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Zero Rating Report: When Data Decides Access

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digital poverty alliance

Zero Rating Report

Sections of the Report

Zero Rating Report

A Message from Our CEO

Access to essential services in the UK now depends, in many cases, on having data at the right moment. That is a quiet shift, but a significant one.

Healthcare appointments, school communications, welfare systems, and employment services increasingly assume that people can get online when they need to. For many households, that access is neither stable nor guaranteed. When data runs out, the impact is immediate. Appointments are missed. Forms go unfinished. Communication stops.

At the Digital Poverty Alliance (DPA), this is not an abstract problem. Our delivery work shows how often people manage these gaps on their own, rationing data, relying on public WiFi, or disengaging from services altogether. Those adjustments are rarely visible to institutions, but they shape outcomes nonetheless.

This report focuses on one part of that picture: data affordability, and the role it plays in determining whether essential services remain accessible in a digital by default system. It examines the growing reliance on mobile data, the consequences of instability at the point of access, and the ways in which current systems fail to account for that reality.

It also considers zero rating, not as a catch-all solution and not in isolation, but as a targeted mechanism that has already been used in moments of recognised necessity. The question explored here is not whether zero rating can solve digital poverty, but whether, and how, it might help prevent people from being locked out of essential services when data becomes a barrier.

The analysis draws on lived experience, stakeholder perspectives, and existing research. Taken together, they point to a structural issue rather than individual failure, and raise difficult questions about responsibility, governance, and how access should be protected when digital delivery becomes the default.

Elizabeth Anderson
Chief Executive Officer
Digital Poverty Alliance

Zero Rating Report

Why This Report Matters

Currently in the UK, at least 2 million households stand at risk of losing access to welfare, healthcare, or education simply because their data runs out, and around 5% of people cannot go online at all.
Evidence from this research shows that nearly one third (31%) of respondents rely primarily on mobile data for internet access. For these households, data availability keeps fluctuating, and in the digital by design system, data affordability directly determines whether healthcare, welfare, education, and employment services can be accessed when needed.

For years, the UK has used the concept of freephone numbers (0800, free to call numbers) to ensure that people were not deprived of essential services or support during crisis. Zero rating, that is providing certain online content without charging for data, is the digital equivalent of a freephone, based on the same principle of ensuring universal access to the essentials.

Zero rating has already been used in the UK in moments of recognised necessity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, mobile network operators removed data charges for NHS websites and selected public service platforms to maintain access to health information, care pathways, and official guidance. However, zero rating is not a silver bullet, nor is it as simple as it sounds. This report is an attempt to understand the landscape of digital poverty, its consequences, and whether, and through what mechanisms can zero rating help bridge the digital divide.

To answer this, the report draws on original survey evidence, stakeholder insights, and existing research to diagnose where digital access fails and why. For this purpose we conceptualise digital access as consisting of five layers:

1. **Foundational access:** Having access to a functioning device, network, and affordable data.
2. **Connection and safety:** The ability to have basic online communication, access information, navigation.
3. **Essential services:** Having access to services such as healthcare, education, employment, and core government services delivered online.
4. **Work and opportunity:** Being able to look for jobs online, pursue training, skills development and financial management.
5. **Participation and wellbeing:** Being able to have social connections, civic participation, and cultural engagement.

Instability at the foundational level of access disrupts each layer above it. When data is unaffordable or unreliable, people are pushed out of

essential services first, and then from work, opportunity, and civic participation over time.

Key findings of the study:

- People are forced to make trade-offs between data and basic needs.
- People absorb the cost of digital access in silence.
- Losing digital access often means heavy emotional toll on people.
- Low usage of essential services is misread as low relevance.
- People rely on public WiFi as a safety net, which is unsustainable as an alternative.
- Responsibility for maintaining access has shifted onto individuals.
- Essential services are not being treated as essential when they are being provided online.
- Existing targeting and eligibility mechanisms fail to capture real need.
- Public investment in connectivity is fragmented and insufficient.
- Responsibility for funding digital access remains unresolved.

These findings point to a structural problem of access. There is a clear gap between digital by default service delivery and the people that are meant to benefit from them. Zero rating is a potential policy response within this context. It removes data charges for defined services, reducing the extent to which data affordability determines access at the point of need. The the UK has already used zero rating in moments of recognised necessity, including during COVID-19 for NHS and selected public service platforms. The question is therefore less about whether zero rating is possible, and more about how it can be governed, bounded, and aligned with wider affordability measures.

Recommendations:

The report distinguishes between three types of digital access, based on their role in service delivery, and the consequences when access fails. The recommendations are set out accordingly, in order to keep the interventions focused and proportionate.

1. **Essential civic access:** Covering pathways needed to access healthcare, welfare, crisis support, education, and core government systems.

- Keep essential services that are already zero rated free to access.
- Clearly define which digital public services are essential.
- Mandate zero rating for defined essential digital public services.
- Pair zero rating with clear awareness and communication standards.

2. **Opportunity and stability:** This includes digital services that support longer-term outcomes, such as job search, skills and training, and financial management.

- Introduce a tiered cost-sharing model for high-bandwidth essential content.
- Use administratively workable proxies to target support.
- Recognise public WiFi as a stopgap, not a solution.
- Align zero rating with broader affordability measures.
- General Internet Use: This includes discretionary online activity.
- Maintain explicit non-intervention in general internet use.

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- Maintain explicit non-intervention in general internet use.

Zero Rating Report

Introduction

For most of history, access to help, care, and governments depended on crossing a physical threshold. People stood in line at a government office to claim support, visited a school to speak with a teacher, or went to a workplace to apply for a job. These thresholds were not always easy to cross; distance, cost, and exclusion shaped who could access them but they were tangible, which meant that the exclusion was visible and easily understood.

These physical thresholds shaped how public services were designed and delivered. They made barriers legible, and they allowed institutions to recognise when access was breaking down.

In the UK today, many of these thresholds have moved. Access to healthcare, welfare, education, housing, employment, and financial services increasingly takes place online. Booking a GP appointment, managing a Universal Credit claim, applying for work, accessing school communications, or even checking council notices now often requires a data connection, a device, and the ability to stay online long enough to complete the task. The threshold is no longer a door or a counter. It is a login screen.

This shift has brought real benefits. Digital services can be faster, more efficient, and more responsive. But they have also introduced a new fragility into everyday life. When access to essential services is mediated through the internet, the ability to cross the threshold depends not only on eligibility or need, but on whether someone can afford data at that moment. The consequences of this shift are not abstract. As one respondent described:

"I rely on speaking therapy for my ADHD and anxiety. If I'm unable to get online for my appointment, I miss a session, leaving me another week, if not more, sometimes without therapy, leading to me falling behind in my mental health and falling off track with everything I work on to try and get through my days."

As essential services move online, the continuity of access increasingly depends on conditions that sit outside the service itself, including the availability and affordability of data at the moment care is needed. In practice, this means that maintaining access has become, to a greater extent, the responsibility of the person seeking care.

For millions of people, the digital threshold is unstable. It can disappear without warning when data runs out. Millions of people in the UK live in "data poverty", unable to afford sufficient internet access at home. Ofcom reports that 5% of the population (around 2. 8 million people) have no internet access whatsoever.

Many more are mobile-only users because they cannot afford fixed broadband. In 2023, an estimated 2 million households struggled to pay for home broadband service. Many low-income households cannot afford sufficient internet data, creating a "data poverty" divide. For example, the poorest 10% of families spend nearly 19% of their disposable income on broadband (versus ~1. 3% for the average household), and an estimated 1, 2 million people are effectively unable to afford internet access. As one survey respondent put it:

"I couldn't look at the map on my phone when going to a hospital appointment, so I was late to it."

We take things like GPS powered maps, and checking the weather, or keeping in touch with friends as an everyday aspect of life; it's only when these accesses are taken away that we realise that the harm of digital poverty is often mundane, yet serious.

