

Digital Inclusion Strategy 2021 - 2024

Foreword

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting changes across many aspects of our lives has highlighted that more needs to be done to ensure our residents can actively participate online. With many organisations making a 'channel shift' towards digital, we have a duty to help and support our residents to move online so they can access opportunities and not be left behind.

The council has already done a lot of work with partners over previous years to try to increase digital inclusion, however the rapid transition to digital services during the first lockdown has meant more action needs to be taken to keep up the pace of digital inclusion interventions.

Addressing these issues needs to be a key part of our pandemic recovery plans and alongside the Covid-19 impact report, Tower Hamlets Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Inequality Commission recommendations and Poverty Review findings, provides an overarching aim of reducing inequality. This is also a key aim of the Tower Hamlets Partnership; borough leaders from organisations and community groups representing every corner of Tower Hamlets. Their five year vision, Tower Hamlets Plan 2018-2023, has the fundamental objective of tackling inequality by building a strong, inclusive and fair borough.

We have collaborated with partners across the borough to review and understand the barriers to digital inclusion in Tower Hamlets and have spoken with a range of organisations supporting our communities to get online. It is clear there is some really good work being undertaken by groups working closely with residents to enable them to benefit from the digital world. However, we have identified gaps in this provision that need to be addressed.

This action plan sets out a range of good practice and actions that will improve services across the borough to tackle digital exclusion.



Cllr Mufedah Bustin,
Chair Digital Inclusion Steering Group,
Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion



John Biggs,
Executive Mayor of Tower Hamlets

Introduction

What is digital inclusion and why is it important?

The internet and digital technology are firmly at the heart of how public, economic and social life functions – even more so during the pandemic. It has transformed how we work, socialise, and consume, as well as how we learn, entertain and access information and services.

Many children have never known a world without the iPhone (launched in 2007), the iPad (launched in 2010) or even the smart speaker (launched in 2014). In 2003, just half of UK homes were connected to the internet. By 2021, 99% of households with children aged under 18 have access to the internet at home.¹

However, despite the advancement and availability of technology, access and use are unequal across Tower Hamlets, and many people remain digitally excluded. Those who are excluded can be limited or unable to participate fully in society and are at a disadvantage.

If we understand the barriers to digital inclusion and identify and promote ways to remove these, we will enable non-users and sporadic users of the internet to become regular users. In this way we can ensure the benefits of the internet and digital technologies are available to everyone. Access and use of the internet and digital technology are important for helping people access services, stay in touch with friends, learn new things, and access a wide range of entertainment.

Further though, digital inclusion is important for social and economic equality and to ensure equal access to the many benefits the internet offers, such as increased earnings, higher employability, access to healthcare, variety and reduced cost of shopping, improved communication and time saved through online services.

Barriers to digital inclusion?

National and local research had identified four key challenges to digital inclusion:

1. **Access** - the ability to go online and connect to the internet, including having appropriate device and internet connectivity
2. **Skills** - to be able to use the internet and find what the individual needs
3. **Motivation** - knowing the reasons why using the internet is a good thing
4. **Trust** - the risk of crime, or not knowing where to start to go online

¹ Online Nation 2021 – Ofcom report [Online Nation 2021 report \(ofcom.org.uk\)](https://www.ofcom.gov.uk/consult/condocs/on2021/on2021.pdf)

Summary demographics

6% of UK households do not have internet access²

Those who left education at or under 16 years are 2.8 times more likely to be non-users saying 'it's not for me' than those who left education after 21³

Those who are not "very" confident about their literacy are 2.4 times more likely to be nonusers saying 'it's not for me'⁴

Those in the two lowest socio-economic groups⁵ D & E are 3.2 times more likely to be non-users saying 'it's not for me' than those in the highest two

socio-economic groups (A & B)⁶

97.5% of non-disabled respondents have used the internet within the last 3 months, compared with only 81.4% of disabled respondents⁷

Each child in the house makes you 1.7 times less likely to be a non-user saying 'it's not for me'⁸

96% of people in the 15-24 age group had essential digital skills for life, compared with 46% of people aged 65+⁹

