



## **Tackling Poverty Service**

### **Digital Inclusion**

<b>Owner</b>	Lee Cambule
<b>Author</b>	Lee Cambule
<b>Version</b>	1.0
<b>Date</b>	20 August 2024

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## 1. Executive Summary

In 2017, Swansea Council published **Working towards prosperity for all in Swansea: A tackling poverty strategy for Swansea**. This corporate strategy represented the Council's commitment to reducing poverty and the impacts that poverty has on the people of Swansea. In line with this commitment, tackling poverty is one of Swansea Council's well-being objectives defined in its **Corporate Plan 2023-2027**:

**Tackling Poverty and Enabling Communities** so that every person in Swansea can achieve their potential.

On 9 March 2023, Audit Wales published the report '**Digital Inclusion in Wales**'. The report presented the evidence and analysis concerning the main reasons for digital inclusion. In addition to the main report, a supplemental document '**Key questions for public bodies**' was published with suggested questions for public bodies to ask themselves as they consider their approach to digital inclusion.

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the findings of this report (including the key recommendations for consideration) and the Council's internal assessment of the key questions raised, which presents an opportunity for reassessment of the local authority's approach to digital inclusion.

## 2. Context

Digital exclusion describes the challenge that people face when they do not have the access, skills or confidence to use the internet or digital technologies (such as smartphones and tablets). Without these, people struggle to do things that are available or easier to do digitally such as emailing, shopping or booking appointments.

Digital inclusion is the approach taken to help people to be able to use the internet or digital technologies. Being digitally included means being able to use digital tools or services independently.

There are key elements to digital inclusion that, if done well, make it easier for people to being digitally included:

- Broadband and internet services that are resilience and affordable;
- Devices that can access the internet and meet the needs of the user;
- Content that is relevant, accessible and encourages independent use of online platforms;
- Training and skills development to improve digital capabilities (digital literacy);
- Quality technical support that is easy to access and understand.



Digital equity is another common term, which means that everyone has equal access to digital services and technologies regardless of their socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity or location. This is a different part of the same challenge in creating a fair and inclusive digital society.

Welsh Government's **Digital Strategy for Wales** includes a mission on digital inclusion to 'equip people with the motivation, access, skills and confidence to engage with an increasingly digital world, based on their needs'.

Responsibility for digital inclusion policy sits within Welsh Government's Financial and Digital Inclusion Team. This team chairs a **Digital Inclusion and Skills Programme Board**, which includes representatives from Welsh Government and external stakeholders, to discuss digital inclusion policies and issues.

While individual public bodies have their own roles to play in promoting digital inclusion – including for example Digital Health and Care Wales – the Welsh Government is also providing additional funding to support delivery of its digital strategy through the work of Centre for Digital Public Services (CDPS) and the Digital Communities Wales (DCW): Digital Confidence, Health and Well-being programme.

Digital service delivery is a complex and constantly evolving industry. Digital skills and knowledge are changing frequently in line with advances in digital technologies. There are tools that support accessibility such as text-to-speech readers, translation services, larger fonts and other assistive technologies.

There are many benefits to being digitally included such as:

- People can use digital technologies to connect with others and build more inclusive communities, reducing barriers that some people face in their daily lives;
- Organisations and sectors that “digitise” services can benefit from moving service delivery to online channels;
- People with greater access to important services such as education, which means people can improve their skills and knowledge overcoming barriers such as distance, lack of resources or some disabilities;
- Some groups or cohorts of people experience specific benefits of digital inclusion, such as older adults using digital technologies to stay mentally active and stimulate cognitive development;
- Communities can benefit from the wider economic growth arising from digital services and technologies such as the creation of businesses and new jobs.

The Swansea Council **Digital Strategy 2023-28** builds on what has already been achieved and aims to contribute to wider partnership strategies. Our digital goals are:

1. Excellent Customer Service aligned with our service standards;
2. People focused digital services;
3. Resilient digital infrastructure and systems;
4. Accessible data that supports communities and council performance;
5. Digitally skilled and confident workforce and communities;
6. A digitally connected city and county.

