

CHARITY DIGITAL



Digital inclusion in the UK charity sector

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Introduction

Digital technology has made it possible for charities to reach more people than ever, revolutionising the way we deliver services, fundraise, and interact with audiences. It helps us deliver vital services to people in need, reach out to donors directly with news about our missions, and find new advocates for our causes all over the world.

Despite these advances, however, charities are not able to reach everyone. According to [research by professional services firm Deloitte](#), around one in seven people are digitally excluded in the UK, meaning they are unable to access the online world fully, where, when, and how they need. More than 8 million people in the UK lack the foundational digital skills to get online, digital inclusion charity [Good Things Foundation](#) reports, while rapidly evolving technologies such as artificial intelligence risk leaving people further behind.

People experience digital exclusion for many reasons, including the absence of local internet infrastructure, the inability to afford digital products and services, the lack of appropriate digital skills, an experience of harm online, or a combination of multiple factors. The digitisation of society and services means those experiencing digital exclusion face further barriers in day-to-day life.

So, though technology is an essential tool for charities to deliver services and reach communities more effectively, it is important that they acknowledge those they are unable to reach. Digital exclusion can affect all areas of a person's life and can prevent them from accessing the services they need, from healthcare to banking, and including those provided by charities.

With the above in mind, we launched our survey in 2024 to discover more about attitudes towards digital inclusion in the charity sector. We wanted to understand more about the challenges charities face in reaching out to their service users and how they are making the most of the digital technology they use.



What we found – a summary

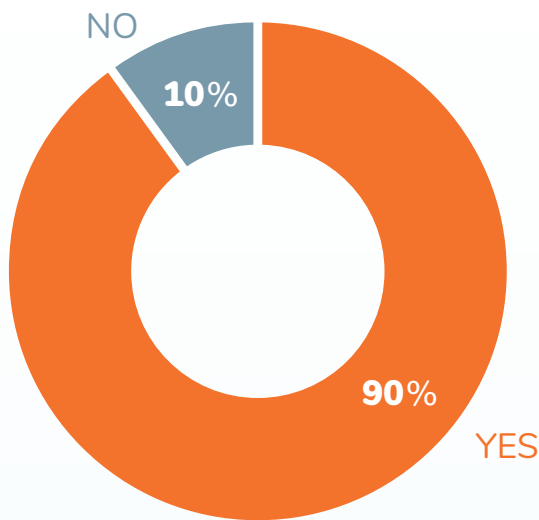
The results from the survey have been illuminating. Although charities are able to achieve more with digital technology than without it, digital exclusion still remains a barrier, limiting the impact they can deliver.

While nine in ten charities use digital tools to deliver their services, more than half (56%) find reaching service users difficult due to problems with digital technology (Fig. 1).

Likewise, two thirds of charities have struggled to implement digital technology due to a lack of digital skills among service users, while a similar proportion (64%) said the same about digital skills internally.

Fig. 1

Do you use digital tools to deliver charity services?



Do you find it difficult to reach service users due to problems with digital technology?

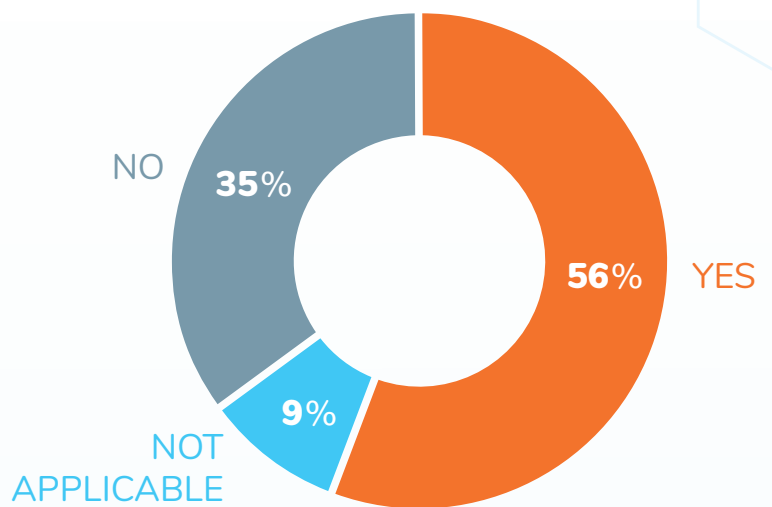


Fig. 2 Have you struggled in the past to implement digital technology due to lack of skills among service users?

