

# IFB GAMING

## Community-Based Pathways to Digital Inclusion and Equity in England

### A Literature Review and Policy Briefing

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**January 2026**

## About IFB Gaming

IFB Gaming is a research and learning organisation using gaming, technology, and education to advance digital inclusion and community innovation. Our work focuses on developing trust-based, human-centred pathways that help individuals build digital confidence, improve wellbeing, and access new opportunities.

## About This Briefing

It is intended for policymakers, local authorities, funders, libraries, and civil society partners seeking evidence-informed approaches to reduce digital exclusion.

This document synthesises academic literature, government policy, and evidence from IFB Gaming's **Empowering Futures** programme to examine the role of community-based models in strengthening national digital inclusion efforts. It highlights emerging insights, identifies structural barriers, and provides policy recommendations aligned with the UK's evolving digital equity agenda.



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# Community-Based Pathways to Digital Inclusion and Equity in England

## Abstract

This paper examines the evolving landscape of digital inclusion in England, arguing that digital exclusion is a structural and relational challenge shaped by socioeconomic inequality, service design, and access to trusted support, rather than a simple deficit of skills or motivation. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship, national policy, and applied evidence, the paper positions community-based pathways as critical mechanisms for enabling equitable and sustained digital participation.

The review synthesises academic literature, national policy documents, third-sector reports, and independent reviews published between 2017 and 2025, selected for their relevance to digital access, capability, trust, and place-based delivery. Key sources include the Digital Skills Report (2025), Good Things Foundation research, DSIT and LOTI policy frameworks, and Dame Carol Black's work on inequality, participation, and the role of trusted institutions. Together, this evidence base highlights the limitations of one-off or digital-by-default interventions and underscores the effectiveness of locally embedded, people-centred approaches.

Using IFB Gaming's *Empowering Futures* programme as an applied case, the paper outlines a community pathways framework that integrates access to connectivity and devices with relational support, confidence-building, and onward signposting. This framework emphasises the role of trusted intermediaries—such as libraries and community organisations—as anchor institutions capable of reducing barriers to engagement and supporting progression over time.

The paper concludes by identifying key gaps in current evidence, particularly around longitudinal outcomes and delivery models for populations experiencing multiple forms of exclusion, including people with no recourse to public funds and new arrivals to the UK. It offers policy-oriented recommendations to strengthen national digital inclusion strategies through strategic partnerships, localised delivery, and sustained investment in human digital capacity, positioning community pathways as a core component of inclusive digital infrastructure.



## 1. Introduction

Digital access and literacy are now fundamental to social mobility, economic participation, and civic engagement in the twenty-first century. From accessing employment opportunities and public services to maintaining social connections and exercising civic rights, meaningful participation in contemporary society is increasingly mediated through digital systems. Despite this centrality, digital exclusion remains a persistent and deeply embedded structural inequality in the United Kingdom.

Recent evidence indicates the scale and persistence of this challenge. The Good Things Foundation (2024) estimates that approximately ten million UK residents lack the essential digital skills required for everyday life and employment. This exclusion is not evenly distributed; it disproportionately affects low-income households, older adults, refugees and asylum seekers, people with disabilities, and individuals experiencing multiple forms of social and economic disadvantage. These patterns reflect wider inequalities, reinforcing the understanding that digital exclusion is not simply a skills gap, but a manifestation of broader structural and systemic barriers.

Policy and research increasingly recognise that addressing digital exclusion requires more than technological provision or online training alone. The Independent Review of English Public Libraries (Sanderson, 2024) highlights the role of libraries as key civic institutions that support learning, connectivity, and inclusion, describing them as “trusted public spaces for learning, wellbeing, and connectivity.” The review emphasises that libraries and similar community-based settings function as anchor institutions within local digital ecosystems, capable of restoring trust, reducing stigma, and reengaging individuals who have been marginalised by digital-by-default systems. This perspective underscores a central principle of contemporary digital inclusion scholarship: inclusion is shaped as much by place, trust, and purpose as it is by access to technology.