### 3. Findings of Audit Wales Report

#### Key Highlights

Audit Wales' report highlights that:

- 7% of adults in Wales are 'digitally excluded', meaning they have not personally used the internet in the previous three months;
- the percentage of households with access to the internet has steadily increased since 2012 but some groups in society are more likely to be excluded;
- while there is enough data to suggest high-level trends, there are data gaps that make it difficult to give a complete picture and gain an understanding of the 'lived experience' of people who are excluded;
- digital inclusion is complex and is not simply an issue of access to technology. It is not just an issue of rurality or just an issue for older people. Even when people have access and digital skills, some may still prefer to access services face-to-face;
- there is a trend of public bodies moving some of their services online, which has many potential benefits but also risks disadvantaging digitally excluded people;
- while the UK Government is responsible for digital infrastructure across the UK, the Welsh Government is investing in broadband infrastructure;
- the Welsh Government has a specific mission around digital inclusion and is investing in digital inclusion projects.

There are five **digital skills categories** that make it easier for people to complete activities on the internet:

- Handling information and content;
- Communicating;
- Transacting;
- Problem solving;
- Being safe and legal online.

#### Key Challenges

The main reasons for people being digitally excluded are:

##### **Digital Infrastructure not available**

It can be difficult for people to access the internet if there is not sufficient access to broadband or mobile internet services. As well as being able to get online at home, in public spaces or on the go, people require this infrastructure to be fast and reliable so the quality and speed of these services also affects digital inclusion.

##### **Can't afford to be digital**

The costs associated with having the right devices, data plans and/or broadband/mobile services can be prohibitive especially for people who are experiencing poverty or other hardships. The Cost of Living crisis has pushed more people into poverty meaning that people cannot afford digital devices or internet costs as they prioritise essentials like food and heating.

### **Lack of basic digital skills**

Some people do not possess the skills, motivation or confidence to use the internet, and may not know how to find the necessary support, learning or training required to develop their digital skills.

### **Accessibility, usability and language**

Some people need additional help or different solutions to enable them to use and access digital technologies and services. This includes allowing people to interface using the language of their choice (such as Welsh).

### **Choosing not to use digital services**

Some people might have the right skills and access but prefer to access services in other ways, which is their choice and should be supported too. This may be just from time to time but there will always be people who are not digitally excluded but consciously decide not to use digital services (therefore are by choice not digitally included).

### **Safety online can be a barrier**

Some people do not feel able or confident about using digital services because they are worried about online safety and security issues.

## **Other findings**

The report presents a range of data and evidence about digital inclusion, including findings from Welsh Government's National Survey for Wales and stories shared by people with lived experience of digital exclusion. Below are some other findings from the report:

- digital exclusion affects about 32% of older adults aged 75 and above;
- digital exclusion affects about 14% of social housing residents;
- digital exclusion affects about 12% of people with a limiting long-term illness;
- 95% of premises in Wales can receive superfast broadband;
- 41% of internet users aged 75 and above had all 5 digital skills compared to 89% of internet users aged 16-49.

## **4. Key Questions**

Audit Wales' report included a supplemental publication that set out the main issues affecting digital inclusion and presented a range of questions for public bodies to ask themselves in considering their approach to digital inclusion.

The Council has completed an internal assessment against these questions through the Digital Transformation Board and the outputs of this assessment are detailed in Appendix A. The key issues are:

Section	Issue	Description
1	<b>Awareness of digital inclusion as a challenge</b>	Digital inclusion and exclusion is a complex, multifaceted issue that causes real difficulties for those experiencing it.
2	<b>Digitising while meeting the needs of the excluded</b>	7% of Welsh adults are excluded. Therefore, public bodies need a person-centred approach to digital change. This means focusing on individuals' preferences, rather than a blanket digital-by-default approach.
3	<b>Support for public bodies</b>	Digital inclusion is an important topic for the Welsh Government with multiple programmes, cross-departmental working and funding streams. There is support available for public bodies.
4	<b>Future challenges</b>	The rising cost of living is likely to have a further impact on those who are disadvantaged and digitally excluded. But the future will also bring opportunities from advances in digital.