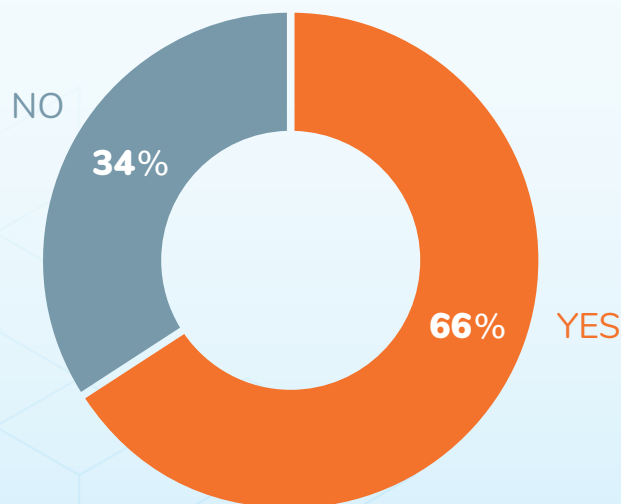
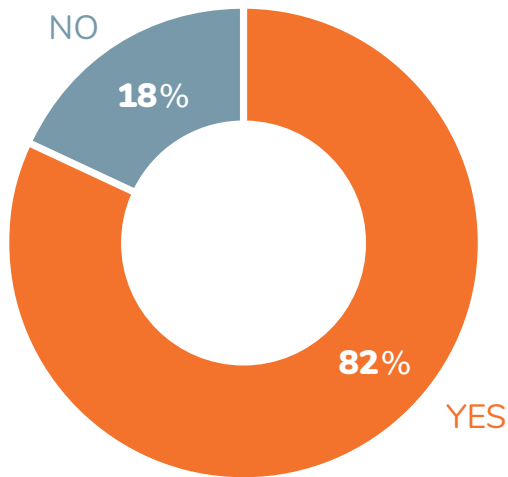


Fig. 3 Is digital inclusion something your charity is concerned about?



It is understandable, then, that more than four in five charities (82%) are concerned about digital exclusion, with managers and trustees among the most concerned parties (Fig. 3).

This is slightly lower than the 88% who told us in 2023 that they were concerned about the impacts of climate change.

Charities have a serious role to play in tackling digital exclusion. Digital technology is a critical tool for charities to boost efficiency and better support communities. Yet with digital exclusion underlying many of the major issues charities are working on today, it deeply concerns us.

We present this report in the spirit of opportunity for the sector. The contents reveal the digital inclusion challenges charities are facing and suggest strategies for addressing them, with the goal to eradicate digital exclusion and collectively deliver more impact.

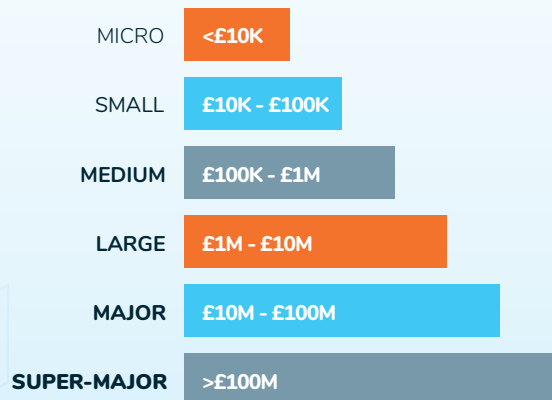
What exactly do we mean by digital exclusion and inclusion?

Digital exclusion: When people are prevented from interacting fully online due to factors such as connectivity issues, lack of online accessibility, and lack of skills.

Digital inclusion: When digital technologies, services, and opportunities are accessed, used, led, and designed in equal, meaningful, and safe ways.

Methodology

This survey was conducted between February and March 2024, with 216 people from the charity sector taking part. Respondents worked in charitable organisations across a wide range of fields – including arts and culture, community, and health – and represented a variety of roles, from volunteers to CEOs and trustees.



1. Digital services

Digital service delivery proved to be a lifeline for charities and many of their beneficiaries during the COVID-19 pandemic. It allowed vital services to continue in an evolving and difficult situation and allowed charities to reach people even in lockdown.

