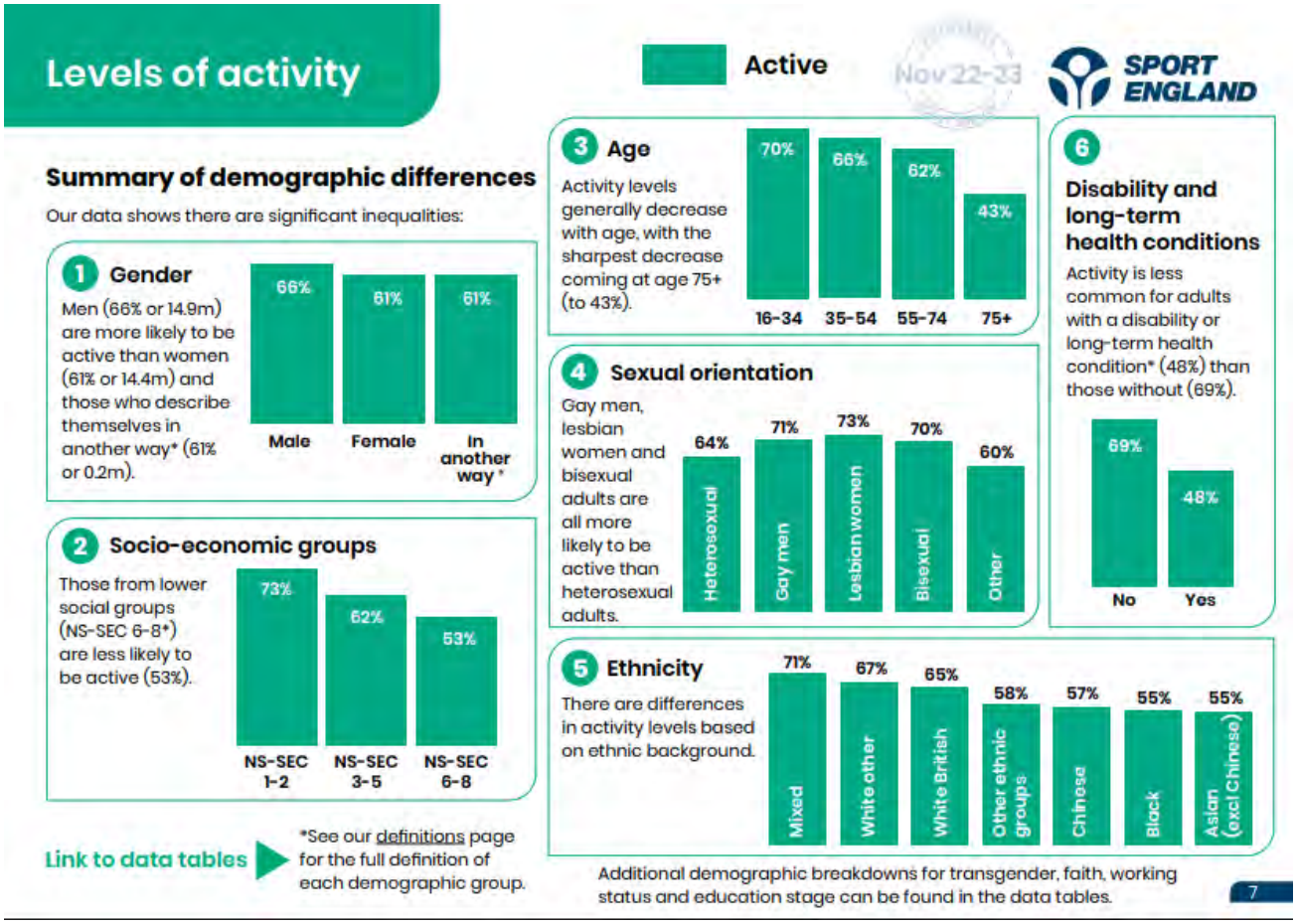


Figure 5: Summary of levels of activity by demographic sub-group (Sport England, 2024)

The Sport England Inequalities Metric identifies that the most important indicator of lower levels of physical activity is where a person has two or more characteristics associated with being less active (see Figure 6 below). Among adults, the groups who exhibit lower levels of activity are:

- Disabled adults or those with a long-term health condition
- Age 65 years or over
- Asian, Chinese and Black adults
- Lower socio-economic groups (NSSEC6-8)
- Pregnant women and parents of children under one year
- Adults of Muslim faith.

Among children and young people, those least active include:

- Girls
- Young people of other gender
- Young people from poorer households
- Asian and Black children
- Young people with limited access to outdoor space.

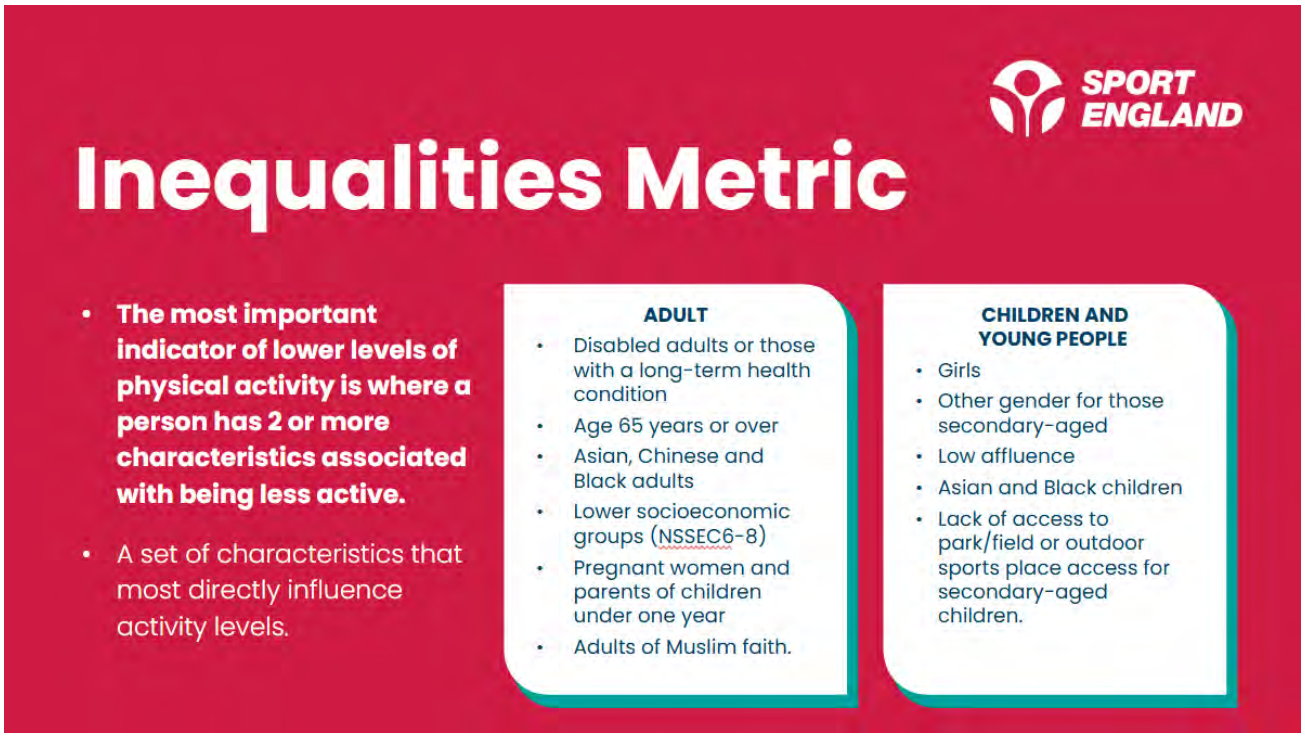


Figure 6: Sport England's Inequalities Metric.

The important role that health and disability play in digital ex/inclusion and physical activity

Sport England's strategy highlights the importance of "*strengthening the connections between sport, activity, health and wellbeing so more people can feel the benefits of, and advocate for, an active life*". Disability and long-term health conditions are significant indicators of digital exclusion and lower physical activity levels. Both digital exclusion data sets and physical activity data sets contain measures of disability or impairment that allow us to see the significant impact that this has on a person's ability to be digitally included or physically active.

Those who have long-term health conditions or are disabled tend to be at risk of being digitally excluded due to lack of skills or because of affordability of access:

Disability or Long-Term Health Condition	
Access	**Skills**
Difficulty **affording communications** services is most likely to affect households with a resident with a **life impacting or limiting condition** (39%) (Ofcom, 2024a)	Among people unable to do any of the most basic Foundation level Digital Skills, 69% have an **impairment such as a disability** or health condition (Lloyds, 2024)

Figure 7: Digital inclusion barriers faced by disabled people or long-term health conditions

Disabled adults are almost twice as likely as non-disabled adults to be physically inactive (40.8% versus 20.7% respectively)(Sport England, 2024).

As we explore below, populations who face social exclusion, wider disadvantage and some health conditions experience poorer health outcomes than the general population. Given the links between physical activity and improved health outcomes, as recognised in Sport England's strategy, the addition of the health inequalities as a third lens provides a useful additional perspective on target populations where wider attention and investment is being made.

