



**Digital inclusion and  
physical activity: insights  
and recommendations  
from user research**

May 2026

# Contents

<b>Executive summary</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>1. Introduction – what we already know</b> .....	<b>5</b>
1.1. Inclusion and exclusion in digital society.....	5
1.2. Digital, sport and physical activity.....	6
1.3. Who is impacted most .....	8
<b>2. Project objectives and approach</b> .....	<b>9</b>
2.1. Objectives .....	9
2.2. Approach .....	10
<b>3. Experiences of navigating digital on the journey to being physically active</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>4. Understanding and addressing digital barriers to sport and physical activity</b> .....	<b>15</b>
Four key digital barriers .....	15
<b>Recommendation 1:</b> Build understanding of the range of digital barriers faced by the populations you want to support to be more active .....	16
<b>Recommendation 2:</b> Provide local support for digital connectivity, devices and skills .....	20
<b>Recommendation 3:</b> Make it easier for people to navigate and use online sport and physical activity platforms.....	25
<b>Recommendation 4:</b> Build partnerships for place-based support around digital and physical activity.....	31
<b>5. Reflections and conclusions</b> .....	<b>34</b>
5.1. Summary of findings.....	34
5.2. Gaps in awareness and understanding.....	35
5.3. Recommended actions for the sector.....	36
<b>References</b> .....	<b>37</b>
<b>Appendix – Further information on research sample</b> .....	<b>38</b>

# Digital inclusion and physical activity: insights and recommendations from user research

## Executive summary

This report presents our research to understand how digital shapes people's access to and experience of sport and physical activity, and identifies good practice for reducing digital barriers to being active. The research builds on existing understanding of the overlap between the groups who face inequalities in being active and the groups who face inequalities in being online (Sport England & Good Things Foundation, 2025).

Participating in sport and physical activity typically involves multiple digital touchpoints: from finding information about local activities, through booking and paying online, to the use of digital technologies for engaging in or enhancing activity. It is crucial we understand how best to reduce digital barriers to ensure everyone has equal opportunity to participate in sport and physical activity.

We conducted in-depth research between October 2025 and January 2026 with people with lived experience of facing digital barriers to being active, and with organisations working across the digital inclusion and sport/physical activity sectors.

## Digital barriers limiting participation in sport and physical activity:



### Access

- Financial barriers to wifi/mobile data connection to get online
- No access to suitable digital device



### Skills and confidence

- Difficulty searching for and accessing information online
- Challenge of using different digital apps and tools



### Trust and safety

- Worries about booking and paying online
- Lack of trust in reliability of online information



### User experience

- Language and/or accessibility barriers
- Lack of key information and support

## What works

- ✓ Providing digital skills and access support in trusted, local spaces
- ✓ Fostering social connections to build confidence for digital and physical activity
- ✓ Understanding needs and preferences of your audience around digital
- ✓ Accessible, inclusive digital platforms, with non-digital support where needed
- ✓ Partnerships enabling signposting to support for digital and physical activity

## Recommendations for reducing barriers:

### 1. Build understanding of the range of digital barriers faced by the populations you want to support to be more active

By [embedding questions](#) into customer or population surveys, into registration processes, and into equality impact assessments, you can collect data on digital barriers faced and use the insights to design sport and physical activity opportunities that are more digitally inclusive.

### 2. Provide local support for digital connectivity, devices and skills

Engage with existing resources and guidance (see for example the [National Digital Inclusion Network](#)) to help embed digital inclusion support into sport and physical activity services, and signpost to existing trusted, local organisations, who help people build capability to get online and be more active.

### 3. Make it easier for people to navigate and use online sport and physical activity platforms

To reduce barriers to accessing information and opportunities to be active, platforms should be designed with the needs of people with low digital skills in mind, through [user-centred design and innovation best practice](#). Multiple channels for sharing information and providing support – including offline channels – should also be provided.

### 4. Build partnerships for place-based support around digital and physical activity

As barriers to accessing digital services are not limited to the sport and activity sector, there is great benefit in establishing partnership working across sectors and places, including health and social prescribing services and the VCSE sector, to facilitate local access to digital inclusion support, and reduce barriers to being active.

# 1. Introduction – what we already know

## 1.1. Inclusion and exclusion in digital society

The world is increasingly digital, bringing many conveniences and opportunities, but also risking exclusion of people who find it difficult to access and engage online. While there is no standardised definition of ‘digital exclusion’, we interpret it as not having the access, skills and/or confidence to use the internet and benefit fully from digital technology in everyday life. It is not a fixed state, but something that an individual can experience to different degrees, at different times, depending on a range of vulnerabilities and life events (Sport England & Good Things Foundation, 2025).

While more and more services become digital-first (or even digital-only), and 6.3 million more people are active online now than in 2016 (Lloyds Banking Group, 2025a), there still remain considerable inequalities in people’s digital capabilities:

- **Levels of essential digital skills across the population are stagnating:** 15% (~8 million people) still lacked foundational-level digital skills in 2025, the same as in 2024 (Lloyds Banking Group, 2025b)
- **People continue to struggle to afford digital connectivity** (mobile data and/or home broadband): 26% of UK households reported difficulty in affording communications services in 2025 (Ofcom, 2025a)
- **Some people are increasingly concerned about staying safe online:** 18% of adults say they avoid using online services because they don’t feel confident or safe, and 38% say the rise of AI makes them feel less confident to go online (PublicFirst for Good Things Foundation, 2025).

We also see that difficulties in being online can affect lots of different groups of people:

- **21% of those over 65** have no internet access at home (Ofcom, 2025b)
- **Only 74% of people with an impairment** have the foundational level digital skills, compared to 91% of people without an impairment (Lloyds Banking Group, 2025b)
- **14% of those in DE** social grade households have no internet access at home, compared to only 1% of AB social grade households (Ofcom, 2026)
- **31% of people aged 16 to 24** struggled to afford their communications services in 2025, compared to 15% of people aged 65 to 74 (Ofcom, 2025a).

## 1.2. Digital, sport and physical activity

This societal picture has relevance for the sport and physical activity sector as there are multiple ways in which people are expected, even required, to use digital tools and platforms to access opportunities to be active. From the recent [Activity Check-in survey](#) (Sport England, 2026), we see that a majority of people are using digital in order to be active with:

- **67%** of people using digital tools to find out information about sport and physical activity;
- **66%** using digital tools to take part in sport and physical activity; and
- **52%** using digital tools to book sport and physical activity.

