# Developing a new benchmark: A minimum digital living standard

"What is the basic 'basket' of digital goods, services and skills that different households need to live in a digital world?"

Executive Summary

Time for a new approach to measuring digital inequalities

COVID-19 laid bare long-standing challenges of digital inequalities in the UK. Inequalities with very real consequences for people and places. Inequalities with implications across all areas of policy, provision, business and civil society. Yet standard policy measures of digital exclusion - based on access to or recent use of internet services - significantly underestimate the challenges faced by households. These measures are also effectively top-down in their assessment of what counts. It is time for a new citizen and society focused approach to understanding digital inclusion - one which complements existing indices, and puts citizens at the heart of defining what counts.
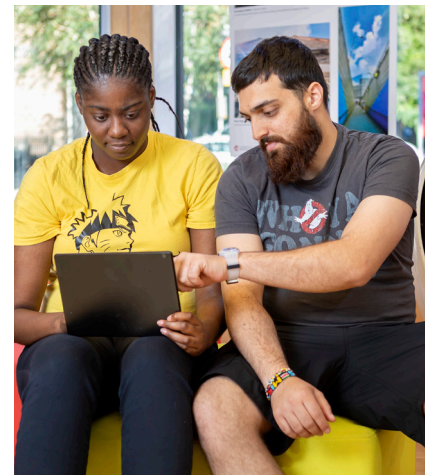
In 2021, the Nuffield Foundation awarded a research grant for a proof of concept study to establish a benchmark for a minimum digital living standard for households. This takes as a starting point a benchmark for urban households with children in the UK, with potential to evolve the standard for other household types (single, couple, working-age, later life).

This briefing outlines the approach, and presents the definition which has emerged from the first stage of the research with members of the public. This may evolve as the research progresses.

'A minimum digital standard of living includes, but is more than, having accessible internet, adequate equipment, and the skills, knowledge and support people need. It is about being able to communicate, connect and engage with opportunities safely and with confidence.'

Developing the standard: Citizen expertise, social science and geodemographics

The Minimum Income Standard methodology, developed by Loughborough University, uses deliberative discussion groups with members of the public to develop a socially acceptable minimum standard of living. It is used widely in UK policy and practice, including to calculate the real Living Wage; by charities as a benchmark for helping people in financial need; and as part of the Scottish Government's fuel poverty measure and targets.

Uniquely, this project applies the Minimum Income Standard methodology to issues of digital inclusion - to generate a Minimum Digital Living Standard for UK urban households with children. It will then apply the standard through a UK-wide survey, linking this with geodemographic data (population characteristics sorted by location) to produce estimated rates for the number of UK households which meet the standard. The project completes in August 2023.

Arriving at a definition

The first stage of research (orientation) comprised four focus groups with members of the public during February and March 2022 in England, Scotland and Wales. These groups included: people of working-age and pension age, and households with and without dependent children. The groups aimed to explore key issues about living in a digital society from different perspectives and arrive at a Minimum Digital Living Standard definition that could be used across all household types (not only households with children) going forward. People were recruited to ensure a mix of digital engagement and experience. The definition that emerged is as follows; it may evolve as the research progresses:

'A minimum digital standard of living includes, but is more than, having accessible internet, adequate equipment, and the skills, knowledge and support people need. It is about being able to communicate, connect and engage with opportunities safely and with confidence.'

In line with Minimum Income Standard principles, the definition is a socially acceptable minimum; reflecting social, economic and cultural norms. It is based on needs but more than survival. The definition has three aspects felt to be integral by members of the public: equipment, connectivity, and support. Importantly, this definition also includes what you can do and how you can do it. (A presentation with more information on the definition is also available on the project website).

- 'Accessible internet' avoids too narrow a focus on cost to encompass the breadth of factors relevant to connectivity.

- 'Adequate equipment' covers the number and type of devices households need, and enables further consideration of additional equipment (for example, related to disability).

- Skills, knowledge and support' came through as an area of universal need but likely differences between household types.

- 'Being able to communicate, connect and engage with opportunities' grounds the definition in everyday life.

- 'Safely and with confidence' responds to concerns expressed around online harms and what to do when things go wrong.

Living in a digital world

The orientation groups generated rich discussions around living in a digital world, the benefits and drawbacks, and the implications of being digitally included or excluded. Key themes were:

- Needing to participate in a digital world was seen as inevitable;

- Importance of digital inclusion across all aspects of life, with Covid accelerating this;

- Benefits include social connection, convenience, instant access to information, choices, expanded horizons, navigation, safety, saving money, entertainment, and sustainability;

- Harms included scams, misinformation, impulse buying, affects on family life, mental health, costs of tech, feeling forced to go online, and loss of human contact in services.