Exploring the groups of people who are most impacted by health inequalities

The NHS uses the Core 20 Plus 5 model to identify populations and groups most likely to be impacted by health inequalities (NHS England, 2023). This includes:

- Core: The **most deprived** 20% of the population.
- Plus: Population groups experiencing poorer than average health access. This includes **culturally diverse communities**; **people with learning disabilities** and exclusion health groups including people experiencing homelessness, vulnerable migrants, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller, people in contact with the justice system amongst others.
- 5: Key clinical areas of health inequalities: **Maternity, severe mental illness**, chronic respiratory disease, early cancer diagnosis and hypertension.

Figure 8: The Core 20 Plus 5 model of health inequalities (NHS England, 2023)

Using this definition, we are able to compare the populations most impacted by digital exclusion, low physical activity levels and health inequalities.

Comparing populations impacted by digital exclusion, low levels of physical activity and health inequalities

As described above, there is limited evidence on the interplay of digital exclusion, health inequalities and physical activity in a single data set. Therefore looking at the overlap of the populations most impacted necessitates comparing different data sets and populations impacted rather than drawing insight from a single source.

Figure 9 below illustrates the overlap of the impacted populations through each sphere.

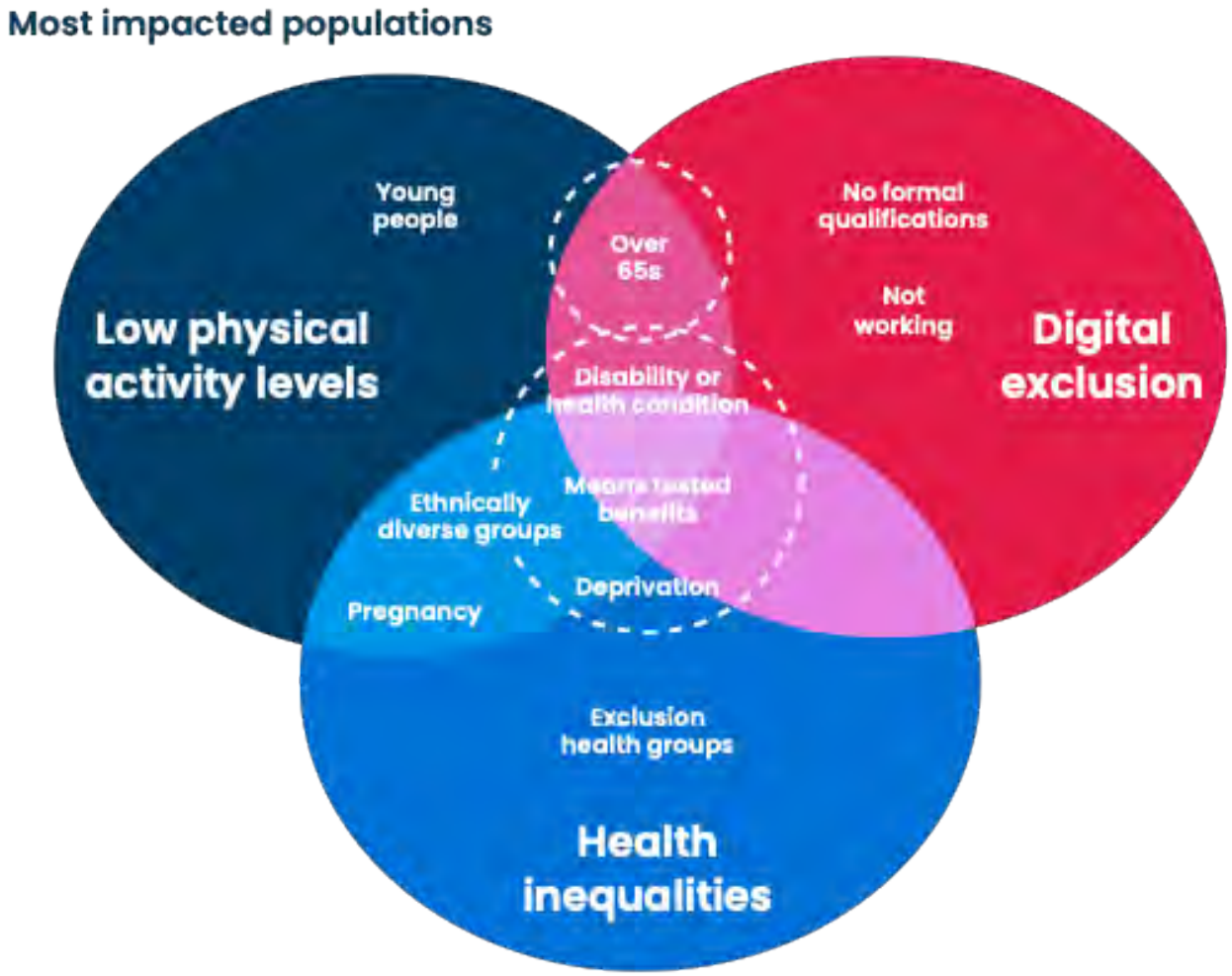


Figure 9: Illustration of the relationship between populations facing low physical activity levels, digital exclusion and health inequalities.

This highlights that the core populations impacted by all three areas of interest are **disabled people** or those with a **long-term health condition**, and those in **receipt of benefits or experiencing poverty**. In addition, **the over 65s** are a group impacted most significantly by digital exclusion and low physical activity levels so represent a core group for further targeting. **Ethnically diverse populations** are included as a partial overlap as for digital exclusion they are not highlighted as a priority group in the larger datasets but through Good Things Foundation's delivery data, we can see that they seek digital inclusion support. Similarly, while **young people** are not a priority group for health inequalities, and do not typically appear as a priority in relation to digital exclusion, we recognise the barriers to digital access faced by some groups, as described earlier. As they are a priority group for increasing physical activity, we have considered this group in the review of evidence around digital in/exclusion and physical activity.

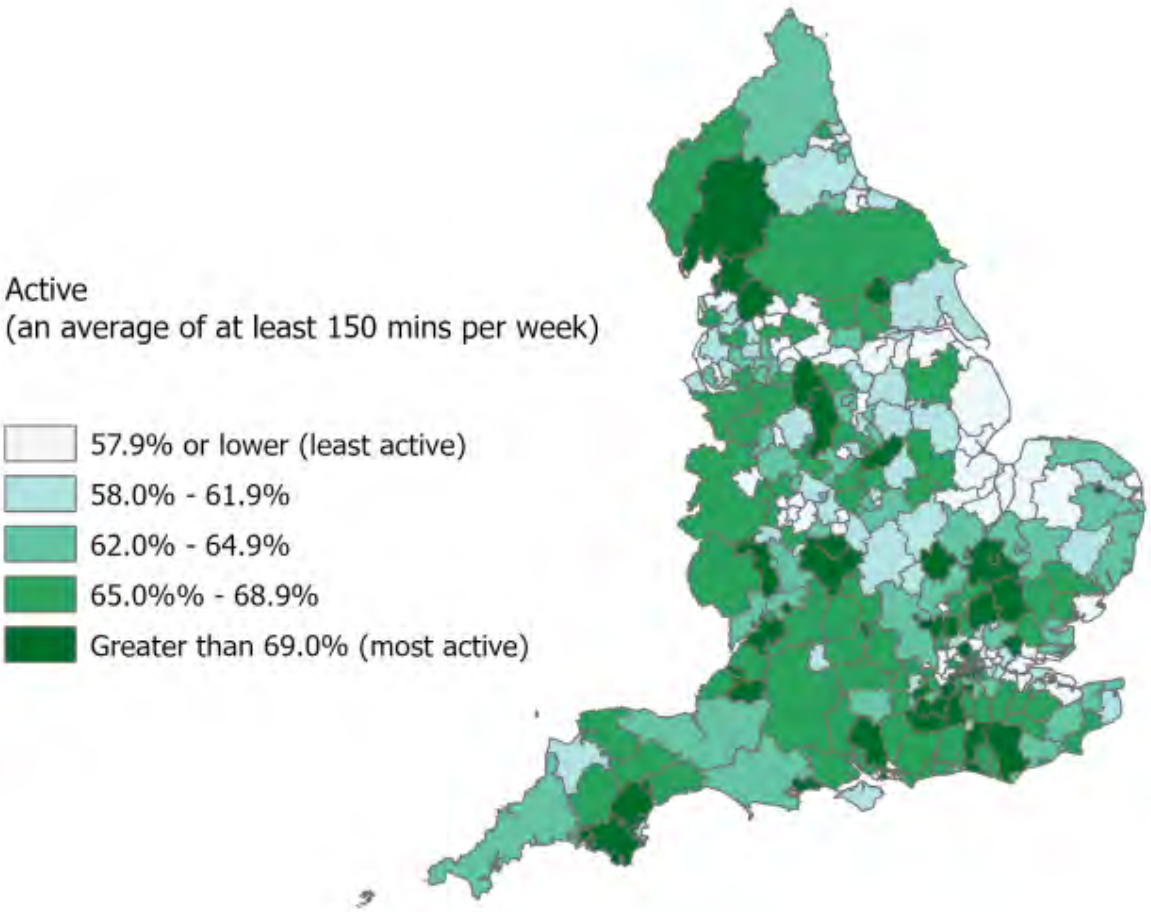
There are a small number of studies that look at the overlap of digital literacy, digital exclusion and physical activity. Research among adults in Denmark indicates that lower digital literacy levels are associated with lower levels of physical activity (Zangger et al, 2024). However, research into the 'We Are Undefeatable' campaign targeting people with long-term health conditions to increase physical activity indicates that barriers to being more active are driven by health condition and age and not digital exclusion per se (DJS Research, 2021).

