Digital Futures for Good

Final report

Good Things Foundation

Episode 1

Digital inclusion needs cross-governmental efforts featuring Baroness Dido Harding and Baroness Anna Healy

Launched: March 2024

Following the 2023 House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee report exploring digital exclusion and the cost of living, Good Things Group CEO Helen Milner OBE spoke to Baroness Dido Harding and Baroness Anna Healy about what urgently needs to change to fix the digital divide. Both expressed frustration at the Conservative Government's inaction. Dido stated: "It's self-evidently obvious that the economic case is really clear, the social case is really clear, and actually there's really good evidence that the general public wants this, so that makes the political case really clear. So I'm mighty frustrated because it seems to me that for the best part of 15 years, governments haven't acted on this."

Prior to recording, as part of the Lords' inquiry, the Baronesses visited one of Good Things Foundation's local partners: Skills Enterprise - a digital inclusion hub, which provided important insights into how charities and community organisations were filling the gaps in delivery and ensuring that no-one is left behind - adding detail to the Lords' final report and the subsequent debate in Parliament. Digital inclusion "has to be delivered locally," said Dido.

Digital inclusion will never be 'done'
Baroness Dido Harding claimed her biggest take away from the Lords' inquiry was that "digital exclusion is a moving target… this job is probably never done and there will always be people on the edge of what technology is offering. It's something we've got to care about, always."

Leadership in digital inclusion
A recurring concern was the UK government's lack of a cohesive approach to tackling digital exclusion. The Baronesses called for strong public sector leadership: "We need the Prime Minister to care because this is a complex multi-agency problem and societies don't make those changes without leadership from the very top," said Dido.

Both argued that digital inclusion should be treated as a basic utility. Baroness Harding highlighted the role businesses can play, from donating devices to leading a national strategy; and the benefits of a cross-government digital inclusion unit.

What did digital inclusion experts say?
At the episode launch, we heard from Liz Williams MBE, CEO of FutureDotNow, and Hafsha Dadabhai Shaikh, Director of SmartLyte and Get Families Talking.

The importance of digital inclusion
Hafsha Shaikh noted its role in bridging generational and community divides: "Digital inclusion enables a fairer, more equitable world where everyone has access and can improve their health, wellbeing, employment opportunities, and educational aspirations. It changes lives and life chances, helping families and communities to aspire. We've all got to be behind it."

Addressing the digital divide
The panel echoed the Baronesses' views on the systemic nature of digital exclusion. Liz Williams MBE stated: "It's not a societal issue; it's a system issue. The people who haven't got foundational competence never catch up. As technology advances, that will create huge inequality."

Featured in this episode:

Interview guest(s)

Baroness Dido Harding

Baroness Anna Healy

Commentary guest(s)

Liz Williams

Hafsha Dadabhai Shaikh

Watch interview

Watch launch

Episode 2

What needs to happen for a digitally inclusive modern Britain with Baroness Martha Lane Fox

Launched: April 2024

Entrepreneur and advocate for digital inclusion, Baroness Martha Lane Fox called for bold leadership and a clear vision for a modern Britain where everyone has access to digital tools and skills. Lane Fox advocated for policies that go beyond connectivity, focusing on practical digital literacy and creating meaningful digital experiences that empower individuals and reduce inequality.

It's time for the Prime Minister to act
"It's got to come from the Prime Minister … You just have to make it your own personal priority, and I would make it a personal priority to build not just the best startups in the world and [also move beyond] the platitudes that come out of ministers for the last 15-20 years about technology, but actually have a detailed plan about what a modern Britain looks like."

Lane Fox explained that action includes internet infrastructure but is also ensuring policies support digital literacy, particularly in underserved communities.

Empowering communities through technology
With years' experience working in digital, Lane Fox highlighted the power of technology to support marginalised groups, enabling access to essential services like healthcare and job opportunities. She pointed out that when digital inclusion is prioritised, people can fully participate in modern society.

The new 'essentials'
The conversation covered what is necessary in a Modern Britain, and Lane Fox called for a realistic approach that prioritises the essentials: connectivity, accessibility, and its practical use in improving public services for everyone.