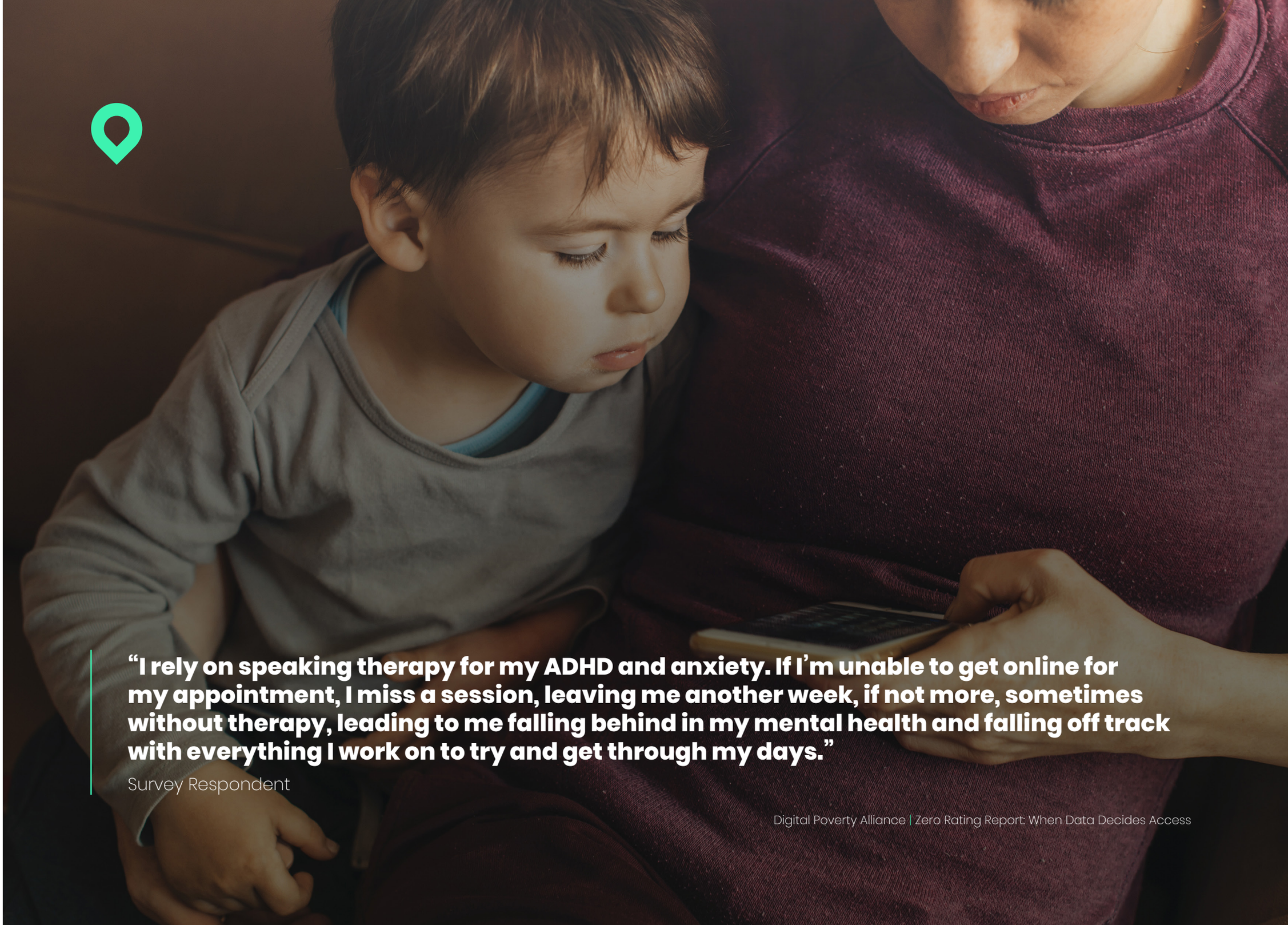
The same fragility shows up in education. Homework, communication with schools, and access to learning platforms increasingly depend on connectivity that is treated as "normal" and always available. Yet for many families, data is not a background utility; it is a rationed resource. One respondent described what "no data" means in practice:

"Not having data means my children can't access Google Classroom and that's where their school work is sent to."

This report is concerned with what happens when access to essential services depends on such a fragile threshold. In a digital by default system, affordable data has become a condition of basic functioning, and its absence produces exclusion that is largely invisible to institutions.

Crucially, this form of exclusion is not always clearly visible. It can often manifest as adjustments made at the individual level by way of low usage and limited engagement. From the perspective of service providers and network operators, this can look like indifference or lack of need. From the perspective of people living with data poverty, it reflects a system that no longer feels designed for them.

This report argues that responding to digital poverty requires recognising the internet as part of the access infrastructure for essential services. It diagnoses the problem as layered and systemic, drawing on lived experience, stakeholder insights, and existing research. It then examines the role of zero rating essential services as a policy tool; as a targeted intervention to keep the digital thresholds to healthcare, welfare, education, and other essentials open, regardless of fluctuations in someone's ability to pay for data.



“I rely on speaking therapy for my ADHD and anxiety. If I’m unable to get online for my appointment, I miss a session, leaving me another week, if not more, sometimes without therapy, leading to me falling behind in my mental health and falling off track with everything I work on to try and get through my days.”

Survey Respondent

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What is Zero Rating?

Put simply, zero rating is a practice in which access to specific online services does not count towards a user's data allowance. When a service is zero rated, people can use it without paying for the data required to access it, even if they have limited data or have run out altogether. Zero rating applies only to the designated services and does not make general internet use free.

The concept is similar to freephone telephone numbers (such as 0800 numbers). These numbers were introduced so that people could access essential services or support without the cost of the call acting as a barrier. Zero rating applies the same principle in a digital context: certain online services can be accessed without cost to the user, ensuring that affordability does not prevent access at the point it is needed.

How to read this report?

Answering the core question of this report requires looking beyond any single source of evidence. For this reason, the report adopts an integrated approach that brings together lived experience, stakeholder insight, and existing evidence, and examines how these interact within current systems of digital service delivery. The analysis draws on three primary inputs.

First, it is informed by a survey of individuals who self-identified as experiencing digital or data poverty. The survey captured both structured responses and free-text accounts, allowing insight into not only what people struggle with, but how those struggles are experienced and managed in everyday life.

The survey received 106 responses from individuals experiencing digital or data poverty.

- Respondents were drawn from across the UK, with participants based in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.
- The sample included a wide age range, with respondents under 18, working-age adults (25-44 and 45-64), and older respondents.
- Respondents represented diverse employment situations, including full-time and part-time employment, unemployment, students, carers, and people unable to work due to health or disability.

- While many respondents reported having some form of broadband access, a substantial proportion relied primarily on mobile data as their main means of getting online.

Second, the report draws on a multi-stakeholder policy roundtable involving representatives from civil society, telecommunications providers, regulators, and service delivery organisations. These discussions provided insight into how zero rating and data affordability are currently understood from an implementation perspective, including constraints, assumptions, and areas of disagreement. Importantly, they also brought to surface how demand for digital access is interpreted and sometimes misinterpreted within institutional and commercial settings.

Third, the analysis is grounded in existing UK and international literature on digital poverty, digital inclusion, and access to essential services. The report uses insights from the literature to contextualise and interrogate findings from the survey and roundtable.

To structure this analysis, the report treats digital access as part of the infrastructure through which essential services are reached. Building on the idea of digital access as a threshold, we distinguish between different layers of need - from foundational connectivity to access to specific essential services - and highlight where instability at lower levels disrupts participation higher up.

The diagnostic section that follows brings out the key patterns and tensions. Taken together, these diagnostics establish the case for why interventions such as zero rating essential services are a needed responses to a structural barrier that people face. They provide the foundation for the policy recommendations that follow.

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Understanding Digital Access as Layered Infrastructure

To make sense of how digital access fails in practice, this report describes digital access as layered rather than binary. People are often described as either connected or disconnected, but this distinction misses how access is actually experienced in a digital by default system. Access tends to fail first at the most basic level and then progressively affects other areas of life.

Digital access can be described in terms of five layers, distinguished by their function and importance in everyday life and in public systems.

Foundational access

The first layer is foundational connectivity - Basic Digital Access - things like access to a device, a network, and, crucially, sufficient and affordable data. This layer determines whether people can be online at all, and whether that access is reliable over time.

Connection and safety

This includes the ability to stay in touch with family and friends, receive news and alerts, access information, and maintain a sense of belonging and security. These functions are often relied on during moments of stress or urgency and are particularly sensitive to interruptions in access.

Essential services

This includes access to essential services delivered digitally such as healthcare, welfare, education, crisis support, housing, employment, and financial services. Increasingly, these services are designed on the assumption of continuous connectivity. Appointments are booked online, benefits are managed through digital portals, schools communicate through apps, and banks encourage or require online engagement.

This is where the distinction between essential and discretionary digital use becomes critical. While much internet traffic is recreational or optional, access to essential services is not.

Work opportunity

This includes job searching, skills development, training, and financial management. At this level, digital exclusion begins to shape long-term life chances. People who cannot reliably access job portals, complete online applications, or build digital skills find it harder to secure employment or improve their economic position. The result is a feedback loop: digital poverty limits opportunity, and limited opportunity entrenches poverty.

