

Digital Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan

Foreword

Digital inclusion is not just about laying highspeed fibreoptic cable or making sure that everyone has the latest smartphone. It is about so much more. It is about keeping families and friends connected, even when they are miles apart. It is about ensuring that everyone has access to online learning and training, to enable them to lead fulfilling lives and achieve their dreams. And, for our most vulnerable citizens, it is about being able to access the services you need online, right when you need them.

As the rate of technological progress increases rapidly it is easy to feel left behind. In these fast-paced and uncertain times, every new app or online service presents a new opportunity for inclusion – or exclusion. It may be difficult for us to predict how the world will change over the next ten years, but by giving people the right skills and knowledge to understand an increasingly complex landscape, we can make sure that everyone has the same opportunity to benefit from new technologies, improve their lives, and stay safe while doing so.

We are proud of our work towards tackling digital inclusion in Birmingham. We are the definition of a 21st century city – diverse, young and aspirational, with a relentless drive towards improvement and change. For the vast majority of our citizens and communities, digital technology already plays a major role in our everyday lives. That's why so many new businesses and start-ups have chosen to make us their home, and why our very own '[Silicon Canal](#)' boasts the second highest number of technology start-up businesses in the United Kingdom (after London). Birmingham has a bright future, and a lot of that has to do with how we have embraced new digital technologies and opportunities.

However, it has recently become clear that our high overall levels of digital inclusion are masking some striking inequalities between different communities in our city. It is not right that people over 65 are the most likely to be digitally excluded, or that 70% of people in Birmingham with a learning disability do not have access to a laptop, tablet or PC. We can no longer accept that thousands of young people in Birmingham do not have access to the internet in their homes. The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown made it clear that digital inclusion is no longer a 'luxury' – it is a basic requirement to succeed in modern society, with a significant impact on life chances. Digital exclusion speaks to some of the most profound inequalities in our society and now is the time to take collective action as a city to tackle the challenge.

For those of us able to use digital technologies, we can go online, interrogate information, pre-empt problems, pay bills early so we don't pay more and search for better deals. Vulnerable people, people in crisis or people who can't afford to do this are all further disadvantaged. Enabling people to do the things we all take for granted could help citizens regain a bit of power, save money and stop the crisis from getting worse. We mustn't forget that.

The increasing use of digital technology also lies at the centre of the Council's improvement and transformation journey. As we face increasing demands on our services, along with diminishing resources and funding, it is vitally important that we utilise all the advantages that new technologies can bring in terms of quality, efficiency, cost and accessibility.

Tackling digital exclusion is not something that the Council can, or should, do alone. This is an issue that we need to face together as a city – working collectively with businesses, voluntary and community organisations, education and training providers, and communities. Our response to the Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated that we can achieve amazing things when we work together. So, welcome to our Digital Inclusion Strategy for Birmingham, a platform for wider collaboration with city partners and stakeholders and an opportunity to collectively deliver and build on the Action Plan outlined towards the end of the Strategy.

Together, we can and will put digital inclusion at the heart of our vision for Birmingham – a city of growth, where every person, community and business has a better chance of success.

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Executive Summary

This strategy outlines why digital inclusion is an issue for the citizens and communities of Birmingham and how, together with the public, private and voluntary, community, social enterprise and faith sectors, we can work across the City to ensure we can address both the causes and effects of digital inequality and digital poverty. This strategy aims to support all age groups recognising the impact the pandemic has had on not only the elderly and vulnerable people but also young people in schools from deprived backgrounds with little or no access to digital devices and connectivity. The delivery of this Strategy will play an integral role in creating opportunities for our communities to continue to recover from the impacts of COVID-19, putting in place a sustainable Action Plan to support the wider, inclusive economic recovery of the City.

The Strategy has been influenced and shaped by city wide organisations who have experience, knowledge and expertise and aims to build on the excellent work being undertaken by them over recent years.

It is important to recognise that this is a City response and aims to bring together existing activities as well as identifying additional areas where collectively we can add greater value and opportunities for our citizens and communities. This is the Council's first step in developing a comprehensive and holistic approach to address the digital divide. It sets out the goals and ambitions for the Council and its partners, a statement of intent for how we are going to tackle digital exclusion together.

The strategy extends to citizens, communities and organisations and seeks to set out key principles and actions for relevant organisations in Birmingham to adopt in order to help tackle barriers to digital inclusion. By listening to our partners, citizens and communities, we have identified the following areas in order to support the delivery of the Strategy, jointly with partners. We will:

- create a joined-up approach
- create social value opportunities
- assess the digital literacy and skills gap
- provide access to digital devices and affordable connectivity;
- address the lack of access and accessibility;
- build motivation and confidence;
- build trust and addressing online security concerns

For each of these areas, we have identified ways to address them in the action plan under a number of strategic themes. There are some early or quick win activities to start to address these, but we recognise that digital inclusion is a city-wide issue and will need the continued support from all partners. Our approach in addressing the above areas is set out in our co-designed joint Action Plan between the Council, key partners, and other organisations on how we can work together to tackle structural and organisational barriers and create a city where everyone has the opportunity to benefit from digital services which aims to address issues in an inclusive and sustainable way.

We know that we are on the start of a journey and our Action Plan will continue to evolve as the needs of our citizens and communities and the technology changes. Our aim is not to re-invent the wheel, but to learn lessons from successful approaches from across the UK and work in collaboration with partners. Already the Council is working with the West Midlands Coalition for Digital Inclusion, sharing best practice, and learning from others to make the most of the resources and opportunities within the region.

