

Digitally Excluded

How families raising
disabled children are
being left behind



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93% 

of respondents were either excluded or at risk of exclusion.

1. Executive summary

1.1. Introduction

At Family Fund we work with thousands of families raising disabled or seriously ill children and young people across the UK. Our latest research, Digitally Excluded, investigates the rates of digital inclusion and exclusion among the families we support.

As the UK Government's [Digital Inclusion Action Plan](#) outlines, digital technology impacts every part of our lives, and digital exclusion can have devastating consequences. Our survey of families raising disabled children on a low income found that 93% of respondents were either excluded or at risk of exclusion. With £24.1 billion of benefits going unclaimed across Great Britain,¹ the shift towards digital-first delivery for essential services risks excluding families who need more support to get online.

Key public services, education, welfare systems, and opportunities for social connection are increasingly delivered online. Tackling digital exclusion for families raising disabled children on a low income is critical to reducing inequalities and enabling parents, carers and children to access services and opportunities they are entitled to. Digital inclusion should be baked into service design, not bolted on, to make sure no one is left behind.

Our research uses the [Good Things Foundation's](#) definition of digital inclusion: "Digital inclusion is being able to access the internet and engage online - safely and confidently - when you need and want to." Our UK-wide survey and telephone interviews explore the barriers to digital inclusion and identify what more needs to be done to ensure all families raising disabled children have the tools they need to progress in life.

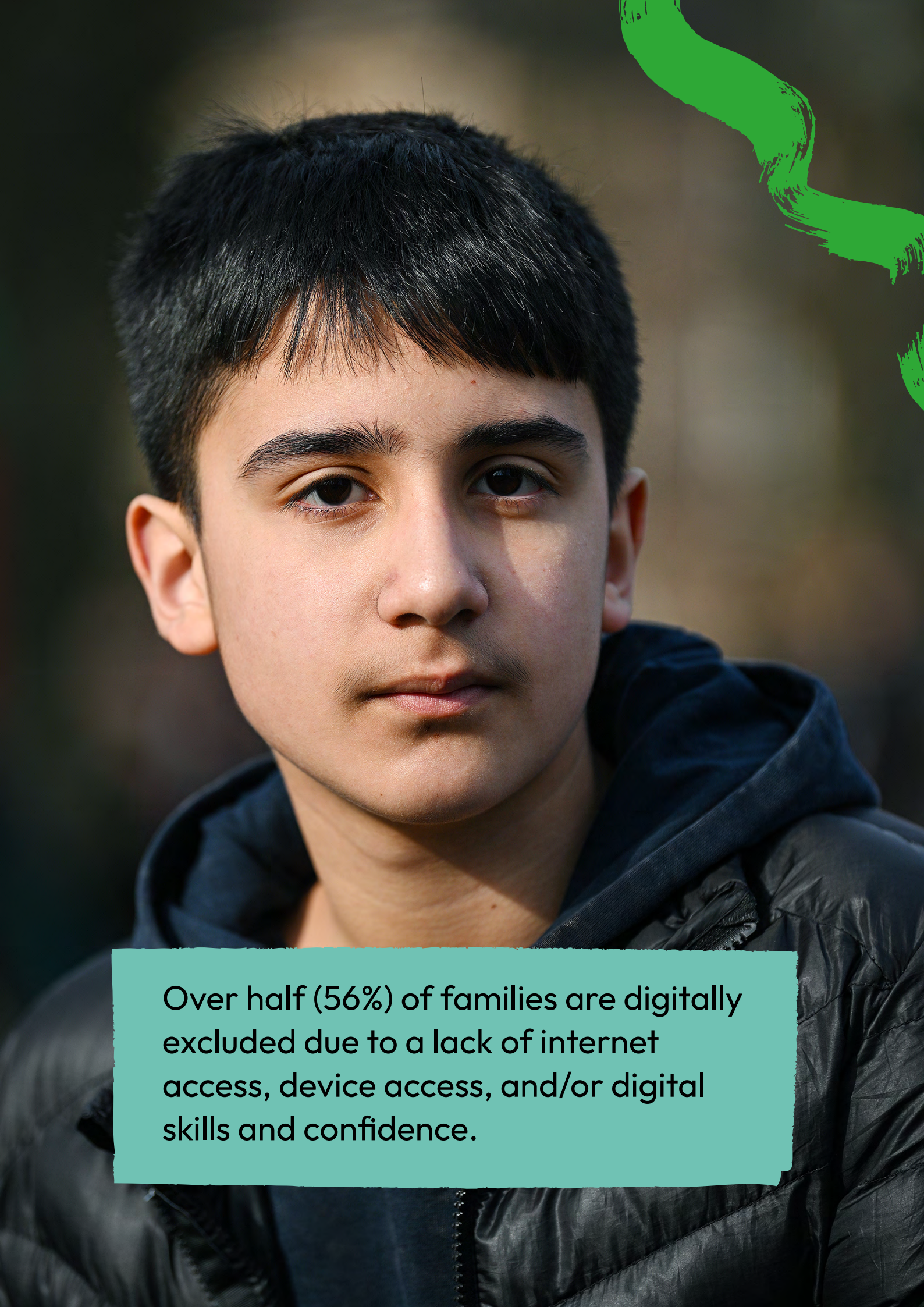
1. Missing Out 2025 | Policy in Practice

