



WORKING TOWARD DIGITAL
EQUITY IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE

DIGITAL DIVIDES

“ With so many of the things that people rely on to survive and thrive now taking place online those of us who are not online are becoming increasingly disadvantaged and disconnected. ”

Introduction

- During the Covid-19 pandemic, access to the digital world became more critical than ever. Information, services and social life were pushed increasingly on-line; the digitisation of essential public services accelerated.
- Long-standing inequalities were exposed, with **a range of groups disproportionately disadvantaged by the increasing turn to digital**. Disabled people, older people, those on low incomes, people with mental health challenges, those living in rural areas where connectivity is poor were amongst those left behind.
- **This exclusion comes at a great cost** – a cost to the communities who are cut off; to the county getting left behind by better connected places; and a tangible cost to individuals who as a result are paying higher bills than those who are on-line, find it harder to book health appointments or make benefit applications and miss out on the potential connections.
- **Charities and voluntary sector organisations are at the forefront of trying to help the excluded stay connected**, to address the need for IT hardware and skills. A number of these organisations came together at this time to consider if a less piecemeal response could emerge.
- The partners behind Digital Divides share **a motivation to catalyse collective action** to close the digital divides in our county.
- This is about recognising that much more of everyday life is now being conducted online. Not everyone who wants to participate in this way is able to because of barriers in connectivity, hardware or skills/confidence. **These people are excluded and we must see action taken that enables them to be able to participate fully.**
- This is NOT about compelling everyone to be online, however. Some people choose not to participate in the on-line world or find it prohibitively difficult to do so. These people are excluded when ‘digital by default’ does not provide a realistic alternative to enable them to still participate fully. **We need to advocate that provision of offline alternatives to digital services must remain.**
- The experience during the Coronavirus pandemic shone a light on the digital divides, but they have been there, and growing, for some time. The exclusion faced by those unable to socially connect online, those unable to access services that moved exclusively online, those unable to participate in home-schooling set online is not limited to the time of a pandemic. **Let the pandemic be the catalyst to us doing something about it.**

“ There are people out there who still cannot access (our webpage and social media sites) not only because they can’t use it, but they can’t afford the internet, or they haven’t got the technology to use the internet. So, we still put leaflets out there and signs in shops. ”



High Risk Areas for Digital Exclusion exist in Every District

Forest of Dean:

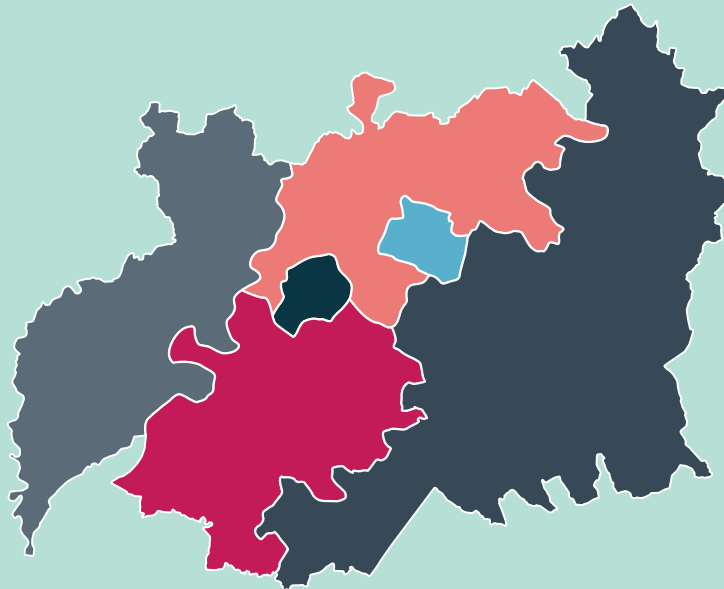
Cinderford,
Newnham
and Blakeney

Gloucester:

the Centre,
Westgate and
Matson/
Robinswood

Stroud:

Stroud Town,
Minchinhampton
and Amberley



Tewkesbury:

Shurdington and
Badgeworth

Cheltenham:

pockets in
Hesters Way,
Arle and Oakley

Cotswolds:

Moreton, Stow
and Cirencester
Central

Our Approach

- Our energy at the start of this programme has gone into collating a single local evidence base to inform activity that is needed to improve the digital inclusion of all citizens of Gloucestershire.
- We have commissioned and received:
 - Digital exclusion risk-mapping from Citizens Online
 - Community asset mapping from Candace Plouffe
 - An academic collation of key digital exclusion examples from University of Gloucestershire.
- All these resources are shared in full alongside this overview so that the county can benefit from the findings from the reports.
- All the reports are available through the dedicated Digital Divides website www.digitaldivides.co.uk or on request by calling 07845 015009.
- A short film highlighting the issues with real case studies from Gloucestershire residents is also available on the website. Some quotes from those who are featured are reproduced in this report.
- This overview report includes the observations and recommendations we feel arise from what we have seen.
- Our hope is that as a county we are motivated to action by seeing the reality of digital exclusion in our communities, but also inspired to build on the assets and opportunities that already exist.
- The academic research we have received confirms that whilst there is much written about the reality and impact of digital exclusion, less is known about what really works in overcoming exclusion.
- We hope Gloucestershire can contribute to this knowledge base through how we respond to the challenge here.

Recommendations for Gloucestershire

1. Develop a Strategic Plan for Digital Inclusion for Gloucestershire



- There is clearly lots of activity and thinking in Gloucestershire about digital infrastructure, expanding digital services and provision of digital skills training. There is interest in increasing digital connections as part of economic development plans, regeneration, learning and education, and the transformation of health and social care.
- What we lack is a clear and coherent vision for digital inclusion – **what is our ultimate aspiration for the digital inclusion of all citizens of Gloucestershire?** For example, would we consider private access to the internet a goal for all, or is it sufficient to provide public access points?
- Our mapping highlights that digital inclusion activity is patchy across the county, it varies across and within localities and crucially **there is no coherent allocation of resources to match the areas where people are most likely to be digitally excluded.**
- We need a **comprehensive, all age, countywide, but, crucially, locality-based strategic plan** in place on how to address the 3 components essential for digital inclusion – the infrastructure, hardware, and skill development/confidence.
- Responsibility for these three components of digital inclusion sits with different organisations and cuts across statutory, private and voluntary & charitable sectors. There is currently **no joined-up leadership for digital inclusion** activity in the county.

“ In the last 2 years we have learned more than any other time that the digital divide impacts everyone. And increasingly the solutions to these challenges do not lie in one place, with one person or in one body. ”

- A direct consequence of the lack of strategy and leadership is that **Gloucestershire does not seem to be connecting into the regional and national digital inclusion initiatives in a consistent and proactive way.** We are likely missing opportunities to access supports to address digital exclusion in our county. It also means we are not adding our voice to appropriate campaigns and raising awareness of the profound negative impact of digital exclusion.
- To make meaningful change to something as multi-faceted as digital exclusion we need to acknowledge it as a **shared responsibility to address across sectors** and invest in creating a strategic long-term approach to closing the digital divides together.



2. Take a neighbourhood level approach

- Our Digital Divides mapping demonstrates how understanding and addressing digital exclusion requires a **consideration of specific neighbourhood-level conditions**.
- There are **multiple reasons for being digitally excluded**. This includes being digitally “constrained” due to connectivity issues, being separated from the internet by lack of access to the internet or the equipment needed due to poverty, or lacking the skills and confidence to use the hardware and fast broadband you do have access to.
- Understanding the specific reasons for digital exclusion must occur at a hyper-local level so that the correct supports for each locality can be put in place to close the digital divides.
- Our mapping highlights the differences in overall levels of digital exclusion risk both between and within Districts. The **specific risk factors vary from ward to ward**.
- Looking at the assets that can be mobilised and built upon also shows differences in where existing community assets are found and **how well these map to the specific pockets and causes of exclusion**.
- Some of the neighbourhoods where the risk of digital exclusion is shown to be highest will not come as a surprise as issues of weaker infrastructure and levels of deprivation are well known. Other areas identified as being at high risk of digital exclusion will be less expected.
- **Each District will have additional intelligence it can apply** to understand how the reality of digital inclusion maps to the risk profile, and also whether there are existing measures or additional assets that may mitigate these risks.
- **Districts** will be crucial in contributing evidence-based insights for each locality as part of informing the strategic plan that we need for the county.