What did digital inclusion experts say?
At the episode launch, Mohini Rao, Responsible Business Lead at Accenture, and Julie Hawker, Chief Executive at Cosmic, shared their perspectives.

The shifting definition of digital skills
Rao highlighted how rapid advancements in AI and emerging technologies have exposed digital skills gaps: "The recent advancement in technology, whether AI, generative AI, or quantum computing, has really put the spotlight on this issue. Businesses now face a conundrum: how do they harness this technology at pace while also reskilling the entire workforce? The definition of essential digital skills is going to shift."

Keeping digital inclusion on the agenda
Hawker discussed the need for ongoing advocacy to ensure digital inclusion remains a priority for policymakers: "We've got to keep the comms on this as strong as we possibly can. I really like Mo's expression about 'realising the true value of digital inclusion', we need to start articulating that in different ways."

Featured in this episode:

Interview guest(s)

Baroness Martha Lane Fox

Commentary guest(s)

Mohini Rao

Julie Hawker

Watch interview

Watch launch

Episode 3

The intersectionality of poverty and digital exclusion with Emma Revie

Launched: May 2024

Digital inclusion isn't a standalone issue, in this episode, Emma Revie, CEO of Trussell Trust, highlighted how digital exclusion deepens poverty, cutting people off from essential services, job opportunities, and social connections. She stressed that digital access is a necessity for dignity, financial stability, and community participation.

"Almost half of the people who access our services [are digitally excluded, and] have little to no contact with friends, family, or neighbours. It's just layers of hardship that make it really difficult for people to keep going."

Breaking the cycle of poverty and digital exclusion
Revie explained how digital exclusion makes it harder for people to escape poverty. She said: "People are missing out on getting better deals, being able to find out information about additional support that might be available, like local crisis support. And our data shows us that people [who are digitally excluded] have received less crisis support .... This is just terrible. On top of the fact that people are facing financial hardship, it compounds isolation and social exclusion."

The case for a Digital Essentials Guarantee
She advocated for a 'Digital Essentials Guarantee', ensuring everyone has access to affordable internet and devices, arguing that digital connectivity is fundamental to opportunity.

Collaboration for sustainable solutions
With a vast increase in the numbers of people living in deep poverty, Revie called for governments, businesses, and communities to work together, combining financial support with people-focused, practical solutions.

What did digital inclusion experts say?
At the episode launch, Nicola Wallace Dean, Co-founder of Starting Point Community Learning Partnership, and Rachel Evans, Sustainability Manager at Vodafone, discussed the issue further.

Social security is failing to meet basic needs
Wallace Dean stressed that digital exclusion cannot be solved by financial aid alone, dignity, human connection, and access to support networks are equally vital.

The growing crisis of poverty and digital exclusion
Evans pointed out that people are forced to choose between food and internet access, preventing them from applying for jobs or benefits. She emphasised that digital exclusion is not just a social issue, it is systemic.

Both experts agreed that cross-sector collaboration is crucial, not as a replacement for government action, but as a support system ensuring solutions are built with people, not for them. "Social security is not the safety net it should be. People need a basic income to fix this for good, not just a sticking plaster."

Featured in this episode:

Interview guest(s)

Emma Revie

Commentary guest(s)

Rachel Williams

Nicola Wallace Dean

Watch interview

Watch launch

Episode 4

Collaborating to close the digital divide with Mayor Andy Burnham

Launched: June 2024

The interview with Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham took place before the General Election was announced, but launched during the pre-election period. Burnham advocated for a comprehensive and integrated digital inclusion strategy and stressed the need for more local control over benefits. He calls connectivity the 'fourth utility' and highlighted the impact of the pandemic and cost of living crisis on digital access. Echoing previous guests, Burnham pointed to Manchester's successful collaboration between public sector, businesses, and communities to tackle digital exclusion, linking it to wider social issues like financial inequality and access to essential services. Burnham acknowledged that the national social infrastructure such as the national databank from Good Things Foundation was an essential element to the success that he and his team had delivered in Greater Manchester.