Our analysis highlights that there is a lot of work currently going on to support people who are or at risk of being digitally excluded. The Council's strategic position is embedded through our Corporate Plan, Digital Strategy and the upcoming refresh of the Tackling Poverty Strategy.

## 5. Way Forward

There is a lot of transformational activity already ongoing in this space and with a focus on future opportunities for digital inclusion. For example, a draft Education Digital Strategy is in development which has focus areas for "emerging technologies", "poverty proofing" and "assistive technologies", all of which look to pro-actively address opportunities to support the inclusive use of digital technologies in education.

The results of this analysis, triggered by the Audit Wales report, is to provide us with the platform for taking further action to improve digital inclusion in Swansea. We have identified the following actions to be taken in response to our analysis of the key questions described above:

Action	Title	Outcome
1	<b>Digital Inclusion Action Planning</b>	We will conduct detailed action planning to identify the digital inclusion activities required to ensure that Swansea has relatively low rates of digital exclusion.
2	<b>Digital Inclusion Framework Development</b>	We will develop our performance, data and quality frameworks for Digital Inclusion (embedded within the context of Tackling Poverty and Enabling Communities) to establish a clear model for delivering and transforming digital inclusion services and initiatives.

<b>Action</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
3	<b>Digital Exclusion Information, Advice and Guidance</b>	We will review our approach to improving understanding and awareness about digital exclusion, targeting information, advice and guidance to staff, partners and stakeholders who work with people impacted by digital exclusion.
4	<b>Digital Inclusion Data Mapping</b>	We will map our current data profile relating to digital inclusion and identify gaps as well as actions to address the gaps.
5	<b>Digital Inclusion Steering Group</b>	We will establish a Digital Inclusion Steering Group under the governance of the Corporate Priority of Tackling Poverty and Enabling Communities.
6	<b>Digital Inclusion Funding Mapping</b>	We will review and map relevant funding and support schemes that support digitising services and addressing digital exclusion, identifying new opportunities for investment and future funding initiatives such as training programmes.
7	<b>Digital Exclusion Lived Experience</b>	We will identify opportunities to engage with people with lived experience of digital exclusion so as to capture / understand their story and improve service delivery in the future.

These actions will be managed through the Digital Inclusion Action Plan, which will focus on addressing the main barriers to digital inclusion and improving the five digital skills for people in Swansea. This action plan will be coordinated through the Tackling Poverty Service and report regularly into the Digital Transformation Board. Governance will be subject to existing arrangements under the Transformation Delivery Board.



## Appendix A – Key Questions Assessment Summary

Issue	Question	Status	Current Position
Awareness of digital inclusion as a challenge	Does your organisation recognise the importance of digital inclusion?	Started	Digital inclusion is referenced in the Council's Digital Strategy 2023-2028, which sets out how we will transform the council using digital technologies to improve people's lives, enable digital access to services 24 hours a day, and to improve operational efficiency. This is also referenced in the Corporate Plan 2023-2028, where increasing digital skills and digital inclusion is aligned with the 'Tackling Poverty and Enabling Communities' Corporate Priority.
	Is your organisation committed to digital inclusion?	Started	As detailed above, the alignment of digital inclusion in our Corporate Plan and Digital Strategy highlights the commitment of the Council to digital inclusion. Both of these strategic documents are subject to scrutiny, monitoring and reporting in line with corporate governance arrangements. As both the Corporate Plan and Digital Strategy are recently published, further detailed work is required to identify actions and investment in digital inclusion over the next five years.
	Are senior leaders (and those who scrutinise them) aware of the impact that digital exclusion can have on individuals?	Started	Digital exclusion has been part of the Council's strategic approach to digital services since Cabinet approved our first Digital Strategy in November 2015. There has been considerable commitment and investment in tackling digital exclusion in previous years. The challenges faced by people digitally excluded - including access to the internet, lack of digital skills, and trust in online services - has been a part of our strategic planning and corporate reporting for some time. As part of our performance measures, more work can be done to report on the stories of people who experience digital inclusion and embed these stories into our monitoring and reporting processes.