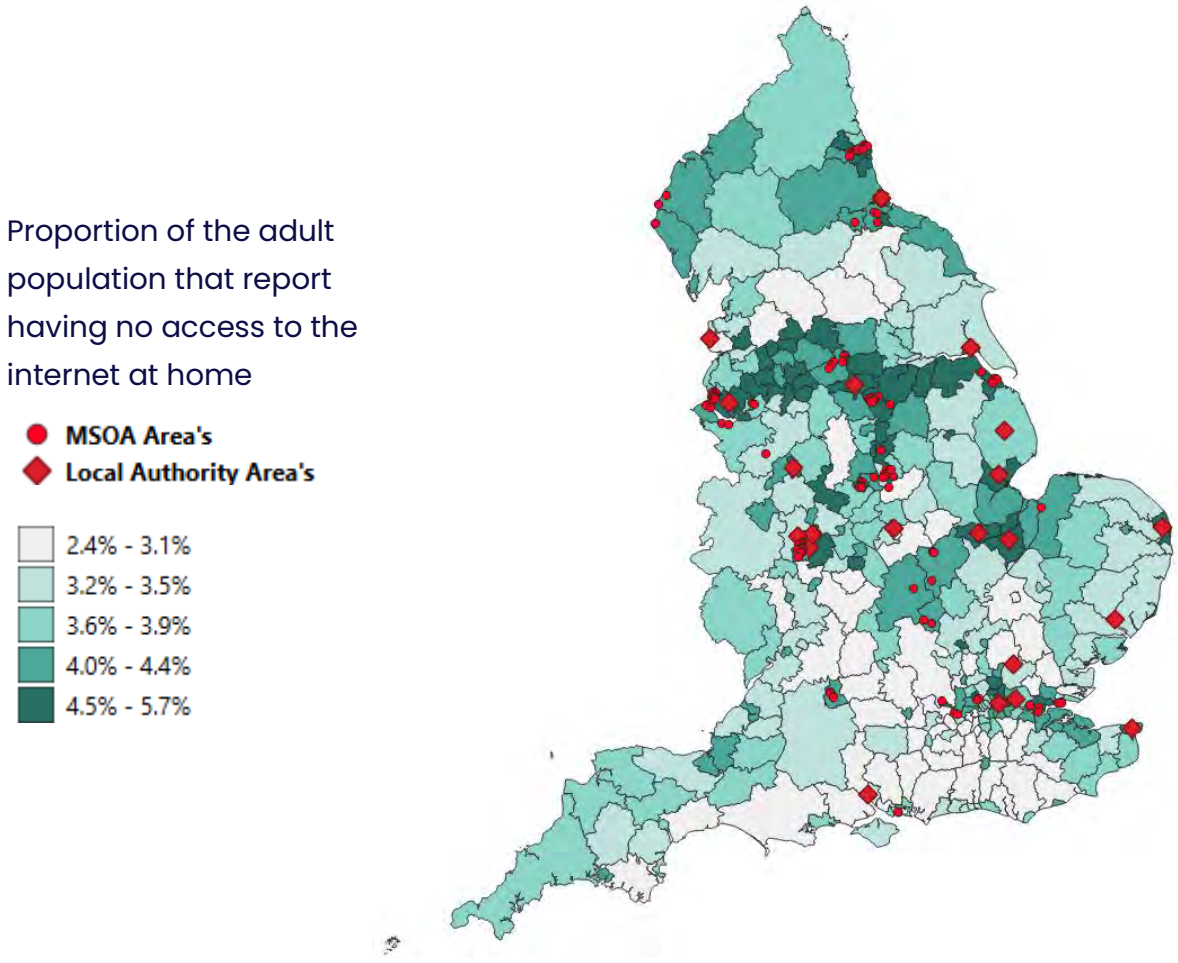
Lower digital literacy levels are associated with lower levels of physical activity. However, barriers to participation are likely driven by health condition and age, and not digital exclusion per se.

Visualising physical activity levels and digital inclusion across England

Mapping side-by-side physical activity levels and digital access allows us to visually compare where there are similarities across England, in the absence of a single data source that combines the two. Areas of higher physical activity levels (left hand map, dark green) tend to map onto areas of higher affluence, such as the Home Counties, South Devon and the Lake District. Areas with good digital access (right hand map, white) closely align with these areas. The same can be said for areas of low physical activity and poor digital access, such as Kirklees, Barnsley, Doncaster and Thurrock.

In addition this map includes the 53 places where Sport England are investing to address regional inequalities in activity levels across England (highlighted in red). What this shows is that 43 of these places (84%) are also in areas where internet access is at its lowest.


Active
(an average of at least 150 mins per week)
57.9% or lower (least active)
58.0% - 61.9%
62.0% - 64.9%
65.0%% - 68.9%
Greater than 69.0% (most active)


Proportion of the adult population that report having no access to the internet at home
MSOA Area's
Local Authority Area's
2.4% - 3.1%
3.2% - 3.5%
3.6% - 3.9%
4.0% - 4.4%
4.5% - 5.7%

Barriers faced by core population groups

Disability and long-term health conditions

Barriers to physical activity: Disabled people are more likely to have low physical activity levels than non-disabled people. From the 22/23 Active Lives Adult Survey, 48% of disabled people are active versus 69% of those without (Sport England, 2024). Over the last few years, activity levels amongst disabled people have increased on average by 4.2%, compared to 1.9% amongst non-disabled people (Sport England, 2024). This was primarily driven by pre-pandemic data rather than recent years.

For disabled people, research shows they are more likely to lack confidence to engage with physical activity in outdoor settings than non-disabled people: 21% of disabled people, compared to 12% of non-disabled people (Activity Alliance, 2024). Awareness of suitable local opportunities for physical activity is also reported as a barrier for disabled people (Martin Ginis et al, 2021). In addition, disabled people have to do lots of preparation and research before going out, for example to understand how accessible a place is and if there will be support when they get there (ONS, 2022).

Barriers to digital inclusion: The disabled population are more likely to be digitally excluded than other sectors of the population. Barriers to being online are similar to the general population of those who are digitally excluded but they are further compounded by being disabled or having a health condition. In evaluation of our recent digital skills pathway project (UKCRF), 18% of people who are digitally excluded cited disability or health as the main reasons for them not being online (Good Things Foundation, 2023). Evaluation of the Digital Lifeline Programme (Good Things Foundation, 2022), providing people with learning disabilities with devices and connectivity during the pandemic, highlighted that their most common barriers to using the internet at home were: being disabled or having a health condition (53%) and not being able to afford a device (48%).

This is further supported by data that tells us that disabled people are more likely to be in poverty than non-disabled people (Health Foundation, 2024), making it difficult for this population to afford suitable device or connection to the internet. In addition, this group are more likely not to have the skills they need to be online. 69% of people living with an impairment do not have foundation level digital skills compared to only 26% of those without an impairment (Lloyds, 2024). Further compounding their lack of digital inclusion is the inaccessibility of many websites and apps, and a lack of awareness of accessibility technology and features (Abilitynet, 2024).

This data tells us that disabled adults who are digitally excluded will face barriers around exploring suitable opportunities to take part in physical activities in advance. This means they are unable to find information on whether the activities that they wish to participate in will be suitable for them and whether locations will be accessible when they get there. This may further undermine their confidence to participate and reduce the likelihood of them returning if barriers are encountered.

Socio-economic inequalities and deprivation

Barriers to physical activity: People in lower socio-economic groups (LSEGs) are the most likely to be inactive (33%) Sport England, 2024). With nearly a third of the adult population in England - around 12 million people - in a LSEG, that is a significant number of people who could reap huge benefits from being more active. The latest data from the Active Lives Adult Survey shows that the gap in physical activity levels between the most deprived and least deprived areas in England is widening. The most affluent (NS-SEC 1-2) have seen long-term growth, with those who are active increasing by 1.6% compared to seven years ago (Sport England, 2018a). In contrast, the least affluent (NS-SEC 6-8) have seen the proportion active drop by 2.2% over the same period (Sport England, 2024).

Research on the specific barriers to participation in sport and physical activity for those in lower socio-economic groups highlights the importance of other demographics and inequalities that determine their participation levels, such as confidence, knowing where to go, cost, lack of time and lack of appropriate opportunity. The interplay between these factors magnify the impact of barriers to being active, meaning there is not a single reason for inactivity among people living in LSEGs (Sport England, 2018a).