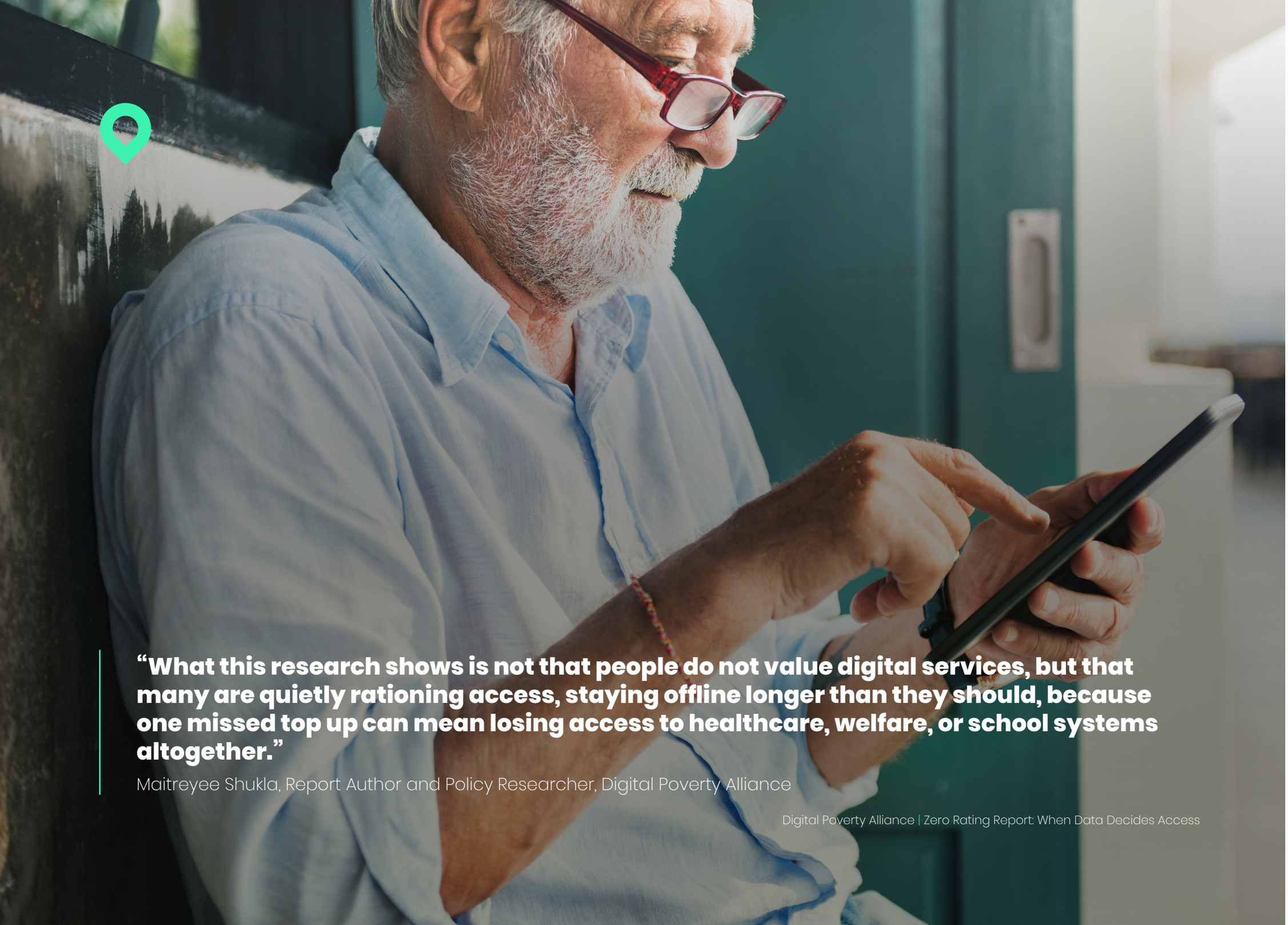
Participation, wellbeing, and social connection

These are the broader outcomes which are integral parts of a well-functioning society, such as Empowerment and Participation: social participation, mental wellbeing, economic opportunity, and a sense of inclusion. These outcomes are shaped by sustained access to both essential services and wider digital life.

These outcomes are often interpreted as individual issues, but the findings of this research reframe them as structural consequences of instability at the base. In other words, social and emotional harms are not separate from connectivity constraints; they are produced by them.

This layered perspective helps diagnose why digital poverty is so harmful. It shows that the issue is not about entertainment or convenience, but about the erosion of basic rights, dignity, and opportunity. Crucially, it also clarifies why interventions must begin at the foundational layers. If people cannot afford data to access essential services, no amount of digital skills training or online service innovation will close the gap.

Within the context of this report, this also establishes the logic for targeted zero rating. Zero rating essential services directly stabilises the lower and middle layers; ensuring that people can always access healthcare, education, welfare, and government services even when data is unaffordable. In doing so, it prevents people from falling into deeper forms of exclusion.



“What this research shows is not that people do not value digital services, but that many are quietly rationing access, staying offline longer than they should, because one missed top up can mean losing access to healthcare, welfare, or school systems altogether.”

Maitreyee Shukla, Report Author and Policy Researcher, Digital Poverty Alliance

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Diagnostics

Instability at the digital threshold forces trade-offs with basic needs

At the base of our diagnostics lies the most immediate and consequential pressure experienced by people living with data poverty: the need to choose between digital connectivity and other basic necessities. Survey responses consistently show that access to data is not treated as a background utility, but as a cost that must be actively managed alongside food, heating, transport, and care. In this sample (n=106), 43% said they have had to choose between buying data and essentials like food or bills (with another 13% preferring not to answer), showing that connectivity is treated as a negotiable line item in household survival budgets.

Economic vulnerability sharpens the trade-off: respondents who are unemployed, unable to work, students or carers report choosing between data and essentials at 52% vs 34% among everyone else.

For many respondents, particularly those who are unemployed, unable to work, or acting as carers, data affordability emerged as a recurring source of financial strain. Average problem ratings in the survey illustrate this gradient clearly. Respondents unable to work rated data cost as a serious problem (3.81 out of 5) , carers rated it even higher (4.00) , while those in full-time work or retirement reported significantly lower levels of difficulty. This pattern indicates that data affordability is not evenly distributed but closely aligned with economic vulnerability.

The survey evidence shows that when budgets are tight, families tend to treat connectivity as the variable that can be sacrificed. In fact, 55% run out of mobile data frequently or occasionally; and among those relying mainly on mobile data, 61% run out frequently. Respondents described running out of data before the end of the month, postponing top-ups until money became available (32%), or deliberately limiting use to conserve access for emergencies (31%). In households with children, connectivity was frequently prioritised for school-related use, with adults reducing or foregoing their own access as a result.

These decisions are not made lightly. They reflect a rational response to scarcity. However, within a digital by default system, they have disproportionate consequences. When access to healthcare appointments, welfare systems, school communications, and employment opportunities depends on being online, the decision to delay or limit data use carries risks that extend well beyond inconvenience.

Crucially, this form of exclusion is difficult for institutions to detect. Individuals may still appear connected in aggregate statistics, and their difficulties may surface only indirectly. The underlying cause, however, lies at the most foundational level: an unstable digital threshold shaped by competing demands on limited income.

This finding establishes the starting point for the rest of our analysis. When access to data competes with basic needs, digital participation becomes contingent upon several factors rather than being a given. The findings that follow show how people adapt to this instability, how systems misread those adaptations, and how the resulting misalignment deepens exclusion across essential services.

People absorb the cost of digital access in silence

When access to data is unstable and must compete with basic needs, many people do not respond by seeking support, raising complaints, or disengaging loudly. Instead, survey responses show that people don't often speak the language of rights, or justice, or systemic exclusion. They say things like:

"I worry about my daughter when we're offline."

"I couldn't use maps to get to the hospital."

"I had to wait until next week to apply."

The most common response is quiet adaptation. When data runs out, respondents overwhelmingly rely on private workarounds rather than institutional support: 42% 'top up as soon as I can', 37% use free public WiFi, and 26% ask friends/family to help, compared to only 13% borrowing a phone and no equivalent 'formal reporting' route emerging as a common strategy. People absorb the cost of digital access privately through sacrifice, rationing, and lowered expectations, rather than treating exclusion as a problem to be contested.

Across free-text responses, participants described a range of coping strategies that are rational in the short term but harmful over time. These include deliberately limiting online activity, avoiding data-intensive services, postponing interactions with institutions, and planning daily life around moments of connectivity. For some, this meant checking essential messages only at specific times. For others, it meant waiting until the next pay cycle or benefit payment before engaging with services at all.

This pattern reflects a broader form of resignation. Rather than interpreting interruptions as failures of the system, respondents often framed them as personal limitations. One respondent summarised this experience simply:

"I just manage with what I have."

When foundational access cannot be relied upon, people minimise risk by narrowing their engagement. They learn which interactions are essential and which can be deferred or avoided. Over time, this leads to a form of self-exclusion that is not driven by lack of interest or motivation, but by repeated exposure to failure points.

This silent absorption of cost has important implications for how digital poverty is perceived by institutions and service providers. Because people do not always articulate their difficulties, unmet need becomes difficult to observe. Low engagement, incomplete usage, or sporadic access can easily be misinterpreted as choice or lack of demand, rather than as evidence of constrained capacity.

