

*“Being... an asylum seeker I have got many restrictions. I live on £37 a week, which restricts me to obtain my basic daily needs every day during the pandemic. All the study materials are online and to access online I need data. As I didn't have the right to apply for the [university's] hardship fund for the students it was quite hard for me to continue with my studies during COVID19 without the support from the university.”*

Asylum seeker, Newcastle

## What is digital inclusion?

Digital inclusion can be defined by people being able and feeling confident to access services, information and goods online. Barriers to digital inclusion include:

- An inability to afford the internet or data
- Lack of equipment such as laptops or smartphones
- Low levels of digital literacy or lack of confidence
- Poor accessibility for disabled people

There are an estimated [15.2 million](#) people in the UK who either have no, or limited use of the internet. The North East of England has the highest proportion of internet non-users in the country, standing at [12.1%](#) for the region in 2018.

Lack of access to the internet prevents people from exercising and enjoying many of their human rights such as their right to education, right to work, and the right to participate in the cultural life of their community. Lack of realisation of these rights means people may struggle to meet their essential needs and access important information, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Digital inclusion is currently seen as a luxury and a privilege rather than a necessity. It is increasingly becoming the means for people to access job opportunities, welfare benefits, and even prescriptions and healthcare appointments. Without the proper commitment from policy

makers to increase digital access, the digital divide will only increase, leaving those unable to access the internet further behind. According to the [Good Things Foundation](#), 90% of people who do not use the internet are likely to be disadvantaged in some way. Our experience and research show that elderly adults, asylum seekers, disabled people, those on low incomes and those experiencing homelessness are amongst those at risk of digital exclusion.



## The added impact of COVID-19

The digital divide has widened as more essential parts of our world moved online, some permanently, due to the COVID-19. Many of the services and parts of life that were once accessible in person have moved online, including school and university studies, welfare advice, healthcare appointments and social gatherings. Not being able to access these elements of life is having an enormous impact on those who are not able to or are limited in using the internet.



*“I’m street sleeping with no access to a phone or the internet, but I’ve been told that I can only get Universal Credit by calling a number and only get a house if I go online to bid for properties. I’m in a catch 22. I want to improve my life and move forward but, at the moment, due to the lockdown and being digitally excluded I can’t.”*

- Hartlepool resident

## How can local authorities help?

Local authorities have a duty and responsibility to improve the wellbeing of their residents and meet their international human rights obligations. In order to improve digital inclusion in the North East and enable more people to exercise and enjoy their human rights, local authorities can take the following steps:

- Support our council motion on digital inclusion which calls upon local authorities to:
  - Promote and support efforts to improve digital inclusion in the North East
  - Ensure digital inclusion is a priority across all council departments and committees, updating existing policies and practices to reflect this.
  - Work with local groups/organisations to improve digital inclusion in relation to the design and delivery of services.
- Repurpose second-hand equipment (such as laptops and smartphones) that would otherwise be scrapped by giving them to local groups.
- Give an ear-marked financial donation to [DevicesDotNow](#) in order to provide local people with brand new data-enabled tablets.
- Write to the Chancellor of the Exchequer detailing the issues around digital inclusion and requesting the release of local authority funds specifically for tackling them.

## Better ConNEcted

[Better ConNEcted](#) is a collaboration of organisations and individuals across the North East region who are working in some way to tackle digital inclusion and are passionate about creating lasting change in this arena.

Our aim is to build a North East where digital inclusion is a right enjoyed by all, where people have the skills, technology and internet to access goods, services and information, in order to close the digital divide.

The campaign development team is supported by [Just Fair](#), [NE Law Centre](#), [ReCoCo](#), [VONNE](#), [Difference](#), [Hartlepool Action Lab](#), [Newcastle Vision Support](#), [APLE Collective](#), [Crisis NE](#), [Action Foundation](#), [Not-Equal](#), [Digital Voice](#), [Inclusion North](#), and the [Wharton Trust](#). Most of these are members of the [Social Rights Alliance North East](#).

For more information visit [www.betterconnected.org.uk](http://www.betterconnected.org.uk) or email [betterconnectedne@gmail.com](mailto:betterconnectedne@gmail.com).