It will greatly support the strategic outcomes set out in the **Council Delivery Plan 2020/21** by enabling our citizens and communities to access services and new opportunities to improve their life chances, greater access to jobs and learning and to be part of an inclusive society.

The digital landscape review outlined in this Strategy provides a snapshot of the types of digital activities and the organisations that responded to the challenges of lockdown to support citizens and communities to stay or get online. It shows the diverse range of organisations from the public sector, educational institutions, non-profit/charities, to the private sector and religious establishments, all delivering various activities to address digital inequalities.

This strategy has been informed by the national digital inclusion position and the comparison with the position in Birmingham; the current digital landscape review, existing evidence of digital inclusion activities and most importantly through engagement with city partners delivering real change on the ground. It recognises the need for better co-ordination and alignment of digital inclusion activities in Birmingham (post COVID-19).

Our Strategy recognises the increased uptake of activities online as a result of COVID-19, but strongly challenges the national measures used to define “digital inclusion” and the notion that only 5% of the UK population is digitally excluded in 2021. This is very much not the lived experience of Birmingham citizens and communities and our Action Plan is aimed at addressing all the factors that cause digital inequalities and poverty.

City partners and stakeholders’ commitment

“At Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership, we recognise the importance of digital and so welcome this strategy. We understand the detrimental effect of digital inequality on businesses, individuals and communities in our area, and are committed to working with Birmingham City Council and other stakeholders to remove barriers. We are also dedicated to providing targeted training, advice and practical support to drive digital inclusion.” – *Henriette Lyttle-Breukelaar, Director of Economic Strategy, Greater Birmingham & Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership*

“We are committed to addressing Digital Exclusion and as the University for Birmingham can play a big role in contributing to progress given many of our students are from neighbourhoods that are being targeted for intervention. We value our relationship with Birmingham City Council which is rich and broad and value the opportunity of inputting to this important piece of work. We are happy to put our support on the document.” – *Joanna Birch, Director Innovation Enterprise and Employability for Birmingham City University*

‘West Midlands Combined Authority Digital Skills Partnership is actively working to improve the digital skills training that is available to all residents and business across the region. We recognise that this can only be achieved through meaningful partnership work and collaboration and are committed to working with Birmingham City Council to achieve improved prospects both social and economic for residents.’ – Matt Jones, Chair of the WM Digital Skills partnership

‘Department for Work and Pensions recognise the negative impact digital exclusion can have on citizens and communities by creating further inequalities and accessibility to vital services as we move into a more digital world. We are committed to working in partnership with Birmingham City Council and other organisations to have a co-ordinated approach to narrowing the digital divide and improving skills and employment prospects for the citizens of Birmingham’. – Lorraine Beech, District Operations Leader, Job Centre Plus

“At Good Things Foundation we know that a lack of digital skills, devices and affordable connectivity affects life chances and increases social and economic inequality. Good Things Foundation supports Birmingham City Council's approach to developing a collaborative digital inclusion strategy, which aims to tackle digital inequality and close the digital divide in the city.”

Introduction

Digital technology and internet connectivity have transformed the way we interact with each other and the world around us; helping connect people, improving access to information, services and support and driving economic and social growth.

Possessing digital skills such as the [Essential Digital Skills Framework](#) and access to Information Communication and Technology has the potential to reduce people’s social, economic and health inequalities, social isolation and relieve the day to day mental and physical stresses that have been exacerbated during the lockdown. They are key to helping achieve the Council’s overall vision that Birmingham is a city of growth where every child, citizen and place matters and will be a key component of our levelling up agenda and community recovery efforts post COVID-19.

However, a gap exists between those who have skills, easy access to ICT and the internet and those who do not – known as the “digital divide”. Those who are already at a disadvantage, whether through age, disability, or income, are most likely to be missing out, therefore widening inequality in the city. A lack of digital skills and access to the digital world can be hugely detrimental, leading to poorer health outcomes, a lower life expectancy, and an increased risk of poverty. The pandemic has exacerbated the impacts of digital poverty, leaving many families having to choose between spending money on food or data. It is this poverty that is widening and deepening the digital divide.

We recognise that one organisation alone cannot address digital poverty and inequalities, instead, it will need the collective resources of many city partners and stakeholders from the public, private, community and voluntary and academic sectors to support our citizens, families and communities.

Definition of Digital Inclusion: (Digitalinclusion.org)

Digital Inclusion refers to the activities necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).

This includes 5 elements:

- 1) affordable, robust broadband internet service;
- 2) internet-enabled devices that meet the needs of the user;
- 3) access to digital literacy training;
- 4) quality technical support;
- 5) applications and online content designed to enable and encourage self-sufficiency, participation and collaboration

Often, national reports and statistics consider someone to be digitally included, if they have used the internet at least once in the last three months using any device. However, having connectivity in the home or using the internet at least once in three months does not mean people are digitally included. They may lack skills in using the devices and applications or may only be able to afford limited data packages, or have inappropriate devices, and/or inadequate numbers of devices to meet family needs. There is a risk that further digital transformation of Council and other public and private services will widen the digital divide and inequalities rather than narrowing them.

We believe in tackling the issues that are creating inequalities and digital poverty for our citizens and communities. Through tackling digital exclusion, we can help to create a fairer city where everyone enjoys a good quality of life; everyone experiences the benefits of growth and has fair access to opportunities and people are connected to one another and able to participate city activities.