Economic activity
"You won't get the numbers of people into work if you're forcing people to live without the basics" claimed Burnham, as he called for "more devolved control of the benefit system" to "create the foundations for a really productive economy." Since the interview, the new Labour government announced large scale employment reforms, which will see Manchester delivering support to improve health, build self esteem and get people ready to move into work.

Collaborating to close the digital divide
Burnham sees digital inclusion as fundamental to a fairer society. He highlighted the importance of cross-sector partnerships in addressing the link between digital exclusion, poverty, and limited access to services.

A localised approach to national goals
While calling for a unified national strategy and a national strategic framework, Burnham argued that implementation must be local. He highlighted how Greater Manchester's initiatives, such as digital inclusion projects for social housing tenants, prove that tailored, community-led solutions are highly effective when paired with national foundational support.

Empowering people through digital access
Burnham's vision extends beyond infrastructure. He believes in investing in skills, connectivity, and support to ensure full participation in the digital world. Whether through public-private partnerships or community hubs, he aims to create a future where no one is left behind.

What did digital inclusion experts say?
Dana Haidan, Chief Sustainability Officer, Virgin Media O2 agreed with Burnham that data, devices, and digital skills are important, but people also need the confidence to be online. She pointed to Virgin Media O2's partnership with Good Things as proof of the acute need to close the digital divide. Burnham's vision ties digital access to broader social issues, from financial exclusion to inadequate infrastructure. Haidan reinforced this point: "We have seen over and over again that digital exclusion makes social issues so much worse." Haidan backed a national strategy implemented at the local level, citing the Shared Rural Network and GMCA's social housing pilot as strong examples of industry and government collaboration. As Helen Milner pointed out, local action is good but action is needed nationally, regionally and locally to ensure the best solutions and economies of scale.

Featured in this episode:

Interview guest(s)

Mayor Andy Burnham

Commentary guest(s)

Dana Haiden

Watch interview

Watch launch

Episode 5

Digital Futures For Good Election Special

Launched: June 2024

In the run up to the General Election, we brought it back to the experts in the National Digital Inclusion Network with a special episode featuring insights from Hayley Nelson from Learn for Life in Sheffield, Geraint Turner formerly from Swansea MAD and Lincs Digital.

The panel discussed the digital barriers faced by local and rural communities and what digital exclusion means for real people. Collaboration, equitable connectivity, and bold government action were identified as key steps to advancing digital inclusion.

The Importance of local Digital Inclusion Hubs
Community organisations like Learn for Life in Sheffield and Swansea MAD are playing a crucial role in tackling digital exclusion at the neighborhood level. These hubs address barriers such as limited internet access, financial struggles, and lack of digital skills.

Their grassroots approach enables tailored solutions to meet the unique needs of each community. Both hubs talked about how essential national support from Good Things is - for local organisations to be able to tap into and deliver scaled solutions such as the National Databank.

Addressing systemic barriers
The discussion explored systemic issues like unreliable and unaffordable internet in many rural areas. The limited competition in broadband services, along with inadequate infrastructure, deepens the divide. Nelson and Turner argued that national-level intervention is needed to address these challenges and ensure equitable access for all.

Nelson said: "Digital inclusion is not on their agenda … The government is catching up. If the government was taking it into account, there wouldn't be places like Learn for Life and Good Things Foundation."

A call for national leadership
Experts agreed that digital inclusion must become a government priority, supported by public, private, and third-sector collaboration. Sustainable funding and targeted policies are essential to scaling the impact of community hubs.

What did digital inclusion experts say?
Liz Williams MBE, CEO of FutureDotNow, stressed that digital inclusion should move beyond temporary fixes: "I want to make sure everyone in the country has the basic digital skills. What's the bold vision, and how can the Government help set that?"

Vinous Ali, Head of International at Public First, warned that inequality will worsen without action: [The next government] "is going to need to do more with less… If people can't access services, we will see a widening in inequality."

Williams concluded with a call to action: "If the Government has a very clear vision, and alongside its convening power, that is a massive game changer. This is not a problem to solve; this is an opportunity to realise. This is about revitalising our communities."

