

DATA BANK IDEA TO HELP ADDRESS DIGITAL POVERTY

The privileged of the UK are sitting on 165 million gigabytes of unused mobile data worth a staggering £165 million¹

Yet families are faced with food or data decisions during lockdown that suggests it is not just lack of equipment (tablet or laptop) but also data access. "If families are struggling, the priority is going to be food, not data," according to the co-head teacher of Surrey Square primary school, in south London. In the same article, the Chief Executive of Greenwood Academies Trust, with 37 schools in the Midlands and east of England, says many families rely on a single mobile phone for an internet connection, which is "not realistic" for online learning and streaming video lessons. ²

During the pandemic it is reported that there are 700,000 families unable to complete school work, but the digital divide problem is not just with families of children. Speaking with David Apparacio MBE, the founder of the Chrysalis Programme aimed at providing real opportunities for behavioural change within the offender community over 75% of all offenders are re-offending within two years of release. Apparently one of the significant influences on the offender community is the lack of readily available access to the internet for education and social development.

There is potential that there will be other parts of UK society where digital poverty exists.

Anecdotal quotes on this subject include:

- Polly Neate, chief executive of the homeless charity Shelter, has described the digital divide as "fast becoming a defining social justice issue of this crisis".
- Nick Gardham, the chief executive of the Community Organisers charity, said some single-parent families were having to "choose between data and food" so their children could complete schoolwork online. He welcomed the lifting of broadband data caps, in a deal struck by the government and telecoms firms, but said that would only help people "in the club" and not those who could not afford a monthly tariff.
- "Mobile companies should be doing more to help their customers save on data they don't use, especially when it's clear people are consistently underusing their allowance," said Gillian Guy, CEO of Citizens Advice.

In order to help address in part the digital divide the idea of a 'data bank' that has the same status as a food bank has triggered some interest between LinkedIn groups and individual network circles. Early indication of widening the debate has started to get a level of interest. For example, an ex CEO (travel industry & LinkedIn influencer) a Premiership football club community foundation CEO, and a Retail CEO.

The idea to drive those in need to the data bank is based on the concept of a **Citizen SIM**. A free as you go utility available in shops, libraries, food banks, community centres, colleges and so on that gives those entitled to free mobile phone access, using the data unused from those of us in the privilege position to have excess. Citizen SIM would be a completely citizen driven collaboration of those with and those without.

Why would this even work? The whole idea is built on the concept that the UK citizen right now has sufficient altruistic energy to help a fellow citizen – Clap for carers, volunteering, charity events, social events and so much more. It is possible that knowing that they have already paid for the data on their mobile phone contract, and the likelihood of refunds and realistic roll over plans that they can actually consume are minimal, may be a cognitive nudge to support Citizen SIM.

To move this forward from a strawman idea to a feasibility discussion will require a deeper investment of research into the problem statement, led by an ambassador to build a think tank or similar to gain political and commercial support. (Note – there is a bill going through Parliament for broadband access for children on free school meals – Internet Access (Children Eligible for Free School Meals) ³, and in Australia the telco Optus, already has a data donation system in place ⁴).

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¹<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-8297455/Locked-smartphone-users-UK-sitting-unused-mobile-data-worth-165-million.html>

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-52399589>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jun/15/uk-children-reliable-broadband-coronavirus-lockdown-education>

⁴ <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2019/12/02/optus-allows-people-donate-data-the-less-fortunate-bridge-the-digital-divide#:~:text=Australian%20telco%20Optus%20has%20launched,living%20in%20poverty%20in%20Australia.>