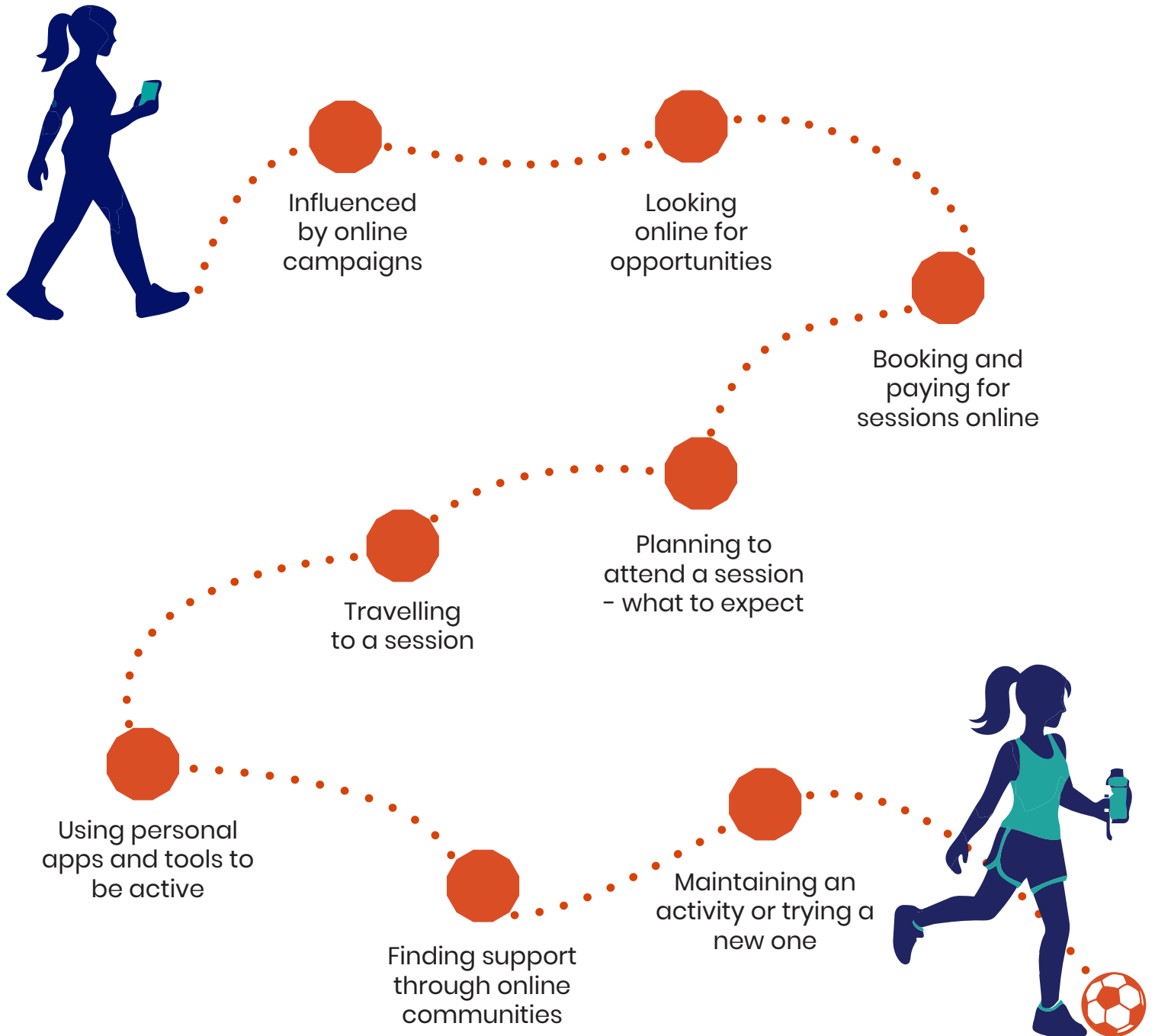
Think about the steps you might take to join a new sports team, for example. You might go online and:

- see a social media post about a sport which catches your attention
- search for information about local clubs offering this sport
- register and pay to join an introductory session
- send an email to the club to ask about what equipment you need
- use an online map tool and the local bus app to find your way to the session
- use a fitness tracker app to record your activity during the session
- join a Facebook group for other people who play the sport, for tips and motivation
- join the club's WhatsApp group for communications about training sessions and fixtures.

These types of digital touchpoints - increasingly common in the journey to being physically active - are illustrated in the graphic below.



# Digital touchpoints on the journey to being active



It is easy to see how people without good digital access, skills or confidence, could struggle to access opportunities for sport and physical activity.

### 1.3. Who is impacted most

In 2025, we conducted desk research to understand the connection between digital inclusion and physical activity (Sport England & Good Things Foundation, 2025). This work reflects Sport England's commitment to understanding how innovation and digital can be applied to address inequalities in sport and physical activity, and Good Things Foundation's mission to ensure everyone can participate in a digital society. Through the desk research we identified:

- There is an overlap between the groups facing most barriers to being active, and those most likely to be digitally excluded, including older people, people experiencing poverty, disabled people and people with long-term health conditions;
- Opportunities for digital tools to increase participation in being active, for some groups; and
- The multiple ways in which digital exclusion can limit access to opportunities for sport and physical activity.



We also highlighted some gaps in knowledge around this issue, including depth of understanding of the lived experience of people facing digital barriers to physical activity, and any differences by demographic groups; level of understanding of digital barriers among organisations supporting people to be more active; and examples of actions being taken by organisations across the sector to address digital barriers to physical activity.

This report summarises findings from research we have undertaken to address the gaps in knowledge identified through the 2025 desk research. It also summarises practical recommendations for reducing digital barriers to participating in sport and physical activity.



# 2. Project objectives and approach

## 2.1. Objectives

To understand and make recommendations for addressing digital barriers to sport and physical activity, our research was guided by four objectives:

1. Generate deep understanding of the lived experiences of people facing barriers to digital inclusion, in relation to accessing different opportunities for sport and physical activity;
2. Explore perspectives of organisations across the sport and physical activity sector in relation to how digital shapes access to sport/physical activity;
3. Identify models of good practice of addressing/reducing digital barriers to promote access to sport and physical activity across the sector; and
4. Approach the above with particular focus on priority demographic groups who face the highest inequalities in engaging in sport and physical activity, and priority areas of England where digital and physical activity inequalities are highest.



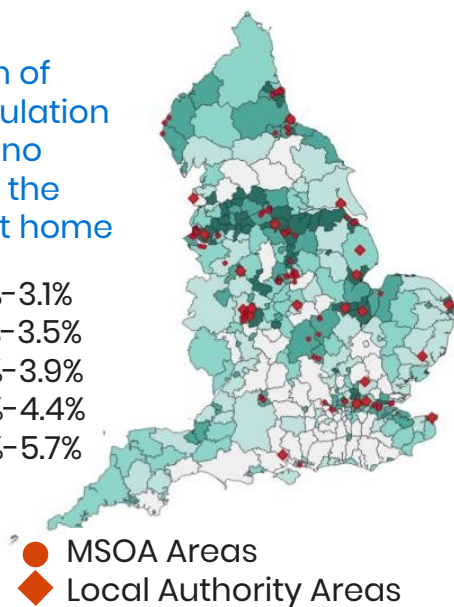
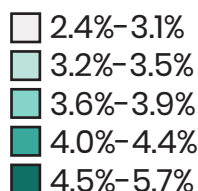
## 2.2. Approach

To achieve these objectives, we conducted qualitative research between October 2025 and January 2026.

### To understand user experiences:

We worked with five community organisations - 'hubs' - from the National Digital Inclusion Network who provide digital inclusion support, and some sport or physical activity provision. All five hubs are located in priority areas. These are the 43 areas across England, identified through the desk research as having highest levels of inactivity and lowest levels of digital access (Sport England & Good Things Foundation, 2005) - see the map below.

Proportion of adult population reporting no access to the internet at home



### Hub visits

Through **visits to these hubs**, we spoke with:

- **35 people** with lived experience of facing digital barriers, including older people, disabled people, people with long-term health conditions, and people on low income
- **12 staff and volunteers** providing digital inclusion and other support.