In 2024, our survey found that nine in ten charities now use digital tools, such as laptops, Zoom, and smartphones, to deliver charity services. [Compare this to 2020](#), when only 61% of charities delivered or were planning to deliver services online, while 27% of charities were forced to cancel services due to lack of skills or technology in the same year.

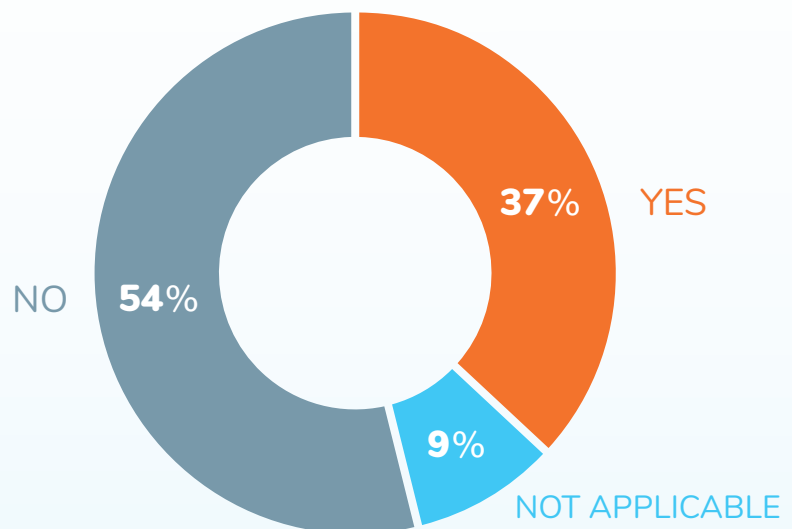
The charity sector has come a long way in four years. However, when we asked them to rate their digital service delivery out of ten, charities, on average, scored themselves at around seven. This is broadly the same across organisations of all sizes, and suggests that, while progress has been made, there is still room for improvement.

Indeed, as in 2020, charities are still finding it difficult to reach many of their service users. More than half of charities say they find reaching service users difficult due to problems with digital technology, with smaller organisations more likely to say this is the case.

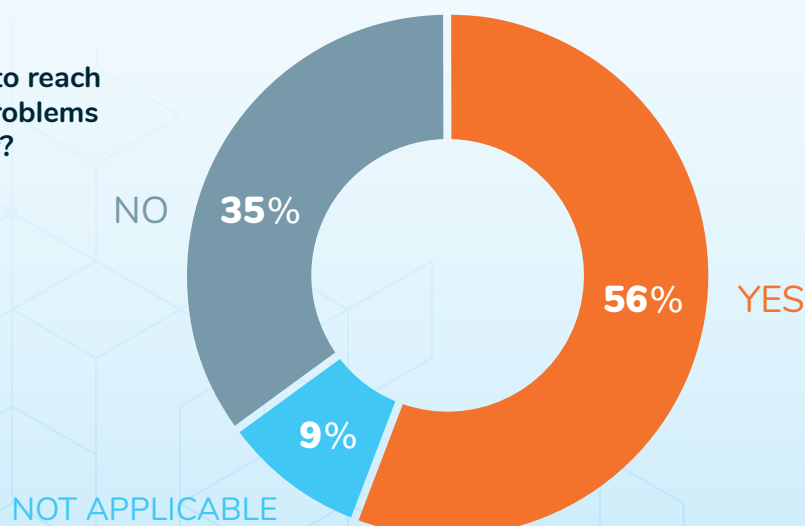
When it comes to volunteering, however, the situation is almost reversed – 37% say it is difficult to reach volunteers due to problems with digital technology, while more than half say it is fine (Fig. 4). This again reflects the urgency for charities in tackling digital exclusion – their service users are often those most affected by it.

Fig. 4

Do you find it difficult to reach volunteers due to problems with digital technology?



Do you find it difficult to reach service users due to problems with digital technology?





Unsurprisingly, cost was cited as the biggest barrier to delivering or improving digital services, cited by almost seven in ten respondents. Lack of skills among service users (57%) and lack of skills internally (41%) were also cited often (Fig. 5). This suggests that lack of skills is a core area of focus for charities addressing digital exclusion.

Interestingly, however, an inability to reach service users digitally (41%) was also identified as a barrier to delivering or improving digital services, alongside lack of access to the right hardware or software, such as laptops and smartphones.