Featured in this episode:

Commentary guest(s)

Liz Williams

Vinous Ali

Full episode

Episode 6

Digitisation and Healthcare with Dr. Minal Bakhai and Professor Sam Shah

Launched: July 2024

The digitisation of healthcare is transforming access to services but risks deepening inequalities for those without digital access. Vulnerable groups, often facing significant health challenges, are disproportionately impacted by issues like limited connectivity, affordability, and lack of digital skills.

The conversation with Helen Milner and Dr. Minal Bakhai and Professor Sam Shah explored the need for equitable service design, ensuring digital tools complement traditional healthcare methods and reach diverse communities.

Digital access and health inequalities
Vulnerable populations often already facing poorer health outcomes, are disproportionately affected by barriers such as affordability, connectivity, and digital skills. Dr. Bakhai stressed, "We need to ensure that digital tools enhance access rather than deepen existing disparities."

Inclusive and equitable service design
Healthcare must adopt a hybrid approach, blending digital and traditional methods to meet diverse patient needs. Professor Shah explained, "A one-size-fits-all digital solution won't work. We must ensure solutions are inclusive and accessible to everyone, especially those with limited digital skills or resources."

Collaboration for impact
Addressing the digital health divide requires collective action. Partnerships between governments, healthcare providers, and community organisations are crucial for creating sustainable solutions. Dr. Bakhai added, "Collaboration is essential, local initiatives, such as digital skills programmes and accessible hubs, [such as family hubs and banking hubs] can empower individuals to engage with digital systems and foster healthier, more connected communities."

What did digital inclusion experts say?
Speaking with Dr Emma Stone, Director of Evidence and Engagement at Good Things, Katie Dowson, Director of Digital for South Yorkshire Integrated Care Board, highlighted the importance of understanding local populations and the impact of digital-first approaches.

She said: "I think like any service provider where we're relying on online digital services for communication and engagement, there is a need and a responsibility to understand people's digital confidence skills but also their preferences as well. [...] Sometimes that blunt implementation is actually making people disengage, so I think it's really vital that we've got to understand our local population when we're implementing that and making sure it's a positive experience."

Featured in this episode:

Interview guest(s)

Dr. Minal Bakhai

Professor Sam Shah

Commentary guest(s)

Dr. Emma Stone

Katie Dowson

Watch interview

Watch launch

Episode 7

AI and emerging technologies with Nina Schick

Launched: September 2024

AI and emerging technologies hold incredible potential, but to ensure the benefits are shared equally, digital inclusion must be a priority.

AI as a transformative force
In her interview with CEO Helen Milner, AI thought leader Nina Schick described AI as a game-changer, comparable to the advent of computing. It reshapes how we live, work, and interact with technology. "In my view, what's happening with AI, the best analogy when you think about how seismic the impact is, is the birth of modern computing itself," said Schick.

While AI promises efficiencies and opportunities, Schick cautioned that job automation could disrupt the workforce. She stressed, "Preparing society for this transition requires robust infrastructure, education, and foresight to ensure these changes benefit everyone."

Addressing digital inequality as AI evolves
As AI accelerates, its benefits may be concentrated among those with existing digital access and skills, deepening the digital divide. Empowering people with the tools and confidence to navigate an AI-driven world is essential. As Helen Milner said in the interview: "Digital inclusion is not just about access; it's about equipping people to engage with and benefit from emerging technologies."

Collaborative solutions for equitable AI integration
Achieving an inclusive AI future requires coordinated efforts across sectors. Governments, industries, and community organisations must prioritise accessibility and equity. Schick noted, "By focusing on digital inclusion, we can ensure AI becomes a tool for social good, not a driver of inequality."

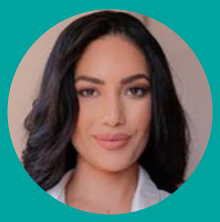
There are already notable successes, with members of the National Digital Inclusion Network adopting AI to help those facing challenging situations, as summed up by Schick: "You mentioned how in your community people are leveraging the power of a large language model to write letters where they weren't able to do that before because perhaps they didn't have access to the right information or didn't know what tone to adopt for the letter. But the fact that they can instruct a large language model to do that is really incredible."