Discussions also explored how parental exclusion can lead to children's exclusion - for example, stigma among peers and missing out socially as well as educationally. People talked about different types of support to suit different needs, with older people especially discussing in-person support. Across all the groups, a diversity of experiences and multifaceted attitudes emerged, which seldom led to a binary split of included or excluded.

"Everything has technology now … And if you don't know how to use it you can be looked upon differently and not get the same opportunities as other people" (Parents group)

"It's going too fast for me" (Pensioners group)

"What I'm scared of is because it's digital, it's the unknown, so you don't know who's actually on the other side talking to your child or playing that game with" (Parents group)

"I'm a little bit older but on Instagram I found loads of community on-line who are all now making their clothes and that's when you go, oh this is quite cool. So I went to London a few weeks ago to meet some of them and I wouldn't have gone if it wasn't for Instagram… " (Mixed households types group)

Research process at a glance

Stage 1 - A shared definition is first developed through orientation groups comprising members of the public from different household types, held in different parts of the UK.

Stage 2 - Three iterative stages of deliberative groups are underway with members of the public - task groups, check back, and final groups. Groups discuss in detail what they feel families with children need to meet the definition. At each stage, groups are freshly recruited to test and broaden public consensus. Through this, consensus will be reached on the detailed standard.

Stage 3 - In-depth group consultations will explore the relevance of the standard with regard to key dimensions of lived experience and intersectionality, such as disability, ethnicity, rurality, poverty.

Stage 4 - The standard will then be used to develop survey measures. These will go through three iterations of expert, stakeholder and citizen testing before conducting 1500 in-person interviews, using face to face recruitment to ensure access to citizens without internet access.

Stage 5 - The survey data will then be analysed with geodemographic data to produce a Mapbook with estimated rates for the number of households which meet the standard.

In Wales:

With funding from the Welsh Government, and in partnership with Cwmpas and the Digital Inclusion Alliance Wales, work is underway to develop a Minimum Digital Living Standard for Wales. This follows a Welsh Government public consultation to review current national indicators which identified the need for several new indicators including 'The Status of Digital Inclusion'. The outcomes from the Minimum Digital Living Standard for Wales will support this new national indicator.

Young people's perspectives:

With funding from Nominet, additional groups with young people will ensure young people's perspectives on a minimum acceptable digital life are included in setting a standard for UK urban households with children. Insights will contribute to Nominet's benchmarking research on young people's digital experiences - the Nominet Digital Youth Index.

For more information

For more information about the project and to access project outputs: visit the University of Liverpool's Minimum Digital Living Standards project page.

If you are in an academic (or associated) role, and would like to explore how you might build on the Minimum Digital Living Standard project in your work, please contact:

Simeon.Yates@liverpool.ac.uk

If you are in a role related to policy or practice, and you would like to explore how you might use the Minimum Digital Living Standard in your or your organisation's work in future, please contact:

Emma.Stone@goodthingsfoundation.org

Timeline of key outputs

June 2022	UK MDLS - Stakeholder event and briefing (orientation phase)
September 2022	Welsh MDLS - Stakeholder event with Digital Inclusion Alliance Wales
September 2022	Digital Inclusion, Policy and Research Conference 2022
October 2022	Welsh MDLS - Phase one report to the Welsh Government
November 2022	UK MDLS Stakeholder event and briefing (headlines - deliberative groups)
January 2023	UK MDLS - Report on findings from deliberative groups
March 2023	UK MDLS - Stakeholder event and briefing (headlines - survey research)
Feb - May 2023	Series of in-depth group stakeholder consultations
July 2023	Launch of MDLS final report, MDLS Mapbook and supporting resources

Minimum Digital Living Standard project team

Professor Simeon Yates, Professor Alex Singleton, Dr Supriya Garikipati, Dr Gianfranco Polizzi (University of Liverpool); Abigail Davis, Matt Padley, Katherine Hill, Chloe Blackwell (Loughborough University); Dr Emma Stone, Tom McGrath (Good Things Foundation); Dr Elinor Carmi (City University); Paul Sheppard (Critical Research)

Minimum Digital Living Standard for Wales partners

Jocelle Lovell, Cwmpas; Prof. Hamish Laing, Digital Inclusion Alliance Wales and Swansea University

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