Barriers to digital inclusion: The main digital inclusion barrier for those facing deprivation is affordability of access. Difficulty affording communications services is most likely to affect households in receipt of means-tested benefits (37%) or eligible for a social tariff (34%)(Ofcom, 2024a). Recent research by Good Things Foundation and The Trussell Trust explored the link between deep poverty and Digital Exclusion. The review found that digital exclusion is clearly related to income poverty and to risk factors of income poverty. Households with very low incomes are twice as likely to be without internet access and 16% of foodbank users have no internet access at all (Good Things Foundation, 2024c). Emerging evidence suggests that those who have no access to the internet often have the skills to engage but without a device they are further left behind (Future Dot Now and CEBR economic impact research, yet to be published).

This data tells us that those in lower socio-economic groups and who are facing poverty experience significant affordability issues to be digitally included. This, overlaid with the variety of barriers faced for participation in physical activity, likely further exacerbates their ability to participate in physical activities and sport more widely.

Older people

Barriers to physical activity: The over 75s are the least active sector of the population. Only 43% of this group are active compared to an average of 63%. However, activity levels amongst this age group are growing and they drive the growth in overall activity levels. 700,000 more over 75s are now active compared to seven years ago. Those aged 55 to 74 also have a long-term upward trend in the proportion who are active (Sport England, 2024; Sport England, 2018b).

Barriers to participation in physical activity for older people can be for a range of reasons and not necessarily directly connected to age and physical ability. It can be work, greater family and caring commitments and even social attitudes about the 'right time' to start getting active (Sport England, 2018b).

Barriers to digital inclusion: Almost 1 in 5 (18%) of people over 65 do not use the internet and a large proportion of over 65s do not have the basic digital skills to allow them to thrive in the online world. 48% of people aged 75 and over in the UK and 29% of people aged 65 to 74, are unable to complete any of the eight foundation level digital tasks (Lloyds, 2024). Whilst poverty is a challenge for some over 65s, around 18% are living in poverty (Age UK 2022), affordability is not the primary barrier for this age group being online.

For many people over 65 the barriers to going online far outweigh the benefits of being online. The main barriers are lack of motivation to participate digitally, the need to meet people face to face to combat loneliness and inaccessible online services (Money et al, 2024).

This data tells us that significant proportions of over 65s do not use the internet and the reason behind this is primarily linked to skills and confidence. This overlaid with the variety of other commitments and intersecting health conditions that they face likely further exacerbates their ability to participate in physical activities and support more widely.

Hypothesis: Audiences who are impacted by digital exclusion are also those who participate less frequently in physical activity

Findings: Being online allows people to explore suitable opportunities to take part in physical activities. For those in poverty, affordability of access and for older people, basic digital skills are preventing them from making the most of the opportunities that being online provides.

4. Testing hypothesis two: Digitally-delivered physical activity opportunities enable some audiences to be more physically active

There has been lots of research published in recent years examining the effectiveness of digital tools and platforms for increasing physical activity, and some of this research is of high quality, including multiple systematic reviews of experimental studies. Much of the research we reviewed has looked at the effectiveness of these tools for general adult and/or children populations. There is less high quality, published research examining any differences in effectiveness for different demographic groups, and very little of the research reviewed considered digital inclusion barriers as a factor shaping effectiveness of the tools.

Strong evidence that digital tools can increase physical activity

The published research indicates that digital tools, including apps, wearable devices, online platforms and activity trackers, can increase physical activity among general (healthy) adult and young people populations (Liu et al, 2023; Laranjo et al, 2021; Goodyear et al, 2021a; Ferguson et al, 2022; McGill et al, 2024). The recent evidence is generally of good quality (systematic and umbrella reviews, typically graded as 'silver' or 'gold' through the quality assurance assessment). Much of the research reviewed has been undertaken in high income country settings, predominantly the US, Australia, UK, Canada and multiple European countries.

The evidence typically indicates small to moderate effect sizes for groups that have used digital tools, compared to control groups. These effects are often measured in terms of daily steps or other measures of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA). Some reviews report other, related outcomes, such as positive impact on mental health (Liu et al, 2023) or reduction in body weight (Ferguson et al, 2022) for those using digital tools). Follow-up time varies across the research, but tends to show short-term effects only, e.g. ranging from 2 to 6 weeks (Goodyear et al, 2021a) to an average of around 13 weeks follow up time (Laranjo et al, 2021; Ferguson et al, 2022).

Within these reviews, there is little exploration of any difference in effect size by type of digital tool or platform used to promote physical activity, so it is not possible to say if one type of tool is more effective than another. However, some papers highlight features of tools that may be more acceptable, increase satisfaction and/or drive more effect. These include tools with text message interaction (Laranjo et al, 2021; Joseph et al, 2023), opportunity to personalise the platform or display (Laranjo et al, 2021), and activity tracking components (Joseph et al, 2023). Among research focused on young people, the use of 'exergames' appeared more effective for increasing physical activity and motivation in school settings, compared with other digital tools (Goodyear et al, 2021a).

However, at the population level, there is less clear evidence that digital tools can increase physical activity in a sustained way. During the COVID-19 lockdown, data indicated increased uptake of digital apps and platforms for exercise, such as run tracking apps and online exercise classes (BBC News, 2020). Yet, research has shown that overall, physical activity levels decreased during COVID lockdown periods, including across different population groups (Stockwell et al, 2021; Park et al, 2022) and regular use of digital tools for physical activity was limited to a minority (Fuzeki et al, 2022).

Some, mixed evidence that digital tools are effective for specific groups of people

There is less good quality research focused on the effects of digital tools for increasing physical activity among different demographic groups, and the evidence can be mixed.

Older people

Some research indicates a small increase in physical activity for older people (typically aged 60 or 65+, living in the community rather than in health or social care facilities) through the use of digital tools and platforms. These include apps, websites, wearable devices, text messaging, and/or digital coaching approaches (Daniels et al, 2025; DiPumpo et al, 2025). However, the evidence of effect is not consistent across the research reviewed. Among the research indicating effectiveness, facilitators appear to include tools that provide motivational messaging or reminders, and/or a peer support element (Daniels et al, 2025; DiPumpo et al, 2025).

Some research highlights barriers, including people needing support to navigate online platforms (Revenas et al, 2023), the activities promoted through digital apps and tools not being adapted for the physical and/or cognitive needs of older people (Soto-Bagaria et al, 2023) and poor user design, making it challenging for people with visual or other impairments (Lowndes et al, 2023)

Young people

There is some reasonable evidence to show a positive effect on physical activity among young people when digital tools (particularly exergames) are used in school-based physical education (Ferguson et al, 2022). Digital tools for physical activity in schools, such as apps, and games, may also increase learning effectiveness and motivation among young people (Modra et al, 2021). Providing teachers with access to digital resources for delivering PE sessions that are enjoyable and accessible for girls, for example the Studio You platform, can increase motivation and enjoyment of being active among girls across all activity levels (Studio You, 2024). However, barriers to engagement identified in the literature reviewed include the lack of accessibility and availability of digital devices in schools, and lack of skills and experience in using digital technologies among teachers (Modra et al, 2021).

Beyond school settings, there are a few examples in the literature of the positive impact of digital tools and initiatives on children's physical activity, though this evidence tends to be lower quality, as it is typically based on single studies. One study in Australia indicates that children under 13 who were obese, and who received 'Go4Fun' programme sessions digitally, were more likely to engage in moderate to vigorous physical activity than those who received the in-person equivalent (McGill et al, 2024). They also saw greater health outcomes, including greater improvements to BMI and increased consumption of fruit and vegetables (McGill et al, 2024).

Focusing specifically on girls, there is inconclusive evidence that digital tools are effective for increasing physical activity within this group (Watson-Mackie et al, 2024). Though mobile apps indicate more potential for positive effects on physical activity for girls and young women, the strength of this evidence is limited (Watson-Mackie et al, 2024).

Disabled people and people with long-term health conditions

There is limited conclusive evidence from the research reviewed to show that digital tools are effective for increasing physical activity among disabled people or people with long-term health conditions. Recent systematic reviews show mixed evidence of the effectiveness of digital devices on increasing physical activity among people with long-term and/or non-communicable diseases (Howes et al, 2024; Kardan et al, 2024). The reviews show that some (but not all) research suggests that digital tools (such as digital activity trackers or interventions delivered through digital platforms) can have a small positive effect. However, the quality of this evidence is low (Howes et al, 2024; Kardan et al, 2024). There is also mixed evidence of the impact of digital tools on physical activity among people with intellectual disabilities or autism, though some evidence suggests that active video games and social media interventions could be more effective (Van Biesen et al, 2023).

The evidence reviewed highlights barriers to disabled people using digital devices for sport or physical activity. These barriers include lack of access to devices; lack of digital literacy to navigate online platforms; technical issues and inaccessible or unintuitive design of digital tools; and the nature of a disability making some features of digital devices and platforms difficult to use, such as the touchscreen on a smartphone, or need for a screen reader (Hayton, 2022; Lapierre et al, 2024; Fortune et al, 2024). For services delivering physical activity support to disabled people, research indicates concerns about the safety of exercise through digital platforms for these audiences, without in-person support or assessment (Fortune et al, 2024).