### To understand organisational perspectives:

We engaged organisations from the National Digital Inclusion Network and Sport England's network in a range of activities, to explore their understanding of digital barriers to physical activity, and to identify examples of good practice for addressing these barriers.

#### Online focus groups

- Three group discussions
- 14 organisations represented



#### Call for evidence

- Structured call for evidence of action to address barriers
- Seven submissions of evidence



#### Interviews

- Three interviews with organisations taking action to address barriers



# 3. Experiences of navigating digital on the journey to being physically active

Through our research with people with lived experience of digital barriers, we learned of the range of different ways in which digital intersects and shapes the opportunities people have to be more physically active. Here we highlight the stories of four people we spoke to, who received support from different community organisations around the country.

Their stories illustrate the lived reality of digital barriers to sport and physical activity, and highlight particular challenges faced by older people, disabled people, people with long-term health conditions and people on low income.

## Ann's story - Feels digital 'isn't for her' but wants to stay active and connected



**Ann, 91**, has never used the internet and describes herself as having been left behind by the digital world. She lives with long-term health conditions, mobility problems and hearing impairment, and her husband is her carer. Ann's son gave her his old mobile phone a few years ago when he upgraded, but she says "I can't use it for toffee" and carries it only for emergencies. She feels that digital is "not for her" and is fearful of online scams, after a friend lost money online.

Up until the pandemic, Ann attended a community fitness class at a local venue, which she loved. The session never restarted and since then Ann has struggled to stay active. A few months ago, Ann met with a social prescriber who encouraged her to try a social group coordinated by the hub. She initially felt hesitant about attending, but now says "I really really enjoy it". She describes the group as uplifting and says it brings back a sense of how she used to feel.

Recently, the hub started offering gentle exercise sessions alongside its social groups. Ann was keen to take part but first needed a form signed by her GP. This proved frustrating, as the surgery advised her to send in the form by email, something she was not able to do. She eventually took the form to the surgery in person, but it took a month to be signed off, meaning she couldn't participate. Ann felt if she emailed the surgery, the GP would have approved the form more quickly and she would have been able to join the exercise sessions.

Now that she feels comfortable attending the groups hosted by the hub, Ann is considering learning digital skills for the first time. When she heard that the hub would soon be running a basic digital skills session, she agreed to come along, saying, "I'll give it a go". With trusted support from the hub, she is open to building her digital skills if it means she can access services more quickly in future.

## Ewa's story - Loves being active and trying new sports but struggles with language and confidence online



**Ewa, 33**, migrated to the UK from an Eastern European country. She has limited English and a low income, and she uses the internet mainly for translation to help with communication. She is cautious about using digital tools because of things she has heard, including about scams. She relies on family if she needs to get online: "I worry about doing things online, you hear many stories."

Ewa attends different sessions at the hub, where she practises English and builds connections. Through people she has met there, she hears about other local opportunities for physical activity and social events that others plan to attend.

Ewa enjoys being active and keeps a regular routine of yoga, karate, kickboxing and swimming each week. She prefers to turn up and pay in cash rather than book ahead, and she does not use apps or online booking systems. Managing costs is important to her, and she described how quickly expenses can add up. When activities require online forms or payments, she

relies on her young son and on friends from these groups to book things for her, as she says: "If it is online, I have to ask someone to help me. I don't feel confident doing this myself." When a local gym membership offer was promoted at the hub, she and others were interested until they learned registration was online only, so she did not take it up.

At the hub, staff and volunteers are encouraging Ewa to give digital a try, as she builds her confidence with English and living in the UK. The hub can also provide free mobile data connectivity, through the National Databank Initiative.

## Amina's story - Feels fairly digitally confident but finds booking exercise sessions online frustrating, and prefers in-person activities online



**Amina, 27**, has three young children and comes from a south Asian Muslim background. English is not her first language, though she speaks it well. Childcare pressures and distractions at home make it difficult for her to be active in the way she would like: "There is always distraction at home... especially with the kids."

Amina found the women-only exercise class at the hub after seeing posters at her GP practice. The class feels comfortable for her because there are no men present, and she enjoys the support of the group. She explained that being at the class helps her stay focused and gives her rare time for herself. She values the instructor's style and the way she remembers people's individual needs, which helps Amina feel supported. Cost is also a factor in what she can attend, and she appreciates that the hub class is free.

Amina is supported to access free mobile data through the National Databank, provided by the hub, and

uses her smartphone to find out about local activities through social media and friends. She uses online booking when she needs to, but prefers in-person exercise sessions for motivation and wellbeing. She described trying online exercise classes and videos, but found it difficult to follow on a small phone screen, and she can't afford to buy another digital device.

Digital tools help her discover activities, but booking systems can be difficult to manage. She is often frustrated when trying to book online for swimming for herself and her children, as the slots fill very quickly: "By the time we get in the slots have already been taken by other people." Because she is not always confident about where to look for other opportunities, Amina worries she may miss out on other activities happening locally.

## **Marcia's story** – Feels confident using digital tools for being active and managing her health, but worries about reliability of information online



**Marcia, 44**, is from a Black Caribbean background. She lives with multiple long-term health conditions, including diabetes and arthritis. She is on a low income and receives support from a carer. Her faith, family and children are central to her life.

Marcia enjoys attending sessions at the hub, including crochet groups, informal advice that supports her diabetes management and exercise classes. She says these sessions help her feel less isolated: “Staff at the hub always get me out of the house... otherwise I’ll be in my bed being depressed.” Being with others motivates her and helps her push herself further than she manages alone.

Marcia uses her smartphone every day and is confident in navigating digital tools. She goes online to check NHS services, shop, travel and stay connected. Following support from the hub, she now uses a step-tracker app on her phone to increase her daily movement, and sometimes uses YouTube for gentle yoga and stretching

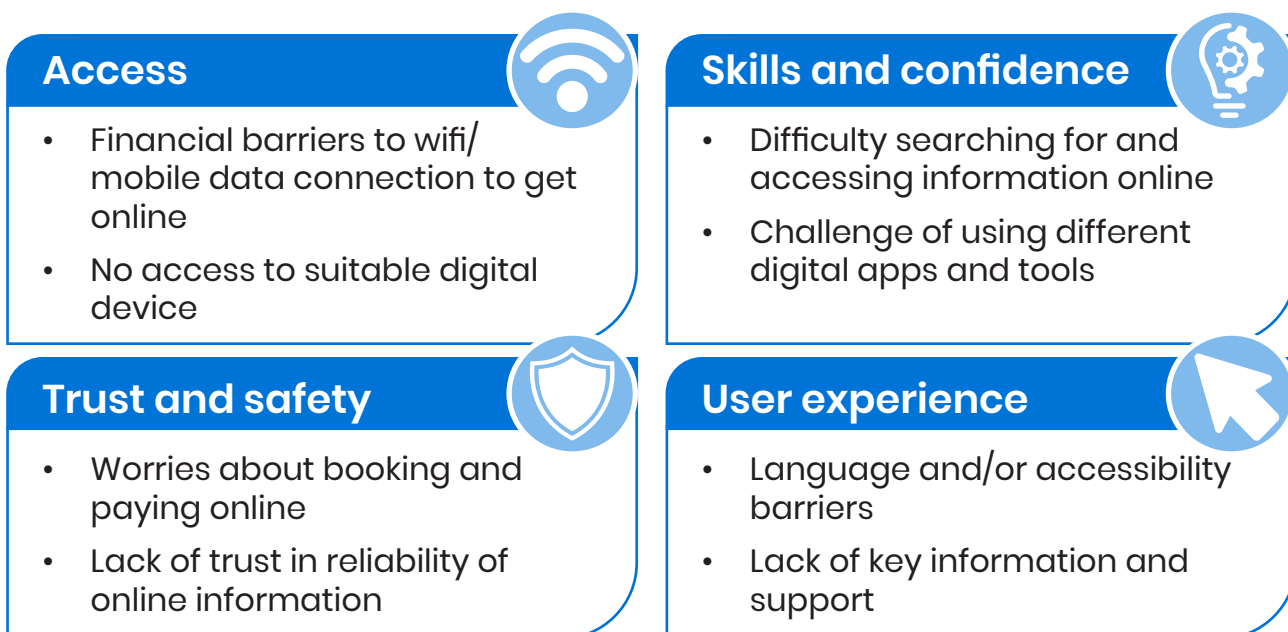
videos. These digital tools help Marcia stay active between in-person sessions, especially on days when her symptoms make it hard to attend the hub.

