STATE OF DIGITAL EXCLUSION REPORT: SOUTHWARK (SE16) AND UNITED KINGDOM

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Who are RJ4All?

Our organisation, 'Restorative Justice for All' (RJ4All), is an international institute devoted to using the core values of restorative justice to empower the community to address power abuse, conflict, and poverty. Restorative Justice can be described as a practice or ethos which embody the core values of power-sharing, equality and involvement in decision making. As an organisation, we have the vision of building the world's first restorative justice postcode in SE16 by redistributing local power, collaborating with local stakeholders, and providing holistic poverty alleviation services. With this postcode project at the centre of our work at RJ4All it is vital that we identify, research and ultimately address issues facing members of our community. This report aims to express our concerns and raise awareness of the growing challenge of 'digital exclusion' in the UK and more specifically the Southwark area. Addressing 'digital exclusion' is important to RJ4All as it can have significant negative implications for those who are excluded from technology or do not have access to the internet, such as a lack of employment and learning opportunities, negative effects on well-being and problems accessing vital services. We are working to tackle this digital poverty and restore power to those digitally excluded by improving internet access in our local SE16 area as well as the number of opportunities for digital learning, social inclusion, and community empowerment. RJ4All provides a digital hub offering, free data, devices, IT access and digital drop-in sessions for one-to-one digital support for individuals lacking the basic skills necessary to access the internet. Providing these digital services supports our vision to create spaces for socialisation, integration and community cohesion in SE16 and beyond.

Defining digital exclusion and its implication

The term 'digital exclusion' has been widely discussed in the recent literature. The House of Lords describes the concept of digital exclusion as an exclusion from the digital world which does not enable certain fractions of society to fully participate in modern society[1]. There are various aspects and factors contributing to digital exclusion which can be considered when exploring the topic.

The National Health Service (NHS) considers the most prominent forms of digital exclusion to be a lack of digital skills, which covers the ability to use devices, inaccessibility to fast

[1] House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee Digital Exclusion (June 2023) *3rd report of the session 2022-2023*

and affordable broadband, and a lack of assistive technology presence[2]. The NHS identifies up to 6 different categories of barriers to inclusion, listed below:

Category 1 - Lack of access
Category 2 - Lack of skills
Category 3 - Lack of confidence
Category 4 - Lack of motivation
Category 5 - Lack of design
Category 6 - Lack of awareness

The 6 categories listed by the NHS demonstrate the breadth of areas which can act as a factor for digital exclusion. Achieving digital inclusion would therefore imply that each of these aspects has been mitigated against.

When considering **access and skills** (categories 1 and 2), the most notorious issues are individuals' inability to go online due to the cost of internet access in combination with a lack of basic knowledge about the internet, according to the NHS. The NHS interestingly points out that the above barriers often come alongside a general lack of confidence and motivation (categories 3 and 4). Discouraged and disempowered people might see the digital world as an enemy rather than an ally which is of resource to them. For example, the fear of being scammed or frauded more easily on the internet, especially if they don't have the tools to protect themselves, may discourage them to engage with the digital world. This in turn dramatically decrease their motivation to even learn a basic skill. While a personal choice not to go online must be respected, it is important to ensure this choice is not influenced by a lack of skill as a co-factor in their motive to protecting themselves from the dangers of connecting online.

For category 5 on the other hand, it is important to understand that not every design, whether software, device, or application, fits the needs and abilities of all people. Those with disabilities are as entitled to accessible technological design as those without disabilities to be able to connect safely and effectively. Within the current digital sphere, a vast majority of designs are not as user-friendly or inclusive as they could be. This includes every day online resources, PDF files and even governmental forms to receive benefits. And finally, many individuals remain unaware of the vast number of services they can enjoy online, and therefore they have no incentive in connecting.

After having defined what it means to be digitally excluded, it is worth reflecting on the implications this exclusion is having on the everyday lives of those who are excluded. Without adequate digital skills, it can be extremely difficult to manage your money for

[2] NHS (January 2023) *What we mean by digital inclusion*

example. Individuals without a smartphone or without the ability to use one confidently are highly unlikely to download their bank apps. This will inevitably impact on the management of their money. Similarly, booking a health appointment is more complicated and time-consuming without basic level of digital skill, as booking systems in the UK are mostly online. As demonstrated later in this report, these barriers have also further critical consequences on the independence and freedom that people have.