Yet charities are split evenly on whether they have provided digital devices or tools to help service users access services – 45% say they have not provided tools, while 44% have (Fig. 6). This even split was seen across all charity sizes.

[According to Good Things Foundation](#), 1.5 million people in the UK don't have access to a smartphone, while a third of people are unaware of local access points for device access or internet connection. In an increasingly online world, charities must consider these factors when designing digital services to ensure that they are serving the right purpose and meet the needs of all those who could benefit.

 **A third of our members don't have email or use PCs or any other technology**  survey respondent

Other barriers to delivering or improving digital services included concerns around web safety, broadband monthly fees, and lack of buy-in and commitment from charity leadership teams.

Fig. 5 What are your charity's biggest barriers to delivering/improving digital services?

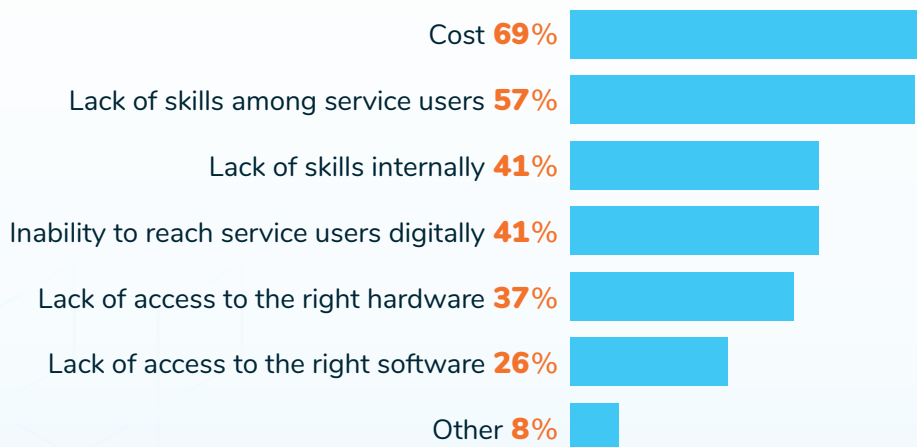
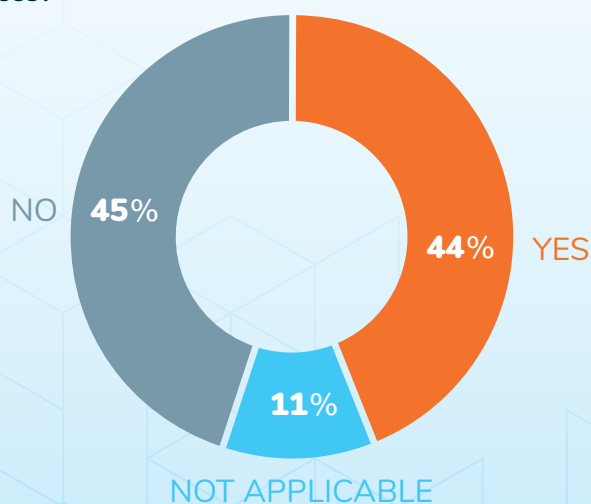
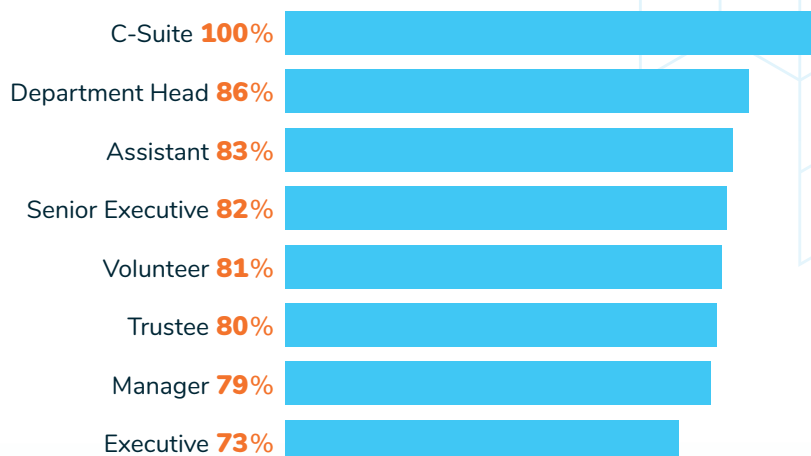


Fig. 6 Have you provided digital devices or tools to your service users to help them access your services?