We know that socio-economic conditions in Birmingham have an impact on digital inclusion as there is a correlation between social exclusion and deprivation. Previous assessments by the Scottish Council of Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) in 2018, suggested that the likelihood of Birmingham's citizens being digitally excluded was medium. As a result of the Coronavirus pandemic, like many other metropolitan cities, Birmingham has been heavily impacted with job losses and economic downturn, leading to a further increase in deprivation. It is inevitable that, without strategic and coordinated intervention digital inclusion will not improve and digital poverty will likely increase across the City.

Our strategy sets out why digital inclusion is an important issue for Birmingham and builds on the Council's Information Communications Technology and Digital Strategy 2016-2021 which outlined our approach for improving digital facilitation across the City. This Strategy sets out why a unified approach is needed to close the digital divide in the city and how the Council and others across the City can work together to ensure as many people as possible can access and benefit from digital.

This Digital Inclusion Strategy is central, as a cross cutting theme, to maximising the short and longer impact of the Council Recovery Plan and wider city actions for reducing poverty and closing the inequality gap. The Strategy is also one of the key recommendations of the 'recovery report' for young people ([Breaking Down Barriers: Working Towards Birmingham's Future](#)).

Our Vision

'A fully inclusive digital city, where everyone has the confidence, skills and capacity to access the services and information they need to thrive and live their lives to their full potential in an increasing digital world.'

In our fully inclusive digital city;

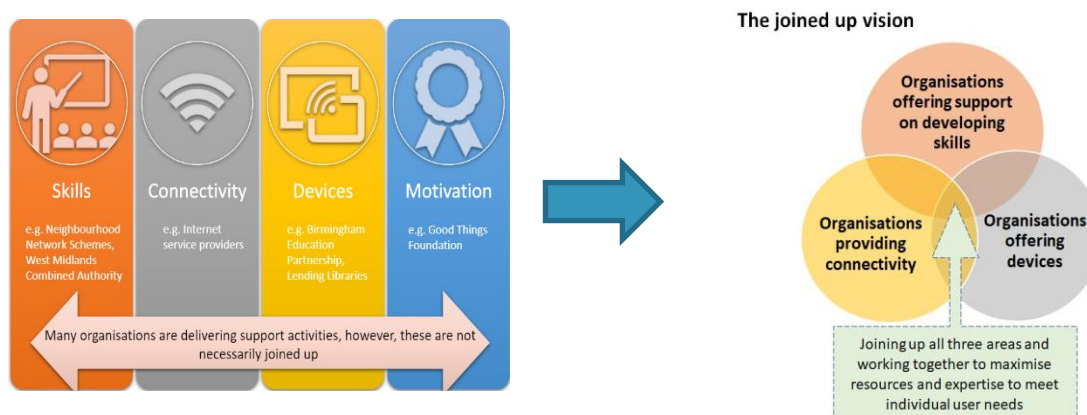
- every citizen has easy access to an internet enabled device such as a computer, laptop, smartphone etc. ideally within their own household.
- there is city-wide, locality based and online educational sessions, giving basic, intermediate and advanced tuition to meet specific needs which enable a person to develop their digital skills, increasing their confidence, motivation and well-being.
- there is targeted interventions and effective signposting to facilitate end to end learning opportunities for all citizens to ensure they can maximise and build on their skills, removing the barriers for those that are most vulnerable or excluded in a sustainable way.
- citizens have a digital by choice preference by making our solutions simple and easy that enable our citizens to access Council services using their device of choice and at a time of their choosing.
- digital and data poverty is minimized so that digital inequality no longer persists, and everyone can have choices to help improve their lives through accessing services and activities online as well as in other ways.
- we work with City employers to raise the importance of digital skills and inclusion and their role in supporting citizens, communities and their workforce

Our City Digital Inclusion Strategy is focussed on supporting citizens, communities and organisations to help them to gain the benefits that being digitally included can offer. However, we do recognise that not every citizen will have a preference for digital and as part of the Council's Customer Service Strategy, we will support citizens to access services using alternative ways until they are ready to adopt digital opportunities.

Principles

Our principles set out how we will work with our communities and stakeholders to deliver the Action Plan. Our digital inclusion approach is customer focused and starts with the citizens' needs; aiming to provide tailored support to help them overcome their own barriers; whether that's around access, cost, skills or confidence and motivation. Services need to be built with a good understanding of how citizens use online technologies in their everyday lives, recognising that peoples' journeys will be different. Our aim is to simplify the pathways and support their journey.

The illustration below shows the areas that need further development and the joined up approach to address these:



We are committed to delivering our Vision through a collaborative, partnership-based approach built around a set of core principles. These principles will provide the foundation on which we will deliver a coordinated and sustainable action plan to enable Birmingham's citizens to realise the benefits of digital.

PERSON-FOCUSED AND INCLUSIVE – placing people, communities, businesses, and organisations at the heart of design and delivery, ensuring they are involved from the outset in helping to co-design targeted and bespoke solutions that meet their needs

HOLISTIC – focusing on activity that seeks to overcome all the challenges associated with digital exclusion and linking this agenda with other areas of work that seek to tackle other forms of social and economic exclusion

COLLABORATIVE – working in collaboration with partners to achieve joint outcomes, deliver coordinated and strategic activity, empowering our communities to develop trusted networks and acting with one voice

PARTNER-LED – delivering a city vision with collective ownership and shared delivery of activity across partners, ensuring we work with and learn from those who have experience and expertise in this area as well as leveraging existing networks and assets

EVIDENCE-LED – working with partners to gather evidence of the local digital landscape, the barriers people face, and evidence of what works well to ensure we have a robust assessment of digital exclusion at a local level and can utilise this insight to identify interventions that will have the most impact

The Case for Change

It has been over 30 years since the launch of the world wide web. The internet has transformed services and continues to radically change the way people live, learn and work. Government figures show the country's thriving digital sector contributed £149 billion to the UK in 2018, accounting for 7.7 per cent of the UK economy.