1.2 Summary of findings

- Over half (56%) of families are digitally excluded due to a lack of internet access, device access, and/or digital skills and confidence.
- 37% of families are online but at risk of digital exclusion due to financial vulnerabilities and needing support from others to use online services and digital devices.
- Only 7% of families meet the criteria for digital inclusion.
- Many families are experiencing multiple compounding barriers and vulnerabilities at once: 85% of our digitally excluded respondents are experiencing a combination of three or more barriers and vulnerabilities (with at least one barrier and one vulnerability), making the journey to getting online even more challenging.
- Buying, maintaining, and replacing digital devices and assistive software and paying for reliable internet access is often very difficult or impossible for families to afford alongside other necessities.
- Many parents and carers feel it is essential for their child to have access to appropriate technology and the internet to allow them to take part in education, play and social opportunities that they wouldn't otherwise have access to. Technology is also seen as an important tool for neurodivergent children to self-regulate, particularly in stressful settings.
- Where possible, being online is invaluable in enabling parents and carers to keep in touch with friends and family alongside their caring roles. It also helps them connect with other families in similar circumstances.

85%

of our digitally excluded respondents are experiencing a combination of three or more barriers and vulnerabilities



Over half (56%) of families are digitally excluded due to a lack of internet access, device access, and/or digital skills and confidence.

1.3 Family Fund's role

Family Fund's mission is to make life better for families raising disabled and seriously ill children. We do this by providing:

- Grants and practical support to make day-to-day living easier and more enjoyable
- Information, connections and skills to empower families, so they can achieve their goals
- Opportunities for families to have an input on the policies and services that shape their lives.

We believe digital access is essential for disabled and seriously ill children and their families for education, communication, and access to services. We're part of the [Digital Services Consortium](#) and the [National Digital Inclusion Network](#), working to bridge the digital divide in communities across the UK. We provide grants for essential items (last year we awarded over 19,400 grants for digital devices and apps²) and help families build their digital confidence through workshops and online resources.

We hear first-hand from families the difference this support makes, to ensure they have access to the same online opportunities as everyone else.

“I have two children with additional needs. It's overwhelming and hard and a constant battle for support. Family Fund doesn't just provide a grant - it's so much more. We benefited from an iPad, but also the support to use it via online classes. I feel like getting awarded makes me feel like my children can have what other children have”

- Parent carer via grant feedback survey

2. From 1st April 2025 to 24th March 2026 Family Fund awarded 19,431 grants to families for digital items. This figure includes grants for tablets, computers, games consoles, mobile phones, apps and accessories for tablets, and assistive technology.