Data

According to the NHS, in the UK, nearly 5 million people, which accounts for more than 7% of the UK population, never go online, while more than 11 million (almost 13%) significantly lack the skills to use the internet effectively. According to Lloyds consumer digital index 2019, 22% of the UK population do not have the skills they need to conduct a basic everyday life supported by technology and, although the prediction showed improvements, it was estimated in 2019 that 8 million people in 2030 will remain offline.

The pandemic and the subsequent need for learning new basic skills to conduct a normal life critically accelerated the process, according to the Lloyds Bank 2022 report, estimating the number of people completely offline to be now between half a million and a million.

Looking at London-wide data in Greater London, according to the Office for National Statistics, in London, 270,000 people are completely offline and 2 million people[3] have extremely limited usage, meaning that they struggle to access health services and bank accounts.

According to Lloyds Bank, nearly 86% of those counted as completely offline reported this to be due to personal choice, and nearly 62,000 people reported having someone going online on their behalf (e.g., booking health appointments and running bank transfers/ managing bank funds).[4]

Lloyds Bank also conducted an extensive survey in 2022 targeting individuals who are not online. When they were asked the reason why surveyed people did not use the internet for the past 3 month, the results were particularly revealing. [5]

[3] Office for National Statistics "Internet Use by borough", 2019
[4] Lloyds Bank, UK Consumer Digital Index, 2022
[5] Lloyds Bank, UK Consumer Digital Index, 2022

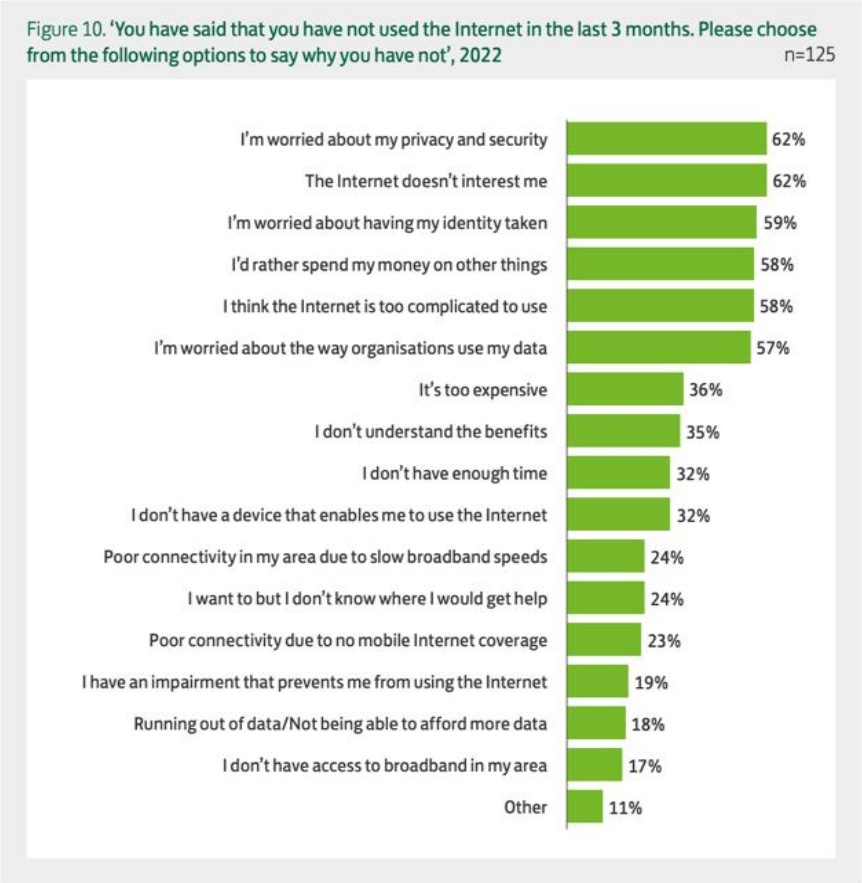

Figure 1. Reasons why people chose not to go online (Lloyds Bank)

As figure 1 shows, the most prominent issues reported was about cyber-security, with survey respondents worrying that their privacy or identity could be compromised. Another important issue related to the costs, with people reporting that they would rather spend money on something else or that it is simply too expensive to connect.

Here Lloyds Bank concluded that support, affordable devices, and data could convince 30% of those individuals to connect. The other 70% on the other hand having security concerns therefore needed more training to become aware of how to avoid scams and protect their privacy.[6]

[6] Lloyds Bank, UK Consumer Digital Index, 2022

According to the London Office of Technology and Innovation (LOTI), those who can consider themselves as highly engaged in the UK are only 30 million people (roughly 45% of UK population), while as many as 86% of adults in the UK use the internet regularly.