The roundtable discussions reinforced this dynamic. Participants noted that during periods when certain services were zero rated, usage did not always increase in visible ways. Without insight into lived experience, this was sometimes taken as evidence that zero rating was unnecessary or ineffective. The survey findings complicate that interpretation. They suggest that many people experiencing data poverty have already adapted their behaviour in ways that suppress usage, even when barriers are temporarily lowered.

Given this context, the absence of a conversation around the unmet needs of people should not be mistaken for satisfaction. It reflects a misalignment between how digital systems are designed and how people are able to engage with them.

Emotional and social harm accumulates

The behavioural adaptations described in the previous finding are not neutral. Over time, the effort required to manage unstable digital access produces emotional and social harm that compounds.

Survey responses indicate that interruptions in connectivity are not experienced as isolated inconveniences, but as stressors that accumulate across daily life. Respondents described anxiety about running out of data at critical moments, frustration at being unable to complete tasks in one sitting, and a persistent sense of falling behind. For individuals managing health conditions, caring responsibilities, or financial insecurity, these pressures are amplified.

One respondent described the consequences of missing online therapy sessions due to lack of connectivity, noting that each missed appointment meant “another week, sometimes more, without therapy,” resulting in deterioration in mental health and difficulty maintaining daily routines. This experience illustrates how intermittent or unstable access can disrupt continuity of essential care, with effects that extend beyond the immediate service interaction.

Social connection is similarly affected. Respondents who relied primarily on mobile data were significantly more likely to report feeling isolated over the past year, particularly when data ran out or became too expensive. For some, this meant withdrawing from group chats, avoiding video calls, or limiting contact with friends and family to conserve data.

Over time, these small acts of withdrawal contribute to a broader sense of disconnection. Nearly half (45%) reported feeling isolated in the past year due to digital access constraints, a harm that won’t appear in service analytics. The isolation gradient is steep: respondents relying mainly on mobile data report isolation at 73% versus 33% among those not mainly mobile-reliant, amounting to approximately 40 percentage-point gap. Importantly, this form of isolation is not always recognised as a consequence of digital exclusion. It can be misattributed to individual preference, mental health issues, or lack of social engagement.

The emotional toll is also shaped by uncertainty. Respondents described needing to think ahead about whether they would have enough data to attend an appointment, respond to a message, or complete a form. This cognitive burden adds to existing pressures and can make engagement with services feel overwhelming.

From a systems perspective, these harms remain largely invisible. Emotional strain, anxiety, and isolation do not register in usage metrics or performance dashboards. Yet they influence how people interact with services, how likely they are to persist in seeking support, and how much trust they place in digital systems over time.

Low usage of essential services is misread as low relevance

Evidence from the policy roundtable and survey highlights a critical misinterpretation at the heart of current approaches to zero rating: low traffic to essential services is being read as evidence that zero rating is not particularly relevant or impactful.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the NHS website was zero rated by mobile network operators to ensure access to public health information and services. Roundtable participants noted that this zero rating has largely been maintained since then. Importantly, providers also reported that

they have not observed a significant increase in traffic to NHS digital services as a result. On this basis, zero rating of the NHS was described as unproblematic but not especially consequential.

However, when asked what people would most want to access for free, respondents most frequently named health/NHS (47%); 35% referenced government services and 27% referenced jobs/job search.

Which indicates that the interpretation of zero rating NHS as not being very consequential rests on a narrow reading of impact. It assumes that increased traffic is the primary indicator of value, and that relevance can be inferred from aggregate usage patterns. The survey findings complicate this assumption.

At the same time, many respondents were unaware that NHS services were already zero rated. This suggests that low observed traffic does not reflect lack of need, but rather a combination of limited awareness, suppressed engagement, and cautious behaviour shaped by long-standing data constraints.

For individuals managing data scarcity, engagement with essential services is often episodic and risk-averse. People do not browse health services casually; they access them when they are unwell, anxious, or required to do so. In such contexts, the absence of a visible traffic spike is not a sign of irrelevance. It reflects the nature of essential services themselves, where usage is intermittent but critical. In fact, we would argue that traffic is the wrong success metric for essential services; the value lies in reliability at the moment of need.

This finding illustrates how people who have learned to ration access do not automatically increase engagement simply because a service has been zero rated, particularly if they are unaware of the change or uncertain about its permanence.

Misreading low usage as low relevance; or rather, using traffic as a metric itself has important consequences. It leads to the undervaluation of interventions that protect access to essential services, and reinforces the idea that zero rating is only justified where it drives measurable increases in consumption. In reality, the value of zero rating essential services lies not in volume, but in assurance. The assurance that access will not fail when it matters most.

Public WiFi has become a de facto safety net, with real costs

Survey responses indicate that when individual access to mobile data is unstable or unaffordable, public WiFi is not a supplementary convenience

but a primary fallback for accessing essential services. A substantial proportion of respondents reported relying on free WiFi in public or semi-public spaces to carry out tasks related to healthcare, welfare, education, and finance.

Respondents described using public WiFi to:

- complete benefit-related tasks,
- access NHS services or attend online appointments,
- download school communications or submit forms,
- and manage banking or payment platforms.

This reliance was especially pronounced among respondents who identified as unemployed, unable to work, or reliant primarily on mobile data. Public WiFi is not a 'nice-to-have' fallback here: 37% said that when they run out of data they usually use free public WiFi. For these groups, public WiFi functioned as a substitute for stable private connectivity, rather than an occasional backup.

However, the survey also highlights the significant costs associated with this dependence.

First, access is constrained by place and time. Respondents reported needing to travel to specific locations- libraries, cafés, community centres, or transport hubs- in order to get online. This introduces delays and friction into interactions that are often time-sensitive. Several respondents described missing deadlines or appointments because WiFi was unavailable when needed, or because they could not physically access a suitable location. This is especially a concern for those relying mainly on mobile data, who, according to the survey, are far more likely to report harms that WiFi cannot reliably solve, for example, 73% of the people who rely solely on mobile data missed an important message vs 43% among others.

Second, privacy and security concerns were repeatedly raised in free-text responses. Respondents expressed discomfort accessing sensitive services including healthcare records, Universal Credit accounts, and banking platforms on shared or unsecured networks. Despite this, many felt they had no alternative if they wanted to maintain access. In effect, people were forced to trade privacy and dignity for connectivity.

Third, reliance on public WiFi disproportionately affects those with additional constraints. Respondents with disabilities, mental health conditions, caring responsibilities, or limited mobility described public access points as difficult or exhausting to use consistently. For these groups, what appears to be a viable workaround in theory becomes unreliable or inaccessible in practice.

The survey evidence suggests that this model is neither sustainable nor equitable. Public WiFi can enable access in moments of need, but it does so unevenly, intermittently, and at personal cost. Crucially, it is not designed to support routine, dignified engagement with essential services.

This finding also helps explain why digital exclusion often remains underestimated. When people succeed in accessing services through public WiFi, their effort is invisible to institutions. The workaround masks the underlying instability, while the cost- in time, stress, and privacy- is borne privately.

Responsibility for maintaining access has shifted onto individuals

As essential services move online by default, the practical responsibility for maintaining access has increasingly shifted onto individuals, regardless of their capacity to do so. While services remain formally available, the conditions required to reach them are no longer fully embedded within service delivery itself.

Survey responses illustrate how this shift is experienced in practice. In the last year, 40% missed a GP/NHS appointment, 39% couldn't apply for benefits, and 37% couldn't pay a bill or manage money online. Respondents described needing to ensure they had sufficient data before booking appointments, responding to messages, or completing required tasks. Where data ran out or connectivity failed, the consequences were borne privately through missed important conversations, delays, or the need to re-enter systems at a later point. In many cases, there was no mechanism to signal that access failure had occurred, nor any accommodation for the interruption.

This shift is not the result of deliberate policy intent, of course, but it does reflect how our digital systems are designed to assume stable, continuous connectivity. Once services are delivered online, maintaining the digital link becomes an implicit prerequisite for participation. The burden of meeting that prerequisite, in the form of topping up data, finding WiFi, managing devices; falls on the user.

The impact of this shift is uneven. For those with stable broadband or generous data plans, access feels seamless and unremarkable. For those managing constrained data budgets, access becomes conditional and effortful. Survey respondents described planning interactions around moments of connectivity, delaying engagement until data was available, or relying on public WiFi to complete time-sensitive tasks. Mobile-reliant respondents show systematically higher disruption across almost every outcome (e. g., 'missed important message' 73% vs 43%; 'felt isolated' 73% vs 33%), indicating that the 'individual responsibility' model distributes harm along connectivity lines.

The roundtable discussions echoed this dynamic. Participants acknowledged that digital service delivery has outpaced the development of supporting access mechanisms. While zero rating and social tariffs exist in limited form, they are not systematically integrated into service design.