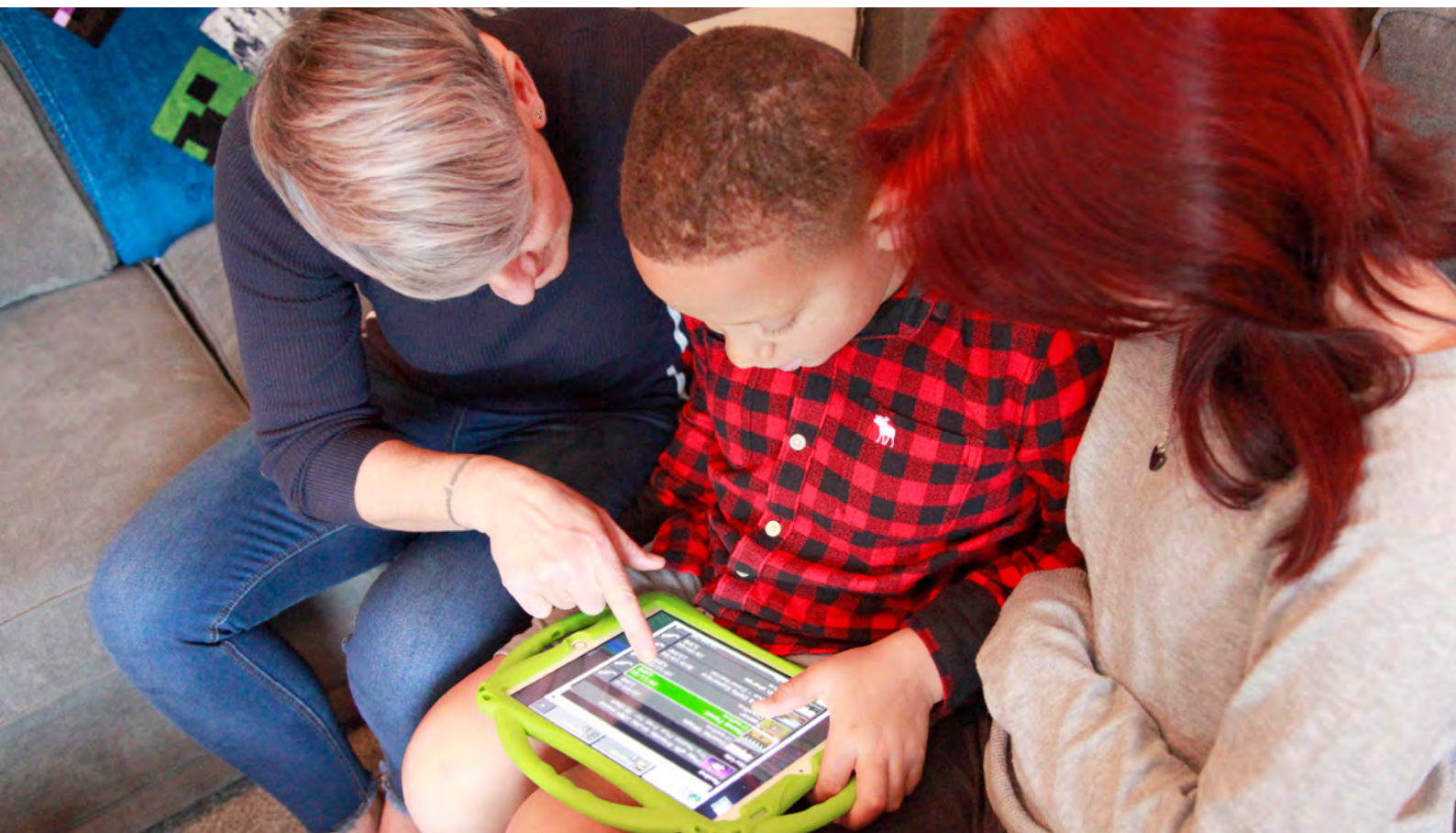
While the support we provide is not limited to digital inclusion, we know that internet and device access is essential to achieving equity in all areas of life.

1.4 What needs to change

As more services are delivered online, it is becoming increasingly important that families have reliable, affordable access to the internet and suitable digital devices. This is so they can carry out online activities like organising healthcare appointments, managing their finances, and applying for benefits.

For disabled children in particular, digital inclusion is fundamental to learning, communication and play. Many disabled children rely on technology to express themselves and interact with the world in ways that differ from non-disabled children: digital access is a necessity, not a luxury.

We call upon policymakers, funders, support agencies and charities to recognise the issues that digital exclusion is causing for families on a low income raising disabled and seriously ill children. We want to work together to ensure everyone has equal access to the online services and opportunities they need.



2. Findings

2.1 Rates of digital exclusion

The rates of digital inclusion in the survey sample were calculated using the Good Things Foundation's Indicators of Digital Inclusion [analytical framework](#) which considers the following barriers and vulnerabilities for the parents and carers who responded to the survey:

- Digital skills and confidence
- Access to devices and internet connection
- Financial risk
- Support needs

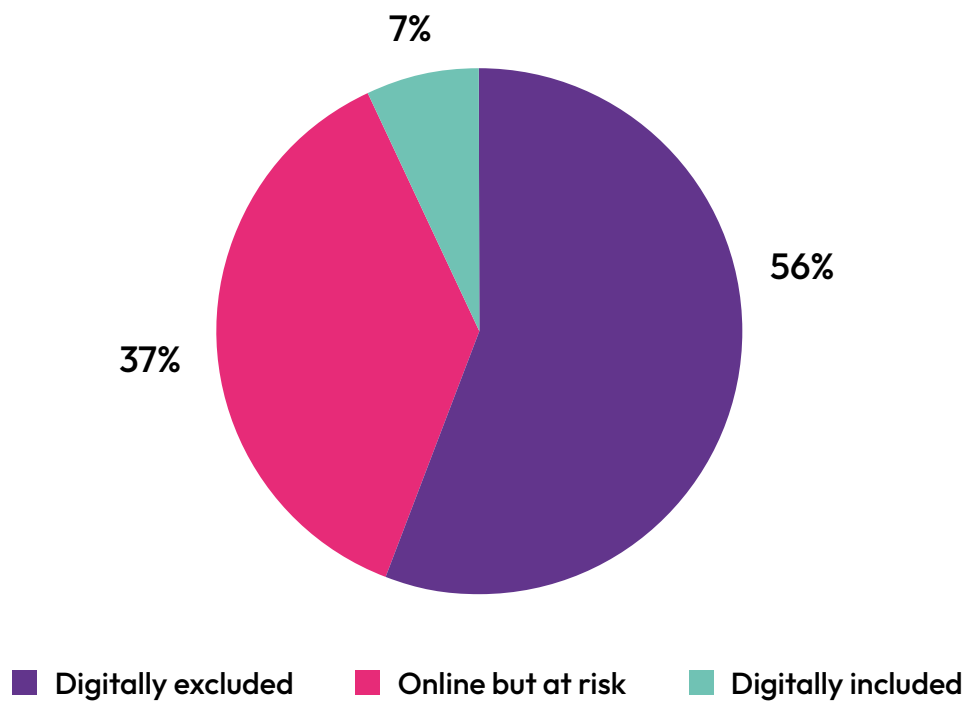
Parents and carers were asked a series of questions to identify which, if any, of the above barriers and/or vulnerabilities they are facing. This data was then used to classify respondents as digitally included, excluded, or online but at risk of exclusion.³