There has also been a small amount of research looking at the use of digital tools and platforms in relation to social prescribing, for example for supporting people to be more physically active. However, research has shown that the range and variety of digital tools for supporting physical activity can be a barrier to using or promoting them, with social prescribers indicating that it can be difficult to know which ones to use and to keep up with new technologies (Patel et al, 2021).

People from lower socio-economic groups

There is only a small amount of evidence examining any difference in effect on physical activity of digital tools for people from different socio-economic groups. This evidence is mixed overall: people from lower socio-economic groups may see less or no significant effect from using digital tools compared to those from higher socio-economic groups (Western et al, 2021; Konig et al, 2025). Although this evidence is not conclusive, it does suggest potential for digital tools to exacerbate existing inequalities in physical activity levels by socio-economic group, if the effects of digital tools on physical activity are experienced unequally.

Some, mixed evidence that social media interventions are effective for increasing physical activity

Research describes social media interventions being used to influence physical activity, typically through social network sites such as Facebook, and using mechanisms including sharing information or recommendations, fostering interaction and social support, or through gamification (Gunther et al, 2021; Durau et al, 2022; Goodyear et al, 2021b). The evidence of the effectiveness of these interventions on people's physical activity is mixed, with some research demonstrating increase in activity and other research showing no significant change (Goodyear et al, 2021b). Effects may be greater for certain groups of people, for example those with higher levels of physical activity and/or poorer body image may be more motivated to exercise as a result of social media influencers (Durau et al, 2022).

Barriers to engaging with physical activity that might be mitigated by digital options

The research on the barriers different groups face to engaging with physical activity, highlights potential opportunities for digital tools and platforms to increase activity among some priority groups. Young people report barriers of limited access to leisure and sports facilities, due to cost, lack of transport, and closure of local facilities (Dodd-Reynolds et al, 2024; Duffey et al, 2021). They also report feeling unsafe or excluded in public leisure spaces, such as gyms and parks, often linked to gender, culture or religious identity (Dodd-Reynolds et al, 2024; Brown et al, 2024). Digital tools and platforms for engaging with physical activity could prove more accessible and attractive options for young people facing these barriers.

For disabled people, research shows they are more likely to lack confidence to engage with physical activity in outdoor settings than non-disabled people: 21% of disabled people, compared to 12% of non-disabled people (Activity Alliance, 2024). Awareness of suitable local opportunities for physical activity is also reported as a barrier for disabled people (Martin Ginis et al, 2021). Research with disabled teenage girls indicates that 63% would take part in more physical activity if it was easier to find opportunities nearby (Women in Sport, 2024). This suggests potential for digital platforms to offer more accessible opportunities for disabled people to be active in the home or in other indoor settings. Digital could also be (better) employed to share information about local services and options for physical activity that are appropriate for disabled people.

Spotlight on UK initiatives using digital approaches to promote physical activity

Below are summaries of examples of large-scale, system-level initiatives that have used digital tools to promote physical activity in the UK. Some of these take a place-based approach to supporting physical activity, and others adopt a population approach.

'Beat the Street'

[place-based]

- Uses digital gamification, supported through community leaders and networks, to encourage communities to move more in local spaces, with a primary focus on parents and children.
- Increase in physical activity for 12% of the population in each participating area (Intelligent Health, n.d.)
- Sustained increased activity levels: in one area, 5% of participants were physically inactive at 2 years post-intervention, compared with 18% at baseline (Harris, 2019).
- Initiative increases motivation to go outside and be more active, and increases sense of social interaction and togetherness (Harris et al, 2024).
- The local 'community connectors' are considered to be 'vital' for the success of each programme, for engaging and motivating communities in person, with digital as an enhancer.

'We Are Undefeatable'

[population-based]

- A media campaign and suite of online resources (eg app with exercise programmes, online guidance and videos) to support people with long-term health conditions to be more active.
- 74% of people agreed that WAU "allows me to get active in a way that works for me" and 75% agreed that WAU "makes it easy for people with health conditions to get more active" (DJS Research, 2024).
- WAU is less effective among people aged 65+, people from lower socio-economic groups, and people who are inactive (DJS Research, 2024).
- Barriers to physical activity among the target groups relate more to people's condition and age, than digital exclusion (DJS Research, 2021).
- But, digital barriers exist, including lack of digital confidence and cost of digital devices (DJS Research, 2021).

'This GIrl Can'

[population-based]

- Campaign to address women's fear of judgment, stopping them from exercising.
- Launched first on prime-time then rolled out across other media, social media platforms, and a website and app, with lots of support from partners.
- First phase: 2.8 million women reported being more active as a result of the campaign; the number of women being active once a week, every week, increased by 250,000 (Sport England, 2022).
- Campaign was extended to women up to age 60, with high levels of engagement through digital media, and positive impact on activity levels.
- A media campaign, with digital approaches, can be effective in building confidence and motivation to exercise (Sport England, 2022).

'Big Sister'

[place-based]

- Initiative aims to address low levels of physical activity in girls aged 9-15 through in-person and digital support, in multiple locations in the UK.
- Includes free access to sport and exercise opportunities at local leisure centres, access to social support through volunteer 'ambassadors', access to free sanitary products and access to online information, support and workout classes (Women in Sport, 2023).
- Women in Sport report that 44% of participating girls are doing 'a lot more' exercise now, and that 64% report enjoying taking part in physical activity more (2023).

Hypothesis: Digitally delivered physical activity opportunities enable some audiences to be more physically active

Findings: Digital tools and platforms can be effective for increasing physical activity levels, and may offer appealing opportunities for people facing other barriers to being active outside the home. However, digital access, accessibility and skills barriers may mean digital approaches are less effective for certain groups, potentially exacerbating existing inequalities in activity levels.

5. Testing hypothesis three: Digital access and skills are often essential in order for people to engage with sport and physical activity opportunities

This section is informed by the data and literature reviewed in the previous sections, plus more informal insights through conversations with key stakeholders and internal research and evaluation work at Good Things Foundation around experiences of digital exclusion and inclusion.

Accessing information about opportunities for physical activity outside the home

Information about local opportunities for sport, exercise and physical activity is predominantly shared online, through social media and websites. Environmental strategies and cost-saving exercises mean that information about these opportunities is now unlikely to be widely available in a physical format, such as leaflets or posters. Lack of access to the internet, lack of skills and/or confidence to search for and interpret information online, and/or a lack of engagement with common social media platforms means some people are more likely to struggle to find information about these opportunities.

Research into the user experience of online sources of information about local physical activity programmes, for older people, highlights the challenges faced by some in navigating websites and understanding how to search for information that is relevant to them (Lowndes et al, 2023). Additional barriers include not being aware of online databases or sources of information about physical activity, missing or incorrect information presented on websites, and poor design of websites, making it harder for people with sight or literacy difficulties to engage (Lowndes et al, 2023).

As well as information about opportunities for physical activity, digital access and skills are required for some people to be able to find key information about how to access opportunities outside the home. This may be more critical for disabled people, whereby knowing in advance if the venue and/or transportation are accessible to them is imperative. This is illustrated by a quotation from the Activity Alliance's Annual Disability and Activity Survey (2024), highlighting the importance of access to online maps and information to assess the accessibility of a new opportunity:

"I've got to look on Google Maps to find where the single yellow lines are. I need to look up the blue badge rules in that borough/county and then strategically figure out where else can I park."

For people on low incomes and/or young people who rely on public transport, access to reliable online information, for example through bus or train company apps, might be required for accessing physical activity opportunities outside the home. Having access to mobile data, and not being reliant on home or public wifi to connect to the internet, could be vital for being able to use transport or map apps while on the move.

Booking and paying for physical activity opportunities outside the home

Accessing leisure centres, gyms and local sports opportunities typically requires digital access and skills for using online booking and/or payment platforms. Removal of telephone booking and payment options in many locations means that people risk missing out on attending exercise classes and sessions if they have to rely on paying in person on the day, when sessions might already be booked up. Digital confidence around being able to stay safe when making payments online is also an important factor, without which people with fewer digital skills may not feel able to use online booking platforms. People without access to their own bankcard for making digital payments - for example people with learning disabilities living in supported accommodation - may also struggle to access these opportunities.

An Equalities Impact Assessment was conducted by Islington Council in 2022 of their proposed movement to "*online booking of all activities*" within their leisure services, post-COVID. The assessment highlighted that older people and those facing digital poverty would potentially be negatively impacted by this change, and it proposed mitigations including having greater availability of staff to provide customer support with booking on site, and offering a telephone service offering information about local leisure opportunities.

The accessibility of online platforms for booking and paying is also an important factor, for ensuring that people can access physical activity opportunities, particularly if they have sight, literacy and/or other difficulties processing information online. For example, some platforms may not be configured to work well with screen-readers (Hayton, 2022). Websites and platforms that are clunky or unintuitive to navigate may deter people who lack confidence in their digital skills from booking physical activity sessions online. In the Digital Futures 2024 survey, all the leisure service providers with digital leisure management systems (68% of the sample) reported they are considering changing it. This suggests concerns about the usability and accessibility of these systems (UK Active & Sport England, 2024). However, with many local authorities facing budgetary constraints, they may be unlikely to want to invest in rolling out a new, more accessible online system to accommodate the needs of a small minority of service users.