Additionally, certain demographics are more likely to experience digital exclusion, according to the House of Lords[7] and Lloyds Bank[8]. These demographics include:

- older people
- people in lower-income groups
- people without a job
- people in social housing
- people with disabilities
- people with fewer educational qualifications excluded left school before 16
- people living in rural areas
- homeless people
- people whose first language is not English.

According to a statistical analysis made by Lloyds Bank, and confirmed by the house of Lords report, those with a disability are 35% less likely to have the digital skills they need in life.

In addition, LOTI reports that 8.7 million people have essential digital skills for life but not for work, which poses a distinction between these two types of exclusion.

Implications

After having considered the above results, Lloyds Bank found a correlation between financial capabilities/stability and digital skills, as people with high digital capabilities are twice as likely to have a more stable financial situation due to high financial capabilities. This implies that investing in people's digital skills means investing in their financial and therefore overall wellbeing. According to the same report, those with higher digital skills than average, are:

- 11 times more likely to check their bank balance
- Saving 3.6 times more frequently
- Saving 3.5 times more money.

[7] House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee Digital Exclusion (June 2023) *3rd report of the session 2022-2023*
[8] Lloyds Bank, UK Consumer Digital Index, 2022

Furthermore, digital skills seem to have a positive impact on people's finance in every demographic.

When exploring aspects around **employability**, digital exclusion appears to be a strong determining factor, as 92% of employers expect at least a basic level of digital skill from employees. The pandemic interestingly seemed to have fostered more inclusion in all demographics, according to LOTI, as 65% of people video-called the first time during that period (including 24% those aged over-75). Regarding individuals' **well-being**, digital inclusion is reported to have a positive effect on the level of happiness, health, bills and salaries. Digital capability helps people connect better with their distant loved ones, maintain a balanced lifestyle, increases probability of getting a better-paid job and gives tips to save money on our bills.

Overall, then, digital exclusion is inter-connected with multiple other issues and cross-factors that are affecting the UK population. Addressing and tackling digital exclusion at its roots would also imply strategically addressing, at least partly, some other issues, such as poverty and loneliness.

SE16 and digital exclusion

After having looked at digital exclusion and its implications on a large scale within the United Kingdom, the report now investigates the situation in SE16 (Southwark), the South-East London postcode in which RJ4All is implementing its restorative justice approaches to build the world's first restorative justice postcode in the world. This postcode covers the areas of Rotherhithe, Surrey Quays and a part of Bermondsey and it fully refers to the authority of Southwark Council.

According to a dataset provided by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) on internet usage, Southwark and Lewisham (the neighbouring council) have 16,000 people that are offline[9], out of a population of more than 570,000 people, which accounts for roughly 3% of the population[10]. It is worth noting that these numbers date from 2020. As previously stated, the pandemic has played a role on digital inclusivity and numbers may have changed one way or the other since then.

Southwark council conducted a consultation with its residents located in Rotherhithe[11]. Results showed that bad broadband connectivity was a significant problem raised by

[9] Office of National Statistics, "Internet users 2020", 6 April 2021
[10] ONS dataset
[11] Better Broadband for Southwark Website : https://www.southwark.gov.uk/housing/better-broadband-for-southwark

residents. In the cabinet meeting that followed this consultation, residents in areas such as Rotherhithe and Canada Water, reported having broadband that does not go at more than 2 Mbps and believed broadband that goes at 1.5 Mbps was “normal“. This is very far from the government definition of fast broadband, which states that acceptable broadband should go above 24 Mbps. It was even very far from the government baseline for Universal Service obligation. The council responded to those issues through the publication and implementation of the Digital Infrastructure Strategy and now the strategy for Digital inclusion. This strategy aims to make Southwark one of the most connected boroughs in London and it aims to tackle digital exclusion by giving residents the tools, skills, and technology to participate in today’s society. This includes providing a fast and reliable internet connection.[12]

Despite the council efforts, there are still reports that the area of Rotherhithe and Surrey Quays is particularly tough to connect, as reported in a Council document that aims to answer the frequently asked questions about Broadband in Rotherhithe[13]. Rotherhithe, is far from the nearest telephone exchange, located in Lynton Road, 1.3 km from Lower Road. This seems to negatively affect the connectivity of the area. It is virtually impossible to connect some households to Openfibre as many properties are reported to have only copper landlines that do not connect to the Open Cabinet green boxes[14]. Given the previous analysis and the current situation, SE16 still lacks access to a fast connection.

