Digital Inclusion:
Vision for the Future

July 2024

Summary

Introduction

What is Digital Inclusion?

Digital inclusion is about being able to access and use the internet and engage with digital technology, confidently and safely, as and when needed or wanted. These are basic requirements for people to participate in a digital society and economy. As more of our lives move online and services become digital as standard, it is more important than ever that everyone in our communities are included.

A whole range of factors impact whether an individual is able to use the internet as they want or need to. The four main barriers to participation have been identified as cost (of data as well as devices), connectivity, motivation and skills.

Some people in our communities are far more likely to be digitally excluded than others. We know that older age, low incomes and low educational attainment all correlate strongly with digital exclusion, social disadvantage, and health inequalities.

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What comes next?

Following years of working on digital inclusion in Wales, we present Five specific recommendations for policymakers. These recommendations are not for a specific government department, but for everyone. We must all take a responsibility to end digital exclusion.

Digital exclusion is not an isolated problem – it is one of countless challenges facing communities in Wales that have unacceptable levels of poverty. The cost-of-living crisis has exacerbated existing inequalities, and there are many stories of families needing to choose between data, heating and food. Ending poverty in Wales requires supporting everyone to get online when they need to, confidently and securely.

Digital must be at the heart for our vision of a Wales that is fit for Future Generations. It is central to achieving each of the seven well-being goals within the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 (Wales).

Health systems are increasingly moving towards digital, such as through the NHS Wales App. While there are clear advantages to this, existing digital and social inequalities risk further exacerbating health inequalities. This could result in a digital health divide and a digital inverse care law.

Younger generations need to have the practical and functional skills for using digital devices and engaging online. The education system must be at the forefront of reaching families most at risk of data poverty and digital exclusion, to enable them to have the opportunity to develop the skills and confidence they need to participate in our digital society.

We understand the financial pressures faced by the Welsh Government, but now is not the time to cut back on digital inclusion. A report published by The Good Things Foundation suggests that for every £1 invested in interventions to enable digitally excluded people to build basic digital skills, £9.48 is gained throughout the economy. This is in addition to the potential savings across health and other government departments. Money invested in a new digital inclusion programme beyond 2025 makes business sense".[3]

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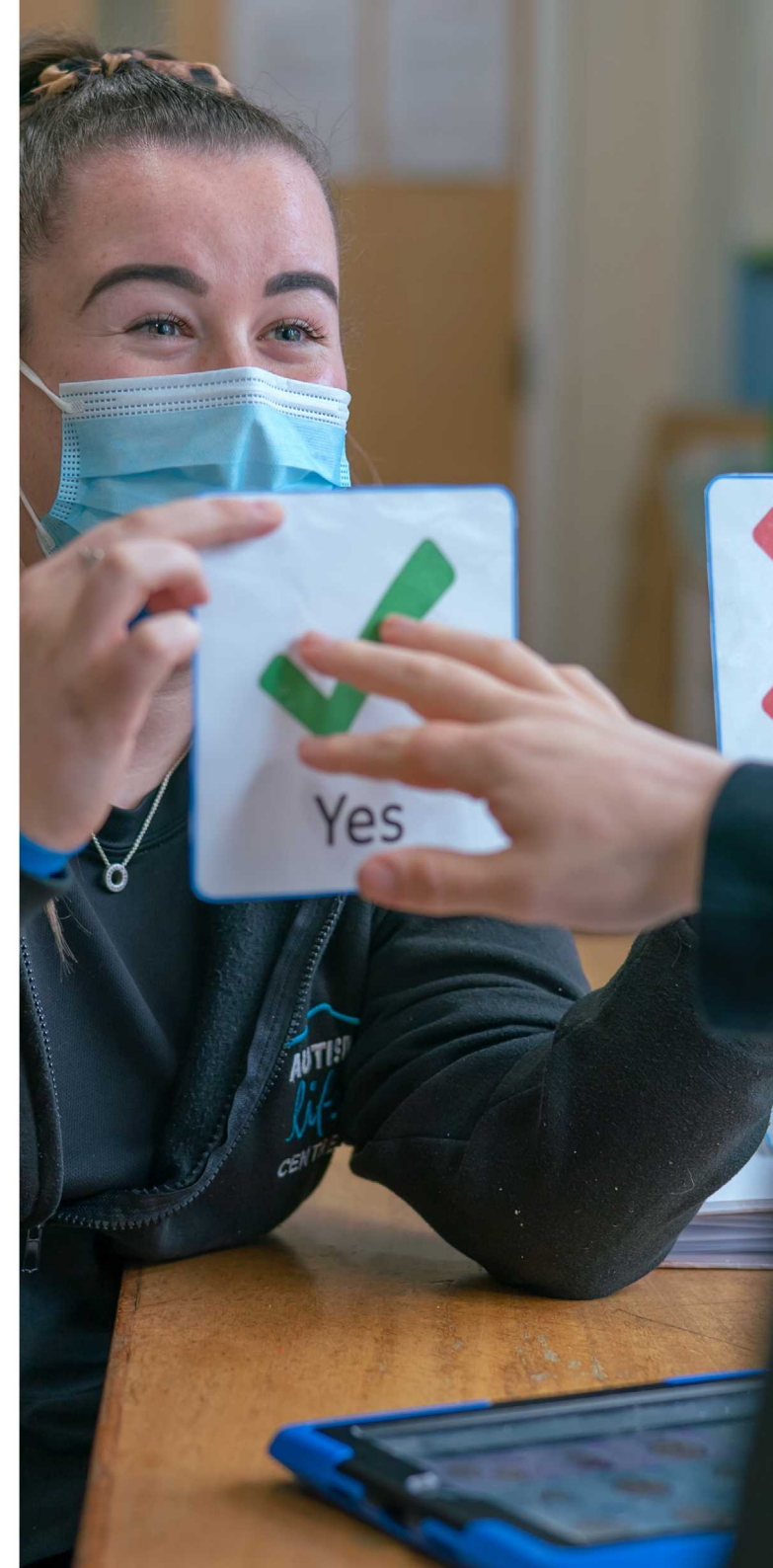
Recommendations