Marcia goes online to look up diet and exercise information related to her conditions and cultural background, partly because she doesn’t always get the guidance she needs from healthcare staff: “I need to go online... because we are ethnic minorities, so our diets are different.” However, she often feels overwhelmed trying to assess what information online is reliable. She sometimes uses AI tools to get ideas for exercise that is suitable for her conditions, but worries about whether she is using the right prompts, and getting ‘fake’ information. Guidance from staff at the hub is helping her feel more confident in this process.

# 4. Understanding and addressing digital barriers to sport and physical activity

The insights from the research have indicated four main types of digital barriers that shape people's engagement with and access to opportunities for physical activity, as illustrated in the stories above.

## Four key digital barriers



## Recommended actions to address barriers

The insights from the research also indicate effective ways to address and reduce these digital barriers. We propose four key areas of recommendation for addressing digital barriers and increasing participation in sport and physical activity:

1. Build understanding of the range of digital barriers faced by the populations you want to support to be more active
2. Provide local support for digital connectivity, devices and skills
3. Make it easier for people to navigate and use online sport and physical activity platforms
4. Build partnerships for place-based support around digital and physical activity.

## Recommendation 1: Build understanding of the range of digital barriers faced by the populations you want to support to be more active

Digital barriers to sport and physical activity are varied and fluid; being digitally excluded is not a fixed state and some barriers will be experienced more by certain demographic groups than others. It is important to understand the nature and extent of digital barriers experienced by existing and potential participants of a sport or physical activity, to identify strategies to reduce barriers and increase accessibility of opportunities for all.

### What the research tells us

#### Digital access barriers can affect all parts of the journey to being active

People on low income may not be able to afford reliable wifi or mobile data connection, or to purchase devices that are suitable for their needs. This will restrict their ability to find information about local opportunities for physical activity, book or pay online or use digital tools or platforms for being active.

*“She just said she would like to [use a step tracker app] but she doesn’t have a smartphone”*

Participant, Hub-04

Some people described having a basic (non-smart) phone, without capacity to connect to the internet, having a device that is in need of repair, or having a device that is incompatible with modern operating systems.

Reliance on free wifi means that people may only be able to access information and platforms online in public spaces, such as a community centre or library, which may not be suitable for participating in activities such as an online fitness class. Poor quality internet connection can also add to frustrations when trying to use online services or book physical activity sessions, particularly when in-person booking opportunities have been removed:

*“It’s very terrible because you sometimes... [want to] have a place [for swimming]; you can’t come in and [do] booking, you can’t just write on paper, why? And the internet sometimes not working very well, very long waiting”*

Participant, Hub-02

#### Lack of digital skills and confidence affect participation

Lack of basic digital skills will limit people’s capacity and confidence to use digital tools to find out about or access opportunities for physical activity. As illustrated in **Ann’s story**, some people, particularly older people, may not be able to do basic online tasks

such as sending an email or creating an account on a platform. Some people may have basic skills, but lack confidence in their abilities, meaning they are reluctant to use digital tools such as scanning a QR code or completing an online form to register for sessions. Language and literacy barriers can make this more challenging:

***"Literacy skills would be a big [barrier], in completing forms and reading"***

Staff member, community organisation

## Trust and safety are barriers to using online platforms

Many groups of people may have concerns about their ability to stay safe online. Direct experience of being scammed, or hearing the experiences of friends and family, shapes individuals' confidence to engage with online platforms:

***"My friend got scammed... they took £1000"***

Participant, Hub-01

Lack of trust around doing financial transactions online is a key part of this, and reflects perceptions of the risk of potentially losing money as being too great for people on low income. Participants talked about their fears of 'getting it wrong' when paying for something online, meaning they are reluctant to do this without support from others:

***"I'm just not confident enough with buying tickets or buying certain things online"***

Participant, Hub-04

Language barriers and difficulties understanding complex systems can also contribute to lack of trust to input personal or financial information, as illustrated in **Ewa's story** above. Others may have concerns about how their personal information is stored and shared from online platforms. People who are in vulnerable situations, such as asylum seekers, or who have experiences of discrimination may have particular mistrust of data sharing which can affect their confidence to use digital platforms and services:

***"Sometime you think oh my information is going to be stored online so I'm scared [of] Home Office or everything"***

Volunteer, Hub-05

These factors will limit people's willingness to engage with digital platforms, and they risk being excluded from sport and physical activity without support or without non-digital options for booking or paying.

## Lack of understanding of digital barriers leads to poor design for users and staff / volunteers

Some sport and physical activity organisations may not have a good understanding of the digital barriers experienced by the people they seek to engage, or understand the extent to which digital may exclude groups from their activities:

*"I do have my smartphone, I do have my laptop, so I feel like I'm not best placed to say how high [digital] would be as a barrier... but it would be a really interesting thing for us to survey our membership on"*

Regional volunteer for national sport organisation

There may also be a lack of understanding by national sport organisations that volunteers who are crucial for coordinating local sports teams and activities can struggle with digital processes. A volunteer from a regional amateur sport league described the challenges faced by some people who manage local teams in keeping up with digital communications, training and governance requirements from the national association:

*"These clubs... can't actually access or don't know how to access a Teams meeting, don't understand how it works"*

Volunteer, regional sport organisation

This can require lots of support and guidance from the regional volunteers to help local teams fulfil their obligations online.

## Examples in action

Here are examples of how to build understanding of the range of digital barriers faced by customers and population groups, to inform service and support delivery:

### Collecting insights on the range of barriers to being active, including digital

Organisations have incorporated questions about digital tools, experiences and access into wider customer insight research to help identify areas of need:

- **Kirklees Council** commissioned research in 2025 among its residents, in response to data indicating comparatively low levels of physical activity (Bright Sparks for Kirklees Council, 2025). Using online and paper surveys, and community discussions, it collected data on the range of barriers to being active, including difficulties with online booking and challenges accessing information online, as well as cost and lack of suitable facilities.