What did digital inclusion experts say?
Helen Milner spoke with Jess Wilson, Chief Executive of Good Things Australia and Kirsty Innes, Director of Technology at Labour Together on the expert panel. Kirsty Innes echoed much of Schick's opinions, saying: "It struck me that we don't yet fully understand the implications of using Language Learning Models... Even experts haven't figured it out yet, let alone mainstream society. I'm optimistic with the new government, and I believe progress will come."

Citizens in Australia are facing many of the same challenges experienced by those in the UK and Jess Wilson cited their latest Digital Sisters AI for Good report: Understanding AI literacy and digital inclusion which found that barriers to AI engagement mirror those faced by people who are digitally excluded, including low digital ability, affordability, access to technology, and regional disparities.

Featured in this episode:

Interview guest(s)



Nina Schick

Commentary guest(s)

Jess WIlson

Kirsty Innes

Watch interview

Watch launch

Episode 8

Keir Starmer's 100 days

Launched: October 2024

In a change to the original format, this episode of Digital Futures for Good featured Good Things' Chair of the Board of Trustees and FutureDotNow CEO, Liz Williams MBE in conversation with Good Things CEO, Helen Milner. The episode focused on digital inclusion during Keir Starmer's first 100 days as Prime Minister. This episode looked back at some of the previous guests as they responded to the recurring question 'What would you do in your first 100 days as prime minister to tackle digital exclusion.'

The conversation looked at sustainable long-term plans, with Williams stating: "100 days isn't very long, I would rather [the Government] listens, then acts decisively, properly engaging with those that do understand that have been sitting at the coalface for a very long time."

Digital skills for a modern age
They also discussed the importance of practical actions like subsidising devices, improving infrastructure, and rethinking the framework to ensure all working-age adults gain essential digital skills. Williams said: "if you haven't got the foundation skills, and you haven't got the skills for life, then you're very unlikely to have the skills for work."

The role of businesses and government in driving change
Williams and Milner agreed that digital exclusion "isn't just the Government's problem to solve. They have a real opportunity to be clear on their ambition and help bring businesses and others around it." One suggestion was like the underutilised apprenticeship and skills and growth levy, should encourage businesses to invest in digital skills. More importantly, fostering cross-sector collaboration is essential.

Helping people to become 'economically active'
Milner and Williams explored the potential of the Pathways to Work report, by Rt Hon Alan Milburn, which fed into the Get Britain Working employment reforms. Milner identified the report as highlighting how supporting people with long-term health conditions, and those on benefits who are not working - many of which are likely to be digitally excluded - into employment will have a vast benefit to the economy.

Milner said: "This is about people who want to work, who currently can't work, for whom digital tools might be the way in which that helps them to work on a health condition using digital tools, but also a way of helping them get back into work and for themselves. Let's focus on them as individual people having better lives, and then that, the knock on effect is that it's good for the economy."

Intersectionality: Addressing digital exclusion across generations and abilities
Digital inclusion must address barriers faced by different groups, including the elderly, disabled, and economically inactive. It's not just about access but also overcoming lack of skills and confidence. For those facing multiple disadvantages, digital tools offer opportunities for education, employment, and empowerment.

Featured in this episode:

Interview guest(s)

Liz Williams

Full episode

Episode 9

Pathways to Work Commission Report with Rt. Hon Alan Milburn

Launched: November 2024

Helen Milner joined Former Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Rt. Hon Alan Milburn to explore the core findings of the Pathways to Work Commission Report that pushed forward the Government's Get Britain Working employment reforms, launched after the interview had taken place later in November 2024.

The report highlights the need to address barriers to employment for individuals facing disadvantages, including limited digital access, disabilities, and caregiving responsibilities.

Breaking down barriers to employment
The report stresses dismantling systemic barriers preventing equitable access to work, such as limited digital access and caregiving responsibilities. Alan said, "Addressing these barriers requires a multi-faceted approach, including government policy, employer action, and community support."