With these cross-cutting themes in mind, we present the following recommendations:

1. **Commit to six-year funding for a national digital inclusion programme that:**

- Delivers direct, targeted support to the 7% of people who are still digitally excluded, and those who do not have the five essential digital skills. Now, more than ever, it is crucial that digital inclusion is embedded into, mainstreamed and owned by organisations and communities across Wales.

- Provides the support, collaboration, and amplification to organisations and community groups to establish a mainstreamed digital skills and inclusion agenda, that is the responsibility of everyone in Wales.

A long-term commitment to funding digital inclusion, to the benefit of all government departments, will ensure the project will be able to focus on delivery, develop relationships with key stakeholders and communities, and adapt to the evolving digital environment in a way driven by need, not funding requirements.

2. **Implement the findings of the Minimum Digital Living Standard research pilot and expand to all households in Wales**

We need to see the implementation of the Minimum Digital Living Standard in a way that is impactful for communities and accessible for the groups and organisations that support them. No household in Wales should be below the MDLS threshold. We need effective cross-sector strategies, policies and actions that are developed together with financial and political commitment to achieve this vision.

The creation of a Minimum Digital Living Standard for Wales for households with children should be a catalyst for Welsh Government to commission further research to understand the implications of the Minimum Digital Living Standard on a range of households and communities facing digital exclusion in Wales.

3. **Funding of the Digital Inclusion Alliance Wales must be continued to ensure its sustainability and enable it to consider options for a transition to alternative funding sources, should that be required in future.**

The Alliance has been a key asset in ensuring a space for peer-networking, data gathering and experience-sharing, fostering meaningful change across sectors. It is growing to be an influential hub to support organisations, small and large delivering digital inclusion systematically across the country and we would want to see more organisations joining the network in the next phase.

4. **Welsh Government should develop strategic partnerships with the technology industry to support an expanded Digital Inclusion programme.**

Industry partners have a key role to play in supporting Wales to become a digitally inclusive nation ensuring all barriers to digital inclusion are overcome, including improving access, skills and confidence.

5. **All digital transformation programmes in the future should include a percentage of their funding for Digital inclusion.**

As we have demonstrated in this report, the business case for Digital Transformation requires investment in digital inclusion. Without this, it risks excluding citizens from essential services, negatively impacting well-being and increasing costs in the long run. By requiring Digital transformation policy and programmes to allocate funding to Digital inclusion initiatives we are ensuring inclusive practices are embedded throughout the transformation process.