Risk Factors differ in the Highest Digitally Excluded Areas (at MSOA¹ and LSOA² level)

Shurdington, Staverton & Witcombe:

Not an area of high deprivation but known connectivity issues in all 3 LSOAs. High rates of older people living alone especially in Shurdington and Badgeworth.

Central Gloucester and Hempsted:

3 of 5 LSOAs at high risk. 2 of these correspond to income deprivation and high levels of disability. The other relates to age profile.

Moreton in the Marsh and Stow on the Wold:

2 of the 5 LSOAs at high risk. Older age profile with connectivity issues and some level of income deprivation.

Matson and Robinswood:

3 of the 6 LSOAs at high risk. Very high levels of income deprivation. 1 LSOA in particular has older population with potential high levels of isolation. Noted lower levels of educational qualifications.

Cinderford:

6 of the 7 LSOAs are at moderate-high risk. 1 LSOA in particular has an older population, lower income and connectivity issues. Some areas have higher rates of people receiving disability-related benefits.

¹ **MSOA:** Middle layer Super Output Area, geographic area that can vary in size, but have roughly equal amounts of people. Small areas that offer a useful approximation for a neighbourhood geography.

² **LSOA:** Lower layer Super Output Area, smaller geographic area than a MSOA that fit within local authority boundaries

Recommendations for Gloucestershire

3. Target future activity at the gaps in provision



- One of the drivers behind this Digital Divides programme was **frustration at piecemeal initiatives** in response to digital exclusion and the duplication of activity.
- The combination of digital exclusion risk maps and the community asset map should be used by Gloucestershire to **focus activity where it is most needed**.
- The instant offering from Digital Divides to the county is sharing the evidence base of where exclusion is likely highest and where existing effort to address it exists. Even without a strategic plan for digital inclusion for the county, **statutory bodies, funders and VCS providers can all now use the information provided here to inform their plans** and focus on where the issues are most acute and avoid duplication of effort.
- In addition to a place-based perspective, it is also important that focus is given to **specific groups** who are more likely to be facing digital exclusion, for example disabled people and people with mental health challenges, older people, and those living in poverty.

“ Well, it does affect me quite a lot, because everything is online these days, with not having the equipment or access. ”

