



#BecauseWeCare
Cheshire East Partnership

**Cheshire East
Partnership**

Digital Inclusion Strategy



#becausewecare



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01 Introduction

Through COVID, significantly more services have gone online and the gap between those who are digitally included and excluded has widened.

“The pandemic didn’t create the digital divide - but it did expose and exacerbate it. Fixing the digital divide is an urgent priority.”¹

The topic of digital inclusion is complex and requires a strong partnership approach to ensure we have **positive, real and sustained impact** across Cheshire East. This strategy is led by the Cheshire East Health and Care Partnership on behalf of the Health and Wellbeing Board.

This includes:

- NHS organisations
- Cheshire East Council
- Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise organisations



The purpose of this strategy is to:

- highlight the issues that digital exclusion causes for residents, organisations in the partnership and the wider system, and our Cheshire East community; and
- make recommendations to increase the number of residents who are digitally included.

£9.48

Return for every £1 invested in digital inclusion activities²

This strategy is for 2023-26 and is an iterative strategy. This means that it will remain flexible to the changing needs of our residents, the external environment and opportunities to achieve increased digital inclusion.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-digital-inclusion-strategy/government-digital-inclusion-strategy>

² <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Economic-impact-of-digital-inclusion-July-2022.pdf>

Glossary

[Digital Inclusion Defined: Digital inclusion is about making sure that people have the opportunity and confidence to use the internet to do things that benefit them day-to day]¹

02 Informed by our communities

This strategy has been informed by engagement with our residents, communities, the Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) organisations, and the Cheshire East Digital Inclusion Task Group.

Our residents and local organisations both hear and see the issues many of our residents experience in relation to digital inclusion, and provide valuable support to our digitally excluded residents across Cheshire East.



03 The vision

- 1** We want to ensure that **no resident is left behind digitally** and all Cheshire East residents can access the digital skills, technology and **services they need and want in the right way for them.**
- 2** We want to support residents now, and in the future as the world of digital continues to evolve.
- 3** We want to have a unified approach across Cheshire East, joining up the great work that is and will be undertaken to tackle digital exclusion, and create positive, real and sustained change for our community.



04 Digital inclusion in Cheshire East

Our residents

Through our engagement, it became clear that there are three types of resident in relation to digital inclusion:



**Digitally
averse**



**Digitally
excluded**



**Digitally
enabled**

Our Digitally Averse Residents

Residents in this group told us that they do not wish to use digital methods and would prefer not to be pressured into using digital methods for a variety of reasons, including:

- They were **not expecting to use digital tools in their lifetime** and rely on friends and family to use such methods
- They are **happy with their lives as they currently are** and tend not to take up opportunities to use digital tools
- The internet is **seen as discouraging human connection** and there is a perception that the internet is seen as for trivial communication
- There is a strong **preference for face-to-face and other traditional methods** of communication, alongside a view that this cannot be replicated digitally.

Ultimately, this group told us that they want their wishes to be respected and to still have access to the services they need through non-digital methods.

“My children help me when I need anything online”

“My husband doesn't want to build skills online, he's just not interested or motivated and I can do it for him”

“I value (in-person or telephone) contact with other people”

Our Digitally Excluded Residents

Residents in this group told us that they want to use digital methods but there are several barriers in the way to them achieving this. They told us:

- They are **fearful of making mistakes** such as breaking their computer and losing their data
- They have **low confidence** in their abilities to use the internet
- They are **thrown by unexpected events** such as cookies requests, popups and updates
- **Learning was perceived as overwhelming** and, when they had sought training for beginners, it had assumed a level of existing competence
- They do not know how it is possible to **remember all their passwords** with many sites having different password requirements, and how to make sure they're suitable to protect their data

- It's **tough to decide what tools to use** and there are minimal instructions, again with many digital items assuming an existing level of competence
- They are **unsure how to keep their data safe** and were very concerned about scams
- There are questions around **affordability** given the rising cost of living



"I'm frightened about doing the wrong thing, pressing the wrong button, it crashing and losing my information and money..."

"Courses don't work as they're in a group with different devices and lots of jargon and terminology that I don't understand"

"If I was confident my data was protected and I know I'm not vulnerable to hacking, I'd love to use the internet more"

Often, there is the assumption that older adults are the only digitally excluded group but, it's not only older adults that fit in this category. We've highlighted a few factors that can affect digital inclusion below.

Carers including young carers	Domestic abuse	Rurality
Sexual exploitation	Socio-economic status	Homelessness
Cultural contexts	Gypsy, Roma and Traveller digital access	Disability and mental health

Our Digitally Enabled Residents

Our digitally included residents felt confident and able to use the internet. They often used it for shopping online, searching for information and keeping in touch with others, alongside accessing the services they need. They told us that:

- They are **open to experiencing more from the internet** and are not deterred by new or different sites

- They find it **easy to transfer knowledge and skills** across sites, albeit finding services can still be a challenge
- They see it as an **important and valuable tool** to help their life
- Some are concerned about transactions, but they feel **aware of how to manage any risks**
- For some, **connectivity is the main issue** they face

“I’m happy with my level of use of the internet and feel pretty confident with it”

“I’m quite comfortable finding services online, although it can be hard to find as there’s lots of information out there and it’s not always clear where to search”

“The only thing that stops me is connectivity. Sometimes I need to go round to my neighbour’s house to use their Wi-Fi when ours drops”

The scale of digital exclusion across Cheshire East

Our current population in Cheshire East is nearly 400,000 residents. In line with UK estimations for the levels of digital exclusion, it is likely we have around 24,000 digitally excluded residents in Cheshire East.