There has been an acceleration in digital uptake since the pandemic. The UK has made five years' worth of progress in one year in terms of its digital engagement. A further 1.5 million more people are now online, increasing the percentage of people online from 92% in 2020 to 95% in 2021. On average people are spending an extra 13 hours online a week with increasing levels of willingness to enhance their digital skills if appropriate support is available.

It was inevitable that the pandemic would increase the dependence on the internet and lead to a massive acceleration in many pre-existing digital trends: from online shopping to online GP appointments, automation of jobs to remote working. The lockdown has been a catalyst for breaking through the inertia that existed in some sectors in relation to digitalisation. We think that these trends will not be reversed, and further services will move to a greater online presence.

In 2021, there remains 2.6 million people completely offline in the UK 39% of whom are under the age of 60 dispelling the idea that all offline people are older, with 11.9 million adults still lacking essential digital skills.

"More than ever, the Digital Divide is impacting on the lives of the most disadvantaged in our communities. COVID-19 has shone a light into how pronounced the divide can be, but it is essential that a long term and sustainable approach is taken to address this. Rushing to provide devices and data for individuals without identifying what will motivate them to take their first steps or providing the right kind of support and guidance to enable them to master the activities they wish to learn would be a missed opportunity to provide positive impacts and improvements to their lives. AbilityNet looks forward to working with partners in the City of Birmingham to come up with a coherent and supportive end to end process to get the citizens of Birmingham making the most of digital spaces and services."
Amy Low, Service Delivery Director, AbilityNet

'COVID-19 has changed everything and it's changed nothing. The social and economic impact of being digitally excluded is now well understood, while online activity has increased across society. But for all the progress, we still see debilitating digital exclusion and data poverty. It is holding millions back and threatens our economic recovery; We must work together to ensure everyone benefits from digital – and that the people hit hardest by the pandemic aren't further disadvantaged, as everyday life moves more online" *Helen Milner, GoodThings Foundation-Lloyds Consumer Digital Index 2021*

Birmingham has seen a faster rate of digital inclusion in recent years, and it has now moved to 91.4% (2019) from 88.6% (2018). The percentage of digitally excluded people has reduced from 11.2% in 2018 to 8.6% in 2019, and no doubt this will be further reduced in 2021 once the Office for National Statistics Reports are released for Birmingham. Whilst the increase is greater than the national average, it does concur with national findings, that digital exclusion remains persistent and is becoming difficult to address which has certainly been further highlighted during the pandemic. Only a Strategy of focussing on partnerships and coordination across all sectors will help to tackle this issue.

Over the years, a number of initiatives in Birmingham have been implemented to support citizens, communities and businesses to take advantage of the internet and gain the skills to enhance their quality of life chances and business prospects. However, despite these initiatives, there remains a persistent number of citizens and communities who remain digitally excluded, leading to a widening and deepening digital divide, with some groups being disproportionately affected; disabled people, people on means-tested benefits, and people from ethnic minority backgrounds. COVID-19 and the recent lockdown has highlighted the importance of reducing the levels of digital exclusion and the need for the Council to intervene.

The factors impacting on digital inclusion are complex and multifaceted and there are different levels of digital inclusion. Many people who are excluded will experience at least one if not all these issues:

- Affordability of devices and connectivity costs
- The skills gap to use a device, or ways to learn how
- A lack of internet and / or device access
- The motivation and confidence to use, understand or engage
- Trust and a fear of crime, or not knowing where to start to go online

We recognise that tackling digital exclusion is important for tackling inequality. This will enable us to deliver our commitments as set out in the Council Plan and help to drive our inclusive growth agenda. Our thinking and approach to digital inclusion must evolve as technology advances. Digital Inclusion requires joined up strategies and investments to reduce and eliminate historical, institutional and structural barriers to access and use of technology.

Those OVER 65 remain the largest digitally excluded group, but there are other groups that require intervention and support such as;

- ❖ People with long term health conditions
- ❖ People with disabilities, including those with a learning disability and autism
- ❖ People living in poverty / with social deprivation

SOME KEY FACTS

- ❖ 700,000 of those aged between 11 and 18 years (12%) cannot access the internet at home from a computer or tablet, and a further 60,000 have no internet access at home ([ONS, 2019](#)).
- ❖ 23.3% adult internet non-users are disabled compared with only 6.0% of those without a disability ([ONS, 2019](#)).
- ❖ People who most need health and care services are those least likely to be able to use digital health services so there is the risk that digital transformation widens health inequalities rather than narrowing them
- ❖ People with an impairment are 25% less likely to have the skills to access devices and get online by themselves
- ❖ In Birmingham, in 2019 8.6% of people had not been online for 3 months compared to 11.2% in 2018 and only 39% in 2017 had used all 5 basic digital skills. While there is improvement, there are still high levels of exclusion.
- ❖ There are an estimated 40,000 adults in Birmingham with a learning disability alone (8,000 children) and around 70% of them don't have access to a laptop, tablet or PC, let alone the means to connect to the internet if one were provided. (*Midland Mencap)

The link between deprivation and digital exclusion:

Birmingham is ranked 7th in the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) with 42% of its population living in the top 10% most deprived areas in the UK. This was predicted to increase by a further 1% before COVID-19 and the Lockdown. Inequalities in the West Midlands are stark, with Solihull having an IMD ranking of 171 compared to Birmingham's ranking of 7.