4. Establish a countywide network to join up digital inclusion initiatives



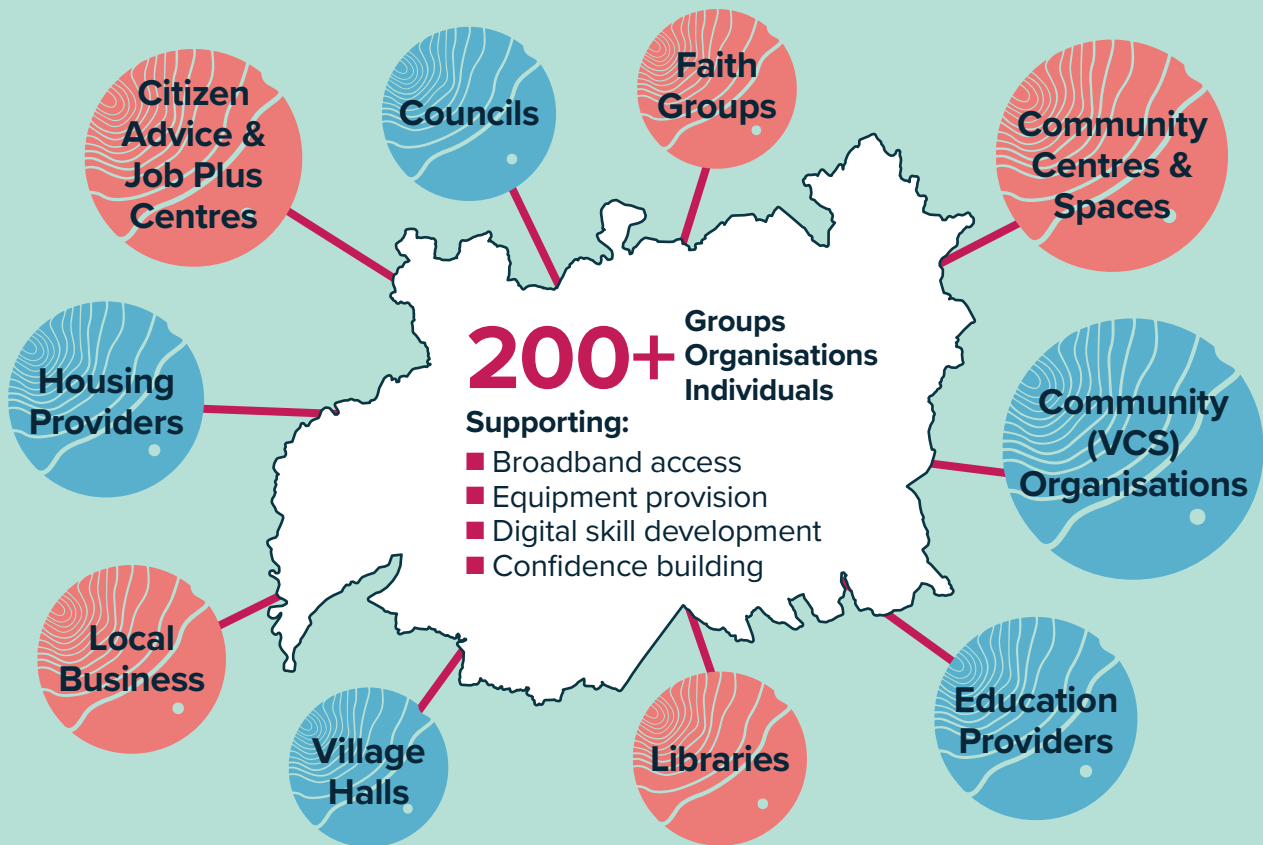
- Our mapping highlights an extensive range of activity already available in the county which is a definite positive to build on. The community asset map shows an array of resources and projects available to support excluded people to get online.
- The **full power of these assets is not harnessed**, however, as there is no real opportunity to join up the positive activity that is happening.
- This is important as it means that people doing good things are not able to automatically share their knowledge and insight with others; **we're not seeing good practice proliferate easily and new projects emerge in isolation** rather than as part of a network of activity.
- There are exceptions, for example the Digi-Hubs project funded by GCC Digital Innovation Fund, led by Forest Voluntary Action Forum and involving delivery partners across the Districts across the county, which serves as a useful case study for how collaborative efforts can both spread learning and allow for local adaptation.
- In other areas of the UK a **Digital Inclusion Network has been a central plank in a co-ordinated locality approach**, drawing in partners across an area, from across sectors, and connecting them to others operating in the same space.

■ Whilst there may be a need for new roles to co-ordinate such facilitated networking, in the main what has been observed in Gloucestershire is the potential for **leveraging more from the tremendous assets we already have** and sharing this expertise across areas, organisations and sectors.

“ The idea behind having a community drop in hub is an open safe space for people to come in and connect with their communities.... to provide support, become more resilient and to create things that are important to them. ”

KEY FINDING

Gloucestershire has a diverse range of assets to draw upon and connect together to address the Digital Divides