Issue	Question	Status	Current Position
	Has your organisation identified which individuals and groups of people are most likely to be excluded from digital services?	Started	We recognise that cohorts of people in our communities are more likely to be affected by digital exclusion, for example as a result of experiencing poverty. Services like the Lifelong Learning Service (LLS) identify and work with some of these cohorts (in this case, people who are seeking to improve digital skills or overcome barriers to accessing services online); in some cases, these are people who may be disadvantaged on two fronts such as low literacy levels and digital exclusion. There is an opportunity for more work to be done to align services and data to develop a single integrated view of the people most likely to be excluded from digital services.
	Is your organisation aware of, and using, the Digital Service Standards for Wales?	Started	The Digital Service Standards for Wales are the standards by which new or redesigned digital services funded by public sector organisations in Wales are designed. They include making sure that everyone can use the service and we have evidence of this; for example, Education's virtual school website offers bilingual content and is designed to support users with some visual impairments. The Council is aware of the standards published by the Centre for Digital Public Services in March 2022 and will continue to assess how these standards currently apply or could be applied in the future. All our online channels are compliant with accessibility standards and subject to ongoing review to ensure that they remain compliant.
Digitising while meeting the needs of the excluded	Is your organisation balancing the need to digitise services at the same time as meeting the needs of digitally excluded people?	Started	Our five year digital transformation programme is based on a balance of priorities including achieving the digital goals defined in the Digital Strategy. A Customer Contact Strategy is also in development. As identified above, more work can be done to develop a clear picture of the people most likely to be excluded from digital services so that we can explore their needs and incorporate those needs into our planning and prioritisation of digital service transformation. Services like Libraries deliver essential frontline provisions that meet the needs of people who are digitally excluded (such as printing services).

Issue	Question	Status	Current Position
	When digitising a service, does your organisation understand and identify the specific barriers that may exclude people or groups of people from using that service?	Started	All service transformation and improvements are subject to Council governance arrangements including our Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) as part of our procedures aligned with the Socio-Economic Duty. The Socio-Economic Duty was introduced in March 2021, which improves decision making and helps those who are socio-economically disadvantaged. This is the starting point for services to help people overcome specific barriers to using services; for example, Education colleagues identify groups who struggle to make school place applications online and provide them with assistance including paper form alternatives.
	Has your organisation aimed to provide solutions or support for specific groups who might be more likely to be digitally excluded for example older people, people living in social housing, people living with long term health conditions or people living in rural communities?	Started	A number of services and initiatives delivered or coordinated by the Council are targeted at groups of people who are or likely to be digitally excluded. The Customer Services team provides a wraparound service to residents, helping them with forms and online channels when applying for services such as blue badges and bus passes (both of which are online Welsh Government services so Customer Services support people over the phone and in person). A range of grants, projects and targeted interventions are available for these groups that tackle issues, challenges or barriers to digital inclusion such as welfare rights advice, assistive technologies for older adults, and community developments in areas of high deprivation or rurality.
	For each of your online services, is there an alternative, non-digital option for people to access?	Started	The Council operates a Digital by Choice approach to service delivery, where people can choose the digital channels available to them but if they chose not to, there are suitable alternatives such as face-to-face or paper channels. Most services offer multiple channels for contacting Council staff. Some services are still on their transformation journeys towards more digital channels/provisions. Co-production is a key principle of service development and involves working with people with lived experience to ensure that the services developed meet the needs of our population.

