

Southby, Kris & Trigwell, Joanne & Brown, Sally & poduval, Shoba & Tutin, Jason & Waller, Laura. (2023). "Co-producing a common Theory of Change and evaluation framework for local authority-led, city-wide Digital Inequalities programmes". Addressing digital inequality is a global, national, and regional policy priority because of the significant adverse impacts on individuals and communities of digitally excluded citizens. In the UK, it is estimated that for every £1 invested in interventions to enable digitally excluded people to build their basic digital skills, a return of £9.48 is gained throughout the economy. Strategic, coordinated action targeting people and places is required to address the complex causes of digital inequality.

In England, councils like Leeds, Coventry, Croydon, Salford, Stockport and Wigan have pioneered city-wide digital equality programmes. However, understanding the personal, social and economic impact of programmes as a whole, and not just their discreet components/projects, has been, and remains, a challenge. The role of local authorities in these programmes, facilitating, convening, and supporting organisations across sectors to design and deliver meaningful digital inclusion interventions requires further exploration. This lack of evidence and understanding reduces the transferability of knowledge and experience between local authorities, inhibiting the effective development of other local authority-led programmes.

The aim of this research has been to understand how two city-wide programmes – 100% Digital Leeds and #CovConnect – contribute towards addressing digital equality at a city-wide level and how this impact can be evaluated. Three collaborative workshops (2x Leeds, 1x Coventry) and key informant interviews have been carried out with stakeholders from the local authority, other statutory bodies, and voluntary sector in each location.

We will present our emergent findings from the project. These are a common Theory of Change and evaluation framework to explain key mechanisms and pathways from activities to outcomes within digital inequalities programmes, contextual factors (positive or negative) that influence outcomes, and when and how to measure changes. We will discuss how our findings can be used to improve understanding of the complexity of such programmes and to support local and national government to design, implement, and evaluate more effective city-/region-wide digital equality interventions.