

RISE

Retrofit information,
support & expertise

Engaging Your Offline Residents in Retrofit Projects

Quick guide

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Summary

This quick guide supports Grant Recipients (GRs) to better understand and address the digital divide when engaging residents. As retrofit delivery increasingly relies on digital communication, platforms, and technologies, some residents risk being unintentionally excluded if they are offline, digitally excluded, or lack confidence using digital tools. This guide sets out practical actions to help project teams plan inclusive engagement approaches that combine digital and non-digital methods. Case study examples are included to show how inclusive engagement can improve resident experience and project outcomes.

This document is intended as a practical introduction. For deeper learning, readers should refer to the full range of RISE resources available on the Knowledge Hub.

Readers requiring this document in a more accessible format can contact rise@turntown.co.uk.

What is the digital divide?

The **digital divide** refers to the gap between people who can easily access, use, and benefit from digital technologies, and those who cannot. This gap is commonly described as **digital poverty**.

The Digital Poverty Alliance defines digital poverty as:

“The inability to interact with the online world fully, when, where, and how an individual needs to. It exacerbates and is exacerbated by other socio-economic, educational, health, and social inequalities.”

Like fuel or energy poverty, digital poverty both reflects and reinforces wider disadvantage. It is rarely caused by a single issue and often affects residents already facing other challenges.

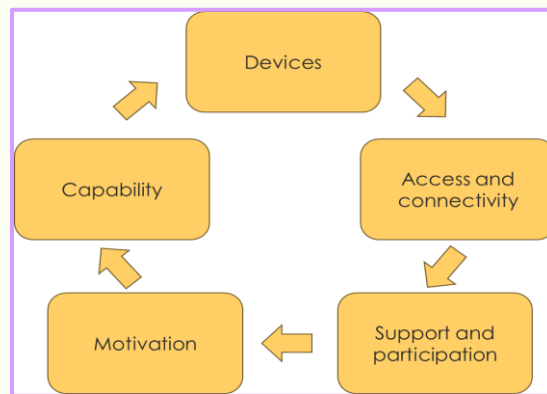
Digital poverty and its determinants

The five determinants of digital poverty

The Digital Poverty Alliance identifies **five interconnected determinants** that must be addressed together to make meaningful change.

1. **Devices** - Residents may lack access to appropriate digital devices such as smartphones, tablets, or computers. In many cases, affordability, shared devices, or outdated equipment create barriers.

- 2. Access and connectivity** - This relates to access to reliable and affordable internet connections. Even where connectivity exists, it may be limited, unstable, or unaffordable.
- 3. Capability** - Capability refers to the skills, knowledge, and confidence needed to use digital technologies effectively. Millions of people lack essential digital skills for everyday activities.
- 4. Motivation** - Some residents are unwilling or reluctant to engage online. This can stem from a lack of perceived relevance, fear of technology, concerns around safety, or previous negative experiences.
- 5. Support and participation** - Residents may want to engage digitally but do not know where to get help, or existing support does not suit their lifestyle, language, or accessibility needs.



These factors overlap and reinforce one another. Addressing only one (for example, providing devices) is unlikely to be effective without wider support.

Why digital inclusion matters for retrofit

Digital and retrofit delivery

Digital tools and platforms increasingly play a role across **all stages of a retrofit project**, including:

- Resident communication and consultation.
- Booking surveys, works, or inspections.
- Sharing project updates and documentation.
- Using smart controls and monitoring systems.
- Post-completion support and performance monitoring.

While these tools can improve efficiency and outcomes, they also risk excluding residents who are offline or digitally less confident.

Risks of excluding offline residents

If digital exclusion is not addressed, retrofit projects may face:

- Missed communications and appointments.
- Lower resident understanding of measures and benefits.
- Increased confusion or mistrust.
- Higher reliance on proxy users (friends, family, carers).
- Reduced satisfaction and engagement.

Inclusive engagement is therefore critical to both **fair outcomes** and **successful delivery**.

Common barriers to engagement

Communication and isolation

Residents who are digitally excluded may feel disconnected from information, services, and decision-making processes. This can increase isolation and reduce confidence.

The “use divide”

Having access to the internet does not guarantee effective use. Differences in skills, confidence, and experience affect how well residents can engage digitally.