Only 7% of our survey respondents meet the criteria for being digitally included. This group have the digital devices, internet access and skills to carry out the online tasks they need to. 56% of respondents are digitally excluded due to a lack of internet access, device access, and/or digital skills and confidence, while the remaining 37% are currently online and have access to devices, but are at risk of digital exclusion due to financial vulnerabilities and needing support from others to carry out tasks online.

Only 7% of families meet the criteria for digital inclusion

3. The questions used to assess digital inclusion status related to the parent/carer respondent only. Although the survey also asked questions about disabled children's use of devices and internet access, this data was not used to assess household digital inclusion status.

Chart 1: Digital exclusion status of survey respondents



Our analysis finds that parents/carers from Asian backgrounds (including Pakistani, Indian, Chinese, Bangladeshi and other Asian ethnicities) have more than twice as high odds of being digitally at risk, or excluded, than other ethnicities. Parents and carers aged 18-24 have lower odds of being digitally excluded compared to other age categories. Parents and carers with lower wellbeing scores also have four times higher odds of being digitally excluded or at risk, compared to those with higher wellbeing scores.

Please refer to Annex A for further detail on methodology.

2.2 The barriers families are facing

When families are asked what would help them and their children get online, the most common response is financial support. This is reflected in the fact that financial vulnerabilities are the most common reason for our survey respondents falling into the category of digital exclusion. On top of this, some parents and carers find online services and devices inaccessible and worry about keeping their disabled children safe online.

Of all our survey respondents:

- 89% have at least one financial vulnerability.
- 50% have at least one skill barrier.
- 16% have at least one internet or device access barrier.

Of our respondents who are digitally excluded:

- 92% have at least one financial vulnerability, and 52% have three or more financial vulnerabilities.
- 98% have at least one skill barrier and 26% have three or more skill barriers.
- 22% have at least one access barrier.

On top of this, many of our respondents are facing multiple barriers and vulnerabilities simultaneously. Of those who are digitally excluded:

- 85% are facing three or more barriers and vulnerabilities, including at least one barrier and one vulnerability.
- 39% are facing four or more barriers and vulnerabilities, with at least two barriers and two vulnerabilities.

This shows the depth of digital exclusion for low-income families raising disabled children, who face multiple compounding factors that make the journey to getting online even more challenging.

98%

have at least one skill barrier
and 26% have three or more
skill barriers.

Families cannot always afford basic digital devices

A key theme for parents and carers is the cost of digital devices. 89% of respondents have financial challenges that are impacting their use of digital devices and internet access. The cost of buying, maintaining, and replacing the digital devices, apps and assistive software, in addition to paying for reliable internet access, is often impossible to afford alongside other day-to-day necessities like food and clothing.

This impacts families' access to devices. 29% of parents and carers tell us they don't have access to a device that meets their internet needs, and 24% say their disabled child doesn't have access to a suitable device either. Almost half of respondents (42%) feel their family would benefit from having access to additional digital devices.

“They [my children] need a higher spec device with compatibility for assistive technology. Their device is old, with many functions not working. Very frustrating.”

“My children don't use devices... My oldest says “I can't use the computer that good, but I'm learning mum”. He goes to the library (at school) to use the internet.”

A number of respondents say their family has competing needs when sharing a single device or that they rely on a device that is very dated. Families say a lack of access to the right digital devices to meet their needs often means they feel they, and their children, are missing out on access to essential opportunities like education, play and socialising.

“Because of his disability, technology is a vital tool for his development. Without a working device, he is falling behind educationally and missing out socially. A replacement tablet or similar device would make a significant positive difference to his learning, wellbeing and daily life.”

Families are struggling to afford a reliable internet connection

The cost of internet access is also a barrier, with 57% of families finding their internet service difficult to afford. 32% of parents and carers tell us they have limited their own internet use in the past due to the cost. Given many parents and carers feel internet access is essential for their child, this sometimes means they're cutting back on other things to ensure they can afford internet provision.

“I would not be able to limit my son's internet use. He needs it. It's all he has. If it wasn't available he would get upset, self-harm. I would sell other things first before limiting internet use because of cost.”

In some instances, poor internet connection is leading to parents and carers spending more on better internet provision, so they can ensure their children's digital needs are met.

