



TACKLING DIGITAL EXCLUSION

Resolution Shortlist Briefing Notes



Tackling Digital Exclusion

Digital exclusion in the UK is preventing a significant proportion of the population from accessing the internet, and therefore limiting access to essential services, learning opportunities and social connection. This can be due to a lack of internet connection, lack of access to devices or lack of digital literacy. With millions of people affected, the NFWI calls on the government to increase investment in digital infrastructure, ensure access to suitable devices and appropriate education and training.

Proposer's position

The proposer would like the WI to launch a campaign calling on the Government to allocate more funding to improving digital infrastructure and access to the internet, as well as ensure greater access to devices and digital skills training.

The scale of the problem

According to a 2021 Ofcom report, 1.5 million homes in the UK do not have internet access. A study by Lloyds Bank also found that nine million people struggle to use the internet independently.

The main reasons for not using the internet include lack of interest or perceived need, privacy and security concerns, lack of ability to use it, and cost of access. Not being able to access the internet can impact people's access to health services, housing support, social care and employment. This has been exacerbated during the pandemic as more services and social activities have moved online.

A 2020 Lloyds Bank survey found that 80% of respondents agreed that technology had provided them with vital support during the pandemic, which suggests that people unable to use or access technology may be significantly disadvantaged.

A lack of online safety skills may have also put some people at a higher risk of harm during this time as misinformation and financial scams have increased.

The pandemic has particularly contributed to the digital exclusion of children. According to Ofcom, 20% of children were without access to a device for learning while schools were closed. The Education Endowment Fund has found that this is likely to have disrupted the education of children from disadvantaged backgrounds in particular.

The current situation

During the 2019 election, the Government pledged to roll out full fibre broadband to the whole of the UK by 2025. This commitment has since been downgraded to 85% roll out by 2025 and full coverage 'as soon as possible'.

The Government has stated that it has 'worked closely with providers to ensure social tariffs are in place that provide low cost landline and broadband services for those on means-tested state benefits'. It has also said it plans to introduce policy reforms to make it easier for the industry to build new telecommunications infrastructure.

In England, the Department for Education provided around 220,000 devices to disadvantaged school children during the 2020 summer term. It has also committed to continue distribution in the 2020-2021 schoolyear. In Wales, the Welsh Government pledged £3 million for local authorities to enable them to support school children to access the internet. It had also delivered 745 devices by June 2020.

Earlier this year, the Government set up the £2.5 million Digital Lifeline Fund to provide access to devices, data and digital support for people with learning disabilities who can't afford to get online.

In 2020, the Government set up the Tackling Loneliness Network (TLN) as a part of its plan to tackle loneliness during coronavirus, consisting of actors from wider society. One of the main themes of the network's work is digital inclusion. A Digital Inclusion task and finishing group has been set up to improve access to devices, learning and support.

The Government has also provided free online training since the beginning of lockdown to boost workplace skills. In September 2020, the Government announced £8 million of funding for digital skills 'boot camps', by offering a free, fully-funded college course to untrained adults.

The NHS is developing plans to support digital inclusion. It has also been asked by the Government to ensure that everyone receives the same level of access, advice and care however they choose to interact with services.

Nevertheless, there is a need to make digital inclusion a priority to prevent it from further widening social inequality. Good Things Foundation has called for £130 million over the next four years to improve digital inclusion. It is also calling for internet access to be recognised as an essential utility, such as electricity, and a digital strategy to make digital inclusion a social priority.

Age UK has said that many older people have not started using the internet as a result of the pandemic and are at risk of not being able to access services. The charity has called for greater support for those who are offline and more and sustained investment in digital skills training and IT hardware for older people.

How could the WI work on this issue if it was passed?

A full campaign would be developed by the NFWI if the resolution is passed, taking into account developments since then. To help inform your discussions, here are some ways the WI could consider working on this issue.

At local and regional levels, WI members could host educational events or share educational materials to support their local communities to get online. Members could also work with local authorities and specialist organisations to promote digital connectivity and literacy.

Nationally, the NFWI could build on the work of NFWI-Wales and engage with specialist organisations to develop educational resources and support policy initiatives promoting digital inclusion and broadband access.

The NFWI could also call on the Government to take further action to address digital exclusion.

Points to consider:

- This resolution could tie in well with the organisation's educational charitable object, and strategic focus on inclusivity, as well as our broader work around supporting and enabling members to use digital tools.
- This resolution offers an opportunity for the NFWI to build on the work currently being undertaken by NFWI-Wales around digital inclusion and access to broadband.
- The Government has recently taken a number of steps to widen access to devices and digital skills, including through investment. How achievable is it to call for further funding on this?
- The pandemic has drawn national attention to the problem of digital exclusion and the issue is already on the agenda of a number of organisations. How could a WI campaign build on existing campaigns and add value to the work underway in the sector?

Further information

Good Things Foundation: www.goodthingsfoundation.org/the-digital-divide/

Citizens Online: www.citizensonline.org.uk/digital-inclusion/

House of Commons Library: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2020-0162/>

Infographic

Good Things Foundation: <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/insights/building-a-digital-nation/>

Public Affairs Department Contacts

If you have any questions about the resolutions or the resolutions process then please get in touch with the NFWI Public Affairs department.

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