- People with an annual household income of £50,000 or more are 40% more likely to have foundation digital skills than those earning less than £17,499.
- Of those households earning between £6,000 to £10,000, only 51% had access to the internet at home, compared with 99% of households with an income of over £40,001.
- 57% of people with a household income below £11,499 have essential digital skills, compared to 89% of those with a household income over £25,000.³
- 41% of Children in Birmingham live in poverty and there is a life expectancy gap between the richest and poorest areas
- Birmingham's claimant unemployment rate stands at 15.3%; above both the West Midlands (9.1%) and the UK (7.8%) rates.

Birmingham has been heavily impacted with job losses by the economic downturn, leading to a further increase in deprivation. It is inevitable, that, without intervention digital inclusion will worsen and digital poverty will likely increase across the City. We recognise that poverty in general is a significant contributor to digital poverty and inequality and that's why we are committed to including actions to increase digital inclusion activities within other partnership strategies such as the Financial Inclusion Strategy and the Council's Customer Services Strategy.

Case Study

SmartLyte, our community partner based in Birmingham, is passionate about teaching digital skills to transform people's lives.

The families SmartLyte works with experience poverty caused by cultural, social and economic challenges. A majority of its members and their children lack literacy skills and have limited digital and financial management skills.

"We've been able to empower people during lockdown, remove shame around their financial situation, and build trust with our learners"

"The Mastercard Nobody in the Dark campaign has helped us find solutions to some of the financial challenges families face, in a simple and creative way. We've been able to empower people during lockdown, remove shame around their financial situation, and build trust with our learners so they don't feel alone in the dark anymore and have the support they need to tackle their problems." - Hafsha Shaikh, SmartLyte Director.

A lack of connectivity at home means greater reliance on libraries, community hubs or localities with the availability of computers or free Wi-Fi, made worse when those access points have been closed as a result of COVID-19 and the recent lockdowns. This also directly impacts on how the Council and other public sector organisations can deliver their services.

The Current Digital Landscape

Birmingham has a vibrant and passionate community of organisations from the public, private, community, voluntary, charities and academic sectors, all of whom are contributing to improving the life chances and opportunities for Birmingham citizens through digital inclusion activities.

This Strategy recognises the numerous digital inclusion activities being carried out across Birmingham and the West Midlands. Some of these have been a direct response to COVID-19 whilst others are part of the fabric of the City. A Digital landscape Review which sets out the need for this Strategy is available on the Digital Birmingham Website (www.digitalbirmingham.co.uk).

The National Response

At a national level, organisations such as **FutureDotNow** are coordinating industry action through a new initiative, DevicesDotNow, targeting the 1.9 million households who don't have access to the internet and are not digitally included.

Good Things Foundation has launched a new [Data Poverty Lab](#) with Nominet

At a political level :-The House of Lords has published its Beyond Digital: Planning for a Hybrid World – recognising that home broadband is an essential utility in the same way as water or electricity: without it, people are excluded from employment opportunities and access to vital services. No one should be without access to the internet for reasons of cost or location.

The Department for Education (DFE) also announced a £100 million package to support vulnerable young people in schools who do not have access to devices nor connectivity at home.

Several **national charities**, organisations and funding bodies are also providing a variety of digital inclusion activities

At a regional and local level:

- At a regional level the West Midlands Combined Authority, is working with local authorities and regional partners to develop their approach on digital inclusion and have recently established the West Midlands Coalition for Digital Inclusion.
- There are credited and non-accredited digital skills courses for those aged 19 years and above with essential digital skills courses free for those with low levels of IT.
- At a local level, most digital inclusion activities are co-ordinated through a number of key partners, many of whom target specific age groups, with new initiatives such as:
 - Work identifying an estimated 5,000 young vulnerable people who may not have access to devices or connectivity out of school.
 - Supporting older people to connect with local organisations and resources which enable them to live healthy happy independent lives within their communities.
 - Developing computer loan schemes, and device recycling opportunities

The Council is fully committed to responding to the call for justice articulated by the Black Lives Matter movement and recognises that Black and Minority Ethnic communities are unrepresented with the digital economy. Therefore, this Strategy will support initiatives that bring together technical organisations, partners and educational institutions to implement key strategies and have actions aimed at bridging the digital skills gap for these communities.

Case Studies





Connect • Learn • Thrive

Thank you for your kind consideration in helping my daughter at this time of need. The laptop is working well and enabling her to continue her learning.

- Year 10 parent



Powered by



THANK YOU!

TESTIMONIAL

★★★★★

In year 6, we have an hour-long daily registration. One girl was rarely there: she was working off a phone, the data was patchy - she couldn't join in with the class chat and felt isolated. When we got a BEP laptop to her with a wifi dongle, she was straight onto the online lesson. When the teacher called the register and she answered, the whole class started cheering; their response showed how important the daily social contact is.

- Deputy Headteacher in a Birmingham School



Challenges and Benefits

The city has a great track record of working to improve digital inclusion, with many organisations across the city already engaged and delivering excellent work that is seeking to close the digital divide, but there are still several challenges that make it difficult to have a long-lasting impact at the required rate and scale.