Recommendations for Gloucestershire

5. Take action to establish consistent standards of digital support



- Central in supporting those who are digitally-excluded, especially where skills and confidence are the barrier, are projects providing awareness, encouragement and skills development to get online.
- **Citizens supporting other citizens** to bridge the digital divide is a positive model to develop.
- The imminent 'Volunteer Glos' platform could be a useful conduit for **recruiting into a network of digital enablers**, hosted in a range of VCS organisations to help to contribute to closing the digital divide.
- Digital inclusion projects in Gloucestershire currently each develop their own offer independently. This means **there are currently many different approaches to governance, training, and evaluation systems**. Working in a more joined up way on these processes could not only save time and avoid duplication, but would also allow for more consistency and improve standards. The impact of digital inclusion programmes could be tracked, without losing the autonomy to meet local organisational needs.
- It is important to acknowledge the **considerable risks that are involved in getting support to get online**. There are risks linked to personal and financial details being shared, but also in having your 'digital identity' shaped by others. There are risks to volunteer enablers if equipment breaks, mistakes are made or if accusations are made against them too. As such there is a need to consider the governance and safeguarding issues of citizens both in receiving assistance, as well as for those citizens supporting others.
- A countywide focus on this could contribute to **improved quality of support, less duplication, more consistency and more ease of movement** around different sources of support.
- A fully considered approach to training digital enablers should also allow for **guidance on how to consider and best respond to those who have access issues (disability/communication/sensory/mental health)** so they too can fully benefit from training and support to get connected.

6. Invest in the VCS to be able to fully support digital inclusion



- It is clear that a large amount of the support to tackle digital exclusion is currently being provided through **voluntary action, charity and social enterprise**.
- This appears to have increased during the Covid pandemic as VCS groups and organisations sought to find ways to keep people connected when they had to be physically distant.
- There are many examples of **effective VCSE initiatives** seeking to tackle to digital exclusion.
- This is a reactive, rather than strategic, situation. VCSE organisations get involved because they see the need, can see a means to tackling exclusion, and look to provide solutions.
- **VCSE organisations are not, though, always fully resourced to fulfil this need** - their own digital capacity, equipment & resources and levels of skill can be limited.

■ A more consistent approach to **ensuring that the local voluntary sector has access to the kit, connectivity, training and confidence to support digital inclusion is essential**. The VCS will be a key player in tackling digital exclusion, so it needs to be the focus of investment to be able to fulfil this potential.

■ This is **not limited to initiatives explicitly tackling digital exclusion**. Much of the work of the VCS sector around poverty, culture, involvement and civic participation will have a digital element as more of our lives are conducted on-line.



Along with local resources there is a range of National Initiatives we can tap into to support our ambition to address the Digital Divides in Gloucestershire

National Databank (from Good Things Foundation)

<https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/databank/>

The National Databank provides free sims and mobile data (as well as talk minutes and texts) to people in need via Good Things Foundation's network of local community partners. It's like a 'food bank' but for internet connectivity data.

Reboot (from Nominet)

<https://rebootproject.uk/>

Reboot is an interactive platform providing practical steps which enables schools, charities and community groups to set up your own device distribution programme.

Wavelength Fighting Loneliness

<https://wavelength.org.uk/apply-for-help/>

WaveLength gives radios, televisions, and tablet computers, free of charge, to people who are lonely and can't afford to buy the technology themselves.

IT Support at Home (from AbilityNet)

<https://abilitynet.org.uk/at-home/request-free-it-support-home>

AbilityNet's Tech volunteers provide free IT support to older people and disabled people of any age. Volunteers can support people located anywhere in the UK.

EdTech Demonstrator Programme (from the Dept of Education)

<https://edtechdemo.ucst.uk>

The EdTech Demonstrator Programme was developed to ensure schools and colleges across England could **access free, expert advice on educational technology**. Offers support to schools and colleges in developing digital strategies which make effective use of technology to enhance teaching and learning.