This contrasts with the broader picture from the report, which revealed that 82% of trustees and C-Suite respondents were concerned about digital inclusion in their charity. In fact, 100% of C-Suite respondents were concerned, alongside 86% of department heads – the highest of all levels (Fig. 7).

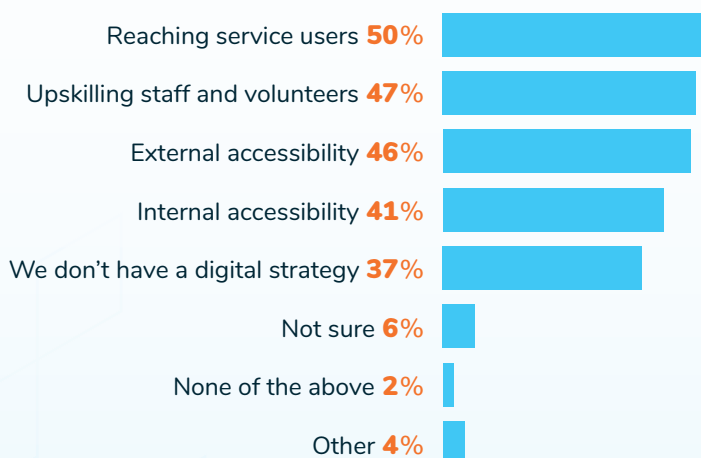
Fig. 7



Indeed, perhaps there is more work to be done when it comes to communicating the importance of digital inclusion throughout an organisation. More than a third of respondents said they did not have a digital strategy (37%).

Of those who did, only half included reaching service users, while just 47% included upskilling staff and volunteers (Fig. 8). This is concerning given that lack of internal skills was among the biggest barriers to delivering digital services.

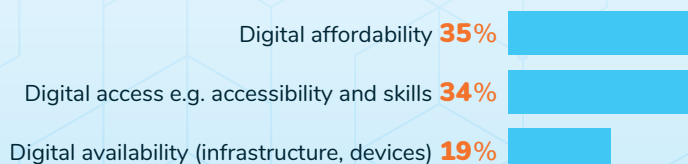
Fig. 8 What elements of digital inclusion are included in your organisational strategy?



When asked what the biggest digital challenge is when it comes to achieving their charity's mission, affordability narrowly took the top spot, while 34% of respondents cited digital access, including accessibility and skills (Fig. 9). One charity said it would like to offer digital services, but "staff are reluctant/unable to handle the technology" that would enable them.

In the next chapter, we delve more into the status of digital skills in the charity sector and what charities can do to address this concern.

Fig. 9 The top three digital challenges when it comes to achieving a charity's mission



2. Digital skills

As already discussed, a big part of digital inclusion is about learning the skills needed to access the online world. You can have all the digital tools and devices in the world, but if your service users, staff, or volunteers don't have the skills to use them, they remain inaccessible.

Digital skills have, in fact, long been a challenge for charities, with [the 2023 Charity Digital Skills report](#) identifying it as the second biggest challenge to the sector and 47% of charities saying it is a barrier to digital progress in [2024](#).

But the pace of technological change in 2024 means that it is easier than ever for people to feel left behind when it comes to digital skills. Digital inclusion should therefore not be seen as a one-and-done initiative – investing in digital skills should be consistent and continual.

The good news is that, internally, most charity professionals feel confident using digital technology at work. Our survey found that more than seven in ten (72%) rated themselves at between eight and ten in terms of confidence (Fig. 11). Of those who were not confident, rating themselves at five or below, they were more likely to be from smaller charities, with an income below £1 million. Broadly, however, most people in charities of all sizes felt confident using digital technology.

It is also worth noting that 84% of trustees rated themselves as seven out of ten in confidence levels, which is refreshing given the important role trustees have to play in driving digital transformation.

Skills among service users, however, remain a concern. Two thirds of charities say they have struggled to implement digital technology due to lack of skills among service users, while 57% say it is a barrier to improving services, as we noted in the previous chapter.