Milner and Milburn's conversation highlighted the importance of holistic support systems, accepting that local support is best-placed to meet local need, with Milburn stating: "One of the recommendations in the report is to devolve responsibility for employment support away from Job Centre Plus being run as a national organisation to instead being run much more locally. The idea is to give Mayors control over those employment support services. Second thing that you've then got to do is you've got to align employment support, career services and health care, because a lot of these problems are health related, and you've got to get these agencies working as one, and at the moment, they're like ships that pass in the night. Third thing that you've got to do is you've got to make sure that you know what are the cohorts that can both benefit from that support, and you've got to personalise that support to the individual, because every individual has very different family circumstances, health needs and so on, and so that's a real cultural reinvention of the way that employment support currently works."

The transformative role of digital inclusion
The Pathways to Work report does not, however, mention digital exclusion or how lacking access, skills and confidence to use digital technologies is exacerbating the issue of people being unable to enter the workforce. During the conversation, Milburn agreed "the future is digital" stating: "We don't want the [digital divide] gap getting wider. We want it to get narrower. I'm relatively positive and optimistic about the government's agenda, because I think what they're trying to do is to create a more inclusive economy, a growth economy, but one that is a form of inclusive growth, and digital has got an absolutely vital part to play in all of that."

What did digital inclusion experts say?
Helen Milner was joined by Sophia Worringer, Deputy Policy Director, Centre for Social Justice, and Mayor of South Yorkshire, Oliver Coppard and the panel discussed the importance of simplifying the current system to better empower those with limited digital skills. Worringer highlighted best practice in the Netherlands: "They devolve their employment support and adult education. So what we can learn from our neighbors across the channel [...] they moved that money away from the center and into the regions." Coppard said: "Right now, the system is too complex. It's not on people out of work; it's a system problem, not just a health problem. We need to be responsible for fixing the system."

Featured in this episode:

Interview guest(s)

Rt. Hon Alan Milburn

Commentary guest(s)

Mayor Oliver Coppard

Sophia Worringer

Watch interview

Watch launch

Episode 10

Exploring the links between financial inclusion and digital exclusion - a panel discussion

Launched: December 2024

For the final episode, we convened four experts of financial inclusion: Sara Weller, Money and Pensions Service Advisory Board; Jemma Waters, Lloyds Banking Group; Professor Martin Coppack, CHASM/Fair by Design; and Piers Claughton, Virgin Money.

Coming together just after the Government's announcement of a Financial Inclusion Committee, and Digital Inclusion Subcommittee, the panel discussed the vital connection between digital and financial inclusion, highlighting how improving digital skills can reduce financial stress and economic inequality.

Weller said: This is the "first time putting digital inclusion as a strand within financial inclusion and it's hugely important, because at a very practical level people it's really hard to be financially included if you're not digitally included."

The intersection of digital and financial inclusion
The conversation focused on how digital exclusion leads to financial exclusion and higher costs for essential services. The Lloyds Consumer Digital Index revealed that those with high digital capability are more financially secure, saving money and reducing stress. In contrast, digitally excluded individuals face significant barriers, which worsen financial struggles. Panelists noted, "By tackling both digital and financial exclusion together, we can help more people access financial services and improve their lives."

Waters said: "people are telling us that the ability to access and engage with finances anywhere, anytime, any space, is helping them worry less whatever their financial situation is, we can see that they're saving more."

The importance of collaboration across sectors
Panelists stressed the need for collaboration between businesses, government, and regulators to drive both digital and financial inclusion. Sara Weller highlighted the importance of the Financial Inclusion Committee in creating coordinated policies. She said, "Businesses must align their efforts, guided by clear government leadership," to ensure marginalised communities are not left behind.

Co-designing solutions with lived experience
The panel discussed the importance of co-designing policies and services with individuals who have lived experience of digital and financial exclusion. Martin explained that including voices from marginalised communities ensures solutions are practical and relevant.

"We need to make sure that services are tailored to the real challenges people face," he stated, advocating for a collaborative approach to close the digital and financial gaps continuing: "people with lived experience have the best ideas for solutions in all these issues."

Featured in this episode:

Panel

Sara Weller CBE

Professor Martin Coppack

Jemma Waters

Tamara Dewhirst

Full panel

Good Things
Foundation