As a result, individuals are left to manage the risk of disconnection on their own, even when engaging with essential public services.

This diagnostic finding is important because it helps explain why digital exclusion often appears as individual non-compliance or disengagement. When responsibility for maintaining access rests with the user, failures are absorbed privately and rarely register as service-level issues. Over time, this reinforces the invisibility of data poverty within institutional systems.

Addressing this shift does not require reversing digital delivery. It requires recognising that ensuring access itself is part of service provision, and that maintaining it cannot be left entirely to individual capacity where that capacity is uneven.

Essential services are not being treated as essential online

Despite the central role digital systems now play in accessing healthcare, welfare, education, and financial services, these services are largely governed using the same assumptions as general internet use. Survey evidence and stakeholder discussions indicate that essential digital services are not consistently distinguished from discretionary or commercial use in how access is structured, protected, or prioritised.

Survey respondents were clear about which digital services they considered essential. When asked what they would most want to be accessible without data costs, respondents overwhelmingly prioritised services related to healthcare, welfare, education, and household management; including NHS services, Universal Credit, school platforms, ParentPay, and online banking. Respondents' lived prioritisation is overwhelmingly 'essential-first', not entertainment-first: among those who gave a specific answer on what should be free/zero rated, 47% named NHS/health, 35% named government services, 27% named jobs, and 20% named Universal Credit/benefits.

However, this prioritisation is not reflected in how digital access is currently organised. From an access perspective, welfare platforms, crisis helplines, and school systems are treated no differently from other websites or applications. They draw from the same limited data allowances, compete with all other online activity, and are subject to the same risk of interruption when data runs out. The system currently treats these services as just another drain on a finite allowance and as a result, 55% run out of data frequently/occasionally, and 32% report going without data until they can afford more, making access to 'essential' services structurally contingent.

Insights from the policy roundtable reinforce this misalignment. Participants acknowledged that while some essential services such as NHS websites were zero rated during the COVID-19 pandemic, the continuation of such measures has not been embedded within a broader framework that recognises essentiality as a guiding principle.

This absence of a clear distinction between essential and non-essential digital access has important consequences. When all internet use is treated as equivalent, protections designed to ensure access to rights and care become difficult to justify or sustain.

Access to essential public services is increasingly mediated through digital systems. In practice, this means that the exercise of basic citizenship- accessing healthcare, welfare, education, and local government- now depends on reliable digital connectivity. However, when these services continue to be governed online as discretionary internet use, citizenship itself becomes conditional on data affordability.

Targeting and eligibility mechanisms cannot reliably capture need

Efforts to address data poverty through targeted interventions are constrained by a fundamental problem: there is no reliable, widely accepted way to identify who needs support, when they need it, and for which services. The survey itself demonstrates why eligibility is hard: even among people who self-identify as digitally poor, 90% have broadband, 31% rely mainly on mobile data, and 55% run out of mobile data frequently/ occasionally; meaning 'need' is not equivalent to 'unconnected', and it fluctuates.

Survey findings, stakeholder discussions, and existing research all point to the same conclusion: current eligibility mechanisms are poorly suited to the lived reality of data poverty.

Survey responses show that data poverty is situational, fluctuating, and unevenly distributed over time. Many respondents reported moving in and out of constraint depending on income timing, household expenses, health needs, or caring responsibilities. A person may be able to afford data one month and not the next; may prioritise connectivity during a crisis and reduce it afterward; or may sacrifice their own access to support others in the household. These patterns do not align neatly with static eligibility categories.

Roundtable discussions reinforced this difficulty. Participants noted that while targeted approaches such as restricting zero rating to specific tariffs or customer groups, are often seen as more feasible than universal measures, they rely on proxies rather than direct measures of need. Tariff type, benefit status, or usage patterns are used as stand-ins for data poverty, despite being blunt and exclusionary. As a result, many people experiencing genuine constraint fall outside formal eligibility thresholds.

External research supports this finding. Studies of digital exclusion in the UK and comparable contexts consistently show that reliance on benefit-based eligibility or income thresholds underestimates need, particularly among groups such as carers, people with fluctuating health conditions, those in insecure work, and individuals with no recourse to public funds. These groups may not qualify for support, yet face acute barriers to digital access.

This creates a structural dilemma. On the one hand, universal measures are often perceived as inefficient or costly. On the other, targeted measures struggle to reach those most affected. The result is a gap between policy intent and lived experience, where support is narrowly defined and unevenly distributed.

This finding also raises a deeper question about what should be treated as a public good in a digital society. When access to healthcare, welfare, education, and financial systems is delivered digitally by default, the criteria for support cannot be defined narrowly. In doing so, we risk excluding the most vulnerable. If people need internet access to use essential services, then making sure that access exists should be a shared responsibility, not something individuals have to qualify for.

Government investment in connectivity remains a hidden weak link

UK policy has so far relied on voluntary industry action to zero rate "essential" sites rather than on direct public funding or mandates. In the pandemic, operators like Vodafone, EE, Virgin Media, O2 and Three voluntarily zero rated NHS guidance and online education resources (e.g. BBC Bitesize, Oak Academy) Since then some firms (such as Virgin Media O2, VodafoneThree, and EE) have continued to offer free access to some public-service websites.

Ofcom's net neutrality guidance explicitly permits such zero rating (e.g. allowing NHS advice sites to be free, but there is no obligation on providers, nor any government-funded scheme to support it. Crucially, no UK law or official definition names which online services are "essential", this choice is left to private networks. In practice, operators evaluate uptake and often scale back free services if usage proves very low. Thus, zero rating in the UK plays out as a commercial perk, rather than an entitlement of the citizen.

By contrast, some other governments have taken a much more proactive approach. For example, Brazil's federal government created the *Internet Brasil* program (late 2021) to give free mobile data SIM-cards to low-income schoolchildren. In that scheme the state explicitly funds and distributes connectivity (rather than waiting for market incentives), ensuring vulnerable students get ongoing data access. The the UK has no equivalent, although some providers (such as O2 and Vodafone) do provide databank initiatives offering SIM cards through charities. In short, UK telecom policy lacks strategic investment or regulation to zero rate public services.

Beyond zero rating, current UK programs fall short on sustained support, especially for affordable data and devices. The government's flagship Project Gigabit (a £5 billion subsidy for full-fibre broadband) has significantly expanded fixed connections, and a legal Universal Service Obligation now guarantees at least 10 Mbps download speed. However, these target fixed broadband only, they do nothing to make mobile data more

affordable or to reduce data poverty on smartphones. Likewise, social tariffs, cheap broadband and phone plans for people on benefits, are voluntary and poorly taken up. Ofcom notes there is no mandatory requirement to offer social tariffs, and by late 2023 only around 8. 3% of eligible households had signed up. Even where the industry offers reduced-price packages (some networks have £12 - £22 mobile broadband deals or special “no-income” rates) , many very low-income families still find them too expensive.

On devices and data subsidies, government involvement has so far been intermittent. During COVID-19, the Department for Education distributed nearly 2 million laptops/tablets to schoolchildren, and other pilot activity is underway through the Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund. But these efforts have been short-term and small in scope. Outside of these campaigns, device provision has been almost entirely charity-led. Similarly, mobile data affordability is largely left to the goodwill of operators through charitable schemes.

In practice, people who run out of data often must resort to makeshift solutions, borrowing a friend’s connection, hunting for free public WiFi, or simply going offline. Ofcom’s qualitative research confirms that many low-income users cope by trying to connect to public WiFi or waiting for credit to top up. Our survey has also highlighted the necessity of “coping” for the digitally poor. In other words, the current support system is a fragile patchwork of charity SIM schemes, library and café hotspots, and low take up social tariffs. Without consistent government funding or regulation, this ecosystem will remain fragmented and unreliable.

Who pays for access when services go digital?

The diagnostics so far show that responsibility for maintaining digital access to essential services has, in practice, shifted onto individuals. However, this does not mean that no other actors are bearing costs. On the contrary, the current system is characterised by informal and uneven cost absorption, rather than by a clear allocation of responsibility.

