

Digital Inclusion Strategy

1.0 Vision

The ultimate aim of this plan is to better unify and enhance current local authority and partner agency digital inclusion interventions, bridge remaining provision gaps and embed future inclusion actions into “business as usual”, in accordance with the 2021-24 Strategic Plan workplan outcome to: *“Create and deliver a strategy to increase digital inclusion for children, young people and adults across Middlesbrough”*. The gold standard for where we want to get to is bringing Middlesbrough in line with national digital inclusion standards.

2.0 Background

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, the scale and negative effect of digital exclusion has been exposed beyond previous understanding, impacting on quality of education, access to healthcare, employment and services, and ability to connect with loved ones. Ofcom research shows that 11% of the UK population still do not have access to the internet at home. In addition, there are those who do not have the appropriate device, quality of connection, or required skills in order to make use of the digital potential.

A lack of digital skills and access can have a huge negative impact on a person’s life, leading to poorer health outcomes and a lower life expectancy, increased loneliness and social isolation, less access to jobs and education. It can mean paying more for essentials, financial exclusion and an increased risk of experiencing poverty. People who are digitally excluded also lack a voice and visibility in the modern world, as government services and democracy increasingly move online. It is those already at a disadvantage – through age, education, income, disability, or unemployment – who are most likely to be excluded, further widening the social inequality gap.

Middlesbrough’s high levels of multiple deprivation factors contribute to and are exacerbated by digital disparity among residents. Many individual short-term interventions and projects within the council and local partners tackling the issue exist, but these are not currently coordinated within a single synchronised strategy or built into cohesive long term service plans.

3.0 Digital Exclusion and Disparity Issues

There are many causes of digital inequality and exclusion, and poverty underpins several but is not the only factor. The 5 key barriers – of equal importance and impact - are:

- *Access to appropriate devices/hardware.* This could be smartphones, tablets, laptops and PCs. Each have their pros and cons depending on the type of need (eg smartphones are portable and good for reducing isolation, but less useful for completing schoolwork or applying for jobs/services).
- *Connectivity.* Access to the internet –through either WiFi infrastructure or 4G/5G mobile data. Access needs to be available, affordable and reliable and therefore each of these factors can provide barriers.
- *Digital skills and confidence.* Being able to use computers and the internet. For many, particularly vulnerable elderly people who have not grown up with devices this would require training and support. Confidence is also a key barrier for those who already possess devices/connectivity and basic skills but are failing to get the most out of digital opportunities such as access to services.
- *Online safety and security.* Fears and issues around scams, fraud, data security and personal safety deter many from utilising digital devices and the internet.
- *Accessibility.* Support services available online should be designed to be inclusive and user-friendly for all, including those dependent on assistive technology, and as compatible as possible with modern devices.

4.0 Key DISP Objectives

1. Ensuring children and families are able to access digital learning and no pupil misses learning due to digital disparity.
2. Ensuring job seekers are able to access digital skills and employability support.
3. Ensuring individuals (particularly elderly people) are able to engage with others to reduce isolation.
4. Ensuring local businesses are supported to trade digitally.
5. Ensuring town-wide connectivity plans support Middlesbrough's digital ambitions.

5.0 Where we are now

5.1 Local Baseline compared to national

In order to work towards achieving parity with national digital inclusion standards it is important to understand current local levels and the gap with the national average. Several key data sources collect digital inclusion statistics:

Source	Statistic	UK Average	North East*	Variation
ONS Internet Users, 2020: (6.4.2021)	Recent Internet Users (used in last 3 months)	91.2%	88.6%	-2.6%
	Internet Used over 3 months ago	1.5%	2.8%	1.3%
	Never used internet	6.3%	8.2%	1.9%
Ofcom Technology Tracker 2020	Personally use a smartphone	87%	87%	0
	Households with any type of PC, laptop, netbook or tablet computer	77%	80%	3%
	Households with access to the internet at home(via any device, e.g. PC, mobile phone etc)	87%	87%	0
	Households with internet access but don't use	2%	2%	0
	Households without access at home	11%	11%	0
Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index 2021	Offline/no internet in the last three months (e.g. desktop, laptop, mobile or tablet)	95%	92%	-3%
	Very Low Digital Engagement	29%	32%	3%
	Confident using Internet	85%	83%	-2%
	Benefit claimants with very Low digital engagement.	34%	37%	3%
	Wouldn't have coped through pandemic without tech	53%	54%	1%
	Net increase in Internet usage through pandemic	55%	46%	-9%
	Digital skills have improved as a result of pandemic	29%	23%	-6%