Benefiting from campaigns and social networks supporting people to feel more confident to be physically active

As discussed in relation to Hypothesis Two above, social and mass media campaigns can be effective in shaping identities and motivations around engaging with physical activity, particularly among groups who face confidence barriers to physical activity (for example the "This Girl Can" campaign). Digital access and skills are needed for people to be able to benefit from these campaigns, in terms of exposure on social media platforms. Some social media-based initiatives also use online spaces for peer support and network building, to help people feel more confident and motivated to try physical activity. These mechanisms are less accessible to people who lack digital access and/or skills and confidence to engage with online spaces. However, an over-reliance on social media to promote activity programmes, such as "Beat the Street" (Harris et al, 2024), may mean people not using these platforms will miss out on the benefits of online interaction and peer support around the programme.

Accessing online or digital opportunities for physical activity

Accessing online or digital opportunities for physical activity may be more accessible or appealing to people who face barriers to accessing opportunities for exercise in their local areas. However, these opportunities require digital access and skills. As described above, there are also a range of accessibility barriers to some people using these platforms, for example relating to cognitive or physical impairments, and for people who require additional support or guidance to do physical activity safely (Fortune et al, 2024).

Digital access and skills are enablers to physical activity, but unlikely to be the main barriers

As illustrated in analysis of the first hypothesis in this report, the core groups of people who are digitally excluded and have low physical activity levels are disabled people or those with long-term health conditions, those in lower socio-economic groups and those aged over 65. The profile of those facing digital exclusion (through the lens of digital skills) and low physical activity is largely similar across core demographic groups, as shown in Figure 10 below. However, even amongst the most physically active sections of the population (aged 16-34, socio-economic classification NE-SEC 1-2, and non-disabled people) we see around 30% of the population demonstrating low activity levels. Conversely, these segments of the population have good levels of basic digital skills.

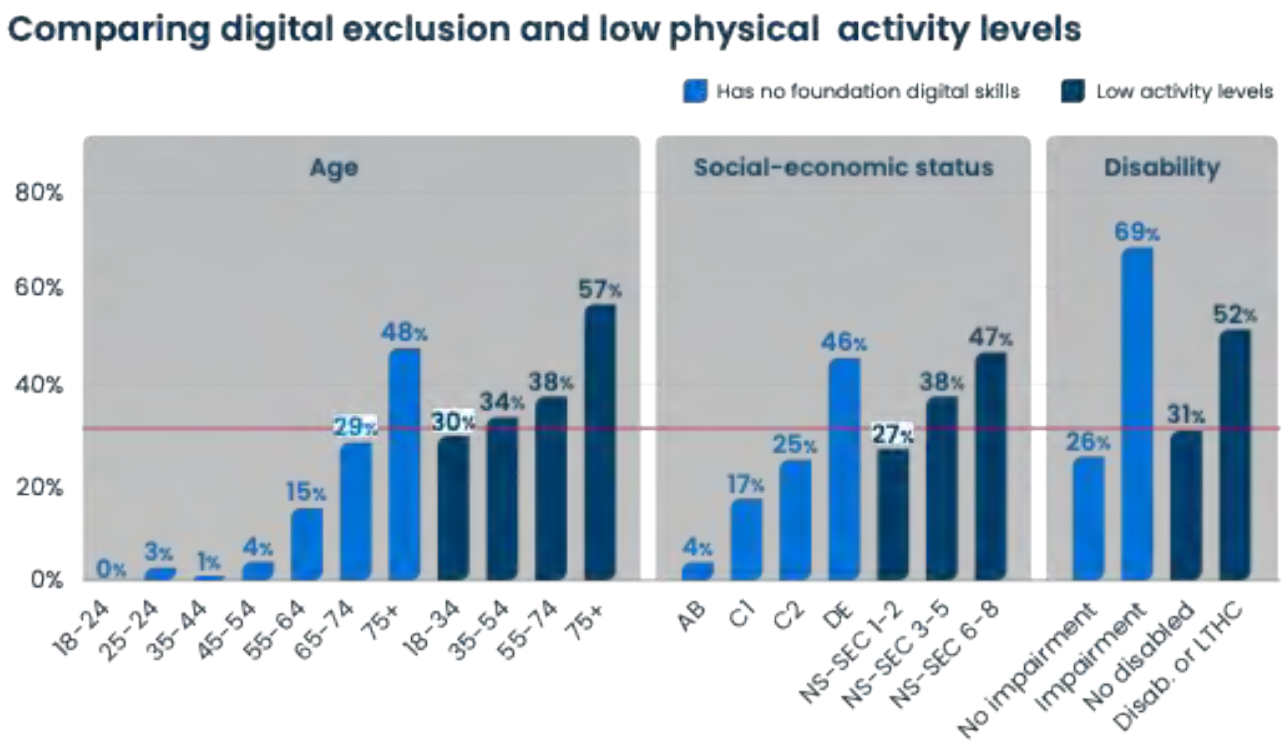


Figure 10: Comparison of low digital skills and low physical activity by demographic groups

This suggests that it is likely that there is no strong correlation between digital exclusion and physical activity, but more likely that digital inclusion is an enabler for physical activity, among other factors.

The "We Are Undefeatable" initiative, targeting people aged 34 to 65 with long-term health conditions, provides valuable tracking data mapping digital confidence levels against physical activity levels. The quantitative tracking survey uses online and face-to-face completions, though those completing the survey offline are not necessarily digitally excluded. The tracking data shows a clear relationship between physical inactivity and low digital confidence (see Figure 11 below). Yet, as with the data above, there is also a marked level of inactivity among those reporting higher digital confidence (51%) (We Are Undefeatable campaign evaluation data, 2024).

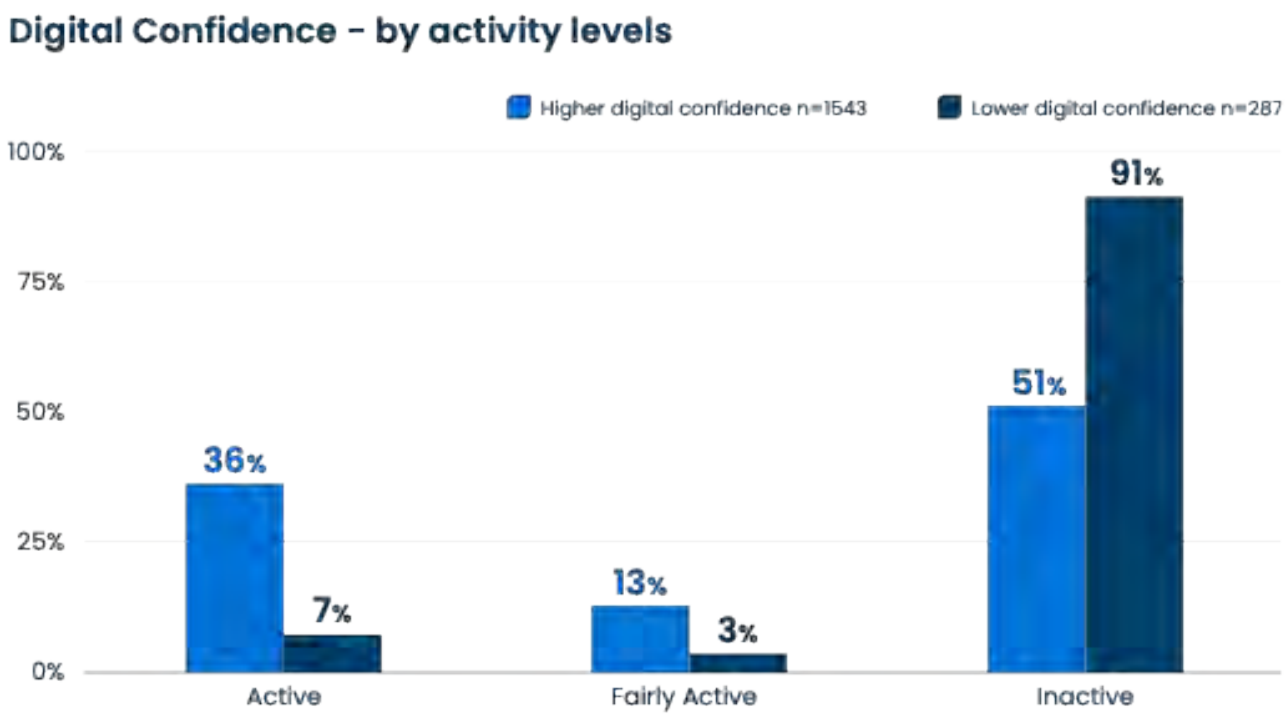


Figure 11: Difference in digital confidence levels, by physical activity level, in relation to the We Are Undefeatable initiative.