Recommendations for Gloucestershire

7. Build digital inclusion responses into existing touchpoints



- Those who are digitally excluded are likely to encounter other pressures in their lives that may see them connecting to a variety of sources of community support.
- Someone who has to access a food bank due to food poverty, or a child benefitting from the national holiday activity and food (HAF) programme, is also likely to be experiencing digital poverty.
- **These touchpoints should be opportunities to seek to address the wider exclusion.** So we should explore how we can upskill those working to support people in food poverty to also be in position to support their digital inclusion. We should, for example, ensure those working in food banks have knowledge of, and access to, the available offers on free data for those on low incomes so they can make that available to those they are supporting.
- This is not just about food banks, but any touchpoints and ‘frontline roles’ where people who are digitally excluded might be presenting. The HAF programme would be a useful existing network to draw into the digital divides approach.
- If we can train, support and inform people in those roles and **equip them with the tools, resources and information on ways of tackling digital exclusion** we can be more proactive in trying to resolve digital exclusion wherever it presents.
- Building digital inclusion into a wider range of roles will enable more wrap-around support to be offered. This is relevant both when designing single programmes of support or when linking existing programmes together. We need to see more commissioning that joins up responses and encourages collaboration on issues that exclude.
- **Having a countywide strategy and a digital inclusion network in operation would make it easier to draw in and pull together activity that does not focus solely on digital inclusion, but which is supporting those who are digitally excluded.**

8. Consciously resist ‘digital by default’



- The potential of digital solutions is driving change at a rapid pace and digital by default has a momentum that is hard to resist.
- Prioritising the adoption of digital solutions and services is **to the detriment of those who are excluded, who may have the least resources and whose voices are heard less often.**
- As such it is imperative that we actively consider the consequences of digital by default, think proactively about who that excludes and **take action to ensure there are always accessible alternatives to online.**
- Whilst Digital Divides is a movement that is positive about increasing digital participation, it must also be **a movement that advocates for there to remain easy to access alternatives to online provision.**
- In this way we can reduce the impact of digital divides by ensuring those who choose not to, or who cannot, be online are not disadvantaged by their not being digitally active.
- This is a bigger issue than simply providing a paper alternative to a web form. Consider the issue of utility bills. If it is currently the case that those who arrange their utility provision online are able to secure on average 30% cheaper bills, then how do we ensure that someone who is not active online has the same chance to secure the cheaper rates?

“ We are incredibly lucky here that we can work with so many other agencies and I can put them physically in touch with these people who they can’t reach out to by filling a form online. ”

“ The digital divide is an important social issue of our time. It is time for all of us to come together, realise the potential of the digital world, and most importantly ensure no one is left behind. ”

This report concludes Phase 1 of a Digital Divides programme. It provides the initial evidence-base for our local situation and makes suggestions for how we make meaningful progress to tackle the inequalities caused by digital exclusion.

We don't claim that our research is exhaustive. We know there are more aspects to this that need to be added, such as the role of educational settings to support digital inclusion for children, young people & families and the role of the housing sector for example.

Where we take this as a county in Phase 2, or whether there even is a Phase 2, remains to be resolved.

There is certainly more to be done. This report alone does not close the digital divides in our county.

There are questions still to answer:

■ **Does the risk profiling reflect the reality on the ground?**

We are keen to hear from District Councils in particular about the findings for their areas and would welcome their engagement and insights into whether the mapping and issues are capturing the whole story from their perspective.

It would be interesting to look more closely at those areas identified as exclusion hotspots to understand them better and to identify if any targeted work is happening or can be commissioned.

■ **How is this issue being addressed within wider initiatives in Gloucestershire?**

Digital inclusion is linked to issues of poverty, infrastructure, health and wellbeing, education, employment and economic inclusion. Improving digital equity will contribute significantly to wider developments in our county.

However, seen as only a sub-issue within these other areas and without a strategic focus of its own digital inclusion will never be fully realised. Levelling up has to include a commitment to removing digital inequity. If we aspire for Gloucestershire to be a 'cyber capital' we need this to include explicit strategic plans for ensuring local people are digitally included.

■ **Who should drive this agenda forward – VCS, statutory bodies, the commercial sector?**

Digital Divides to date has been driven by the VCS sector. As shown the VCS are active in trying to address digital exclusion and we are driven by a desire to overcome the inequity that arises from being digitally divided.

The levers that need to be pulled to make bigger impacts are, though, held by statutory and commercial players. Where is the energy to take this agenda forward? How do we draw businesses, especially the tech-companies in Gloucestershire, into addressing this social inequality their companies have a link to? Which IT equipment providers could we get involved to contribute to provision of hardware? And could a countywide strategy enable access to cost price kit?

