



Consultation response

Response to the Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund Action Plan, April 2025.

About Parent Zone

Parent Zone is an organisation that sits at the heart of digital family life, providing advice, knowledge and support to shape the best possible future for children as they navigate a digitised world. Founded in 2005, we have collaborated with many organisations who share our vision, remaining responsive to the continually developing nature of digital technologies, and how they intersect with family life. We recognise the enormous opportunities whilst understanding the challenges that accompany them.

The impact of digital poverty and digital inclusion are both specific areas of our focus. In 2020 we published the ‘Left behind in lockdown’ report that illustrated how vital connected tech was for supporting parents and families – with 77% of parents reporting that tech was a lifeline during COVID-19 restrictions.¹ However, the report also showed that household income related directly to how much families get from their use of digital, with those who already have more, unsurprisingly, benefitting more.² Our ‘Digital poverty’ report in 2021 also showed that the more affluent in society have the capacity to do more with tech – from a range of opportunities to activities like exploration and play. This report confirmed what others have found – that being connected and online does not necessarily equate to engagement with digital tools, services and opportunities.³

Through our extensive work with families, we know that access to digital must be supported by a wide skill set including online safety, media literacy and authoritative parenting. Unless these elements are included, families are unable to maximise the benefits of digital. We were therefore pleased to see media literacy included in the action plan and will be keen to explore how that manifests in practice.

Given parents are a key lever for driving change – not just for children and young people, but cross-generationally – it is interesting that they have not been included as a priority population group. As the Action Plan progresses we hope to see that change.

Finally we support the Action Plan’s emphasis on localised interventions and on the need to build confidence so that people of all ages are enthused about digital. However, we also raise a note of caution. A focus on localism should not become a reason to minimise national leadership. Fragmented local delivery can result in low quality provision and delay much needed system change.

You can read the Digital Inclusion Action Plan document, [here](#).

¹ https://parentzone.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-12/PZ_Left_Behind_In_Lockdown_2020_0.pdf

² Ibid.

³ <https://parentzone.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-05/PZ%20Digital%20Poverty%20Report%202021.pdf>

Government has identified five population groups that would likely benefit greatly from digital inclusion initiatives, these are:

- low-income households
- older people
- disabled people
- unemployed and those seeking work
- young people

Do you agree with these five population groups?

We agree with the existing five population groups identified in the strategy and are particularly supportive of the specific inclusion of young people. However, we would like to see parents added as a specific population group. We know that parents play a critical role as the providers of the technology that children use and as the people who supervise, encourage and support children's relationship with digital. Never more so as the debate about technology becomes more polarised, and as parents are being actively encouraged to withhold access.

There are other pressing reasons to include parents, too. According to the ONS, 35% of parents opt for hybrid working compared to 24% of non parents.⁴ Parents who are digitally excluded are likely to find it more difficult to balance work with childcare and those in work with limited digital skills and/or limited access are less likely to be able to progress to higher paid roles. Rates of unemployment are twice as high for single parents as for people parenting as a couple and as the Action Plan notes, people who are unemployed are less likely to be able to afford broadband, data and devices.⁵

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<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/whoarethehybridworkers/2024-11-11>

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<https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/The-Single-Parent-Employment-Challenge-Report-SPEC.pdf>

Similarly, around 1.3 million people are thought to be in the ‘sandwich generation’ caring for both children and elderly relatives.⁶ Supporting these parents would in turn enhance attempts to support two of the other population groups.

For all of these reasons we would recommend adding parents as a population group. To reiterate, parents are an important lever for the inclusion of children and young people and have their own needs and challenges that need to be met. It is difficult to see how young people will experience the maximum benefit of the Action Plan if parents aren’t also front and centre. Indeed we would suggest that not specifically including parents has the potential to significantly undermine the ambitions of the plan.

How can the government ensure the Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund best supports local communities across the UK?

Parent Zone specialises in developing programmes – including ‘Parent Zone Local’, ‘Everyday Digital’ and ‘Resilient Families’ – that are designed for local delivery. Creating initiatives at the national level, whilst thinking and delivering locally, offers the maximum economic efficiencies by investing in well-designed programmes that can be used in many different contexts. It is a model that delivers reach and recognises the crucial role of a local ‘turn to professionals’ model. It is an approach that we would commend as one that is relevant for the innovation fund.

Our DSIT-funded Everyday Digital programme, for example, is designed to improve media literacy knowledge and skills with a specific focus on vulnerable families. It does this by training and supporting professionals to become Local Champions equipped with an evidence-based set of resources that can be adapted for use with and within their communities. We know from research and practice that families respond better to people they already know and trust, and for most families that means local professionals. This capacity-building model is a highly effective way to construct a scalable model whilst maintaining quality and ensuring proper evaluation. We are also seeing local authorities commission the programme after central government funding has come to an end.