Asking questions about digital access, skills and confidence at the outset of a sport or physical activity programme, as a way of identifying any additional support that might be needed:

- **SPORTAINMENT**, a charity promoting wellbeing among young people experiencing poverty, disability and/or long-term health conditions, collects data on digital skills and access at registration to its programmes. It uses this data to help find solutions to the barriers individuals face, and also uses it as part of monitoring and evaluation of the impact of programmes.

Building questions on digital barriers into population surveys to help identify how and which digital barriers are experienced by different groups of people. This information can be used to push for improvements to access to sport and physical activity opportunities:

- **Active Together**, an Active Partnership supporting access to sport and physical activity across Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland, have collected data through their Physical Activity and Wellbeing Residents' Survey on residents' preferences for accessing information about physical activity in the region (digital/non-digital).
- **Activity Alliance**, a national charity supporting disabled people in sport and physical activity, runs the Annual Disability and Physical Activity Survey (Activity Alliance, 2024), completed by disabled and non-disabled adults aged 16+. The survey collects data on preferences for how and where to be active, including use of digital tools for activity in the home; accessing information about physical activity; and the kinds of support needed to be more active (including digital/online tools). The insights inform training and advocacy for making physical activity more accessible.

## Further steps for implementation

- **Develop guidance** to help sport and physical activity organisations to embed questions about digital barriers into regular data collection/customer insight activities, plus collect data on digital barriers experienced by volunteers and the workforce.
- **As part of the above, promote the use** of the [Indicators of Digital Inclusion](#), a simple, consistent set of three questions designed to capture i) level of online activity; ii) barriers to being online (device, connectivity, skills, confidence, support); and iii) vulnerabilities experienced (not knowing how to access support, concerns about safety online, financial situation). These questions can be embedded into surveys to measure digital barriers at the population level, and into registration or triaging processes to identify digital barriers faced by individuals.
- **Raise awareness and expectations** that data on digital barriers should be collected routinely alongside demographic and other information when registering people for sport/physical activity opportunities, and for monitoring and evaluating the reach and impact of sport/physical activity programmes or services.
- **Incorporate assessment of digital exclusion and digital barriers** into equality impact assessments for the design or commissioning of physical activity services. This can help ensure that services are designed to be digitally inclusive from the start.



## Recommendation 2: Provide local support for digital connectivity, devices and skills

To enable people to feel more confident to engage with digital tools and platforms for being active, support is usually most effectively delivered in local, trusted spaces.

### What the research tells us

#### People facing digital barriers may also need support with other barriers to being active

Digital barriers are unlikely to be the only reason people struggle to participate in sport and physical activity. Being able to go to one place to access a range of types of support, tailored to their individual needs, can help build confidence and capacity to be more active. For example, people on low income or with long-term health conditions may need support across a range of areas, including digital, financial and health, to enable them to participate in sport and other activities:

***"The amount of things [hub staff member] has done for us whether it's getting the SIM cards, bus passes, food, exercise, help with our diets, people coming in to talk. It's been endless"***

Staff member, Hub-04

Particularly for people facing social isolation, language barriers and / or other challenges in accessing services, having a single trusted space where they know they can be supported with different needs can increase their capacity to be active.

People with health conditions and / or who are disabled might feel they lack knowledge and confidence to do physical activity in the 'right' way for their needs without instruction, and therefore be reluctant to use digital exercise tools alone. Staff at one hub talked about some of their clients who were asked to use digital tools for exercise prescribed by health professionals, but lacked confidence to do this without support:

***"Women have brought me their apps, these little apps or videos from their physiotherapist and said, 'Can you help me with these exercises?'"***

Staff member, Hub-03

Also, due to financial or other reasons, some people may be unable to pay online for activities, if they do not have access to a debit or credit card. In one focus group, a participant described how staff and volunteers find ways to support people to participate when they cannot pay online, but put themselves in a potentially difficult position by paying on their behalf:

***"They'll give [the volunteers] the cash and then the volunteer will use their card so they can pay online"***

Staff member, regional physical activity organisation

## The social element is an enabler

In the face of these multiple barriers, the research indicates that having access to trusted, social support can be a great facilitator for building motivation and capability to be active, and people value the opportunity to build social connections around exercise:

*"Because it was a woman-only group and everyone's around in the local area so it is a good way to connect and socialise"*

Participant, Hub-03

For people facing additional challenges to being active, such as physical or mental health conditions, or social isolation, motivation to participate in sport or physical activity can be low, especially when suffering pain, fatigue or low mood. As **Marcia's story** shows, there can be great value in attending group sessions in-person. The social connections provide support and encouragement, helping people feel more able to participate in exercise, and are something they feel would not be possible via digital platforms.

*"That's the motivation we're talking about. So when you're in a group or you have your friends and it just makes such a huge difference"*

Participant, Hub-04

## Local organisations are trusted sources of information about physical activity opportunities

Familiar social networks, such as staff or volunteers at community organisations, may be preferable routes for accessing information about local activities, particularly for those with lower digital skills and confidence. Staff at one hub described accompanying people to local sports and leisure facilities, to build their confidence in accessing these spaces.

*"If you can go with people and say, 'Do you know what? This is a welcoming space. You've got equal right to access this service, this sport, whatever', then it opens those doors for people"*

Staff member, Hub-02

This means that people facing digital barriers may not trust or engage with information about opportunities for sport and physical activity that is only available online.

For communities that are particularly vulnerable, there may be additional safety concerns around engaging with information online about local opportunities. Staff at a hub supporting migrants and refugees talked of their concerns about using social media to share local activities suitable for the communities they support. They described hostility and anti-immigration sentiments in the local area, much of which is expressed on social media platforms. This means staff are very cautious about how they share information with migrant and refugee communities to minimise risk of harms to these groups:

*"[We have to be] really careful with how we engage with [Facebook] as an organisation... as we couldn't trust who was going to see it"*

Staff member, Hub-02

## Examples in action

Here are examples of how capability and confidence to engage with digital, enabling access to physical activity, can be built through digital inclusion support in trusted community spaces:

### Providing access to digital connectivity and devices, via existing initiatives

By joining the [National Digital Inclusion Network](#), organisations can access a range of resources for providing digital inclusion support to their clients, including free mobile data and refurbished devices:

- There are **over 4,000 organisations** who are members of the [National Databank](#), receiving free mobile data packages to pass on to people facing digital connectivity barriers. A staff member in one of the focus groups described providing a free data SIM to a client so she could connect to YouTube and follow dance videos to keep active at home.
- [Nearly 700 organisations](#) have received refurbished digital devices through the National Device Bank initiative, to pass on to clients lacking a suitable device. Other organisations have engaged with local device recycling schemes.

### Embedding digital skills and confidence support into service provision

While some organisations deliver formal digital skills training programmes, others embed more informal support around their other services (including sport and other activities), such as digital drop-in sessions or support from 'digital champions':

- **MAL Centre**, a community organisation in Leicester, provides in-person support with navigating online booking platforms for exercise, training on digital safety, and a digital buddy initiative for building confidence online.
- **Empowerment for Heya**, a community organisation in Nottingham, has embedded more formal and informal digital support across its delivery, to facilitate the participation of women in physical and social activities. This is described in the case study below.