Issue	Question	Status	Current Position
	Is your organisation ensuring digital inclusion is built in as a standard consideration across all services?	Started	The Council is developing a Customer Charter having completed a review of existing service standards across the Council. The IIA process provides the mechanism for considering the cumulative impact of service developments and changes on all population cohorts including those identified by protected characteristics. This ensures that, during the developmental process, consideration is given to engagement, consultation and co-productive approaches. There is an opportunity to improve the advice provided during this process in relation to digital inclusion, to help staff ensure the right focus on the impacts of their developments on digital inclusion.
	Do you have accurate and up to date data to understand the extent of digital exclusion from your services?	Started	As the Audit Wales report highlights, there is a recognised challenge with data gaps and developing a complete picture of digital exclusion. Some data is nationally coordinated or not frequently updated. Data we capture locally is not always connected to the issue of digital exclusion (for example, we know how many people use library services for help with getting online but not necessarily if they are doing so because they are digitally excluded). There is an opportunity for building on our existing data framework to capture more targeted data and trends about digital exclusion.
	Does the data help identify exclusion by different services, local areas or communities?	Started	At this time, data about digital exclusion does not provide this level of scrutiny at service or locality levels. Data that is available is not always widely available outside of service context; for example, school staff have limited knowledge regarding older people as they usually deal with children and young people as well as their parents or carers. There is an opportunity for developing a more robust framework of how this data is used more effectively and how gaps in data can be addressed as part of our transformation work.

Issue	Question	Status	Current Position
	<p>While considering the data, are there any gaps? How are you addressing these gaps?</p>	Started	<p>We are aware of areas for further development such as providing more information in large print or braille, as well as providing services in languages other than English and Welsh. Work is underway on a Performance Framework (and supplemental data and quality framework documents) linked to the Corporate Priority of Tackling Poverty and Enabling Communities (against which digital inclusion is corporately aligned). This will form the basis for a more robust performance monitoring and reporting approach. This will also give us the baseline against which we can identify data gaps and incorporate these gaps into our transformation planning activities. This will be taken forward under the remit of the Council's Digital Transformation Board.</p>
	<p>Has your organisation considered the framework for future generations produced by the Well-being of Future Generations Commissioner, which provides some questions to consider when developing service changes?</p>	Started	<p>The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 sets out the seven Wellbeing goals (see diagram) and details ways in which public bodies must work and work together to improve the wellbeing of Wales. These goals, the sustainable development principle and ways of working underpin the Council's approach to service delivery and development, which is a key aspect of the IIA process. In relation to digital inclusion, we use this framework to ensure that we are considering the needs of people who are digitally excluded now and in the future.</p>
Support for public bodies	<p>Is your organisation accessing support from Digital Communities Wales? For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A review of your organisation to help develop and deliver digital inclusion work.</li> <li>- Training for staff and volunteers to help people in the community with digital skills.</li> <li>- Loaning digital equipment like laptops and tablets to organisations to help deliver digital activities for users.</li> <li>- Help to improve the digital skills and confidence of existing volunteers and support the development of digital volunteering programmes.</li> </ul>	Started	<p>Our Lifelong Learning Service has secured digital equipment from Digital Communities Wales to support individual learners to overcome barriers to online learning. Training provisions are available in all Council run libraries. There is an opportunity to engage with Digital Communities Wales about our forward plans for digital inclusion in Swansea and identify other areas of support.</p>