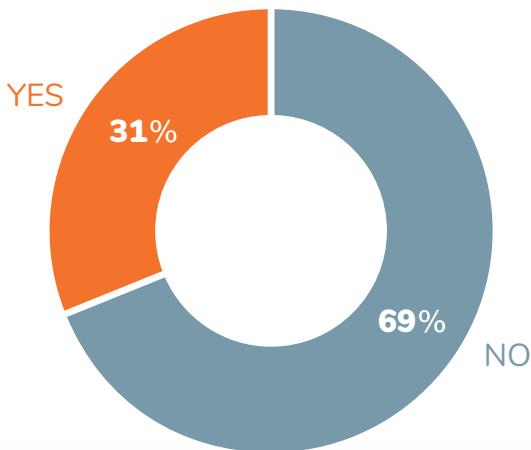
But it seems little is being done to address these skill gaps. Almost seven in ten charities say they do not offer digital skills training to service users (Fig. 10). This is perhaps due to lack of time and resource available to divert to digital skills training, particularly if services aren't currently digital. Charities are understandably focused on getting help to where it is most needed as quickly as possible and in a notoriously time-poor sector, training service users on digital technology may not be seen as an effective use of limited resources.

However, digital services can help charities extend their reach and ultimately deliver greater impact in the long-term, so long as they do not leave behind those experiencing digital exclusion in the process. Digital services may not be right for every charity, but as the pandemic proved, they are a worthwhile investment to ensure that people can access services as easily as possible.

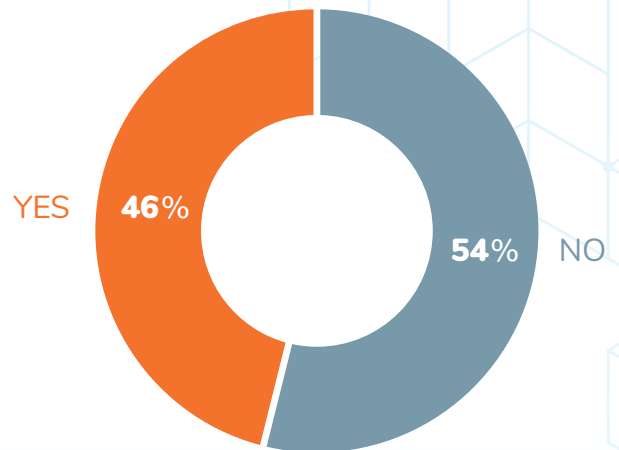
What's more, with so many charities citing skills as a barrier to implementing digital technology in their operations and services, there is clearly already drive among the sector to develop their services with digital. Training service users may take time, but it could be critical for the future effectiveness of charity services.

Fig. 10

Does your charity offer digital skills training to service users?



Does your charity offer digital skills training to staff and volunteers?



Internally, 64% of charities say they have struggled to implement digital technology due to lack of skills within the organisation. However, while more charities offered skills training to staff and volunteers (46%) than did so for service users, more than half do not (54%).

This demonstrates the significance of continuing to develop staff skills, too. Not only can digital tools help with service delivery (again, note that 41% said lack of digital skills internally was a barrier in this area), but they can support everything from fundraising to finance management.

With changes in technology requiring charity professionals to learn new digital skills, and often at pace, it is also important that the sector takes steps to support its staff and volunteers, making their workplace as digitally inclusive and accessible as their services. This could mean empowering staff with cyber security training, helping them to be more confident online and protect themselves and the charity from fraudulent threats. It also means giving them the digital skills and technology they need to do their jobs.

While the 46% of charities who do offer skills training to staff and volunteers is a good start, consistent support in this area will lead to a happier, more productive, and collaborative workplace culture.

Fig. 11

Out of ten, how confident are you in using digital technology at work?



3. Digital access

The second key pillar of digital inclusion is access. If people have the skills to get online, are they able to access the internet? Do they have the right devices? Do they have access to data or broadband? Do the websites they want to visit cater to their needs in terms of accessibility e.g. can it be used with screen readers?