7% of over 70s lack the digital skills to shop and

manage their money online¹⁰

40% of benefit claimants have very low digital engagement¹¹

95% of those with an annual household income of over £50,000 had essential digital skills for life, compared with 64% of people with a household income under £17,499¹²

93% of people with a university degree, masters or PhD had essential digital skills for life, compared with 34% of those with no formal qualifications¹³

Fifty years since the first email was sent, 88% of UK online adults use an email service¹⁴

The smartphone is the most-used device for accessing the internet

² (March 2021) - Online Nation 2021 – Ofcom report

³ https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/understanding_motivations_of_non-users_of_the_internet.pdf

⁴ https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/understanding_motivations_of_non-users_of_the_internet.pdf

⁵ NRS social grades (based on occupation)

⁶ https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/understanding_motivations_of_non-users_of_the_internet.pdf

⁷ ONS, 2020

⁸ https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/understanding_motivations_of_non-users_of_the_internet.pdf

⁹ Lloyds Bank Consumer Digital Index 2020 Index

¹⁰ Lloyds Bank and Ipsos MORI - Essential Digital Skills UK (2020)

¹¹ Lloyds Bank and Ipsos MORI - Essential Digital Skills UK (2020)

¹² Lloyds Bank Consumer Digital Index 2020 Index

¹³ Lloyds Bank Consumer Digital Index 2020 Index

¹⁴ Online Nation 2021 – Ofcom report

for all age groups apart
from those aged 65+¹⁵

¹⁵ Online Nation 2021 –
Ofcom report

Who are the digitally excluded?

There are people known as digitally *excluded* - meaning some people lack internet access and/or have low levels of digital literacy. The latest Ofcom, Online Nation Report (2021) states that 86% of UK adults used the internet in September 2020. That's 45.5 million adults aged 18 and over, and they spend on average three hours and 37 minutes a day online.

However, Ofcom reports there are still 6% of homes (around 1.5 million) with no internet access as at March 2021. Nationally, research suggests people who are digitally excluded are more likely to have one or more of the following features:

- are older
- do not have formal qualifications
- are in the lower socio-economic groups
- have a disability
- are not confident in their literacy

Nationally

The government launched their digital inclusion strategy in 2014, with the national goal that “by 2020 everyone who can be digitally capable will be”. In 2017, they expanded upon this, launching the UK Digital Strategy. The seven strands of the strategy include connectivity, digital skills and inclusion and a safe and secure cyberspace¹⁶. At a national level, the government have outlined their desire to “develop a world-leading digital economy that works for everyone”.

London

The London Recovery Board's¹⁷ Digital Access for All Mission has set a goal for “Every Londoner to have access to good connectivity, basic digital skills and the device or support they need to be online by 2025”. The Greater London Authority (GLA) and London Office of Technology and Innovation (LOTI) are working towards this goal. Tower Hamlets supports this goal and will coordinate our work with these activities, but if necessary we will move faster on our actions rather than being held back by the timelines of others.