These challenges include:

- **A lack of coordination and strategic planning**, including between national, regional and local schemes as well as between the Council and local organisations. This can lead to duplication of effort and missing out on key opportunities, for example working with major companies. It can also mean that the activity being delivered may not address citizens' wider needs.
- **A lack of access to digital devices and affordable connectivity costs.** Whilst there is a recognition that digital skills, access to devices and connectivity are all factors needed to deliver effective digital inclusion, lack of affordable connectivity has been identified as the most significant barrier for those in poverty or from deprived households.
 - Citizens on basic data limited packages, especially for vulnerable households with multiple users particularly pay-as-you-go customers without the means to buy data.
 - People with learning difficulties, can find their social isolation heightened with no means of communicating with the digitalised outside world.
- **The provision of equipment** is also challenging. The use of smartphones is widespread (issues of data aside) but many may struggle with a PC or laptop. Also, research by Midland Mencap suggests that around 70% of people with a learning disability in Birmingham don't have access to a laptop, tablet or PC, let alone the means to connect to the internet if one were provided. For many citizens digital access would also mean adapted equipment, specialist software and access to training and tech support amongst other enabling considerations.
- **Dependency on grant funding** that is time-limited and/or can only be used for certain types of activity. This makes it difficult to plan for the long-term and deliver lasting benefits, for example creating pathways to ensure people can continue to use and develop their digital skills.
 - Need to work with funders as many do not understand the issues around digital inclusion or what is needed, which makes bid writing harder, especially in knowing what will be successful.
- **Addressing digital skills** in underserved groups can be problematic when local workers often lack the skill themselves to be able to support them. Also improving digital literacy needs to be accompanied by increasing levels of general literacy especially;
 - Given the city diverse ethnic minority make up for whom English is not the first language.
 - For some young children, whilst their social media skills are good, their literacy skills for online employment and academia uses is sometimes limited
- **Aligning and developing complementary provision** at a regional level (West Midlands Combined Authority and Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership) with a focus on improving digital skills of businesses and citizens to enhance their job readiness.

We recognise that COVID-19 has left more people isolated and unemployed. That means they are further removed from a workplace which is likely to be digitally connected and leaves them at greater risk of going off the radar. The city is presented with a great opportunity to harness the weight of support from partners across the city to face these challenges head on and seize

the chance to improve the lives of so many people currently excluded from the benefits of digital services.

There are many examples of great digital innovation across the city, including the prospect of 5G coming to Birmingham, so we must capitalise on these initiatives and make sure citizens can realise the benefits of digital:

Social and Wellbeing Benefits

- Having access to information, knowledge, learning, services and support
- Staying in touch and connecting with family and friends, including social activities and volunteering
- Being able to manage everyday matters, including shopping and keeping track of your money
- Improved job prospects
- Having your say on decisions that affect you
- Addressing wider equality and social issues, including reducing isolation, improving physical health and mental wellbeing, and enabling people to self-manage health conditions

Economic benefits

- People with digital confidence and skills are more likely to secure employment and increase earnings
- Every £1 invested in digital inclusion delivers £15 rate of return over 10 years
- Within the next two decades, 90% of jobs will require some form of digital skills

Examples of local digital literacy resources:

Digital West Midlands News - a monthly ebuletin produced since 2017 by social enterprise RnR Organisation which helps to increase digital skills and knowledge in the voluntary, community and social enterprise sectors, and supports the use of technology for social good.

Dr Tech show - a weekly show on YouTube, produced since Sept 2020, which helps guide people through the world of online communications, often with special guests, and shares news about digital inclusion and literacy locally, regionally and internationally.

"It is fantastic that we can access their services remotely and we love the tips coming through regularly. It is the most amazing service. We can't praise them too highly and would recommend them to anyone. DigiKick has made a big difference to our lives."

Case Studies

'TEA and T'INTERNET' is a free, fun, social internet access group, with sessions run by DigiKick, supporting people in the community to be more confident online.

"The Tea sessions were absolutely fantastic. Everyone looked forward to them. We are in Harborne very often, or at least we were before lockdown, and we often used to bump into others from the sessions and they always said they just couldn't wait for the next meeting. We can't wait for it to start up again, everyone loved it so much" - Jane

"I was contacted by a scammer recently but DigiKick helped me to clear my computer and learn how to turn the Wi-Fi off and on, so I won't get caught again!"

"Tea and T'internet has really opened up computers for me. I have always been a technophobe. I have MS and can't spend too much time in front of a screen but now, thanks to DigiKick, I am doing internet banking! My husband can email now too! It has opened up our eyes completely."

"It is fantastic that we can access their services remotely and we love the tips coming through regularly. It is the most amazing service. We can't praise them too highly and would recommend them to anyone. DigiKick has made a big difference to our lives."

AbilityNet supports anyone living with any disability or impairment to use technology to achieve their goals at home, at work and in education.

AbilityNet are delivering Digital Lifeline; a digital inclusion project aimed at alleviating the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic felt by people living with learning disabilities and providing them with greater independence, social connection and ability to engage in work or training. Digital Lifeline is a DCMS-funded initiative. The lead partner in the project is The Good Things Foundation with Digital Unite providing online training options and over 150 local and national delivery partners from self-advocacy groups to specialist charities, local authorities and education providers.

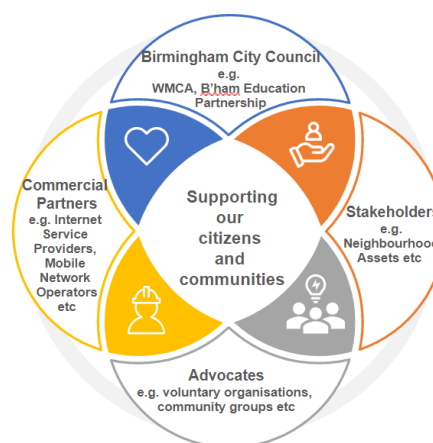
Developing the Outline Action Plan and Approach

Our intention is not to reinvent the wheel. Instead we will look for best practice and adopt it if it helps us to deliver our vision more effectively. We have already approached other local authorities as diverse as Leeds City Council to Cornwall County Council so that we can learn from their experiences and adapt them to meet our needs. Our aim is to also share our knowledge with others so that they too can learn from experiences.