Next Steps

■ **What do residents of Gloucestershire feel about this issue and want to see happen?**

Tackling digital exclusion will not be achieved through a project, it requires a movement; it's about a collective desire to remove social inequity. Digital Divides needs to be bigger than a small Steering Group and be driven by a wide range of people. As such getting the public involved, sharing their experiences, their ideas and their hopes will be important.

And we should be prepared to hear anger and strong emotion about the experience of digital exclusion. It is a debilitating and unfair position to be in. That strength of feeling should motivate us to bigger and quicker action.

■ **Can we learn more about the behavioural barriers to digital inclusion, or about the specific experiences of certain groups at higher risk of exclusion?**

There is still more to uncover. What influences people to feel drawn to be online or not, how to overcome the reticence of those for whom digital processes are new, and what being online means in terms of personal identity are areas where more understanding would be helpful.

Similarly, it would be useful to unpack some of the data we have already received to provide a fuller picture on the risk factors for specific groups including those with disabilities and mental health challenges.

■ **Do developments like the Digi-Hubs programme provide a platform from which to develop a digital inclusion network for the county?**

The Digi-Hub project funded by the Digital Innovation Fund and led by FVAF is a positive example of taking good practice from one area and spreading it in other localities. The approach has networking across partners at its core. The model also builds on an approach that recognises the benefits of a hub 'front door' that is not narrowly about digital inclusion, but wide enough to draw people in and to receive support with digital inclusion as a part of a wider focus on connection and addressing exclusion.

This is in its early days and is linked (financially) to adult social care, so it may not be entirely the right model to address all the digital divides, but it represents a local opportunity to learn from and build on.

■ **What are the radical ideas?**

We are mindful in our recommendations of highlighting things that are somewhat predictable. These will move things forward from where we are today and will allow the activity to be co-ordinated and energy and resources to be appropriately directed.

A challenge as large as closing the digital divides will, though, also need some big ideas and radical plans. If we are serious about levelling up areas that face multiple deprivation, then why do we not aim to roll out free broadband to households in these wards? When housebuilding in the county, why is fast broadband not considered an essential utility? How do we get IT equipment into the hands of people who need it along with infrastructure to support ongoing maintenance, tech support and replacement?

We need to be bold and ambitious, creative and open-minded about how to close the divides. We need to stimulate and create the environment to hear the radical ideas.

■ **What is next for Digital Divides?**

Digital Divides is not an organisation. It is a collective, a commitment, a call to action. Digital Divides is the stick in the candy floss. The central solid around which a complex web of activity can materialise.

We believe that Digital Divides needs to continue to exist. Not to deliver things directly, but to catalyse and to join up what is happening around the county; to identify partners, resources, funding and signpost these throughout the county.

It therefore needs holding as a precious resource. It doesn't need to be a big entity to have a big impact, but it needs enough investment to enable it to continue to draw in the wide ranging elements that are part of achieving the change needed.

As we complete this report, the Steering Group behind Digital Divides are not intending to walk out and switch off the lights. There is more to be done.

But we need to hear reactions to our reports.

We are calling on those who read this report to consider and tell us:

- **What information and insight can you add to what we have collated here?**
- **Which of the recommendations are the most important? And which are most urgent to address?**
- **What additional, radical ideas would you propose?**
- **How can a Digital Divides movement support you to take action to close the digital divides that exist?**
- **Would you be interested in joining a larger Steering Group to shape Phase 2 and perhaps develop a digital inclusion strategy for Gloucestershire?**

Please send your comments, thoughts, ideas and interest to: digitaldividesglos@gmail.com or via **07845 015009**

Phase 1 Digital Divides Steering Group

- **Baroness Rennie Fritchie** (independent chair)
- **Chris Brown** (Forest Voluntary Action Forum)
- **Sally Byng** (Barnwood Trust)
- **Di Billingham** (Gloucestershire County Council)
- **Matt Lennard** (Gloucestershire VCS Alliance)
- **Rob Fountain** (Age UK Gloucestershire)

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