Within this context, community-based organisations play an increasingly important role in translating policy ambition into lived experience. Initiatives such as IFB Gaming’s *Empowering Futures* programme operationalise people-centred approaches to digital inclusion by combining access to connectivity and devices with skills development, relational support, and local engagement. By embedding digital support within trusted community pathways, such initiatives seek to move beyond one-off interventions towards sustainable participation, confidence, and empowerment. This paper situates these community-based pathways within the wider literature and policy landscape, examining their potential to address structural digital exclusion and contribute to more equitable digital futures.



## 2. The State of Digital Exclusion in England

Digital exclusion is formally defined by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT, 2024) as the inability to access or effectively use online services and tools due to barriers related to affordability, connectivity, skills, or confidence. This definition reflects an increasingly accepted understanding that digital exclusion is multidimensional, extending beyond physical access to encompass economic, cognitive, and emotional barriers.

Current evidence highlights both the scale and complexity of the challenge. Despite widespread digital infrastructure, approximately 1.7 million households in England remain without internet access, indicating persistent gaps in connectivity (Ofcom, 2024). Even where connectivity is available, affordability remains a significant constraint: 12% of low-income households report cutting back on essential expenses in order to maintain internet access, underscoring the financial trade-offs faced by digitally marginalised families (Good Things Foundation, 2024).

Skills and confidence further compound these barriers. The Digital Skills Report (2025) indicates that 28% of adults in England lack at least one essential digital skill required for work, limiting employability and access to increasingly digital public services. Alongside this, emotional and psychological barriers play a substantial role; 36% of digitally excluded Londoners report anxiety or fear related to technology use, highlighting confidence as a critical yet often overlooked dimension of exclusion (LOTI, 2024).

Digital exclusion is also closely linked to educational inequality. Schools in more deprived areas report significantly lower access to learning devices, with device availability estimated to be around 40% lower than in more affluent regions (DfE, 2024). This disparity reinforces intergenerational patterns of exclusion, as limited digital access in childhood constrains educational attainment, skill development, and long-term participation.

Taken together, these indicators demonstrate that digital exclusion in England is a systemic and reinforcing condition. As government, education, healthcare, and employment services continue to shift towards digital-by-default delivery, the risks of entrenching existing social and economic inequalities intensify. Addressing digital exclusion therefore requires coordinated, people-centred responses that recognise access, affordability, skills, and confidence as interconnected components of digital participation.

### 2.1 From National Policy Ambition to Local Delivery Gaps

Recent national policy developments signal a growing recognition of digital inclusion as a core component of social and economic participation. However, despite increased strategic attention, a persistent gap remains between national ambition and local delivery. While



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frameworks such as the UK Digital Inclusion Plan (DSIT, 2025) articulate clear objectives, the mechanisms through which these objectives translate into consistent, effective outcomes at community level remain underdeveloped.

Existing policy instruments largely emphasise measurement, coordination, and partnership, yet offer limited guidance on how inclusion should be operationalised in contexts characterised by low trust, multiple disadvantage, or complex social needs. Local authorities and delivery partners are often tasked with implementation without commensurate long-term funding, shared standards for community engagement, or evidence-based models that address confidence, habit formation, and sustained participation.

This disconnect reflects a broader tension identified within digital inclusion scholarship: while structural inequalities are increasingly acknowledged at policy level, delivery models frequently revert to short-term, access-focused interventions. As a result, individuals most affected by digital exclusion—such as people with no recourse to public funds, refugees and asylum seekers, and those experiencing economic precarity—continue to encounter fragmented and inconsistent support.

It is within this space between national policy intent and local lived experience that community-based pathways to digital inclusion have emerged as a promising, yet under-examined, approach. The following literature review examines the theoretical, empirical, and policy foundations underpinning these pathways, with particular attention to trust, place-based delivery, and the role of intermediary organisations in translating policy goals into meaningful participation.



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## 2.2 National Policy Developments: The 2025 Digital Inclusion Plan and Parliamentary Oversight

Recent policy developments have elevated digital inclusion to a prominent position within the UK's national agenda. The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) launched the *UK Digital Inclusion Plan* (2025), framing digital equity as “a shared national mission” and explicitly recognising digital participation as essential to economic productivity, public service access, and social cohesion (DSIT, 2025, p. 3).