**Although data localised to Middlesbrough is not currently available, TVCA are working to collect this information through a research collaboration with DCMS and IPPR on the digital divide in the North East. For anecdotal context, the 2020 Middlesbrough HelpBoro Covid Hub survey of 600 vulnerable residents identified 72% of them had no access to wifi at home.*

5.2 Middlesbrough Digital Provision Gap Analysis

There is a huge range of digital provision interventions and projects already taking place within the council and local partners in Middlesbrough to tackling exclusion (see Appendix A), but due to the breadth and complexity of the issue, and the lack of cohesive coordination many gaps in provision remain:

Theme	Key Gaps/issues
Education and Learning	<p><i>Disparity in support provision</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Devices are provided to schools, not individual children, so some families with multiples are having to share, some schools have recalled devices after lockdown leaving a remote-learning gap for supplementary learning (inc homework), exclusions, sickness absence. • Different schools have adopted different digital learning platforms/apps. It is hard for LA services (particularly EMAT) to gain familiarity with them to provide additional support for families • Limited provision of devices/digital support for CASP, school leavers and care leavers • Funding for MCLS laptop loan scheme for learners who had limited access to technology is limited, prohibiting wider reach <p><i>Poverty</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many families have no/limited connectivity due to affordability <p><i>Skills</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issue of language barrier exacerbating digital skills gap – for pupils and their parents • Attainment gap exacerbated by parents without the digital skills to support their children’s remote learning • Middlesbrough has one of the lowest uptakes of GCSE IT nationally, creating a skills gap and local recruitment shortfall for digital sector
Employability support	<p><i>Equipment/device availability</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No current device loan offer available through libraries or MCLS and IT equipment used to provide jobseeker support and digital learning programmes at MCLS is outdated and in need of replacement • Central library PC provision reducing from 35 to 22 • Most adult residents own smartphones, but these are not ideal for applying for jobs/benefits online or creating CVs <p><i>Skills</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intelligence from local digital businesses suggest students leaving college and university have gaps in their digital skills and are not work-ready

	<p><i>Accessibility</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 70% of jobseekers coming through MCLS Adult Skills Programme had low/no English language proficiency, making teaching digital skills much more complex
Support for isolated and vulnerable adults	<p><i>Equipment/device availability</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Devices offered by Hope Foundation/Furbdit are not the best solution for every vulnerable resident • ASC are developing Independence Hub in Cavendish House – would like to offer loan system for devices but do not currently have the capital <p><i>Accessibility</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gaps in availability of digital accessibility equipment – eg screen readers/magnification devices/adaptions for learning disabilities <p><i>Skills, confidence and online safety</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gap in skills/support provision for very vulnerable elderly <p><i>Connectivity</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The town’s asylum seeker/refugee properties have no wifi provision and this cohort have limited access to funds or ability to initiate contracts, yet are in desperate need of connectivity to process their asylum claims and access vital services.
Supporting businesses	<p><i>Accessibility</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A huge amount of digital support is available through local and national agencies, but it is not promoted/signposted enough • Digital Business Strategy needs refreshing post-covid, plus a new gap analysis of support provision (Dan Watson/Sam Gilmore) <p><i>Skills</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intelligence from local digital businesses suggest students leaving college and university have gaps in their digital skills and are not work-ready • Local digital businesses are struggling to recruit locally due to skills shortfall <p><i>Connectivity</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Businesses and centres/properties are responsible for their own broadband infrastructure, if a company’s connection is too slow or unreliable, having a dedicated line laid is prohibitively expensive
Townwide Connectivity	<p><i>Connectivity</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Townwide broadband plan will take 3-5 years to complete. In the meantime some areas (particularly South West areas) have very little coverage, and most of the town has only one provider, leaving consumers without choice re. speeds/costs

6.0 Roles and Responsibilities

6.1 The Council's role

The LGIU, in partnership with Carnegie UK Trust defines the role of councils: “tackling digital inclusion requires dedicated attention and resources, it also needs to be embedded across public services rather than treated as a standalone issue. Local authorities are perfectly placed to align ambitious digital strategies with delivery through knowledgeable local organisations who understand community needs. Local authorities can have a huge impact by ensuring that work to get people online is joined up across their area, and that resources and expertise are shared as effectively as possible.”¹

Middlesbrough Council pledges to provide strategic local leadership for reducing digital inclusion barriers by:

- Embedding Digital Inclusion within our core council business
- Providing strategic local leadership to coordinate digital provision
- Ensuring infrastructure provision
- Improving signposting to and promotion of digital assistance

6.2 Other key roles

The council will provide the necessary local strategic leadership on the Digital Inclusion agenda, however due to the complexity of the issues involved it will be vital to work harmoniously in coordination with our public partners, local businesses, schools, adult education providers, housing providers, charities and support agencies to ensure resources, best practice and skills are shared effectively. Partner agencies are currently providing a wealth of digital support provision (as outlined in Appendix A) and this Digital Inclusion Strategy aims to enhance and coordinate that provision going forward.