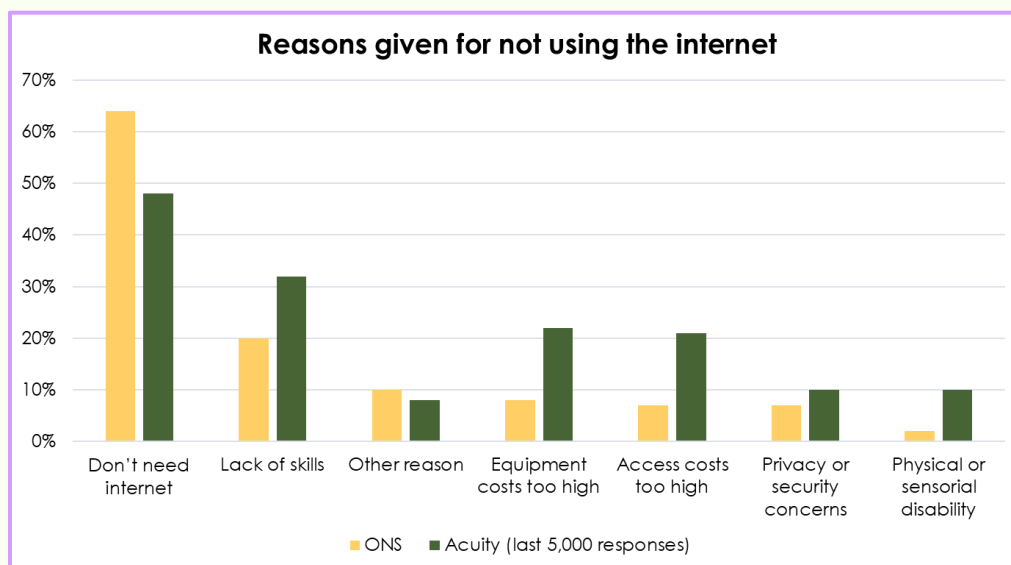


Figure 1: Tenants and the digital divide: what is the role for landlords? (Source: Acuity)

The access divide

Some residents are unable to afford devices, data, or broadband, or live in areas with limited connectivity. Disability or health conditions can further restrict access.

The quality-of-use gap

Even among digitally connected residents, some struggle to get meaningful value from digital services due to poor design, inaccessible platforms, or lack of support.

Planning for inclusive engagement

Inclusive engagement should be planned from the outset, not added later. When developing a retrofit project, teams should consider:

1. Which residents may be offline or digitally excluded.
2. What level of digital access and confidence residents have.
3. Where digital engagement is required within the project.
4. What non-digital alternatives and support are needed.

These considerations should be embedded into the **Resident Engagement Plan** and reviewed regularly as projects progress.

Practical solutions and approaches

Using mixed communication methods

Effective engagement typically combines digital and offline approaches, including:

- Printed letters, leaflets, and newsletters.
- Phone calls and face-to-face conversations.
- Drop-in sessions or community events.
- Clear signage and noticeboards.

Digital channels should be offered as an option, not a requirement.

Providing appropriate support

Support should be tailored to residents' needs and circumstances, for example:

- One-to-one assistance from Resident Liaison Officers.
- Simple, jargon-free explanations of retrofit measures.
- Clear instructions for using new technologies.
- Signposting to local digital inclusion or advice services.

Building skills and confidence

Digital confidence can be improved by:

- Linking skills to practical benefits residents care about.
- Offering demonstrations rather than written instructions alone.
- Avoiding pressure to adopt digital tools.
- Creating safe spaces to ask questions and learn.

Case study examples

Springvale Court - Gravesham Borough Council

At Springvale Court, 29 independent living flats were retrofitted with ground source heat pumps and solar panels. Engagement focused on inclusive, offline-friendly approaches.

Key actions included:

- Early consultation with residents before design finalisation.
- Regular in-person drop-ins and weekly coffee mornings.
- A dedicated Resident Liaison Officer.
- Social events to build trust and encourage feedback.



Outcome:

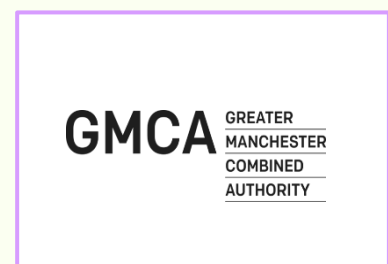
Resident trust and satisfaction increased significantly, and the project received national recognition for best practice in engagement.

Greater Manchester Combined Authority - Connect More

The **Connect More** programme addresses digital exclusion across Greater Manchester through partnerships between the public sector and industry.

The programme:

- Provides community-based digital skills training.
- Builds confidence and motivation, not just access.
- Supports wider participation in digital services, including retrofit.



This approach demonstrates how retrofit programmes can align with broader digital inclusion initiatives.

Next steps

You should now have a clearer understanding of how digital exclusion affects resident engagement in retrofit projects. Your next steps are to:

1. **Review your Resident Engagement Plan**
Ensure it explicitly considers offline and digitally excluded residents.

2. Assess resident needs early

Understand levels of access, skills, and confidence before delivery starts.

3. Use mixed engagement methods

Combine digital and non-digital communication throughout the project.

4. Build partnerships

Work with community organisations and digital support providers where possible.

5. Monitor and adapt

Gather feedback and adjust engagement approaches as resident needs become clearer.

Links to resources referenced:

[Hact – Digital Poverty in Social Housing whitepaper](#)

[Gov.UK - Tackling the digital divide](#)

[University of Cambridge – Digital Divide](#)

[Greater Manchester Combined Authority – Get online](#)



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