Issue	Question	Status	Current Position
	Where relevant, is your organisation accessing support from other organisations such as the Centre for Digital Public Services or Newid (the Third Sector digital skills / leadership project)?	Started	We also access this support from other sources such as Welsh Government grant funds (for example, using Chromebooks scheme to provide digital equipment to people who need help to overcome barriers to searching for employment opportunities) and partnership working with organisations such as Jisc Wales. There is some support provided by CDPS for colleagues in Education but this is focused on school management information systems, not specifically relating to digital inclusion.
	Is your organisation accessing all relevant funding and support schemes that are available to help with digitising services and addressing digital exclusion?	Started	As above, we access a range of grants, funding programmes and partnership arrangements - such as the Adult Learning Partnership Swansea - to support the Council's work in addressing digital exclusion. For example, a Welsh Government grant was used to develop an online solution for Additional Learning Needs which included portals for young people and parents. There is an opportunity to map out relevant funding and support schemes, working with Welsh Government's Digital Inclusion Unit and others to explore other initiatives to support our work.
Future challenges	If people are unable to afford access to digital services, in part due to the cost of living crisis, how will your organisation ensure they are able to access the help and information they need?	Started	A lot of work is being done to support people who are experiencing poverty or have been impacted by the Cost of Living crisis. For example, the Lifelong Learning Service offers a support helpline (open 5 days a week) for people who are unable to access digital services, which includes signposting people to accessible community venues such as libraries for further support face-to-face. The Council launched a Cost of Living Help web page in October 2022 with advice and guidance for people impacted by the crisis, including signposting to other services and ways of helping people to be able to afford digital services and overcome barriers.

Issue	Question	Status	Current Position
	Does your organisation have a good baseline understanding of the digital skills, knowledge and current needs of communities and staff?	Started	There is some information identified through a range of surveys, engagement activities and other interactions with our staff and our communities, such as the recent Swansea Libraries customer survey. Feedback from these various sources is being used to inform the refresh of the Council's Tackling Poverty Strategy (which will highlight Digital Inclusion as a key priority for action planning). There is an opportunity to undertake more targeted activities to explore the lived experience of people affected by digital exclusion, including supporting those people to become involved in co-producing our action plan around digital inclusion.
	As aspects of digital technology become more complex and advances, what steps will your organisation take to ensure the gap in knowledge and skills will not widen for people who are digitally excluded?	Started	Planning for the future is continuously being refreshed through our Corporate Plan, Digital Strategy, Tackling Poverty Strategy and other policy developments. Key to this challenge is ensuring that our internal knowledge, capabilities and professional skills around Digital, Data and Technology are in line with global advances in digital technologies; this includes User Experience (UX) mapping to hide increasing complexities from digital service users as much as possible. We have partnerships and working arrangements with organisations that are driving these developments such as BT. We are part of the Swansea Bay City Deal which includes the Digital Infrastructure Programme that is driving connectivity through collaboration as part of a £175m investment in the local economy. There is an opportunity for us to establish a local steering group to coordinate our continuing engagement and transformation activities.

Issue	Question	Status	Current Position
	What steps is your organisation taking to ensure the digital skills of staff are kept up to date with advancing technology?	Started	There are a number of training and development opportunities available to Council staff focused on digital skills. In the Education department, there is a Leader of Learning role that supports education staff across the Council with digital teaching and learning developments. In the Lifelong Learning Service, there is a Digital Literacy Senior Learning Development Officer role focused on the provision of our Basic Digital Skills programme (such as the successful Get Swansea Online courses). There is an opportunity to develop more bespoke training and sector level skills programmes around Digital, Data and Technology, working with our partners and based on our aspirations for digital transformation across the Council.
	Does your organisation have a pro-active approach to horizon scanning for opportunities that will be delivered from future advances in digital technology?	Started	This has included improving access to the internet in Swansea, improving digital skills for residents and staff, promoting digital inclusion in partnership with local stakeholders and supporting other means of helping residents (e.g. promoting private sector schemes that provide access to smartphones or tablets for people in poverty). There are also a number of digital transformation activities ongoing under the Digital Transformation Programme. These activities have been part of commitments and approvals at Cabinet and Corporate Management levels of governance.