¹ <https://lgiu.org/12-steps-for-digital-inclusion>

8.0 Action Plan

This DISP is intended to be a “live” ongoing programme developed over time to be responsive to strategic priorities and local needs as they emerge. The current action plan contains the strategic and practical actions required to launch the coordinated digital inclusion programme and attain tangible improvement over the next 12 months. An annual review and refresh of the DISP will enable future actions to be developed to build upon the success of this plan and ensure continuous progress towards eradicating exclusion.

8.1 STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN		
Pledge	Strategic Actions	Timescale
Embed Digital Inclusion into our core council business	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Include digital inclusion measure within Strategic Plan 2. Create internal “Digital Leads” working group, to review DISP, coordinate actions and ensure objectives and actions are incorporated into all future linked service plans and strategies 	Included in Strategic Plan by Jul 21 Group established by Jul 21, meeting quarterly (min)
Provide strategic local leadership to coordinate digital provision	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Coordinate DISP with South Tees Digital Group to address local provision gaps, monitor progress and prevent initiative overload 2. Synchronise DISP with Local Poverty Strategy 	DISP lead to join STDG by Oct 21 DISP Lead to contribute to LPS by Nov 21
Ensuring infrastructure provision	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Maintain Local Infrastructure Improvement Plan in partnership with TVCA 2. Apply for future capital grant funding streams to further advance infrastructure 	LIIP lead to join Digital Leads Group by Jul 21 Review of available and anticipated funding by Nov 21
Improving signposting to and promotion of local digital assistance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Create dedicated Digital Inclusion signposting page on council website and intranet 2. Improve training for all contact centre/resident and business support staff on available internal and external digital support 	Pages available on website and intranet by Dec 21 Briefing available to all staff by Jan 22

8.2 PRACTICAL ACTION PLAN – NEW ACTIONS

Objective 1: Ensuring children and families are able to access digital learning and no pupil misses learning due to digital disparity.

Action	Barriers Addressed	LMT Owner	Timescale
Support schools to access and provide digital devices for all pupils, and develop use of digital and remote learning platforms	Devices	Rob Brown	Specific digital plan in place by Mar 22
Embed new Digital Entitlement offer - free government initiative aimed at those who do not have ICT skills up to Level 1 – into MCLS	Skills, Online Safety	Rob Brown	Offer promoted by Mar 22

Objective 2: Ensuring job seekers are able to access digital skills and employability support

Action	Barriers Addressed	LMT Owner	Timescale
Develop business case for device “lending library” through libraries/hubs/MCLS	Devices	Geoff Field	Business case completed by Mar 22
Host Digital Event – promoting local digital businesses, employment opportunities and digital learning services	Skills	Richard Horniman	Event held by Sep 22

Objective 3: Ensuring individuals (particularly elderly people) are able to engage with others to reduce isolation

Action	Barriers Addressed	Owner	Timescale
Develop Independence Hub in Cavendish House including live device and software demonstrations, and creation of a digital skills buddying system (train the trainer / family member inclusion programmes)	Skills; Accessibility; Online Safety	Erik Scollay	Nov 22
Create business case for a “safety net” scheme run through MCLS for all residents which offering basic ICT training on engaging with friends, family and essential public services	Skills; Accessibility; Online Safety	Rob Brown	Business case completed by Mar 22

Objective 4: Ensuring local businesses are supported to trade digitally

Action	Barriers Addressed	Owner	Timescale
Develop Middlesbrough Digital campaign to provide advice for local businesses, signposting for digitalization support and promotion of town's digital cluster	Skills; Online Safety; Connectivity	Richard Horniman	Campaign launched by Mar 22
Explore the utilisation of open data more widely as per best practice in Sunderland and Leeds	Skills; Accessibility; Connectivity	Richard Horniman	Review undertaken by Mar 22

Objective 5: Ensuring town-wide connectivity plans support Middlesbrough's digital ambitions

Action	Barriers Addressed	Owner	Timescale
Develop planning/procurement policies to influence developers to incorporate superfast/fibre broadband infrastructure into new housing/investment developments as a basic minimum requirement	Connectivity; Accessibility	Richard Horniman	Policy included within new Local Plan by April 2022
Work with CityFibre to ensure full roll out of new fibre infrastructure	Connectivity; Accessibility	Richard Horniman	Annual review held with City Fibre each April (22/23/24/25)