### Fostering trusted social connections carefully through digital

Some organisations are using closed WhatsApp groups (or similar digital messaging tools) to help share information safely about physical activity opportunities, while helping build social connections and digital confidence:

- Staff at Hub-02 and Hub-05 talked of the importance of closed Whatsapp groups for sharing information and fostering social support among vulnerable groups, to encourage them to be more confident in taking up opportunities.

**Case study:** Supporting digital access around opportunities to be active



# Empowerment for Heya, Nottingham

Empowerment for Heya ('Heya') is a community organisation based in Nottingham and dedicated to empowering and connecting Arab (and other) women. Heya was established in 2019 to help address social isolation, and provides support to women to build confidence, navigate life in the UK, and participate in social, sport and other activities.

Through the provision of support, the organisation has recognised the critical link between digital access and social participation, and has recently joined the National Digital Inclusion Network. With support from the local authority, Heya has delivered digital skills training for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, with provision of a tablet or laptop to those lacking access to a digital device. It has collaborated with other organisations to provide access to free mobile data SIMs through the National Databank, to people on low income or living in temporary accommodation. Heya has also trained women to become volunteer 'digital champions', and to provide informal support to others around accessing key online services.

Helping women access opportunities to participate in different sports and physical activity is a key part of Heya's social inclusion work, with funding, for example, from This Girl Can and Sport England. It has offered

sessions including walking, cycling, swimming, hiking trips, and Zumba, driven by the women's desire to stay healthy and engage socially. Staff and digital champion volunteers work to address different barriers faced by the women to being active, including digital barriers. Offering free mobile SIMs and helping build confidence to use WhatsApp groups helps women have access to information about sport sessions, and to build social connections and motivation. They also provide help with using online platforms for booking onto sessions, for example, for a recent cycling programme with RideWise.

Heya's director recently won a Nottingham 'This Girl Can' award for fostering physical activity in this community, but she highlights the barriers they face in continuing to support women's digital access and participation in sport. There is a lack of devices available to give to women without their own, and it is difficult to resource the extra staff time needed to support digital skills and access, both necessary for helping women participate fully in sport activities.

## Further steps for implementation

- **Ensure that funding for sports programmes and activities** includes sufficient resourcing for the wrap-around digital and social support often required to help people feel confident and able to engage in physical activity
- **Raise awareness among sports organisations of the role they can play** in embedding digital inclusion support alongside their services, and create guidance that signposts these organisations to existing initiatives and resources for digital inclusion support (such as through the [National Digital Inclusion Network](#))
- **Encourage organisations across the sport and physical activity sector** to identify ways they can support existing digital inclusion infrastructure at local and regional levels; for example, by donating old tech to device refurbishment schemes and building partnerships with local organisations providing digital inclusion support (see Recommendation 4 for more detail on partnerships).



## Recommendation 3: Make it easier for people to navigate and use online sport and physical activity platforms

How people experience digital platforms and tools for accessing information about sport and physical activity, or for engaging in activities, will shape their level of motivation to participate in the activities. For people who face digital barriers, it may be more difficult for them to engage effectively with these platforms, if they are not designed inclusively.

### What the research tells us

#### Poor user experience of digital platforms will put off people with low digital skills or confidence

Many people in our research described frustrating experiences with digital platforms for sport and physical activity, regardless of their level of digital skill. For those people with lower digital skills and confidence, poor experiences of trying to use these platforms to find information or book an activity can mean they are put off from trying again. A staff member at one hub described a negative experience when a local gym made an offer to the people they were supporting who were on low income, and some lacked confidence online:

***"When you go through the link [for the gym pass], it just drops out. So, you kind of think, 'Yeah'. So, is it really a 7-day free pass or is there an IT glitch behind it? And you kind of do that once or twice and you've lost the confidence in it"***

Staff member, Hub-02

The number of different apps and platforms that someone might need to engage with along the journey to being active, plus the variety in their design and user experience, can be off-putting and even excluding. It may be particularly overwhelming for people with lower digital skills or confidence to navigate effectively across different platforms, especially if they are seeking access to opportunities for family members as well as themselves. There are also concerns about the difficulty of maintaining safe practices across multiple platforms, such as managing passwords securely across different sites, for people who have lower digital skills or worry about online safety.

Some sports and activities may require additional administration or processes for people to participate, such as completing health and safety or waiver forms to participate in higher-risk activities like climbing. If these are all online processes, this could be an additional barrier for people who struggle doing online tasks, unless additional support is provided.

Further, the types of images used on digital platforms can be inadvertently excluding if they are not representative of the communities that might be looking to participate:

***“If you don't see yourself in campaigns, you don't feel yourself going to be active”***

Staff member, national physical activity inclusion organisation

As identified in recent research from This Girl Can (2025), images that are publicly available online of sport and physical activity are not proportionately representative of women, especially women of colour (appeared in only 1.5% of images) or disabled women (women with visible disabilities appeared in only 0.16% of images).

### **Not knowing where to find information or how to act on it are barriers to being active**

For people with lower digital skills, lack of connectivity or facing other literacy, language or accessibility barriers, it can be difficult to find and navigate the right information online about opportunities for being active. The amount of information available can be overwhelming and off-putting for some:

***“If you go on Google or anywhere and search a topic they give you millions of links... you lose patience on it”***

Participant, Hub-05

Others may find it very difficult to navigate information online about what is available locally. Some people find it hard to know where to look to get information about sessions that are suitable for their health or cultural needs, or, for people on a low income, to find free or affordable activities. This can be especially difficult for those who are new to an area or to systems in the UK, such as refugees or asylum seekers or those with language or literacy barriers.

***“I think it's really difficult to find what's available in your local area”***

Participant, Hub-03

Even those who are more comfortable navigating online information can find it challenging to use online booking systems for accessing sport or physical activity. As **Amina's story** shows, it can be difficult to coordinate with the timing of when slots are made available to book online.

### **It can be hard to find relevant information online about accessing opportunities**

Poor communication experience and lack of availability of relevant information on digital platforms for sport and physical activity organisations can also lead to frustrating user experiences, and mean that some people are not able or confident to take up opportunities.

Websites may not provide sufficient detailed information about accessibility of venues or equipment, meaning it is difficult for people with long-term health conditions, who are disabled or who have particular cultural requirements to assess if an opportunity is suitable for them:

*“Websites never really have the right information that I need as a wheelchair user, but I’m sure that applies to a lot of people”*

Staff member, national physical activity inclusion organisation

This can be exacerbated by poor experiences of trying to contact organisations digitally to ask for more information. Frustrations can arise from organisations not responding effectively (or at all) to queries via website contact forms, online chat functions or social media, and/or not providing non-digital channels for contact, e.g. by phone.

## Examples in action

Here are examples of how organisations are supporting people to find information online about opportunities for sport and physical activity, providing non-digital pathways for being active and considering the needs of people with low digital skills in relation to digital platforms:

### Helping people find and navigate existing information online

Some organisations are doing this as part of wider support to build digital skills and confidence, as illustrated in Empowerment for Heya’s case study above. Other models for bringing together information online about different sport and physical activity opportunities include:

- The [OpenActive model](#), supporting providers to publish standardised data on their opportunities, and making it easier for people to search and find and book these opportunities online.
- More informal methods of compiling information on opportunities, such as those described by an organisation in one focus group. They are working with local university students to map free activities available across the city, to make it easier for the people they support to find suitable activities.