“The twins have educational apps and games. It’s a learning aid for them along with communication devices. I’ve had to buy the higher internet package and speeds of 1 gig to help make sure it’s stable and fast enough to avoid any problems, to avoid any distress. But this is costly and can be a struggle on carers allowance.”

A small proportion of families (9% of respondents) say they are reliant on mobile data as their main source of internet access which means their access is limited and intermittent.

“We have to rely on my mobile data and use the hot spot, it usually finishes very quickly... then we are left with no internet for at least a week or so.”

Many respondents say the quality of their internet connection is an issue, with slow speeds and connections that frequently drop out. 17% of respondents say their internet connection is affected by interruptions, slow speeds and data limits on a daily basis, with a further 19% experiencing weekly issues.

Online services and support are not accessible enough

Responses highlight the need for online services and support that take into account their needs as parents and carers raising disabled and seriously ill children. In addition, 50% of our survey respondents say they're lacking key digital skills, and 98% of digitally excluded respondents have one or more skill barrier that prevents them from carrying out essential online activities.

Parents and carers feel that having more support to access information and more space to build confidence would be useful. Many express a preference for digital skills workshops, to have the opportunity not only to develop their digital skills but also to connect with other families like theirs.

“Clear written guidance and step-by-step instructions for online services [would be helpful]. Flexible, accessible support that takes into account time pressures and stress would make it easier for me to use these services confidently”

Accessibility challenges with reading and writing for parents and carers are another barrier preventing digital inclusion according to parents and carers who took part in our telephone interviews. This likely applies to a small number of families but has a significant impact on this group, who often mention being disabled or having health conditions themselves. This means they rely on family members, social workers or school staff to help them use their devices or carry out online activities for them.

“I’m dyslexic, so I have problems reading, so I don’t use the internet that much. I wait until my older children are back to do all the reading and that for me.”

“I find it very difficult to read forms. Forms look very big and with reading and writing and I’m not into that. With the children’s conditions and my conditions...life is not really a reading life. Reading and technology, it’s a burden for me.”

Parents and carers worry about how to keep their child safe online

While many parents and carers feel confident in using online services, some had concerns around managing their child’s safety online, with some saying they’re lacking the right skills or knowledge. Many respondents feel there should be more support and guidance around this. Concerns around use of social media and exposure to inappropriate content are common.

“There should be more help with safety and awareness. More help with knowing what they actually do on there and what they can go on. I’d like help with that, so more help for me to help them.”

Some parents and carers feel it’s essential for their children to have access to the same operating system as them so they’re easily able to manage safety controls from their own devices.

2.3 The additional digital needs of families with disabled children

Families say they have greater demand for digital devices and internet access in their households than families without disabled children. This is due to needing to repair and replace devices more frequently, having to spend more on accessible devices and the assistive software or apps their child needs, and needing more devices to meet their family's needs. For example, needing their child to have their own device for independent self-regulation while they are using their mobile phone.

Spending more on repairs and replacements

Several respondents say they need to repair and replace their disabled children's devices more frequently than they would have to for non-disabled children due to the higher wear and tear rate.

“He is prone to breaking [tablets] and has currently got one that has a cracked screen that he cannot see very well.”

Families with access to suitable devices are often concerned about affording future repairs or replacements. 63% of respondents tell us it's very difficult or impossible to pay for repairs or replacements if their current devices stop working. Parents and carers say they need devices that are more robust or include more affordable warranties or maintenance guarantees.

“My son had a computer I brought for him and it now doesn't work. He enjoyed playing games on it and learning how to use the keyboard but I do not know how to fix it or where to go. I wouldn't be able to afford to replace it.”



63%

of respondents tell us it's very difficult or impossible to pay for repairs or replacements if their current devices stop working.

“My son is struggling as his iPad was damaged and I can’t afford a replacement. This has led to him disengaging from his studies.”

As a result, families categorised as “at risk” of digital exclusion can easily become fully digitally excluded without a safety net for replacing or repairing devices they depend on.

Paying more for the right devices and assistive software

45% of families tell us their disabled child needs access to a specific device or model to meet their accessibility needs. Many parents and carers also frame their own needs for support in terms of the needs of their children, especially for assistive technology to support their children’s education.

Families highlight a range of devices that work best for their children, with a clear preference for tablets due to the screen size, touchscreens rather than buttons, educational apps, assistive and communication software options, and effective parental safety controls. Confidence in using familiar brands and devices is a common theme, with children often reliant on a specific brand or model to meet their needs.

“My daughter has a left sided palsy and cannot hold a pen or pencil. A tablet allows her to push buttons on the screen with her good hand. It’s also useful for helping her calm down during disregulation. We can increase text size which is better for her vision. We can also limit volume and brightness which prevents sensory overload.”

Several parents and carers are unable to afford the additional assistive software or applications that they feel that they and/or their children would benefit from. This is often mentioned in relation to Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) software and subscriptions to accessible education applications.