The plan sets out a five-pillar strategy encompassing universal access, digital skills for life and work, digital health inclusion, locally led delivery, and accountability through improved measurement. Notably, this framework marks a shift away from purely infrastructural approaches towards a more human-centred understanding of digital inclusion, acknowledging that access alone is insufficient without confidence, capability, and trust.

A central innovation within the plan is the introduction of the National Digital Inclusion Index (NDII), designed to track disparities in connectivity, affordability, and skills at national, regional, and local levels. The NDII aims to strengthen accountability and enable more targeted interventions by identifying where exclusion persists. In parallel, the plan emphasises decentralised delivery, positioning local authorities, libraries, social enterprises, and voluntary organisations as key partners in adapting national priorities to local contexts.

Alongside executive policy action, parliamentary scrutiny has reinforced the urgency of reform. The House of Lords Digital Exclusion Committee (2025) launched a national inquiry examining the socioeconomic costs of digital exclusion and the effectiveness of existing government responses. Its Interim Report concludes that “community-based, trusted organisations deliver the highest return on inclusion investment” (House of Lords, 2025, p. 12), highlighting the comparative effectiveness of locally embedded delivery models over centrally administered schemes.

However, the Committee also identifies significant structural weaknesses, warning that current efforts remain “fragmented and underfunded” and lack a coherent long-term delivery architecture (House of Lords, 2025). Among its recommendations are the appointment of a National Digital Inclusion Commissioner and the introduction of statutory equity targets by 2030, signalling growing concern that digital exclusion has become a systemic policy failure rather than a marginal issue. As the Committee concludes, “digital exclusion has become a modern social determinant of inequality” (House of Lords, 2025, p. 14).



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Taken together, these policy developments reflect an emerging consensus that digital inclusion must be addressed through coordinated, place based, and people-centred approaches. They also expose a critical implementation challenge: while national strategies increasingly recognise the importance of trust, local delivery, and partnership, there remains limited clarity on how these principles should be operationalised in practice. This tension provides a direct rationale for examining community-based pathways to digital inclusion, which the following literature review explores in greater depth.

### 3. Literature Review and Theoretical Context

Digital inclusion scholarship increasingly positions access and literacy not as ends in themselves, but as enabling conditions for social and economic participation, shaping individuals' capacity to engage with work, services, and civic life (Helsper & Reisdorf, 2017). Building on this, Digital Capital Theory argues that digital participation enhances an individual's ability to convert skills, networks, and resources into tangible social and economic outcomes, reinforcing the cumulative nature of advantage and disadvantage (Ragnedda & Mutsvairo, 2018).

Contemporary literature consistently demonstrates that digital inequality mirrors wider social inequality, indicating that interventions focused solely on skills acquisition or access are insufficient. Instead, effective digital inclusion requires addressing both structural barriers—such as affordability, service design, and institutional assumptions—and human capability development, including confidence, trust, and perceived relevance (Helsper, 2021). Empirical evidence from the Digital Skills Charity (2025) further confirms that digital capability is strongly associated with improved employment prospects, wellbeing, and civic participation.

A growing body of research suggests that localised, trust-based interventions outperform top-down digital training schemes, particularly for populations experiencing persistent exclusion. Community learning models embedded within familiar and accessible institutions, such as libraries and community hubs, have been shown to engage digitally marginalised groups more effectively by reducing stigma and lowering psychological and practical barriers to participation (Taylor et al., 2022).

This emphasis on trusted, place-based delivery aligns closely with Dame Carol Black's foundational work on inequality, health, and participation. Her landmark reviews (Black, 2008; Black & Frost, 2011) establish that exclusion emerges through cumulative disadvantage and systemic barriers rather than individual deficit. More recent policy discourse building on this tradition has reinforced the importance of anchor institutions—including libraries and grassroots organisations—as trusted environments capable of re-engaging excluded groups through empathy, relational support, and tailored provision. The



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UK Government's digital policy agenda similarly acknowledges that "digital inclusion cannot be achieved without human connection and local trust networks" (DSIT, 2025, p. 11).