**Maintaining multiple channels (digital and non-digital) for sharing information and for booking/paying for sessions** is important for accommodating different customer preferences and needs. Some organisations also provide offline support to help customers or volunteers use digital platforms or seek additional information about opportunities:

- **Your Trust**, a leisure services provider in Rochdale, supports access to physical activity and leisure opportunities by offering a voucher scheme for attending sessions for people who are not comfortable or able to book online; providing telephone support for booking online; and providing sessions that do not require pre-booking online.
- An organisation that participated in a focus group has created step-by-step guidance on how to access an online training portal for volunteers managing local amateur sports teams.

**Assessing the accessibility and user experience** of digital platforms and digital communications for sport and physical activity, and taking actions to improve them helps ensure inclusive design:

- **Activity Alliance** produces a range of guidance on ensuring the accessibility of digital communications across the sport sector; advocates for ‘accessibility audits’ of digital platforms; and delivers training to improve understanding and implementation of good practice for digital communications.
- **Active Black Country**, an Active Partnership, identified a lack of engagement with their online activity wayfinder platform, and digital skills barriers faced across their local population. The case study below describes the actions they are taking to increase engagement with the platform and uptake of physical activity opportunities.



**Case study:** Developing a digital inclusion strategy to address digital skills barriers to physical activity



# Active Black Country

Active Black Country (ABC) is a charity working to increase physical activity across Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton in the West Midlands, taking a place-based approach to reducing inequalities in access to and engagement with physical activity. As one of Sport England's 43 Active Partnerships, ABC acknowledges the higher levels of inactivity among its residents: 34.5% of adults in the region are inactive, compared to 25.1% nationally.

As part of the legacy of the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games, ABC developed an online wayfinding platform - [Black Country Moving](#) - to help residents find local opportunities for physical activity. The platform enables local community organisations to upload information about their activities, alongside services and opportunities provided by local authority partners.

Early insights from user engagement data, combined with feedback from community organisations and partners, highlighted digital confidence and skills barriers affecting how residents and providers engage with the online platform and uptake of physical activity opportunities. This insight builds on wider data showing levels of digital exclusion across the West Midlands.

Consequently, ABC committed to addressing the link between digital exclusion and reduced engagement with physical activity, using the Black Country Moving platform as a core enabler. Additional funding was secured from Sport England via the

West Midlands Combined Authority, to build organisational capacity to respond to these digital barriers. ABC has since appointed a digital inclusion manager, and two community engagement officers, and is developing its first physical activity digital inclusion strategy and programme to guide this work, with a broader focus on building digital confidence and skills across communities and delivery partners.

ABC will do this through:

- **Building partnerships and collaboration:** ABC has started mapping and connecting with local organisations who provide digital skills support, drawing on regional and national networks, such as the National Digital Inclusion Network. These connections will facilitate signposting to support and promotion of the Black Country Moving platform.
- **Developing data and insights:** ABC is working with local communities to better understand the challenges residents face in relation to both digital inclusion and physical activity. This insight will inform approaches to improving access to existing digital skills provision and guide ongoing enhancements to the activity finder platform to improve usability and accessibility.
- **Advocacy:** ABC hopes that its innovative approach to addressing digital barriers to physical activity has the potential to become a flagship model that others can learn from, helping bring lasting change beyond the Black Country area.

## Further steps for implementation

- **Commissioning and funding of sport and physical activity** should set expectations that services must deliver accessible information and platforms, suitable for people with low digital skills and other accessibility needs, and also maintain offline sources of support for accessing information and booking.
- **The use of accessibility audits, and other evaluations of user experience**, should be promoted to help organisations identify ways to make their digital platforms more inclusive, and ensure they meet the needs of their users, identified through robust data collection as outlined in Recommendation 1.
- **Adequate resourcing and guidance** should be made available by national sport associations to their members, to help them to build digital skills and confidence to engage safely with any required digital platforms, such as for training or governance.
- **Partnership working across sectors is needed** to help to join up and improve user experiences at all digital touchpoints on the journey to being active; for example, working with local transport stakeholders. More detail on partnership working is provided under Recommendation 4 below.



## Recommendation 4: Build partnerships for place-based support around digital and physical activity

The digital barriers described above are not unique to the sport and physical activity sector, but reflect the challenges that people face accessing a range of digital services. These intersections highlight opportunities for collaboration and partnership, to help people find support with digital barriers and improve participation in sport and other activities.

### What the research tells us

#### Health and social prescribing can be valuable pathways into digital support and being more active

Wanting to increase participation in sport and physical activity is not necessarily the primary reason why someone might seek help with overcoming digital barriers. As health services become increasingly digitised, and more people are being encouraged to use the NHS App to access care, this is a common route into digital inclusion support. Many community organisations may find themselves providing informal support to people to build digital skills to use the NHS App and other digital health services. There are existing resources for fostering trust and confidence in using digital health services (Good Things Foundation, 2025a), which could be applicable to digital platforms for sport and physical activity. Also, as people with long-term health conditions may be encouraged by health professionals to be more active to promote their health, this can create opportunities to help people use digital to be more active.

At one community organisation, staff described providing support to people to use digital health tools to promote their health and manage their conditions. Staff have embedded use of the NHS App into their digital skills training programme:

***“We have our own computer hub where we train people who have no clue on going on the NHS app... in September we graduated 47 [people]”***

Staff member, Hub-04

They also build on this skills development to encourage service users to use digital tools to be more active, as illustrated in **Marcia’s story**, and her use of a step tracker app to motivate her daily physical activity, as part of managing physical and mental health conditions.

As shown in **Ann’s story**, social prescribing can also be a valuable pathway for people who face barriers to being active to access support and new opportunities. This can include being prescribed into social support to help people build confidence to try new activities. However, as **Ann’s story** also illustrates, without appropriate assessment of digital skills or access, people may face additional barriers if they are required, or expected, to complete administrative processes online for accessing support or opportunities.

## Sustainable partnerships with other organisations help access to holistic support

While not all organisations will be in a position to provide digital support to people, or be able to offer a range of sport or other activities, establishing connections with other organisations in the local area can enable signposting to support. One community organisation that provides digital skills support, advice and guidance and some activities for refugees and asylum seekers has also built a relationship with the local YMCA, meaning they can provide access to a wider range of sports facilities.

Another organisation talked about the importance of having long-standing, sustainable funding sources to be able to offer regular exercise sessions, as well as digital support. With funding from a local housing association, they have been able to provide exercise sessions for women at the same time each week for more than two years. It is this consistency that they feel is important for women to build the trust and confidence to be able to attend, especially for those who are more vulnerable or socially isolated.

## Examples in action

Here are examples of how organisations are working in partnership to help address barriers to participation in sport and physical activity at a system level.

### Building place-based partnerships to support digital inclusion across sectors

Working together with local/combined authorities, or with local NHS and care systems, creates opportunities to tap into existing digital inclusion infrastructure and wider funding streams:

- **Sport for Confidence**, an organisation delivering access to sport and physical activity, is working with **Digital Essex** in a new project funded by the Department of Science, Innovation and Technology (Sport for Confidence, 2026). The project is using a Digital Help Finder tool and community-based digital skills training across multiple areas to increase skills and confidence to engage with key digital services. For Sport for Confidence, this builds on its existing model of supporting people to build capabilities to be more active.
- Researchers from a team led by **University of Stirling** have worked in partnership with local and national government organisations to support the rollout and evaluation of digital tools for promoting physical activity among older people in care homes in Scotland (Ofosu et al, 2023). This includes providing staff training, technical support and connectivity improvement to support engagement with digital platforms and technologies for activity, with positive impacts on staff capability and social dimensions of wellbeing.