We have developed our Action Plan and approach in line with the principles in order to deliver our vision and objectives.

A Partnership Approach

Based on our engagement with city stakeholders, partners and wider research, we believe that the following strategic themes set out in figure.1 will enable us to address the seven key focus areas outlined in the executive summary.



Seven Strategic Themes

1. **Governance** – a shared agenda and shared resources
2. **Scoping challenge** - understanding where to target our resources
3. **Inclusivity** – leaving no one behind
4. **Building capacity** – enabling our communities to lead
5. **Connectivity** – keeping our citizens and communities connected
6. **Building capability** – building on existing expertise
7. **Funding** - securing social value and a collaborative approach for bidding opportunities

Figure.1

The Action Plan outlines the details of the activities that will enable us to address digital exclusion and covers those actions required to address the key seven areas of focus.

However, we recognise that this will be an evolving Action Plan that will be shaped based on feedback and learning from collaborative city projects and programmes as well as an understanding that digital skills will change as technologies evolve.

STRATEGIC THEME	ACTIVITY/ACTION	Delivering on key areas of focus	TIME-SCALES
GOVERNANCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish the right level of governance to oversee the development, design and delivery of the action plan Establish greater alignment with regional and local organisations, the Neighbourhood Network Schemes and community and voluntary groups, commercial and academic sectors Build in greater social value requirements for our citizens through our work with commercial and industry partners and organisations Engage with city employers to raise the importance of digital skills and inclusion and their role in 	<p>A joined-up approach</p> <p>Creating greater Social value</p>	Short Term
Establish a Governance framework for delivery			

	developing the abilities of citizens, communities as well as their workforce		
SCOPING AND SIZING Understanding the extent of the problems and targeting resources accordingly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gather the necessary evidence and information to develop a richer understanding of the digital landscape and the extent of digital exclusion at a local level. Work with partners to understand which individuals, communities, and organisations are most at risk, the specific barriers they face, and assessing their specific needs, e.g. Asylum seekers, refugees, those with disabilities 	A joined-up approach Building trust and reducing online security concerns Lack of access and accessibility	Short Term Medium Term
INCLUSIVITY Influencing policy and strategy development. Ensure digital is built into all policies and strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Council will consider the impact of digital exclusion when developing future strategies and policies to ensure our processes do not increase or deepen the digital divide Work with public sector partners, Department for Work and Pensions, NHS, West Midland Police, housing associations to influence their strategies and policies to ensure digital inclusion is embedded 	A joined-up approach	Medium /Long Term Short Term
BUILDING CAPACITY Enhance community capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a two-year funded team that; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> identifies what is being provided across the city to facilitate better coordinated support, remove duplication and ensure money is spent more wisely. enables better coordination and alignment between the city partners to enhance joint working opportunities co-ordinates activity city wide to reduce fragmentation and ensure that investment is maximised resulting in the best outcomes identifies, shapes and influences emerging strategies and policies with partners to support the delivery of the city vision works with city partners to explore the development of a digital champions framework embedded within the communities to ensure that those that are hardest to reach are included works with the communities and organisations to develop and deliver the action plan 	Meeting the digital literacy and skill gap	Short Term

<p>CONNECTIVITY</p> <p>Maximising our assets to accelerate internet accessibility</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with the community libraries, local businesses and other public sector organisations to establish a city-wide computer loans service with connectivity • Work with our planning and infrastructure teams to explore new models for securing internet connectivity within the social housing sector • Work with partners to map out places/spaces with free Wi-Fi to identify accessibility • Establish areas of “notspots” across the city and work with telecommunication providers to bridge the gap • Work with Housing Associations and Registered Social Landlords to establish ways of providing access to Wi-Fi in communal areas • Work with our care homes, day centres and other centres used by older people, to explore ways to enable the residents to have access to free internet services • Ensure our libraries and community centres provide access to computer devices and free internet services • Work with other community-based organisations, e.g. religious institutions to explore ways to increase places and spaces for online access and digital skills development • Explore opportunities to establish a city-wide digital connectivity and data with telecommunication providers • Working with city partners to develop a city-wide digital equipment recycling service to increase the availability of computer devices for the community and citizens 	<p>Access to digital devices and connectivity</p> <p>Addressing lack of access and accessibility</p>	<p>Short Term</p> <p>Medium / Long Term</p>
<p>BUILDING CAPABILITY</p> <p>Maximise and promote the use of existing communities and organisations that deliver digital skills to build confidence and trust</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify existing and emerging digital skills provision across the city • Utilise Birmingham Adult Education Service offer of free basic digital skills • Build on existing funded programmes such as PURE project and Youth Promise Plus. • Build on and promote digital inclusion activities being delivered by the Neighbourhood Networks Service and their assets for local areas. • Promote the digital skills offering by major corporates, such as Amazon, Microsoft and LinkedIn, Barclays Eagles etc. • Explore opportunities for partnering with tech companies • Work closely with the West Midlands Digital Skills Partnership and Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership to identify new and emerging training and development opportunities • Work with Universities, colleges, further education institutions and schools as anchor institutions to support end to end learning 	<p>Building motivation and confidence</p> <p>Building trust and addressing online security concerns</p>	<p>Short Term</p> <p>Medium Term</p>

FUNDING Maximising funding streams for better alignment of outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify funding streams, such as government grants, i.e. Big Lottery Establish potential partners to develop joint bids for targeted interventions, such as infrastructure, connectivity or skills development 	Creating greater social value	Medium Term
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We have a good understanding of what digital inclusion support is available in the city, including key organisations and businesses who are delivering great work to help to tackle digital exclusion. We have started the process of bringing together the initial set of organisations who are committed to supporting the delivery of this Strategy and will continue to build engagement with other organisations.