Previous/Current Digital Inclusion Activity – Council and Strategic Partners

Education and learning

- MBC Education Department administered £350,000 digital investment grant to provide 1422 devices (laptops, tablets, wifi dongles) to 39 schools to assist remote learning provision (Karen Smith, Head of Achievement, MBC)
- Local schools have adopted digital learning platforms for the provision of remote learning (schools)
- EMAT provide digital learning support to INA/EAL families (Georgina Chinaka, EMAT Manager, MBC)
- Middlesbrough College have a Digital Board supporting digital inclusion and opportunities for young people, including coding clubs (Zoe Lewis, Middlesbrough College)
- During the pandemic, a small amount of MCLS adult Skills funding was redistributed to set up a laptop loan scheme for adult learners who had limited access to technology. (Claire Kemp, MCLS)
- MCLS provide face to face and online ICT courses, and online sessions have been created to upskill residents with online communication platforms, Google Meets, Zoom, Teams etc (Claire Kemp, MCLS)
- Red Cross offer free digital sessions for learning to access emergency help, connect with others, and build confidence and coping skills.
- Tees Philanthropic Foundation run a charity drive for new and used computer equipment for educational purposes
- Teesside University run “Summer University” Digital courses

Employment Support

- Free wifi, devices (135 PCs) and BYOD workspace provision in all council libraries and hubs. Pre-Covid the hubs ran basic IT Courses (Martin Harvey)
- Council run Jobs Fair (including a dedicated digital quarter promoting locally available digital careers and vacancies, plus programmes for retraining jobseekers into digital roles) (Debbie Ingoldsby)
- Routes to Work and 50 Futures Programme support unemployed residents with jobseeking skills including digital literacy
- Teesside University run a “Summer University” of short, affordable digital courses

- Teesside University “Digital Skills for Growth” programme, supporting jobseekers and local businesses looking to upskill digitally. <https://www.tees.ac.uk/digitalskills>

Reducing Isolation.

- ASC/Staying Put Agency provide digital skills programme for vulnerable elderly residents, including basic foundations (email, social media shopping, banking, VFM, accessing services, healthcare access), plus upskilling and aftercare support. (Chris Thompson, MBC)
- ASC also provide pre-paid wifi dongles/inexpensive contract-free mifi routers included within care package offers
- Hope Foundation/Furbdit provide refurbished donated devices (Hope Foundation)
- Creation of online resource hub, including self-help guides and tutorial videos (Age UK and Hope Foundation)
- ASC developing Independence Hub in Cavendish House
- ASC provide a multitude of assistive technology – Telecare, Cradle Connect falls assistance, Telehealth (medication reminders)
- HelpBoro advice hub providing signposting to digital support for vulnerable residents (Stuart Green/Martin Barker, MBC)
- Digital health services for residents with learning disabilities (Graham Clarke, MBC)
- Good Things Foundation provide advice for accessing online services, support for digital poverty and signposting for free devices.

Business Support

- A huge amount of digital business support is available locally, through the council, national agencies, and business-to-business from the digital cluster. The council acts as an advice agency and signposter
- Middlesbrough Digital Business Plan providing advice for local businesses, signposting for digitalization support and promotion of town’s digital cluster (Dan Watson/Sam Gilmore, MBC)
- Dedicated support through partners to provide 1-1 guidance on developing ecommerce sites, overseas markets, online trading e.g through Dept of International Trade and several other partner organisations
- Digital transformation support webinars and workshops led by Boho/Digital City/TVCA plus other support agencies

- Dedicated 1-1 support around online marketing /social media for pre starts (with partner organisations e.g. Enterprise Made Simple)
- Capital Grants to support business growth and job creation (could include purchase new hardware/web design/ecommerce site) via Tees Valley Business
- 1 year “Business Recovery” role has just been recruited to, to increase capacity and support businesses with post-covid recovery.
- Enterprise Zone created and thriving in Middlesbrough
- Town Centre team providing dedication support and advice for central businesses (Tom Rhind/Michelle McPhee)
- Teesside University and Digital City provide digital upskilling for businesses
- TVCA Business Hub provides digital advisors, help financing capital purchases, digital promotion and online trading support
- Teesside University offer postgrads to local businesses needing transformation projects through Knowledge Transfer Partnerships programme

Town-wide connectivity

- Townwide “gigabit city” broadband extension in partnership with CityFibre, to ensure infrastructure upgrade, full broadband coverage, and provide choice of providers helping drive up connectivity speeds and offer competition of charges (Craig Cowley, Infrastructure Manager)
- Internal Digital Strategy for improved digitalization of council services (Katie Watkins)
- Council Website Digital Project aiming to provide better digital links to residents and how they engage with the LA (Mehmoona Ameen)
- Council website accessibility improvements (Ann-Marie Johnstone)