Within this framing, participation in contemporary society is increasingly mediated through digital systems. Access to healthcare, employment services, education, housing, and social

connection now depends on reliable connectivity, appropriate devices, and the confidence to navigate digital environments. As a result, digital exclusion functions as a modern social determinant of health, work, and wellbeing, reinforcing existing inequalities and constraining individuals' ability to engage with essential services (Watts, 2020; NHS Digital, 2022; Marmot et al., 2020).

Research on people-centred public services further demonstrates that systems relying on digital-by-default delivery, complex interfaces, or assumptions of user competence disproportionately exclude those facing poverty, language barriers, migration-related precarity, disability, or low trust in institutions. These findings challenge deficit-based narratives that frame exclusion as a failure of individuals to "keep up" with technological change, instead highlighting the role of service design and institutional practice in producing exclusion (Marmot et al., 2020).

In response, a substantial body of literature points to the effectiveness of community-based intermediaries in bridging digital exclusion. Trusted local organisations—including libraries, community centres, faith groups, and voluntary sector partners—act as navigators between individuals and complex digital systems, providing not only access to devices and data but also reassurance, contextualised guidance, and relational support (Taylor et al., 2022). Such intermediaries operationalise Dame Carol Black's people-centred, systems-oriented approach by embedding support within everyday community contexts.

Crucially, evidence indicates that one-off interventions, such as isolated device distribution or standalone skills workshops, rarely produce sustained change. Instead, durable outcomes emerge through community pathways: sequenced forms of support that combine access, trust-building, confidence development, and onward signposting over time (Helsper & van Deursen, 2017). These pathways recognise digital inclusion as a process rather than an event, shaped by habit formation, self-efficacy, and relevance to everyday life.

Despite growing recognition of the value of community pathways, there remains limited empirical research examining how such pathways operate longitudinally in practice, how they can be standardised without undermining local responsiveness, and how outcomes beyond basic access—such as confidence, participation, and sustained engagement—should be measured. This gap is particularly pronounced for groups experiencing multiple layers of exclusion, including people with no recourse to public funds, refugees and asylum seekers, and individuals newly arriving in the UK. While policy discourse acknowledges the



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importance of inclusion, delivery models often lack the flexibility, trust, and local embeddedness required to reach these populations effectively.

This literature therefore establishes a compelling case for examining community-based pathways to digital inclusion as a delivery model grounded in Dame Carol Black's people-centred, systems-oriented framework. It also highlights the need for applied research that connects policy intent with operational practice, generating evidence to support scalable, ethical, and effective inclusion strategies. This study responds to that need by examining how community pathways function in practice and how they can be strengthened to support equitable participation in an increasingly digital society.

## 4. Case Study: Empowering Futures by IFB Gaming

IFB Gaming is a UK-based social enterprise operating at the intersection of gaming, technology, education, and community development. Distinct from commercial gaming organisations oriented primarily towards entertainment and profit, IFB Gaming functions as a research-informed learning organisation, using interactive and game-based approaches to explore digital behaviour, strengthen digital confidence, and support inclusive participation within communities.

Its flagship *Empowering Futures* programme delivers community-based digital inclusion through partnerships with local authorities, charities, educational institutions, and funders. The programme is designed to operationalise people-centred and place-based inclusion principles by embedding digital support within trusted community settings and tailoring provision to local need.

Since its launch, *Empowering Futures* has supported more than 1,000 individuals through a combination of connectivity provision, device access, and guided digital learning environments. Delivery has prioritised groups experiencing multiple forms of exclusion, including low-income households, refugees and asylum seekers, and individuals with no recourse to public funds.

The programme comprises four core components aligned with a community pathways approach:

- **Provision of Connectivity and Devices:** Distribution of free SIM cards, refurbished laptops and tablets, and access to local connectivity hubs to reduce immediate access and affordability barriers.



- **Digital Skills and Confidence Development:** Structured workshops and facilitated learning sessions addressing essential digital skills for everyday life and employment, alongside online safety and service navigation.
- **Sustainability Integration:** Delivery of carbon literacy and sustainable technology modules that link digital participation with environmental awareness and responsible technology use.
- **Community Hubs (“Data Waypoints”):** Establishment of trusted, supervised spaces where participants can access devices, receive guidance, and build confidence through relational support and peer learning.