However, this model is not without challenges. The evaluation of Everyday Digital highlighted the need for strategic buy-in at a local level as well as the scarcity of time for busy professionals. Put simply, it isn’t possible to adopt a capacity-based model when

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<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2025/jan/sandwich-carers-experience-decline-mental-and-physical-health#:~:text=The%20number%20of%20people%20in.million%20people%20are%20sandwich%20carers.>

there is no capacity to build. Having the option to provide additional capacity is important for delivery and can act as a stimulus to local engagement – as we saw with our Parent Zone Local programme. In this model, local guides were provided by us to work alongside local professionals. This added much needed capacity and reached more parents and families with in-person support.

One option to ensure that the necessary support and capacity exists in local areas is to create a nationally-mandated requirement for local authorities to provide digital inclusion programmes, ideally targeting each of the priority population groups. This approach was highly effective for parenting support under the previous Labour government.

Has the government identified the right objectives for "Opening up opportunities through skills"?

Having the knowledge and skills needed to access digital services and unlock opportunity is clearly vital. We see first-hand in our work with families significant gaps in basic skills that can often be masked by asking children and young people for help or by simply avoiding some digital tasks. We are particularly concerned, given that the Online Safety Act places such a reliance on user empowerment tools and parental controls, that parents who lack digital skills will be less able to ensure their children are using platforms appropriately and safely.

We would note that digital skills and media literacy skills are inexorably linked. It is important that both are tackled in order to open up opportunities. Being able to critically understand content, data, privacy, online environments, and the consequences of online behaviours – the foundational elements of media literacy – is crucial if users are to benefit from digital opportunities. Media literacy is also necessary for users to avoid any negative consequences which, ultimately, are not only potentially harmful to the user but may also lead to further digital avoidance. Efforts to upskill individuals must include all necessary skills (including digital financial literacy) and not fall into the trap of focusing solely on functional digital skills.

Have government identified the right objectives for "Building confidence"?

As the Action Plan makes clear, not everyone wants to be actively engaged in the online world. Some see little to no benefit in their own levels of inclusion or, particularly, for

children and young people. Others regard inclusion as too high-risk, intimidating and ultimately better avoided. Even people who are engaged can find themselves left behind with the emergence of new technologies like AI. Making ‘building confidence’ one of the focus areas is therefore extremely important, especially for parents who are losing confidence in the online world. The Smartphone Free Childhood movement has struck a chord and we are now starting to see a backlash against EdTech and any device-based learning. This is in spite of the evidence base not supporting smartphone bans.⁷

However, building confidence is complex. In our work with families we hear a myriad of concerns including worries about financial harms, concerns about cost and a pervasive narrative that anyone who wasn’t born in an era with tech is unable to fully understand it. The digital native myth has done lasting damage. We also see gender-based differences with women often deferring to fathers and sons to handle the family tech and, where English is a second language, we find additional functional barriers that ironically can be overcome easily with the use of translation technology. Frustratingly, digital exclusion means those tools are beyond reach.

Overcoming these challenges will require long-term support. Interventions cannot take a ‘once and done’ approach, nor can they be simply siloed into ‘technical skills’ or ‘media literacy skills’. Nurturing confidence takes time and requires reinforcement through lived experiences. Without it, the action plan will not be effective.

Has the government identified the right medium and long-term next steps for “Building confidence”?

We welcome the Action Plan’s emphasis on working with local authorities and local communities to increase inclusion, but reiterate our earlier point that it needs to take into account challenges around capacity and ensure that evaluation is embedded properly.

We note the Action Plan includes a commitment to developing evidence-based policy interventions. This commitment should extend to interventions funded by the Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund. Taking an iterative, test and learn approach with pilots ahead of rollout sounds sensible but can also lead to innovation for the sake of innovation and ‘pilot’ testing things that have already been proven to work or not work. The Government should make every effort to avoid reinventing wheels. Extensive work has been done to

⁷ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanepi/article/PIIS2666-7762\(25\)00003-1/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanepi/article/PIIS2666-7762(25)00003-1/fulltext);
<https://www.bmj.com/content/388/bmj-2024-082569>

understand motivations for being online including by the Behavioural Insights Team, albeit for different policy areas. That knowledge should be identified and considered ahead of any further work, and the fact a previous administration conducted the research should not be a reason for starting again. Finding the right balance between awareness of online risk and harm and encouraging engagement is also a very significant challenge, particularly in the current environment. That environment includes some criticism of Ofcom, which as the UK internet regulator has a very specific role that will inevitably disappoint some users. We would recommend proper scoping and monitoring of any attempts to reassure people including – crucially – parents.

Our work in local communities underlines the fact that it takes time to get families to engage with programmes. We would stress that the Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund's localised initiatives must be patient, long-term and responsive to the unique needs of the target communities. We also know from delivery experience that to achieve change any funding needs to be sustained and long-term.

Finally, we would add that the medium and long-term steps could articulate a clearer, more ambitious approach towards system change. We are concerned that without a clear roadmap towards system change there is a risk of a proliferation of initiatives that do not achieve more than the sum of their parts.