Needing more devices to meet the family's needs

Some families also stress the importance of having separate devices for their disabled children. A number of parents and carers say they regularly have to give up their own devices and internet access to allow their children to use them for educational resources and emotional regulation.

“My child who has special education needs gets very emotional and distressed when I am unable to give my phone for her to use due to me being on call to the doctors or my other children. So I am unable to use my phone at most times. It would have been very useful if she had her own iPad so I could have my phone ready to use when needed to without causing her to get upset.”

“Having an additional device for our child would help ensure consistent access to educational content and online resources without disrupting other family members' use of the internet.”

2.4 The benefits of digital inclusion for families with disabled children

While a small number of parents and carers feel access to the internet would not be suitable for their disabled child due to their condition, most respondents strongly feel there are specific benefits of digital inclusion for their disabled children above and beyond those experienced by non-disabled children.

“If our son hadn’t been able to access the internet or his devices the last 12 months would have been unthinkable for him, his siblings & us as parents. They’re a massive part of who he is and what he needs to feel ‘himself’.”

Many parents and carers describe internet and device access as fundamental to their disabled child’s education, socialising, independence, self-regulation and wellbeing (particularly for neurodivergent children).

“The internet is crucial for my son’s development. He watches educational videos, does homework, plays his games, socialises with friends, does his reading and research for school subjects, and he also does research on his hobbies.”

Many parents and carers feel that digital inclusion has a positive impact on them too: connecting them with other families like theirs, providing emergency lines of communication, and enabling access to critical online services like organising hospital and GP appointments.



“Access to the internet and digital devices has helped our family stay connected and informed. It has made it easier to communicate with relatives and friends, support children’s learning through online resources, and manage everyday tasks like banking, appointments, and school communications. Digital access has also provided entertainment and stress relief, especially during busy or challenging periods.”

Providing access to education

69% of parents and carers tell us that it's essential for their disabled child to have access to online schoolwork and study. Often this is in the context of situations where children could not otherwise attend school or college in person or are being homeschooled. This is particularly impactful in cases where children have access to assistive technologies to support their learning.

“Without being able to study online he wouldn't be able to have continued his education. These are one to one lessons which have been transformative for his learning and mental health.”

Parents also emphasise the value of assistive software on development and communication, with tablets and assistive technology enabling children take part in online learning activities they wouldn't otherwise have access to.

Respondents whose children do not have access to the right digital devices and software to meet their needs often cite this as a barrier to their children taking part in education.

Building social and communication skills

Digital devices provide an extremely important way for many disabled children and young people to socialise. Parents and carers say it reduces their child's isolation and helps improve their communication skills. Often this takes the form of playing online games with friends in cases where children can't interact with peers in person.

“He doesn't have many friends and he is able to socialise with the small amount of friends he has on Roblox which helps with his socialising skills so he doesn't feel lonely.”

“Being able to have internet is a blessing. My daughter loves her iPad. It helps with behaviour management which is a major part of her every day socialising.”

Several families told us that children use their devices as an assistive tool to communicate with family members. This also allows them to enjoy greater independence when out and about.

“My son has been able to use his device to show me what he is trying to explain by using images or google searches. It allows him to plan ahead with images and he can watch and download videos to watch when out of the house. He has been able to have a bit of independence like his peers and feel involved with them.”

Enabling independent self-regulation

Families tell us it is highly valuable for neurodivergent children to have access to their own digital devices so they can self-regulate and avoid sensory overwhelm, particularly in stressful situations such as at medical appointments. It makes getting “out and about” much more manageable and enjoyable for families day-to-day.

“My child’s device provides him with a safe space when he leaves the house. It gives him the opportunity to ‘zone out’ and retreat into a place he feels comfortable. He uses headphones so he can block out noise and it’s useful for regulating him if he starts to get overwhelmed or overstimulated.”

One parent/carer shares the positive impact of a digital device on their child’s development, sense of self and feeling included with those around her:

“It supports her independence by allowing her to follow instructions, express herself, and access information in a way that suits her needs. When she becomes overwhelmed or anxious, using a familiar digital device helps her to self-regulate and reduces meltdowns. Overall, access to a digital device helps her feel more confident, supported and included in everyday activities.”

Supporting the wellbeing of parents and carers

Alongside the benefits of digital inclusion on children, parents and carers also tell us digital inclusion has a positive impact on their own wellbeing. It means they can connect with similar families and maintain contact with friends and family.

“It has helped me a lot with my mental health and keeping in touch with family that I can’t visit. I don’t have an active social life so using my device I don’t feel so alone.”

Some families rely on the internet to do their shopping, manage prescriptions, and organise medical appointments for their children. This is highly beneficial to help parents and carers with a heavy caring load who find it difficult to get out and about.

“Due to my daughter’s disability, I do everything online, from grocery shopping and ordering medication to buying supplements like gels, syringes, and Incopads. I also make appointments and communicate with family.”