Tower Hamlets

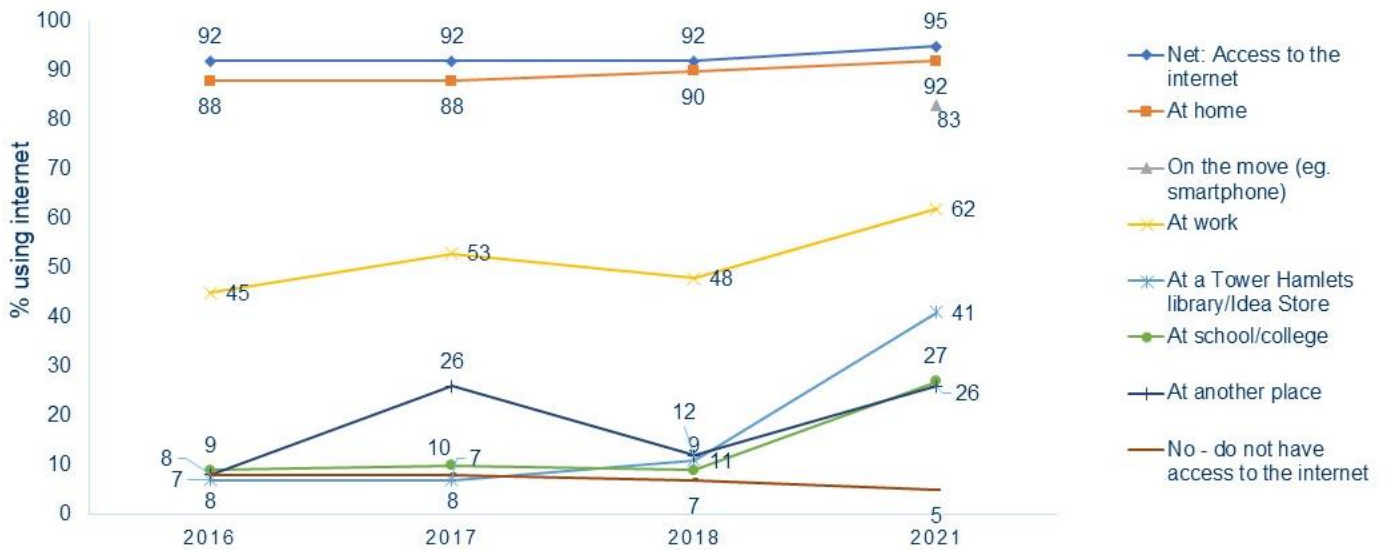
The Tower Hamlets Annual Residents Survey shows a growing number of residents have internet access. From just **9%** of residents in 1998, this increased to **88%** of residents in 2013 and then **95%** of residents by 2021.

In 2021, most residents who responded had access to the internet at home, with numbers having access at work steadily increasing.

¹⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-digital-strategy>

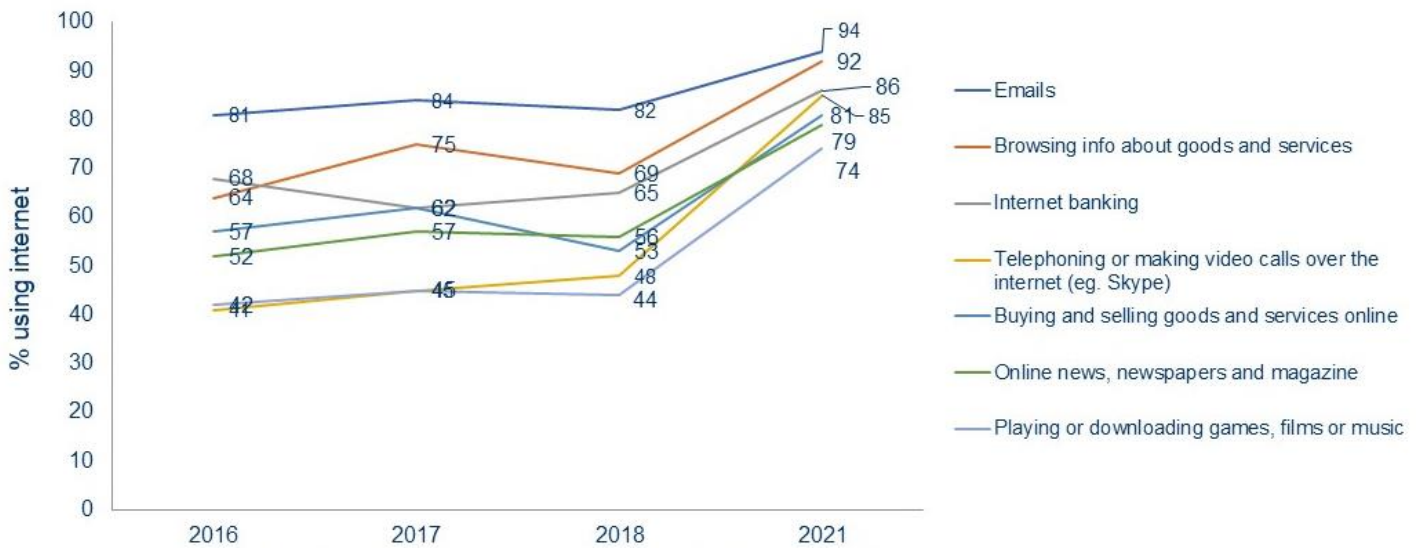
¹⁷ For further details on the LRB - [The London Recovery Board | London City Hall](#)