On a more local level, data collected from service users from the RJ4All Rotherhithe Community Centre painted a similar picture, with 25% of those surveyed not having broadband or WiFi connection at home. The RJ4All community centre has an average download speed of 6.8 Mbps, which is categorised as slow-fine internet speed, however this is significantly lower than the recommended network rates for work and school. Furthermore, the Digital Economy Act 2017, aimed to enforce a minimum download speed of 10 Mbps in the UK[15]. When asked about the efficiency of network connectivity at home, one Southwark resident described his connection as ”frustrating”, mentioning his internet was generally quite slow and would occasionally disconnect, however it was reasonable for his daily activities which consisted of browsing emails and surfing the internet.

The Council’s strategy seems to work in the right direction to tackle key barriers such as giving permission to upgrade the fibre lines. However, this upgrading requires consequent work and refurbishment plans for renewal of buildings and cable lines which inevitably

[12] Southwark digital strategy
[13] Frequently asked questions about Broadband in Rotherhithe
[14] Southwark Council: *Frequently asked questions about Broadband in Rotherhithe.* 2021
[15] Southwark Council, ’Digital Infrastructure Strategy 2017-2020'.

takes time. Southwark Council aims to have achieved their objectives by 2027. However, according to the Daily Express, the average cost of broadband in London is about £28 for a household, given that they already have fibre installed[16]. Service users of the RJ4All centre reported broadband costs "increasing considerably" in recent years, with one resident paying £50 a month. The RJ4All Rotherhithe Community Centre, which is now a digital hub, is having difficulty using a regular broadband line and needs to rely on 5G to operate. To build up a fast wi-fi would cost around £7,000 just for the installation, with a monthly fee higher than £200. As a non-profit organisation, RJ4All is currently seeking funds to implement this, but in the meantime, its employees and its users must rely on 4 or 5G according to their mobile plan.

Another project currently undertaken by Southwark Council is their Digital Champion Scheme[17]. This programme has the potential to tackle multiple digital exclusion categories previously mentioned, including categories 2 (Skills), 3 (Confidence) and 4 (Motivation). The Digital Champion role is a volunteering role that Southwark Council is providing to tackle digital exclusion throughout the council, now consisting of 30 volunteers who are undertaking local programmes in the borough to try and engage more people. Although there will always remain a fraction of people that are out of reach due to their own personal choice to disengage with the digital world, whether cross-factor with other exclusion categories or not, the digital champions endeavour to teach digital skills to the local community and work with community centres to provide spaces in which the community can get online, freely, safely and confidently.

A seasoned Southwark Council Digital Champion, currently volunteering at both the RJ4All Rotherhithe Community Centre and Time & Talents located in SE16, reported that the amount of people he supports on a weekly basis average around 10 across 4 hours of work per week. Working alongside around 30 other volunteering colleagues across Southwark, they appear to report the same levels of need. Most users are reported to be elderly people often seeking support on completing forms for pension and benefits. They tend to report that procedures are too complicated for them and therefore not designed properly for their needs. The volunteer also reported the RJ4All Rotherhithe Community Centre receives a lot of requests for free SIM cards and devices, indicating a lack of access which likely negatively impacted the level of motivation. Volunteers also reported supporting people who are worried about their personal information being hacked. Those individuals often not seeking any specific training on how to avoid scams, but rather a confirmation that they have been targeted, particularly with phone calls.

[16] UK broadband price shock: New map reveals why you are paying too much
[17] Southwark Council strategy for digital Inclusion

The above demonstrates that coordinated efforts are being made to close the digital gap. Furthermore, various local organisations are taking initiatives to contribute to reducing digital exclusion. Libraries and community centres across SE16 are making strong efforts to reduce the number of people being digitally excluded. Organisations like the Docklands Settlement and the Canada Water Library are providing safe spaces to connect and improve digital skills. RJ4All new digital hub has similar aims as it provides a safe space to connect and learn basic digital skills.

However, there is much more that remains to be done, ranging from accessibility, awareness, skills, and other cross-factors to exclusion. A common theme identified by users is that they are not aware of initiatives that may potentially be beneficial to them. It is hoped that the ongoing interventions are made in a structural way which will foster long-term development while dealing with cross-factor issues. Further efforts need to be made to close the digital gap and reduce digital exclusion in SE16, especially considering the high level of inequality and poverty in the area. While accessing the internet has become part of our everyday life, so has the cost-of-living crisis along with financial and economic challenges, which are closely linked to digital exclusion. A strategic response to tackle digital exclusion at its roots will require a holistic model of intervention and support.

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