Families say they are using the internet to access resources to manage their own mental wellbeing or disabilities, as well as their child’s. Several parents feel mobile phone access is crucial for contacting their child or phone for help in a medical emergency. However, some report that accurate information about healthcare is difficult to find online, with lots of conflicting information making it difficult to navigate the online healthcare landscape.

3. Recommendations

1) Digital access must be affordable and inclusive so families raising disabled or seriously ill children on a low income are not left behind:

Affordable:

- **Digital access needs to be recognised as an essential living cost** in national and local government guidance, allowing existing financial support from the state, to cover digital inclusion costs. This needs to include repairs for digital technology and assistive software.
- **Public services need to be accessible across all mobile networks without using mobile data**, so families can access health, education, benefits and support services even when they have no data.
- **UK Government should work with industry to deliver a co-funded UKwide social tariff covering both broadband and mobile data**, ensuring lowincome households have fast, reliable and affordable internet wherever they are.
- **Digital devices and assistive technology need to be funded** for low income families raising disabled children and young people: This should include devices for parents and carers as well as for children and young people, protective cases for devices, warranty cover for accidental damage (like cracked screens or spills) and fast replacement options for broken devices.

Inclusive:

- **Rural connectivity needs investment** to close the urban–rural digital gap
- **Local digital inclusion programmes need investment**- particularly in high deprivation areas, so there is accessible support for disabled children and parent carers.
- Support should include help to use key online services, managing children’s safety online, and advice on accessing financial support for access. **All national and local public sector digital services must be fully accessible, tested with diverse users and assistive technologies.**
- **Digital tools and access should be codesigned with families most affected**, ensuring digital inclusion is baked in, not bolted on.



2) Offline access needs to be improved to guarantee anyone, anywhere can easily use, and enjoy essential public services

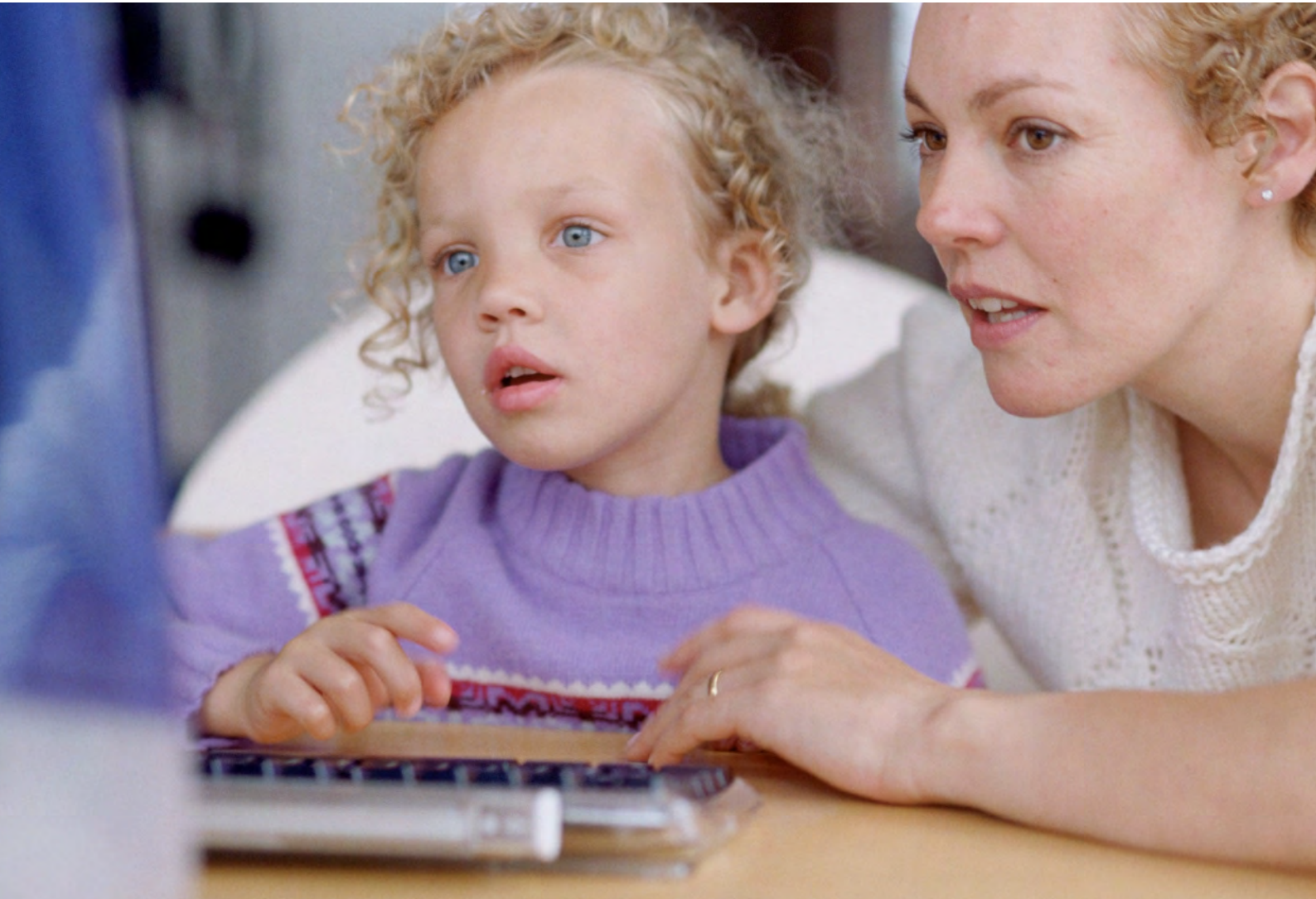
- UK and devolved governments must ensure their **public services are accessible offline**
- UK and devolved governments should **issue guidance requiring local authorities and public service providers to offer easily accessible offline routes** for those who need them.
- **Government digital transformation projects must factor in the needs of those who are not online** and ensure they can continue to access services
- The UK Government must make sure **local government receives enough funding to provide offline access to services.**