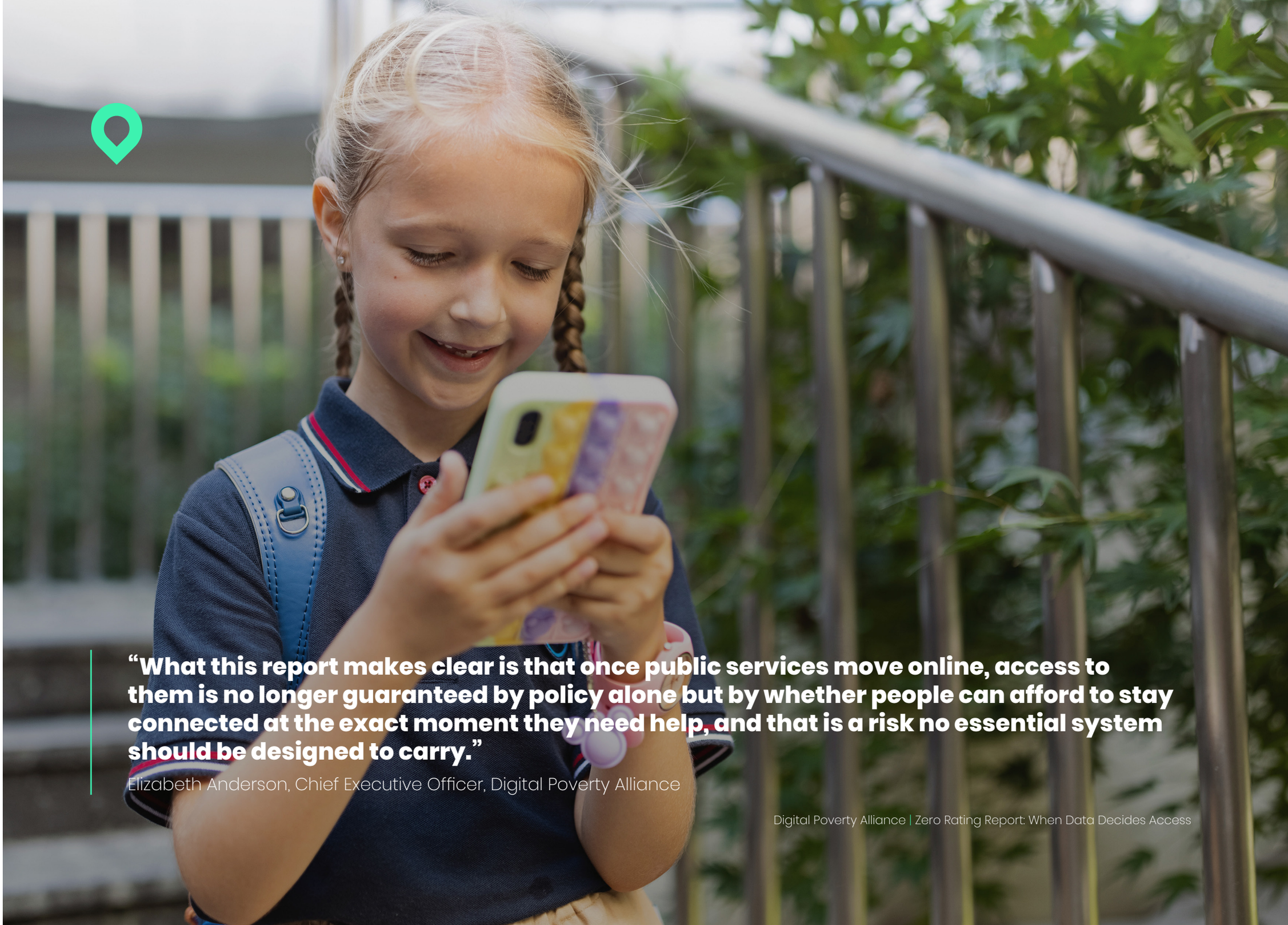
During the COVID-19 pandemic, UK mobile network operators took rapid action to zero rate access to essential public services, most notably NHS websites and education platforms. These measures were implemented voluntarily, without statutory obligation or public funding, and were widely recognised as an important contribution to maintaining access during a period of acute disruption. In several cases, zero rating arrangements introduced during the pandemic have continued beyond the emergency period, with some operators maintaining free access to NHS and selected public service sites.

This history matters. It demonstrates that zero rating essential services is technically feasible, operationally manageable, and compatible with

UK regulatory frameworks. It also shows that network operators have already absorbed a share of the costs associated with ensuring access to essential digital services, even in the absence of a formal mandate.

At the same time, the reliance on voluntary action has important limitations. Because zero rating has been implemented as a discretionary measure rather than as part of a defined public access framework, decisions about scope, duration, and continuation remain contingent on commercial judgement. In practice, this means that operators are left to evaluate zero rating through indirect signals such as traffic levels or customer feedback, rather than through explicit public service objectives.

This ambiguity helps explain why the question of “who pays” repeatedly resurfaces in debates about zero rating. The issue is not that no one is paying, but that cost responsibility has never been formally decided upon.



“What this report makes clear is that once public services move online, access to them is no longer guaranteed by policy alone but by whether people can afford to stay connected at the exact moment they need help, and that is a risk no essential system should be designed to carry.”

Elizabeth Anderson, Chief Executive Officer, Digital Poverty Alliance

Zero Rating Report

Types of Digital Access for Policy Purposes

The diagnostics in this report show that digital access is not a single, uniform condition. The consequences of losing access depend on what people are trying to do online, whether the interaction is optional or required, and who bears the cost when access fails.

Current policy approaches largely treat connectivity as a consumer issue, governed through market provision and individual affordability. This model is increasingly misaligned with reality. As public services operate on a digital by default basis, digital access has become a precondition for exercising entitlements, meeting obligations, and complying with the state . To address this mismatch, the report distinguishes between different types of digital access based on their function and the consequences when access fails. This distinction helps clarify where intervention is necessary, where it should be limited, and where it is not required. It also allows responses to be proportionate, rather than treating all forms of internet use as equivalent.

1. Essential civic access

This includes digital services through which individuals access essential public systems, including healthcare, welfare and benefits, education-related platforms, and core government services.

Access to these services is no longer discretionary. Individuals are expected to book appointments online, manage claims digitally, receive official communications electronically, and respond within set timeframes. In these contexts, digital access functions as infrastructure for citizenship rather than as a convenience.

Where the state requires or strongly steers citizens to use digital channels, the conditions for accessing those channels cannot be treated solely as a matter of individual qualification or consumer choice. Doing so shifts the risk of access failure onto individuals, even when the consequences, missed care, interrupted support, non-compliance, are systemic.

Therefore, for these digital services, the appropriate governance logic is collective provision rather than selective eligibility. This does not imply unlimited free connectivity, but it does imply protecting essential services, and the digital pathways required for their access, from interruption due

to data affordability. This logic mirrors established offline principles, where access to essential public systems is not conditional on the ability to pay for the means of entry.

2. Opportunity and stability

This includes digital services that shape longer-term outcomes such as job search platforms, training and skills provision, financial management tools, and educational enrichment services.

Interruptions at this level tend to have cumulative rather than immediate effects. Existing research on digital exclusion and labour market participation shows that unstable access can prolong unemployment, reduce financial resilience, and deepen inequality over time.

For this, universal provision is neither necessary nor proportionate. At the same time, need is difficult to define, dynamic over time, and poorly captured by income alone.

3. General internet use

This consists of discretionary internet use, including entertainment, social media, and general browsing. While important for wellbeing and connection, access at this level is not directly tied to the exercise of rights or compliance with public systems.

This distinction is used in the report to clarify where access failures have the most serious consequences and to inform consideration of policy responses that focus on protecting access to essential services, while avoiding unnecessary intervention in areas where the risks associated with access loss are lower.

“What emerges from the evidence is not a gap in provision but a mismatch between how digital services are designed and how people actually live, where access fails not because services are unavailable, but because staying connected is too often precarious.”

Maitreyee Shukla, Report Author and Policy Researcher, Digital Poverty Alliance

Zero Rating Report

Policy Recommendations

The first set of recommendations pertain to the digital access that functions as a precondition for exercising rights and complying with statutory systems. This includes access to healthcare services, welfare and benefits platforms, education interfaces, and core government portals that are now delivered on a digital by default basis.

The diagnostics section of this report shows that current approaches place the risk of interruption almost entirely on individuals, particularly those managing constrained data budgets, despite the fact that the shift to digital delivery has been driven by public policy decisions rather than consumer choice. The recommendations below respond to that misalignment by setting out a stable, bounded approach to protecting essential civic access, without extending intervention into general internet use.

1. Establish a continuity principle for zero rated essential services

Global best practice suggests that zero rating schemes should not be ad-hoc or temporary emergency fixes but sustained obligations. For example, South Africa leveraged licensing conditions to make zero rated public-benefit content a permanent obligation for carriers receiving spectrum. In Argentina, the regulator permanently includes free access to government websites and basic apps (e. g. WhatsApp) in its “Basic Universal Service” mobile plan for low-income users.

These examples treat access to health, education, and welfare portals as a stable utility. In the UK, a continuity principle could be implemented by embedding zero rating requirements into licence conditions or law. For instance, Ofcom could require all mobile operators to continue zero rating designated essential sites (e. g. NHS, GOV. UK, DWP after any emergency, as part of their spectrum or operator licences. Alternatively, an amendment to the Communications Act could mandate that digital “front doors” to public services remain free of data charges.

Public funding (via DSIT or a re-purposed Universal Service Fund) could backfill costs, as South Africa has similarly for educational sites. This continuity is crucial because data poverty is dynamic. A formal continuity rule ensures that once a service is deemed essential, no Briton is unexpectedly cut off from it due to their fluctuating data budget, thereby maintaining stable access even in non-emergency times.