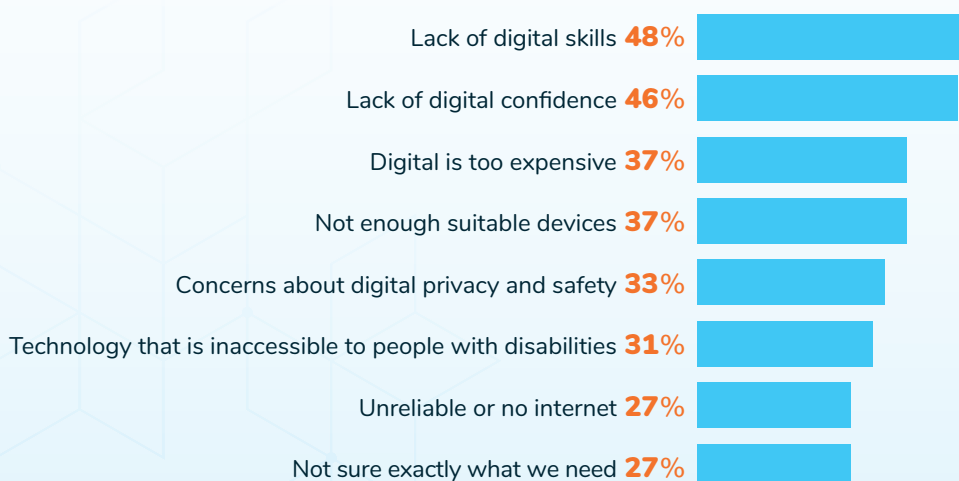
These are all important questions charities must consider when striving to become digitally inclusive. There are many factors that can prevent full digital access. With new hardware regularly released by tech companies, it can be tougher for people to access devices that are up-to-date and can work with the latest software, while the cost of new devices can be prohibitive.

“ There is no point in promoting digital inclusion if the devices and Wi-Fi access costs are prohibitive to the beneficiaries we support. When we run online services, we make sure we provide devices and data packs to beneficiaries and include them in the grant proposal to funders.

survey respondent

Digital expense was cited as the third biggest barrier to charities making the most of digital, behind lack of digital skills and lack of digital confidence (Fig. 12). Lack of suitable devices was also identified as a barrier by 37% of charities, demonstrating that investing in technology remains a priority for charities. In 2020, 43% of charities told the Charity Digital Skills report they needed financial support for new technical equipment, software, or tools. We can see in 2024 that that funding challenge has not gone away.

Fig. 12 What are your charity’s biggest barriers to making the most of digital technology?



“ We haven’t been able to access some software which we would like to use due to cost. We also have trouble with getting good enough laptops for the staff team due to high costs.

survey respondent

The survey also highlighted the importance of accessible technology, with 31% of charities saying technology that is inaccessible to people with disabilities was preventing them from making the most of digital technology. One respondent said, when asked about the specific technologies they find difficult to access, that testing on screen readers was a challenge, partly “driven by lack of time and general under-resourcing”.

Online accessibility is important for every sector – in some cases, it is a legal requirement – and for charities, more so, given their aim to reach as many people as possible with their cause. That three in ten respondents are unable to make the most of their technology due to its inaccessibility should be a cause for concern.

When it comes to technology in the workplace, the outlook is slightly more optimistic. More than three in five charities (64%) say they can access the technology they need at work, rating their ability to do at between eight and ten. Only 13% rated their ability to access the right technology at work at 5 or below.

Speaking of specific technology charities found difficult to access, customer relationship management systems (CRMs) were by far the most noted. Many charities also highlighted poor internet connection and reduced ability to collaborate online in hybrid environments as challenges.

Q. Are there any specific technologies you find difficult to access?



We still have onsite servers which makes working collaboratively with external users really hard. I'm working on moving us all to SharePoint with our new IT partners.

survey respondent



Mainly lack of mobile networks away from home or the office. Coverage is poor in our rural areas.

survey respondent



A user friendly and appropriate CRM.

survey respondent



The report also revealed issues around centralised technology, with one respondent saying that joining services together to prevent staff from having to log in to multiple portals was a challenge. Another said subscription-based services were expensive and often charged per user, despite individually being useful systems. So even while appetite for embracing digital is high, charities remain constrained from doing so more fully by circumstances outside their control.

This perhaps indicates a greater need for collaboration, both across the sector itself and outside it, including with technology companies and grant funders. While technology companies have a huge role to play in promoting digital inclusion – many already offer charity discounts and learning resources – so do grant funds in making digital projects possible. The [2024 Charity Digital Skills report](#) reported that only 34% of charities had applied for grants to cover digital costs, suggesting that this is an unexplored avenue for the sector to boost access to digital technology.