We are supportive of the [Good Things Foundation's digital inclusion policy asks](#) and the commitments outlined in the [Digital Poverty Alliance's National Delivery and Advocacy Plan](#). We continue to work in partnership to drive change on a national and local level.

4. Conclusion

Families raising disabled and seriously ill children on a low income are missing out on digital access, skills and support that are vital to be able to participate fully, progress and thrive in life. With greater digital needs and fewer resources available to meet those needs, change is urgently needed to prevent families from being left behind.

We call on national and local government, funding bodies and our third sector partners to work with us to ensure disabled children and their families can easily and confidently get online, wherever they live in the UK.



Annex A: Methodology

This research involved a mixed-mode survey of a sample of households who received grants from the following programmes from July to December 2025:

- The Support for Families with Disabled Children (SFDC) programme, funded by the Department for Education in England, and administered by Family Fund
- Family Fund's grant programme in Wales, funded by the Social Services & Integration Directorate of the Welsh Government
- Family Fund's grant programme in Scotland, funded by the Directorate for Children and Families of the Scottish Government
- Family Fund's grant programme in Northern Ireland, funded by the Department of Health of the NI Executive.

The survey was distributed online via email and on paper for families who had applied for Family Fund grants on paper rather than online. The survey was open from Friday 9th January to Friday 30th January 2026. Completion of the survey was optional, so findings are likely to include a degree of selection bias. Parents and carers who had opted out of further contact from Family Fund, or who had notified us of a bereavement, were not included in the invitation. Survey participants were offered the opportunity to take part in a prize draw to win one of four £100 vouchers as an incentive.

The survey was distributed to 14,418 households within the UK and received 667 complete responses from parents/carers of disabled children in total. Table 1 provides a breakdown of responses by nation.

Table 1: Number of survey responses UK-wide and by nation

Nation	Number of survey responses
England	511
Scotland	91
Wales	7
Northern Ireland	58
UK total	667

Of those who responded to our survey:

- 45% are lone parent/carers
- 34% have an illness or health condition of their own that reduced their ability to carry out day-to-day tasks
- 43% have more than one disabled child in their household
- 58% have non-disabled children in their household, in addition to their disabled child/ren.
- 41% say their monthly income, including any benefits they are receiving, does not cover their family's minimum living expenses.
- 94% say they spend more on everyday necessities such as groceries, clothing and toys as a result of their child's disability.

A round of four qualitative telephone interviews was then carried out with paper-based households who did not complete the original survey questionnaire. Interview participants were also offered the opportunity to take part in a prize draw for a £50 voucher as an incentive.

The rates of digital inclusion in the survey sample were calculated using the [Good Things Foundation's](#) Indicators of Digital Inclusion [analytical framework](#) which considered the following barriers and vulnerabilities:

- Digital skills and confidence
- Access to devices and internet connection
- Financial risk
- Support needs

The outcome variable (digital inclusion status) was measured on a three-point scale, categorising respondents into the following three groups:

- **Excluded:** these respondents experience one or more barriers to inclusion such as a lack of digital skills or confidence, limited or no internet access, and not having the right devices to meet their needs.
- **At risk of exclusion:** these respondents have access to the internet and digital devices but report financial risks or needing support to carry out online activities.
- **Included:** these respondents are not experiencing any digital barriers or vulnerabilities.

An ordinal logistic regression model was then used to analyse demographic characteristics and wellbeing factors associated with digital exclusion status in SPSS. The overall model was statistically significant, and the proportional odds assumption was met. Free text responses and interview data were analysed using thematic analysis.

Please note that this research should not be considered representative of all families raising disabled children on a low income in the UK due to the use of a non-probability sample and likelihood of selection bias.

This research was carried out by Family Fund's Research and Evaluation team. The team are grateful to the Good Things Foundation for their support and guidance in carrying out this research. Please contact Family Fund's research team on research@familyfund.org.uk for any questions about this work.

Digitally Excluded

How families raising disabled children are being left behind



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