2. Formally designate "Essential Digital Public Services"

Clarity on what must be free is crucial. Global best practice is to create open, transparent criteria or lists for zero rating eligibility. South Africa's Social Innovation Register is a pioneering model: any non-profit providing public-benefit content can apply to have its site zero rated across all mobile networks. In Argentina, regulators explicitly defined a "basic plan" that included accredited government websites. Some regulators even suggest categorical zero rating (e. g. all ".gov.uk" or all school websites) to avoid subjective gatekeeping. These approaches treat designated services as part of the digital commons or digital public infrastructure. International bodies increasingly recognise Internet access as a right or public utility, implying a definitional mandate for key services.

In the UK, the government could formally catalogue essential services (health, education, welfare, job centres, housing, etc.) as a priority class. For example, communications law could be amended to exempt all domains under NHS, GOV.UK, DfE or local authority school portals from data charges. Alternatively, Ofcom (or a cross-sector Digital Inclusion Committee) could publish an official "zero rate whitelist" maintained in consultation with public agencies. This list could be updated annually, with criteria such as "critical for basic rights/services, low commercial intent, unique online access," following the United Nations notion of public digital goods. Regulators might even require operators to zero rate entire categories: not just specific sites but all accredited healthcare portals, for instance. Such formal designation prevents arbitrary exclusions and assures users that services they need will not suddenly become pay walled.

Defining essentials explicitly counters the invisibility problem - because low-usage users can be silent, only by officially naming vital services can regulators ensure they remain reachable.

3. Mandate zero rating of defined essential digital public services

Leading jurisdictions have shown that legal mandates can effectively guarantee free access to critical services. For example, Colombia issued a decree in 2020 requiring all mobile operators to zero rate the national e-learning platform during school closures. Argentina's 2021 "Basic Universal Service" plan included data exemptions for government websites (and WhatsApp) from some basic mobile plans. South Africa's government first partnered with a provider to launch a zero rated education platform in 2014, with sign-ups quadrupling as school closures hit during the pandemic. More generally, regulators could incorporate affordability mandates into licence awards or USOs, for instance, requiring a "social tariff" broadband package that includes free access to a whitelist of health, education and welfare sites. These models treat connectivity to civic services much like 0800 emergency calls, always free to the user.

In the UK context, a mandate could take the form of a new statutory obligation or Ofcom rule that explicitly names certain digital services (e. g. NHS 111 online, Universal Credit portal, school communications apps as zero rated for targeted user groups. This might require a modest expansion of powers (for example, extending the broadband USO or creating a mobile-USO) or new guidance under net neutrality exemptions. Operators could be compensated via a levy to ensure carriers recover costs. The recent UK Digital Inclusion Action Plan even commits to "enabling easier access to government websites … for those in data poverty" by engaging mobile providers, and this could be a step towards meeting this aim.

Mandates prevent providers from treating zero rating as a short-lived goodwill (in the UK no law or official definition names essential services) . By legally enshrining free access to key civic services, we directly counter the problem that under connected users are otherwise invisible (their silence is misread as low demand).

4. Pair zero rating with mandatory awareness and communication standards

Zero rating only helps if people know about it. Experience shows that many eligible users simply aren't aware of free access offers. For instance, Ofcom reports that 55% of eligible households are unaware of even existing social tariffs. Likewise, during the pandemic many did not realise NHS or education portals were data-free unless told. Best practice therefore is to combine any zero rating scheme with a requirement that providers clearly inform and educate users about it. This could include:

A. Mandatory labelling and promotion: Carriers should be required (by licence condition or code) to advertise zero rated destinations in customer communications and apps, and to label "free" data usage as such on bills/usage dashboards. For example, when accessing a zero rated site, a banner or notification could remind users it won't count against their quota.

B. Public outreach: Government and social partners should publicise the list of zero rated services (e. g. on Gov.UK and via Citizen's Advice) , especially to low-income groups. During COVID-19, telecoms often coordinated with charities and councils to spread the word about free services. The UK's Digital Inclusion plans already call for signposting existing free connectivity points and services, which could be extended to include digital guides to zero rated apps.

C. Consumer protection: Ofcom could require that operators obtain explicit informed consent before enrolling users in any zero rating plan, and that customers can easily check which services are exempt. Transparency obligations (akin to net neutrality disclosures) would ensure uptake.

This set of recommendations address forms of digital access that are not always strictly unavoidable,, but which play a decisive role in shaping economic stability, educational progression, and long-term opportunity. These include employment platforms, training and skills provision, financial services, housing portals, and parts of the education system that extend beyond core statutory requirements.

The insights in this report show that treating all digital use as either “essential” or “discretionary” obscures this middle ground. As a result, many people remain technically connected, yet functionally excluded from pathways that depend on sustained and reliable access. The recommendations below therefore focus on stabilisation, using targeted and proportionate measures that reduce volatility without extending universal obligations beyond what is defensible.

5. Introduce a tiered cost-sharing model for high-bandwidth essential content

Not all essential content is lightweight; video conferencing for telehealth or live online lessons can consume substantial data. Best practice is to share these costs rather than expect users to bear them entirely. Internationally, several programmes have effectively “subsidised” heavy content. Indonesia’s “Internet Data Assistance” (2020, 21) provided millions of students and teachers with government funded mobile data quotas specifically for approved learning platforms. Brazil re-allocated budgets to underwrite students’ internet access during lockdown, explicitly treating connectivity as part of the education budget.

Colombia set aside budget for e learning data costs. South Korea’s government underwrote data for the national education platform. In the U.S., the Veterans Affairs telehealth video app was zero rated by carriers (with government support) so that broadband cost did not block healthcare. These examples show how public funds or sponsored-data schemes can cover the bandwidth-intensive segment of usage.

For the UK, a tiered model might involve the government co-paying data for known high-bandwidth essential applications. NHS budgets, for example, could allocate funds to reimburse carriers when patients use approved video consultation apps, akin to subsidy of 0800 services. Ofcom could encourage “sponsored data” deals, where content providers (e.g. an educational platform) subsidise part of the user’s data. Alternatively, a new Digital Inclusion Fund could be earmarked to cover a set number of gigabytes of NHS app or school platform usage for eligible users. Crucially, pricing could remain market-based beyond the subsidy, so only the excess cost of streaming is shared. This tiered approach aligns with proposed freemium models (small free daily data with pay-as-you-go beyond) discussed in developing markets.

6. Use administratively workable proxies to target support

Our survey shows that need is dynamic and imperfectly captured by income alone. Employment status, caring responsibilities, health conditions, and housing insecurity all affect how and when access instability translates into harm. At the same time, overly granular targeting risks becoming administratively complex and exclusionary.

Therefore, this report supports the use of workable proxies, such as eligibility for social tariffs, participation in specific public programmes, or defined life-stage transitions, to trigger additional support for opportunity-related digital access. Importantly, these mechanisms should be designed to be adaptive rather than static, recognising that people move in and out of vulnerability.

7. Recognise public WiFi as a stopgap, not an alternative to private access

Evidence shows that public/free WiFi, while vital and useful, is inadequate as a long-term alternative to private access at home or on the move. Survey respondents report relying on libraries or cafés to use essential services (benefits, healthcare, school apps), but with significant costs in time, privacy, and reliability. Key findings include that WiFi access is limited by location and hours, often insecure (risky for health or financial data), and practically inaccessible to people with disabilities or caring responsibilities. In short, relying solely on public hotspots creates friction and hidden barriers.

Given these limitations, policy should treat free public WiFi as it is used by the majority - for example, a convenient way to access material when outside the home, for study, or co-working. It is not a suitable alternative to secure, personal connectivity for banking, health or other private services which require confidential data transfer.