Preliminary outcomes from the 2024–2025 delivery period indicate measurable improvements in participants’ digital confidence, social participation, and employment readiness. As a preliminary applied case, these outcomes should be interpreted cautiously pending longitudinal evaluation.

These findings suggest that community-embedded delivery models can effectively translate national inclusion strategies into tangible outcomes, particularly for individuals unlikely to engage with conventional or centralised digital support programmes.

## 5. Policy Hypothesis and Discussion

This study advances the hypothesis that community-based digital inclusion interventions characterised by accessibility, relational support, and sustainability generate greater and more durable improvements in social mobility and wellbeing than centralised, skills-only models.

Evidence from the *Empowering Futures* case study supports this hypothesis. Participants demonstrated not only enhanced technical competence, but also increased confidence, autonomy, and readiness to engage with employment, education, and public services. These outcomes align with DSIT’s (2025) emphasis on digital inclusion as a “shared responsibility across government, industry, and civil society,” requiring collaboration rather than siloed delivery.

The findings also reflect broader policy consensus articulated in the *UK Digital Inclusion Plan* (2025) and the House of Lords Digital Exclusion Committee’s inquiry, both of which highlight the limitations of fragmented, short-term interventions. Instead, these policy frameworks advocate for people-centred, place-based approaches that prioritise trust, local knowledge, and sustained engagement.

Within this context, IFB Gaming’s approach illustrates how national policy aspirations can be enacted at community level. By combining access, skills development, and relational support



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within trusted settings, *Empowering Futures* demonstrates a practical model for translating strategic ambition into lived impact. The case study thus contributes applied evidence to ongoing policy debates concerning the most effective mechanisms for addressing structural digital exclusion.

## 6. Policy Recommendations

Drawing on the literature, policy analysis, and case study findings, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen digital inclusion strategy and delivery in England:

- 1. Adopt Localised Partnership Models**

National and local government should strengthen collaboration with libraries, community organisations, and social enterprises to deliver tailored digital inclusion programmes grounded in local contexts and trusted relationships.

- 2. Invest in Human Digital Capacity**

Funding should prioritise Digital Champions, Community Connectors, and facilitators who can translate national strategies into relational, people-centred support that addresses confidence and habit formation alongside skills.

- 3. Embed Digital Inclusion Across Education and Health Policy**

Digital capability should be integrated within lifelong learning frameworks and reflected in NHS digital service design to ensure equitable access to education, healthcare, and wellbeing support.

- 4. Sustain Community Digital Infrastructure**

Long-term investment is required to maintain community digital hubs, support device refurbishment schemes, and enable social enterprises to scale proven inclusion models without reliance on short-term funding cycles.

- 5. Promote Carbon-Literate Digital Development**

Digital inclusion initiatives should align with sustainability goals by embedding carbon literacy, circular economy practices, and responsible technology use within programme design.

- 6. Establish National Leadership and Accountability**

The appointment of a UK Digital Inclusion Commissioner, supported by statutory equity targets and cross-departmental oversight, would strengthen coordination, accountability, and long-term strategic coherence.



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## 7. Conclusion

Digital inclusion has emerged as a cornerstone of social equity in an increasingly digitised society. Addressing the digital divide requires more than infrastructure and skills provision; it demands trust, empathy, and sustained community empowerment.

As Dame Carol Black's work on inequality and participation underscores, inclusive systems are built within shared community spaces that enable individuals not only to connect, but to belong. The *Empowering Futures* programme demonstrates how such spaces can be cultivated through community-based pathways that integrate access, learning, and relational support.

Taken together with the *UK Digital Inclusion Plan* (2025) and the House of Lords Digital Exclusion Committee's findings, this study reinforces the conclusion that the future of digital equity in England will depend on locally embedded, people-centred delivery models. Community pathways, when supported by coherent national strategy and sustained investment, offer a scalable and ethically grounded route towards inclusive digital participation and social resilience.



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