In order to ensure that there is pace and resources to back up our approach, we have set out several potential quick wins aimed at providing timely intervention to support our citizens and communities.

Strategic Themes - Early Wins

Theme	Council's Commitment	Early Partnership Opportunities
Governance	<p>The Council proposes to invest over two years to establish dedicated digital inclusion team to help create a partner-led governance for a better co-ordinated and joined up approach – Anticipated Delivery: January 2022</p> <p>Invest over two years to secure a Chair for the Governance Board as a secondment opportunity: April 2022. Ensure that digital inclusion is included as a social value responsibility within supplier contracts – Anticipated Delivery: September 2021</p>	Opportunities to bring together existing structures that have differing target groups. For example; Neighbourhood Network Schemes (NNS), Birmingham Children's Partnership, Birmingham Voluntary Sector Council (BVSC), West Midlands Coalition for Digital Inclusion etc as well as the commercial sector
Scoping the challenge	Create a data map of Birmingham highlighting areas where digital exclusion is most likely to occur and identify areas for intervention – Anticipated delivery: October 2021	Some of the NNS are already undertaking local surveys to identify hyperlocal areas of exclusion e.g. Hall Green NNS. Opportunity to undertake a standardised and co-ordinated survey across Birmingham and target resources.
Inclusivity	Ensure digital inclusion is built into key council and partnership strategies. For the Financial Inclusion Partnership Strategy, the Customer Services Strategy, Homelessness Strategy etc. Anticipated delivery: October 2021	Shaping and influencing West Midlands Coalition for Digital Inclusion and the Digital Inclusion Catch Up proposals to ensure our approaches are complementary and benefit our citizens and communities.
Building capacity	Create a 2 year digital inclusion team to work closely with existing partnerships and stakeholders to build greater capacity, align programmes and develop joint community-	Building on local initiatives run by partner organisations, such as Digital Champions, digital tutors, digital mentors.

	<p>based initiatives. Anticipated delivery: January 2022</p> <p>Offer space in our libraries to community groups to provide training facilities and establish the libraries as Citizen Online Centres – Anticipated delivery: December 2021</p>	
Connectivity	<p>Secure initial funding to recycle 2,200 computer devices with connectivity to support vulnerable citizens and communities of all ages. Anticipated delivery: October 2021</p> <p>Ensure all Libraries provide access to free Wi-Fi. Anticipated delivery: September 2021</p> <p>Set up a £0.5 million computer device loan scheme as part of the PURE project: Anticipated delivery: September 2021</p>	<p>Identify and promote social tariffs offered by commercial sector partners using established networking and social media channels and publications</p> <p>Bring together existing computer recycling and loan schemes to ensure a more co-ordinated and targeted response to address hyperlocal needs</p>
Building capability	<p>Embed basic digital skills as part of the Adult Education free courses on Maths and English to ensure digital literacy is supported by a wider literacy programme. Anticipated delivery: September 2021</p>	<p>Pull together and showcase the various skills courses offered by the community, voluntary and commercial sectors as well as creating linkages to education sectors such as Universities, and the Further Education and Colleges sectors.</p>
Funding	<p>Continued close working with NNS and the Birmingham Children's Partnership in order to commission digital services and with closer alignment with the new Digital Inclusion team. Anticipated delivery: Ongoing</p> <p>Develop local and regional funding bids to support citizens and communities to enhance their digital services and capabilities. Anticipated delivery: Ongoing</p>	<p>Identify joint bidding opportunities with multiple partners</p>

These will need to include an agreed set of measures and targets against which the impact can be monitored and reported to inform progress and continuous shaping of our approach. This will be developed under the governance strategic theme.

Acknowledgments and endorsements

We would like to thank the partners listed below for their participation and engagement in the workshops. All partners listed endorse the strategy and are committed to supporting the next phase of its development.

- Aston University
- BID Services – The Deaf Cultural Centre
- Birmingham Adult Education Services
- Birmingham Children’s Trust
- Birmingham City University
- Birmingham Community Matters
- Birmingham Education Partnership
- Birmingham Financial Inclusion Partnership
- Birmingham Public Health
- Birmingham Social Housing Partnership
- Birmingham Solihull Women’s Aid
- Birmingham Voluntary Service Council
- Black Country Consortium
- BT Group
- Capita
- Code your Future
- CX Squared
- Digikick CIC
- Digisheds Ltd
- Digital Innovators
- Disability Resource Centre
- Entrust Education
- Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership
- Green Square Accord
- Hyperoptic
- Innovation Alliance for the West Midlands
- Microsoft
- New Starts
- NHS
- Northfield Community Partnership
- Pioneer Group
- POhWER
- PURE project
- RnR Organisation
- Sandwell Council
- Serco
- SmartLyte
- Solihull Public Health
- STEM Learning
- Telefonica UK
- Titan Partnership
- Trident Reach
- West Midlands Combined Authority
- West Midlands Coalition for Digital Inclusion
- Witton Lodge Community Association
- Wolverhampton City Council

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