The future

Q. So what's next for charities when it comes to digital inclusion?

When asked what steps they believe charities should take to promote digital inclusion, respondents highlighted three key areas where charities believe their focus should be to improve digital inclusion moving forwards:

- ✓ Training
- ✓ Digital strategy
- ✓ Collaboration and Support

Q. What steps can charities take to promote digital inclusion?

“ More access and appropriate training for service users. ”
survey respondent

“ If there was free training available. ”
survey respondent

“ Gain skills and knowledge/obtain the right resources and have confidence in what we are promoting. ”
survey respondent

Focusing on training is understandable, given the digital skills deficits we've highlighted earlier in the report. With fewer than half of charities delivering digital skills training to their staff, volunteers, and beneficiaries (fewer than a third in the latter case), the appetite for more training to improve digital confidence is welcome and, more importantly, achievable.

There are lots of free resources available to charities to improve their digital skills, including Charity Digital's wealth of articles, events, and webinars, as well as schemes offered by the UK Government, Google, Microsoft, and LinkedIn. You can find out more [here](#).

“ Have a digital strategy. Understand how their service uses digital technology and how service users engage with digital technology. ”
survey respondent

Digital strategy is also a core part of tackling digital inclusion, and something that too few charities prioritise, with 37% of respondents saying they did not have one. A digital strategy allows charities to identify the key areas where digital can help them achieve their goals.

A digital strategy should include information on how they plan to deliver services digitally and how they help service users access those services. It helps organisations adopt technology that is purposeful and enables them to design digital services with service users in mind. Charities can carry out digital skills and accessibility audits when putting together their digital strategy to identify gaps and include plans on how to address them. You can find out more about what to include in a [digital strategy here](#).



Partner with likeminded others that are supporting digital inclusion initiatives.

survey respondent



Encourage technology providers to ensure updates are accessible to everyone, not just those with the latest equipment.

survey respondent



Collaboration was the third theme that emerged from our report. Charities acknowledge that digital inclusion is best tackled across industries, working with libraries, technology companies, other charities, funders, and the private sector to remove barriers to accessing the online world, such as expense and expertise.

When asked where they can find help when confronted with digital exclusion, many charities pointed to the work of their peers in the sector, from their own IT professionals to networks such as the Digital Poverty Alliance, libraries, and local government initiatives.

Q. Where can charities find help when confronted with digital exclusion?



For service users, I tend to recommend local charities for funding, libraries for internet access, various online learning spaces for basic skills. Obviously, we get some software from Charity Digital Exchange which helps us directly.

survey respondent



There are organisations that give out data packs and refurbished laptops. Not quite enough to meet the demand, but it's a big help.

survey respondent



Indeed, there are lots of options that can help charities with digital inclusion. Refurbished hardware is a good way of finding devices at a lower cost, both economically and environmentally. There are organisations that provide much-needed computer equipment specifically to charities too, such as Computers4Charities and InKind Direct.

The Charity Digital Exchange provides charities with a wide array of software and hardware at a significant discount. To date, we have helped more than 68,000 charities save money on their technology, enabling them to make more of it, whether it's shoring up their cyber security or making use of video conferencing software to collaborate more effectively.

Meanwhile, charities can support digital inclusion across the UK by donating their unused devices to charities like Good Things Foundation and the Digital Poverty Alliance, who securely wipe and distribute them to people experiencing digital exclusion.

Digital exclusion is not an isolated issue. A quarter of people with a disability or health condition are among those experiencing digital exclusion, according to Good Things Foundation, as well as 37% of people aged over 65 and 48% of people with no formal qualifications.

Digital inclusion, therefore, should be a concern to charities, both as responsible employers and organisations existing for the benefit of the public good. While it is heartening to see the vast majority of charities concerned about digital inclusion, there is still more work to do to ensure that everyone can access the services they need.

For more information, check out our [Digital Inclusion hub](#) on the Charity Digital website.

About us



Charity Digital partners with leading technology providers to deliver the UK's only software donation platform, Charity Digital Exchange. The charity aims to improve digital awareness and access, connect charities to the digital expertise and talent they need, and raise the bar for digital skills and understanding for non-profit organisations of all kinds.

Last year, we helped more than 600,000 people learn about digital transformation and improve their digital skills through our content, events, and training programmes.

We've enabled more than 80,000 charities to save on technology investments by connecting them to discounted digital products and services. In total, we have saved these charities over £288 million.

Whether it's digital exclusion or [climate change](#), we help charities use tech to enhance the ways they work and collaborate when faced with current challenges.

You can find out more at www.charitydigital.org.uk.



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