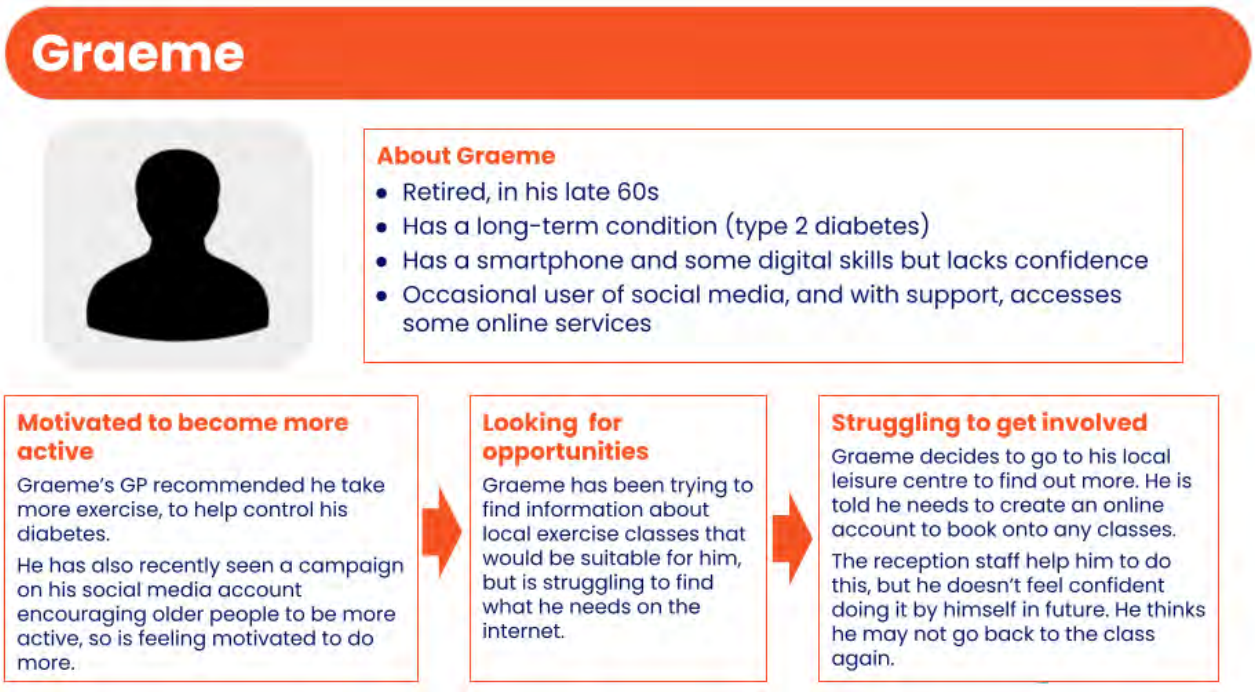
Again, this points to digital inclusion being an enabler in participation in physical activity rather than being a pre-requisite, and that there are other influential factors that shape physical activity levels ahead of digital in/exclusion.

Hypothesis: Digital access and skills are often essential in order for people to engage with sport and physical activity opportunities

Findings: Digital access and skills are important factors in people's abilities to access and engage with opportunities for physical activity. However, there are likely other, more influential factors that shape people's levels of physical activity, with digital being an enabler rather than a pre-requisite.

6. Answering question one: What is the role of digital in people's journeys to being physically active?

Four user journeys have been developed to illustrate the different ways in which digital access, skills and accessibility can shape people's pathways to being more physically active. We have drawn on multiple sources in developing these user journeys, including data on the groups who are less physically active and face more barriers to digital inclusion; evidence of the impact of digital tools on physical activity; and insights around the need for digital access, skills and accessibility for engaging with physical activity.



Aliyah

About Aliyah

- Mother of three young children, in her early 30s
- Works part-time and claims Universal Credit
- Has a pay-as-you-go phone, and has free data through the National Databank, but cannot afford broadband at home
- Shares a tablet with her children, but it's in poor condition and she can't afford to replace it

Motivated to become more active

Aliyah wants to know more about opportunities for exercise with her family, especially during the school holidays.

As she has a low income, she needs activities that are low-cost or free, and for which she doesn't need to pay much for public transport to get there.

Looking for opportunities

She's confident using social media and online directories to look for what's on for families and children. However, many activities are too expensive or are not very accessible.

Using digital tools

Aliyah tries to get the kids to be more active at home, using videos she has found on YouTube, though she worries about her data being used up.

Through her son's school, she hears about a local 'Beat the Street' initiative, using phones to explore the local area. She's keen to get started with this, as it's free.

Bodi

About Bodi

- Late 20s, works full-time
- Has a lifelong condition which affects his mobility, balance and coordination, and also has some sight-loss
- Sometimes needs to use a wheelchair
- Is confident using digital devices with accessibility adaptations, such as a screen-reader

Likes keeping active where he can

Bodi has enjoyed keeping active in the past, but is sometimes limited by his condition.

He wants to do a bit more now, to improve his mental health and feel more socially connected.

Struggling to get involved

Bodi has tried working out at his local gym in the past, but has struggled to use some of the machines, for example those with touchscreens. He also sometimes feels out of place.

To go somewhere new, he has to spend time on the internet researching how accessible the venue is, and how he can get there.

Getting support online

Bodi has joined a network on social media for people with disabilities who enjoy exercise.

This has given him some good suggestions for activities in his local area, and some peer support which is making him feel more confident to try new things.

Jasmine

About Jasmine

- Aged 14, attending school
- Comes from a culturally diverse community
- Lives with her family on the edge of a small town
- Has a smartphone and laptop, and enjoys spending time on social media watching and making videos

Dislikes physical activity at school

Like many of her friends, Jasmine really hates PE at school as she feels she's no good at it and feels embarrassed in front of others.

Her parents expect her to concentrate on her academic work and don't often encourage her to do sport or exercise.

Influenced by the online world

Spending time on social media, Jasmine follows influencers who make content on exercise and diet. She's started doing yoga at home, watching YouTube videos, though isn't always sure she's doing it right.

Building confidence to try something new

Jasmine feels like she's now seeing more people like her online, doing exercise. She's been enjoying the yoga and is now feeling more confident to try other activities. She's downloaded an activity tracker app, and wants to start doing some local walks with her friends at the weekends.

7. Answering question two: What best practice examples are there, including from sectors beyond sport and leisure, where services are being designed to address the impact of digital exclusion?

Case studies of providing support for digital inclusion and physical activity

Supporting digital inclusion and physical activity side by side

Case study: Digital skills and exercise sessions at **Nature Warriors**, Lancashire

Nature Warriors is a charity operating in East Lancashire, delivering a range of services and support predominantly to young people. As part of their fundraising model, they have an on-site gym which generates revenue for their charitable activities. Following conversations with social prescribers in the area, they became aware of the needs of local refugee and asylum seeker communities, around wellbeing, social connection and support with digital to engage with online services:
"[there are] a lot of single males from like Eritrea, Sudan, Afghanistan, Iran and they're very, very bored because… they can't work"

Nature Warriors were awarded an Activation Grant from Good Things Foundation in 2024 to set up a 10 week programme providing fitness and digital skills sessions for men and women. Each week, participants were collected by minibus and taken to the charity's main building, where they had an hour's session in the gym supported by a fitness instructor and an hour's session learning basic digital skills. The groups were split by gender, and there were around 6 to 8 people in each group.

Many of the participants faced barriers to doing things online due to limited English language, and due to a lack of confidence. Staff at Nature Warriors said the programme has helped them to reach some of the "most vulnerable people" in the community, and provide them with some vital skills and support: "we empowered them with skills that will help them in life".

People attending the programme said they enjoyed the gym sessions because it was good for their fitness and mental health, and they felt more confident with doing things online. One Ukrainian refugee said she benefitted from the sessions as she was learning skills to help her apply for work, "improving [her] health" and getting more practice speaking English.

Source: Good Things Foundation internal evaluation data, 2024.

Creating opportunities to bring together physical activity and digital inclusion support

Case study: Get Online Week event held at **Restorative Justice for All**, October 2024

Restorative Justice for All is a community interest company committed to supporting social justice and reducing inequality in the UK and internationally. It has a community centre in South London, where they deliver a range of services and programmes, including digital skills and connectivity, health and wellbeing sessions, and a food bank, community fridge and cooking sessions.

A charitable arm of the organisation focuses on delivering accessible opportunities for sports and exercise to the local community, including group fitness classes, walking and cycling sessions and sailing.

For the 2024 'Get Online Week', Restorative Justice for All hosted an event combining digital inclusion support with their regular gardening and activity sessions. They provided digital skills support, access to free mobile data through the National Databank, and distributed free refurbished mobile phones, through the National Device Bank. They reported hosting 40 people at the event, and said it was their highest ever number of attendees at a digital drop-in session. The organisation agreed that hosting the event had enabled them to reach new people, increase take-up of digital inclusion support, and raise the profile of their organisation and wider services.

Source: Good Things Foundation internal insight and evaluation data, 2024.