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Source: Tower Hamlets Annual Residents' Survey, 2016 to 2021. Q15 Do you have access to the internet...?
Base: All respondents (2021: 1108)

When asked residents mainly used the internet for emails and browsing information about goods and services.



Source: Tower Hamlets Annual Residents' Survey, 2016 to 2021. Q18b What do you use the internet for?
Base: All those who have access to the internet (2021:1,057)

However, the results illustrate that 5% of residents are still without internet access and surveys and anecdotal evidence has found that certain groups, broadly following the national picture, are less likely to have access than others.

For example, the Tower Hamlets Annual Residents Survey 2019¹⁸ found only 57% of Tower Hamlets' residents aged 60+ have access to the internet compared to 99% of residents aged 18-34 years old. The same survey found only 69% of disabled residents have access to the internet compared to 95% of non-disabled residents.

A 2020 survey by Tower Hamlets Healthwatch about residents accessing health services found that 15% of those surveyed either had no access to internet-accessing devices or did not know how to use the internet¹⁹. The same survey found that compared to other respondents the digitally excluded were more likely to be residents from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Communities, aged over 65 and/or disabled or in poor health. Reinforcing these findings, the groups of people most likely to say they would use NHS services online were in-work, middle-class and/or under 50.

However, caution should be taken when trying to predict who is digitally excluded. While preparing for the 2021 Census, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) looked at each area of the country to identify households that would be unlikely to complete the census online and therefore would require the paper form. Using demographic data to provide an indication of the likelihood to engage with online tools, they determined which households would be digital first and which would be paper first. In Tower Hamlets, 4% of households were identified as needing paper first, higher than other inner London boroughs. However, when the census took place, 72% of paper first respondents then ignored the paper survey they had been sent and completed the survey online after all.

Tower Hamlets had the highest online response rate to the 2021 Census in the country at 97.3%.

Given these findings, we can estimate that between 2% - 5% of our residents are digitally excluded and may need support to get online. This also highlights the requirement to continue to monitor and measure resident need, particularly given how this can change over time.

¹⁸ https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Borough_statistics/2019_ARS_Briefing_Paper.pdf

¹⁹ <https://cdn.whitebearplatform.com/hwtower/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/21172311/WEL-Digital-inclusion.pdf>

Our vision for the borough

The following vision for the borough, alongside the outcomes and actions that will achieve it, have been developed in partnership. Working collaboratively, colleagues from health, business, education, the voluntary and community sector (VCS), housing and the council reviewed national and local data, commissioned research and heard directly from those working with the communities of Tower Hamlets. This provided an overview of digital exclusion in the borough, and an understanding of some of the key issues faced by our residents. This work, alongside an exercise to map existing digital inclusion interventions in the borough, has developed a picture of what is already happening, what needs to be strengthened and where there are gaps. This evidence base is the foundation of this strategy.

Residents of Tower Hamlets have the tools and skills they need to participate in, contribute to, and benefit from a digital world

Outcome 1 - Every resident is able to access a device and affordable high-quality broadband at home and in the community for education, seek employment and access public services

To be able to engage in the digital world, residents must firstly be able to access it. Not only will they need an internet-enabled device e.g. laptop, smartphone, PC, they will also need a connection e.g. Broadband, Mobile, WiFi hotspots. Having a device connected to the internet will allow our resident to get online.

Actions

Priority actions are highlighted in bold.