## Further steps for implementation

- **Sport and physical activity organisations** should build capacity to establish connections and place-based partnerships, to facilitate signposting to existing digital inclusion support, and embed digital inclusion support into their own delivery where possible.
- **Collaboration across sectors is needed** at national and regional levels, to capitalise for partnership and place-based working to support digital inclusion across health, social and sport. Existing models of partnership building may be useful for guiding this work, for example, Good Things Foundation's maturity model on partnership working for digital inclusion (2025b).
- **Examples of best practice of place-based, partnership working** should be shared across sectors to foster connections between sport and physical activity, and other services and organisations, to embed digital inclusion support across local systems.



# 5. Reflections and conclusions

## 5.1. Summary of findings

In an ever-increasingly digital world, it is vital we ensure that those who face digital barriers are not left behind, and can access all the opportunities facilitated by the online world, including access to sport and physical activities.

The findings from this research strengthens existing understanding of the intersection between digital inclusion and physical activity (Sport England & Good Things Foundation, 2025), highlighting:

- That the journey to being more active is **increasingly being shaped** by digital access and online experiences
- The **range of different challenges** people can face in engaging with digital platforms and tools
- How groups who **already face inequalities** in opportunities to be physically active can face additional barriers because of digital exclusion
- That **trusted support** can help reduce these barriers and improve access to physical activity by providing digital access, skills and confidence, more inclusive and accessible design of online platforms, and increased partnership working
- That with the **relevant support**, digital tools can enable people to participate in physical activity; for example, people using step-tracker apps to motivate them to be more active as part of managing their health.

The findings also add more to the existing picture, in particular that:

- **Trust and safety online are key factors.** This relates to levels of i) confidence to use digital platforms to book and pay for physical activity opportunities; and ii) trust in the online sources of information about local exercise opportunities, with some groups preferring to access information through trusted word-of-mouth sources. This is echoed by insight from the most recent Activity Check-in survey by Sport England (2026), which shows that for two thirds of people (66%), feeling safe when using digital tools is important to them
- **User experience of digital platforms shapes uptake of opportunities.** This relates to i) the presence or absence of key information on digital platforms to help people decide if opportunities meet their needs; and ii) availability and effectiveness of further support around using digital platforms, e.g. digital and non-digital communication channels.

## 5.2. Gaps in awareness and understanding

Through conducting this research, we have also identified gaps in awareness and understanding across the sector of the issue of digital exclusion in relation to participation in sport and physical activity:

- The **limited response to the call for evidence** may be due, in part, to a lack of understanding of the issue among sport and physical activity organisations, or a lack of recognition of the issue as a priority, as well as, possibly, due to the timing of the call. The absence of responses to the call for evidence from national-level sports associations suggests a particular need at this level for efforts to raise awareness and drive action to address digital barriers.
- There seems to be a **lack of models of good practice** focusing on **addressing trust and safety barriers** to using digital tools for being active, beyond the examples in this research of community-based organisations providing digital skills/confidence support and wider social support. There may well be some other activity happening around this issue, but we have not been able to identify it.
- We found few examples of **place-based partnership working** between digital health services, digital capability and physical activity, although through the research we saw some evidence of how community organisations are providing support around this at the local level. There are conversations happening in this space, but few concrete examples yet of best practice are available to share.



### 5.3. Recommended actions for the sector

Through dissemination of the findings of this research, we can continue to raise awareness across the sector of the issue of digital exclusion in relation to sport and physical activity. We can help build a shared understanding of the range of digital barriers different groups face on the journey to being active, and examples of good practice to address them. To take further action on this issue, we can:



Continue to **build awareness** across the sector of digital inclusion, highlighting the impact of digital exclusion on participation in sport and physical activity, and the steps our partners can take to reduce digital barriers



Build **simple, consistent measures of digital in/exclusion** into our own data collection strategies, and provide guidance to organisations across the sector on doing the same across their own services, to build a more reliable picture of the issue. We have already started this work, having added the [Indicators of Digital Inclusion](#) into our most recent [Activity Check-in survey](#) (2026).



Explore ways to **measure the social value** of programmes or interventions to address digital barriers to participation in sport and physical activity, to create a compelling case to organisations across the sector to take action. FutureDotNow's (2025) work on how digital skills create social value is a useful starting point.



Work with partners to **set expectations across the sector for commissioning and funding** of sport and physical activity services that are digitally inclusive and provide resource for digital inclusion support around physical activity programmes.



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# Appendix – Further information on research sample

## User research

The five hubs that were recruited to host research visits to explore the lived experiences of people facing digital barriers in relation to sport and physical activity:

**Hub-01:** located in a town in the North West of England. A member of the National Digital Inclusion Network, and supporting people who are socially isolated and vulnerable, including older people, disabled people and people with long-term health conditions.

**Hub-02:** located in a town in the East of England. A member of the National Digital Inclusion Network, and providing a range of social support, advice and guidance to diverse communities, including migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

**Hub-03:** located in London. A member of the National Digital Inclusion Network, and providing a range of social and digital inclusion support services, with emphasis on creativity and arts-based approaches.

**Hub-04:** located in a city in the West Midlands. A member of the National Digital Inclusion Network and providing health promotion and social support for people with long-term health conditions.

**Hub-05:** located in a (different) city in the West Midlands. A member of the National Digital Inclusion Network and providing a

range of social support, training, advice and guidance to diverse communities, including migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

## Organisation focus groups

There were 15 participants representing 14 different organisations across the three online focus groups. The participating organisations included:

**Six organisations** who are members of the National Digital Inclusion Network (NDIN), including five community-level organisations and one national organisation.

**Five sport/physical activity organisations** recruited through Sport England's network, including two national sport organisations, one regional branch of a national sport organisation, one national organisation promoting access to sport, and one regional Active Partnership.

**Three organisations in both the NDIN and Sport England's network**, including one regional amateur sport association, one regional organisation supporting access to physical activity and one community organisation delivering physical activity and digital inclusion.

## Call for evidence and organisation interviews

Through the call for evidence we asked for examples of current practice in relation to the following areas:

1. Collecting data or other insights to understand digital barriers to sport/physical activity
2. Developing strategies/policies to address digital barriers to sport/physical activity
3. Planning or delivering projects, programmes or interventions to address digital barriers to sport/physical activity
4. Any other action to reduce digital barriers to sport/physical activity.

We received **seven** formal responses to the call for evidence, from:

- Your Trust (Rochdale)
- MAL Centre (Leicestershire)
- Active Together (Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland)
- SPORTAINMENT (national)
- Activity Alliance (national)
- Intelligent Health (national)
- University of Stirling and partners (national/international).

We also received suggestions of further examples of practice, including Digital Essex working with Sport for Confidence, British Blind Sport and Youth Sport Trust, though not all of these suggestions aligned with the focus of this research.