Best practice examples from other sectors of delivering solutions to address the impact of digital exclusion

Embedding digital inclusion into existing services

Digital Health Hubs: Destinations, Saltburn

Digital Health Hubs were created through a pilot project, as part of NHS England's 'Widening Digital Participation' programme delivered by Good Things Foundation. Different kinds of community-based organisations were funded to provide support, to test the hypothesis that 'dedicated community locations with trusted people on hand to guide can help socially and digitally excluded people to improve their online skills and access relevant information and tools (both online and in their local area) to improve their health and wellbeing' (Good Things Foundation, 2020).

Destinations is a community resource and learning hub for the Saltburn and East Cleveland area. Its digital health hub is physically connected to an independent café, Milo's, which provides a friendly atmosphere and opens directly into the digital health hub behind – there is no door separating them.

Through the Digital Health Hubs initiative, Destinations improved the building's layout, changed the space to be more informal with relaxed seating, rather than banks of computers, improved the WiFi, purchased new digital equipment and trained 14 people as digital champions. To begin to make that connection more obvious, they held an open day for the community to come and see what the Hub is about, and find out about the associated health and wellbeing opportunities and resources, both digital and 'traditional'.

By offering improved access to devices, Destinations has encouraged use: people who might feel uncomfortable in the internet room can come and use a laptop or tablet in the less formal areas. Participants have also chosen to look for non-urgent medical advice and book appointments online rather than going in person to a GP or pharmacy more than they did before.

Digital inclusion support within library services

Libraries are recognised as playing a vital role in supporting digital inclusion. They are typically open, trusted and accessible spaces in which people can access support to do things online. Recent research with libraries in England shows they provide support to people to get online for a wide range of reasons, for example to access information about health and health services, about financial support or employment, or about other local services and support (Good Things Foundation, 2023b).

The digital inclusion support provided by libraries varies by branch and services, with some leading the delivery of digital skills and connectivity support, and others playing a more facilitative role, signposting service users to other support in the local area.

The types of support that libraries provide include:

Connectivity:

- Providing free access to public wifi
- Free mobile data through the National Databank

Devices:

- Providing free access to public computers
- Charging points for devices
- Device loan and / or donation schemes

Skills:

- Ad hoc support by staff or volunteers to access online services
- Digital skills training sessions for different groups and needs e.g. basic skills sessions; coding sessions for young people

Signposting: to other voluntary and / or community sector organisations who deliver digital inclusion support.

Digital inclusion support within library services (continued)

Enablers:

Research indicates that libraries can provide effective digital inclusion support if they:

- Tailor support to individual needs and preferences: finding the 'hook' that motivates a person to want to engage with the online world.
- Work in partnership with other local organisations such as voluntary and community organisations, for referrals and signposting to appropriate services.
- Have capability to provide ad hoc support, for example through digital champions.
- Work strategically with local authorities, for example as part of a local authority digital inclusion strategy.

Barriers:

The challenges faced by libraries in providing digital inclusion support include:

- Staff time and capacity
- Lack of strategic support for digital inclusion
- Staff and / or volunteers' own knowledge and confidence with digital.

Upskilling staff

Supporting digital inclusion in General Practice: Conisbrough Group Practice

Conisbrough Group Practice was one of many practices in England that introduced an online system to enable patients to request appointments, advice and other kinds of help from their surgery, using a form on their website.

Enablers:

- The practice gave all staff permission and they were actively encouraged to support patients to use the online service.
- The practice actively identified people who may not be tech savvy, and those that were more vulnerable and less digitally confident to support verbally rather than sending them a link and expecting them to work it out for themselves.

Impact:

As a result, more patients started using the forms and other patients who couldn't use the forms or who preferred not to, found it easier to get through by telephone.

Source: Good Things Foundation (n.d.)

Building networks and digital champions

100% Digital Leeds - Digital Health Hubs

Digital Health Hubs are trusted community organisations in key locations with supportive staff, and they offer a wide range of digital inclusion support, such as providing access to devices and data connectivity, and helping people to build their digital skills and confidence.

Enablers:

Through workshops, network meetings, and conversations with organisations, 100% Digital Leeds and Leeds Local Care Partnerships built a digital support infrastructure across local voluntary and community sector organisations. They created digital champions and used an additional role reimbursement scheme to enable these roles.

They also worked with GP practices, community healthcare, social prescribers and others to promote the offer and provide a simplified referral and signposting route.

Impact:

276 digital champions engaged and support infrastructure established

Bevan Health and Wellbeing

Bevan Health and Wellbeing successfully recruited and trained peer volunteers to increase digital literacy and online use of healthcare for volunteers and patients who were asylum seekers, refugees or who had been affected by homelessness.

Enablers:

Comprehensive training of volunteers in digital inclusion and peer advocacy

Building local relationships to provide reconditioned smart phones and data bundles

Impact:

Of 77 patients who participated in an evaluation, 29% started using online consultation systems or similar website forms to request help from their GP; 26% requested repeat prescriptions online; and a quarter used a video app for GP consultations (Good Things Foundation, n.d.).

Top tips for designing digital inclusion programmes

Through many years of experience of delivering digital inclusion initiatives in a wide range of systems and settings, Good Things Foundation has a broad understanding of how digital inclusion initiatives can be designed to best effect. They have identified 'top tips' for making digital access more inclusive, especially for those in under-served communities and socially excluded groups. However, there is no one-size fits all solution to designing digital inclusion approaches and time needs to be invested to find out what works best in the area of focus.

These top tips can be grouped into four core areas as outlined below:

Audience

Taking care to design the service around the specific needs of the audience will give it the best chance of success. Using data to help identify the audiences that are at the highest risk of digital exclusion in the area and establishing their specific needs such as access or skills will give the service the best opportunity to address these barriers. The Digital Exclusion Risk Index (DERI) is a useful tool for visualising risk of digital exclusion at lower super output area, across England and Wales (GMCA, 2022). Collecting data throughout the design and delivery process will also help identify who is not being reached through the service and it will provide the best opportunity to bring this audience in by evolving the design.

Co-design approaches can help with understanding these needs and barriers and ensure that the service is designed to meet their needs. This will help determine whether the service needs to include access as well as skills and confidence support and how this should be included. When engaging with local communities do this in a setting that is easy for them to access and is where they feel comfortable. Setting up the co-design process as early in the development process as possible will ensure that the resulting service is led by their needs.

Design

A co-design approach should help ensure that the services are grounded in meeting the needs of core customer groups. There is a wide range of guidance available on how to design with accessibility and ease of use in mind (eg accessible information standard and easy read formats). Providing choice in how people access the service will ensure the service attracts the broadest audience and will provide multiple opportunities to discuss online or digital formats to build confidence over time. Reference and how-to guides should always be provided in paper format. Users find having a reference point to remind them how to engage really valuable and it can reduce the burden on staff supporting people every time they try to login or engage with the digital service.

Support

Perhaps one of the most important parts of designing a digital inclusion service is considering the role of support in the design. Some key questions to ask when designing the service are:

- Who is providing the digital inclusion support?
- Have they got the skills they need to be able to help others?
- Have they got the time or capacity to help?

Exploring existing networks and roles may help identify where this support best comes from. The best people to lead are often the ones who are enthusiastic or passionate about digital inclusion. Creating specific roles such as digital champions or buddies can create a sense of belonging and make it easy to identify who to refer to within the service setting if support is required. VCSE organisations, volunteers, link workers and social prescribers all could play a role in the delivery of the service.

Communication

Finally, telling people about the service is the key to its success. This includes both potential service users and staff. Using multiple communication routes will ensure individuals are engaged who are already online as well as offline. Face-to-face communication can often be very effective as well as considering where and how to build the communication into existing customer journeys.

As discussed above, digital inclusion is not a static state and people's circumstances change all the time, so continue to invite them in to try the digital service or get support.

Further resources and frameworks to promote digital inclusion

Joining the National Digital Inclusion Network: Becoming a member of the Network allows organisations to be part of a movement that's fixing the digital divide across the UK. Network Members have access to Good Things Foundation's digital inclusion services to provide to the communities they support: free mobile data through the National Databank and beginner digital skills training through Learn My Way. There is also access to a whole range of additional resources such as:

- Peer-to-peer networking with support from a Network Ambassador
- Regular online training sessions, co-delivered by experienced members
- Online resources and guidance on delivering digital inclusion support.

Partnership working to promote digital inclusion for health (Good Things Foundation, 2024d). This report, based on research with local authorities, presents a maturity model for shared action on digital inclusion for health. It includes actions across a range of areas such as reach, governance, funding and impact. Whilst the model was developed specifically with local authorities and their health partners, the steps in the model would prove useful for anyone looking to implement digital inclusion in a local system or place.

NHS England's Framework for Action on Digital Inclusion (NHS England, 2024). This framework has been developed to help ensure that NHS digital services are designed to be complementary with non digital services and support

Digital Inclusion in Libraries: Framework and Practice Notes (Good Things Foundation, 2023b). A guide developed through research that aims to be a simple, nonprescriptive resource to support libraries in their strategic thinking about, and advocacy for, the role they play in closing the digital divide. It aims to be aspirational without imposing expectations.

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