- **Develop, promote and implement best practice on loaning and gifting devices that can be used by any organisation in the borough, include disclaimer template/example for gifted devices, different guidance for loaning (including maintenance), safeguarding and so on** Map and promote free wi-fi provision and access to free internet-connected devices across the borough
- **Develop policy / process for distribution of new and repurposed devices across the borough, including creating a list of approved providers / pathways to repurpose / recycle equipment (to be shared and promoted across the borough)**
- **Undertake coordination role to drive forward the social value elements of the fibre broadband wayleave, working with those providers who are undertaking the rollout in Tower Hamlets and negotiate and promote range of 'affordable' connections from different providers to TH residents**
- **Identify branding or similar, to promote mapping of free access and other borough digital resources and activity and use 'Get online week' (each October) to expand promotion, creating an ongoing digital campaign to promote positive benefits of going online**

- Promote and support the Connected Communities Project to expand across the borough – CC to further develop key actions borough partners can undertake to help drive this project forward
- Coordinate financial support to fund ongoing provision of devices, maintenance where relevant, connectivity and training
- Undertake coordination role to drive forward the social value elements of 5G, working with those providers who are undertaking the rollout in TH

Outcome 2 - Every resident has the skill or access to the training, to enable them to get online and complete online transactions

Providing an internet-connected device is only the first step, we need to ensure our residents have the level of digital literacy and skills to be able to use both the device and the internet. This needs to range from being able to turn on the device, to creating and changing secure passwords, to managing money and online transaction securely.

Actions

Priority actions are highlighted in bold.

- **Create and share best practice guidance for digital training including: digital skills as part of other training (e.g. ESOL, benefits advice) – include digital element in all adult skills training. Alongside a directory of skills training provision, including free to access online learning e.g. Good Things Foundation, Lloyds digital and financial skills, and work together to market and promote**
- **Partner organisations to provide digital skills training for staff that do not use ICT as part of their work and those with limited digital skills**
- Work with local disability led organisations to understand skills provision need for disabled residents, to enable customised I.T training for people with particular disabilities and access needs and support and improve the provision of assisted technology across the borough.

Outcome 3 - Every resident has access to the support needed to enable them to understand the benefits of digital and to do so safely

We've outlined the many benefits the digital world brings and the need to promote this with our residents. There are a range of reasons why someone might not want to use online services so we need to ensure our residents have the motivation and the trust to do so. This should include supporting them in understanding how they can go online safely.

Actions

Priority actions are highlighted in bold.

- **Maximise impact of digital buddying (buddies, champions, ambassadors) programmes mapping provision, giving access to community spaces/hubs and linking resources (link with volunteering schemes e.g. Volunteers Centre, ELBA corporate volunteers and others)**

- Develop safeguarding training which is accessible and meets local needs and ensure this is promoted widely to ensure reaches all sections of the community
- Compile and promote resources to raise awareness and respond to online safety, sharing guidance on how to protect and how to respond (sources include The National Cyber Security Centre, links to free malware)
- THCVS to develop a Digital Offer to support smaller groups in areas of data protection, using data effectively to bid for funding and improving communication with service users

Cross-cutting actions

Priority actions are highlighted in bold.

- **Agree funding from partners across the borough to support the creation of a fixed-term partnership based Digital Inclusion Ambassador role and appoint to this role**
- **Identify and monitor further metrics to measure the ongoing impact of the digital inclusion work and meet the needs of our residents**
- Encourage engagement from large companies in the borough who may be interested in supporting digital inclusion through their CSR activity
- Promote Good Things Foundation funding audit²⁰ to VCS partners and the Online Centres Network²¹ amongst Tower Hamlets groups

Making it happen

The strategy will be delivered using a partnership approach through the Digital Inclusion Steering Group. They will have oversight of the actions and will be responsive to any changes in need.

- Support others – both internal council departments and external partners
- Coordinate activity (streamlining and integrating disparate groups/projects and undertaking specific interventions)
- Apply resources (identifying resourcing and capacity requirements for ongoing development, management and delivery)
- Measuring success (identifying and monitoring key performance indicators via a steering group of key partners and annual reporting to the Tower Hamlets Partnership's Partnership Executive Group)

²⁰ [Funding opportunities for our network | Online Centres Network](#)

²¹ [Join the network | Online Centres Network](#)