8. Align zero rating with broader affordability measures

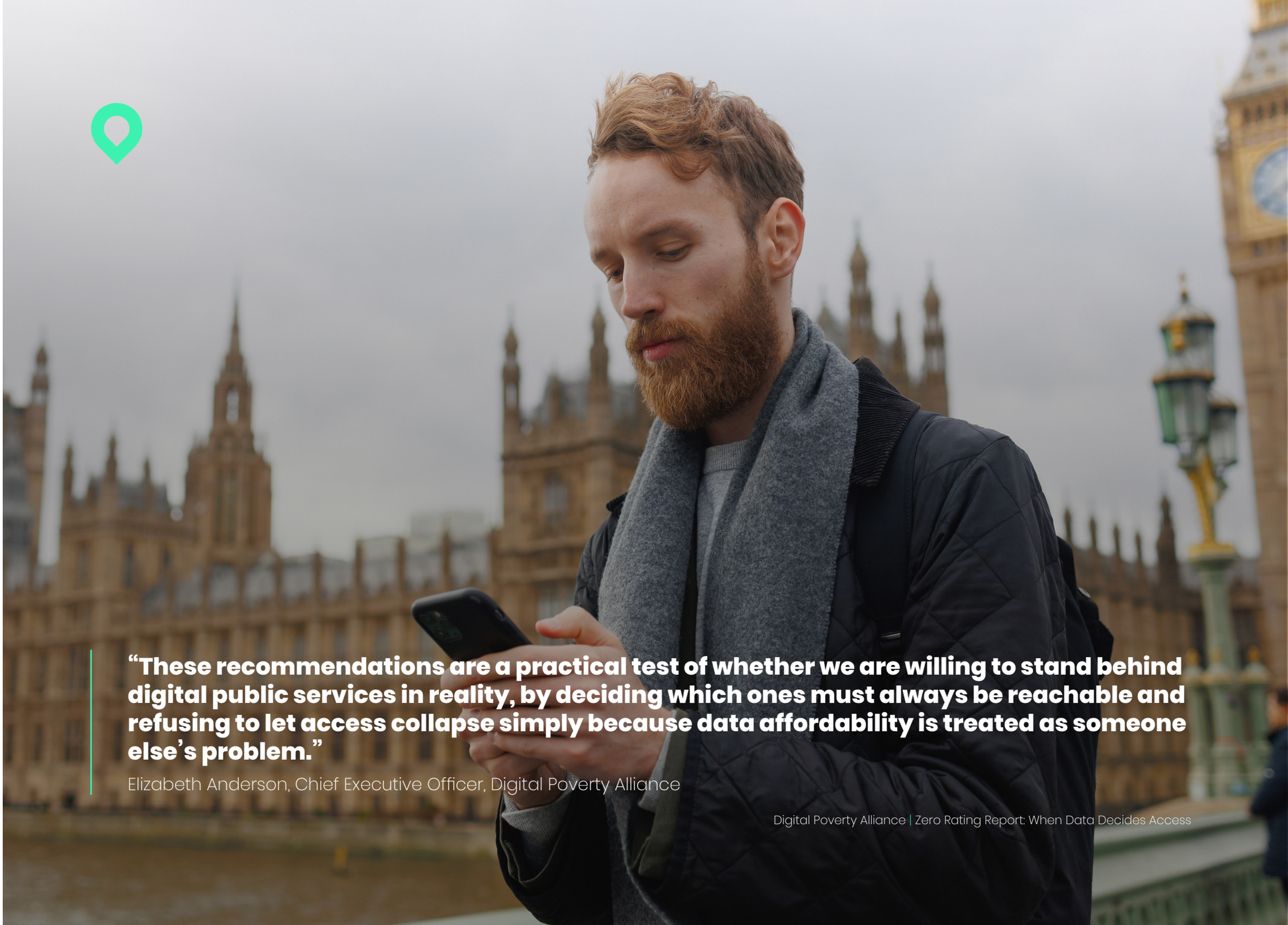
Zero rating must not stand alone but be part of a comprehensive digital inclusion strategy addressing data poverty. In practice, adding zero rating alongside social tariffs, direct subsidies, and public funds has more impact. For example, Argentina's basic plan (with free government sites) is explicitly a "social tariff" for those in poverty. Around the world, next-generation Universal Service Funds are expanding to cover digital inclusion activity related to connectivity, and potentially offer a learning opportunity for UK policy makers.

9. Ensuring explicit non-intervention in wider internet use

Wider digital activity supports social connection, entertainment, exploration, and personal expression, which is vitally important but not directly tied to accessing rights, complying with statutory systems, or maintaining economic and institutional stability. Whilst we argue that 0800 services were previously widespread to allow free access to telephone based support - in both the public and private sectors - internet access functions very differently and it is crucial to avoid overstepping net neutrality principles that exist globally for public protection.

By drawing this boundary openly, we avoid two pitfalls. First, it prevents the gradual expansions of zero rating or other such interventions that risk undermining net neutrality principles. Second, it provides certainty to network operators and regulators that the recommendations are not a backdoor attempt to reshape internet pricing more generally.

Importantly, making this boundary explicit strengthens the case for intervention elsewhere. It allows policymakers to say, with clarity and consistency, that access protections are being applied only where digital delivery has become an extension of the state's own service infrastructure, or where instability predictably undermines opportunity in ways that generate public costs.



“These recommendations are a practical test of whether we are willing to stand behind digital public services in reality, by deciding which ones must always be reachable and refusing to let access collapse simply because data affordability is treated as someone else’s problem.”

Elizabeth Anderson, Chief Executive Officer, Digital Poverty Alliance

Zero Rating Report

More About the Digital Poverty Alliance

The Digital Poverty Alliance (DPA) is an independent charity working to end digital poverty in the UK by the end of the decade.

Founded in 2021 as a collaborative initiative between the Learning Foundation, Currys plc, and the Institution of Engineering and Technology, the DPA was established to unite efforts and accelerate action on digital exclusion. In 2024, the Learning Foundation rebranded as the DPA, marking a pivotal evolution in its mission to address the urgent and growing challenge of digital inequality. This transformation signalled a renewed focus on creating lasting change and deepening impact in communities across the UK.

Digital poverty remains a major barrier to opportunity, with millions of people still lacking the tools, connectivity, and skills needed to thrive in an increasingly digital world. The DPA works across government, industry, and the third sector, aligning efforts to break down systemic barriers related to affordability, access, skills, motivation, and connectivity. By fostering collaboration and avoiding duplication, the Alliance ensures that every initiative contributes meaningfully to long-term, sustainable solutions.

Through advocacy, research, and delivery programmes, the DPA drives systemic change. Its evidence-led campaigns engage policymakers and inspire action at every level, while its innovative programmes offer practical support to individuals and households. By combining robust insights with real-world delivery, the Alliance is working to bridge the digital divide and empower communities nationwide.

The DPA represents a bold vision for a digitally inclusive society. By convening diverse voices, forging strong partnerships, and delivering tangible impact, we are building a national movement to eliminate digital poverty. With determination and collective effort, we are shaping a future in which everyone – regardless of circumstance – has the tools, confidence, and opportunity to thrive in a connected world.

Zero Rating Report

Join Us in Our Mission

Ending digital poverty requires more than ambition. It requires sustained, coordinated effort from individuals, organisations, and institutions across the UK. The Digital Poverty Alliance (DPA) invites all those who share our vision of a digitally inclusive society to stand with us. Whether you represent a business, charity, local authority, or public body, there is a meaningful way to contribute to this national movement.

Become an Industry Forum Partner

The Industry Forum is a national platform for organisations that are committed to tackling digital poverty at scale. Members of the Forum help shape the direction of our National Delivery and Advocacy Plan, collaborate with peers across sectors, and contribute to the development of coordinated, impactful solutions. Forum members have access to exclusive research, events, and policy discussions, and play an active role in advancing digital inclusion across the country. Joining the Forum is an opportunity to demonstrate leadership on one of the defining social challenges of our time.

Sign our Charter for Digital Inclusion

The *Charter for Digital Inclusion* offers a practical and visible way for organisations to commit to action. Signatories pledge to embed digital inclusion into their operations and culture, whether through raising awareness of digital poverty, improving accessibility, donating devices, supporting staff training, or partnering to deliver local solutions. Signing the Charter signals a clear commitment to building a society in which digital access is recognised as a basic need, not a luxury. There is no cost to sign the Charter, and it is open to all organisations with two or more employees.

Join our Local Authority Network

The Local Authority Network brings together local authorities from all four nations of the UK to share best practice, deepen understanding of different policy environments across regions and nations, and identify how to increase support for councils, regardless of where they are on their digital inclusion journey. Membership is free and open to all UK local authorities, with up to two nominated representatives per authority. Quarterly meetings and additional network events offer a space to connect, learn, and shape approaches to digital inclusion together.

Join our Community Circle

The Community Circle is a collaborative initiative designed to bring together charities, non-profit organisations, and community groups who are working to end digital exclusion on the ground. It is a space to share knowledge, influence policy, and develop local responses that are grounded in lived experience. By joining the Community Circle, your organisation becomes part of a collective effort to create systemic change, working in partnership to ensure that no community is left behind. Together, we can help make digital access a right for everyone in the UK.

Make a donation

Every donation, whether financial or in the form of devices, helps bridge the digital divide. Donated laptops, tablets, and smartphones are refurbished and provided to individuals and families who would otherwise remain excluded. Financial contributions help to scale delivery programmes and sustain our advocacy work across government and industry. However you choose to support this work, your contribution helps create a future in which everyone has the tools, skills, and confidence to thrive in a connected world.

“Working with the Digital Poverty Alliance allows organisations to move beyond one-off responses and into a shared national effort, where practical delivery, lived experience, and policy influence are deliberately brought together to create change that is sustained rather than symbolic.”

Joel Tiller, Head of External Affairs, Digital Poverty Alliance

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