However, it is important to not ignore pressures from the current economic climate with recent estimates pointing to a more concerning figure; it has been estimated by Citizens Advice that more than 1 in 6 people are struggling to afford their broadband.

This works out to around 51,000 adults across Cheshire East who are at risk of digital exclusion on the grounds of cost alone.

“I can’t afford broadband, so when my mobile data runs out I can’t see my grandkids. Do you know how heartbreaking that is?”³



24,000

digitally excluded residents



1 in 6
people struggling to afford broadband
which works out to be
51,000
adults across cheshire east

³ <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/features-and-news/digital-divide-narrowed-but-around-1.5m-homes-offline>

⁴ <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/about-us1/media/press-releases/more-than-one-in-six-struggling-to-afford-broadband/>

05 Why is it important?

The benefits of boosting digital inclusion would be seen at three key levels:



06 Benefits for residents

For individuals, the benefits are very clear.

Cost of Living

Digital access can mean reduced costs of living. Households offline are missing out on savings of £560 per year from shopping and paying bills and council tax online or being able to keep in touch with family and friends.

"I am also able to do my banking online too. I can't use the branches anymore, so I do everything online and my bank gives me 5% interest - so it's actually quite good for me."⁵

For individuals, the cost benefits do not stop there. According to a 2014 BT report, getting online is worth £1,064 a year due to increased confidence, less social isolation, financial savings and opportunities in employment and leisure.

Employment

The internet also provides improved job prospects. Many jobs are advertised online and require submission of an electronic Curriculum Vitae as a minimum requirement of the recruitment process. According to a 2014 BT report, for workers, getting online is worth £3,568 a year due to opportunities for remote working and increased earning opportunities.⁶

⁵Government Digital Service (2012) "Digital Efficiency Report": www.gov.uk/government/publications/digital-efficiency-report/digital-efficiency-report

⁶www.bt.com/bt-plc/assets/documents/about-bt/bt-uk-and-worldwide/bt-in-the-uk-and-ireland/research-and-reports/digital-inclusion-the-social-return-on-investment.pdf

Education

Digital inclusion can increase opportunities to access free and paid online learning programmes, alongside informal learning through websites such as YouTube.

“In the UK, it’s very popular to use the internet to learn things. YouTube has really helped me, my wife and my family to improve our English.”⁷

Many children also have opportunities to learn outside of school, yet those without internet access will struggle to access this in comparison to their peers.



Wellbeing

81% of people aged 55 and over say being online makes them feel part of modern society and less lonely⁸. Online access can increase opportunity for social engagement whether online through social media or finding in-person activities. Our Live Well site is our online directory that helps residents find the community groups and services they need.

“As each day goes by, I’m feeling more cut-off”

Cheshire East Resident

“Digital can help you keep your independence and keep you living independently”

Cheshire East Resident

Health

Digital inclusion means improved access to health and wellbeing information, services and support for independent living such as tele-health. It also means better access to medical communication. As one resident we spoke to said:

“While I was on holiday, I received a message through the NHS app about an appointment. It’s great because I wouldn’t have received if it had just been sent via letter to my home address”

Cheshire East Resident

Access to Consultations

Many Council and NHS consultations, alongside surveys from other organisations across the public, private and VCFSE sector, are typically most easily accessed online. Being digitally included means greater opportunities for residents to have their say, have their voice heard and have an impact on their wider community.

⁸Just Economics for BT (2014), “Valuing Digital Inclusion: Calculating the social value to individuals of going online”

⁹www.goodthingsfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Economic-impact-of-digital-inclusion-July-2022.pdf

¹⁰www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-digital-inclusion-strategy/government-digital-inclusion-strategy

07 The Benefits for Cheshire East Partnership

VCFSE Sector

Speaking to VCFSE organisations, it became clear that time and resource is spent trying to help those access the services they need during service provision that is intended for other purposes.

“I spent 40 [forty] minutes with a service user helping them fill in an online housing form. That time should’ve been helping them with the reasons they came to our service. So much time is spent doing things digitally for people who are digitally excluded”

VCFSE employee

Helping those who want to be digitally included in principle means that there is less demand on the system to provide such support and organisations, such as the above, can dedicate more of their time to providing the services they offer.

Additionally, we heard from our VCFSE sector that digital exclusion poses a barrier for many volunteers. Volunteers who lack digital skills often find it difficult to engage with digital processes, such as online form filling.



“We’ve had people want to volunteer who don’t have online access to complete the forms needed. We’ll always help them but it means more cost and time to post out the forms and get them to send them back to a local care home who can then scan and send across to me”

VCFSE employee

The gap between demand for volunteers and the supply of volunteers was also raised during our engagement. Given that many volunteering opportunities are advertised online, it is anticipated that, the more we enhance digital inclusion, the more residents who are willing to volunteer can be matched up with potential opportunities.

Cheshire East Council Services

For Cheshire East Council, alongside the above benefits that are seen for the VCFSE sector, improving levels of digital inclusion will help achieve the strategic aims such as the:

- **Customer Experience Strategy** - our Digital Inclusion strategy will support the Council's goals of adopting a digital first approach and helping our customers to access our services online
- **Digital Strategy** - our Digital Inclusion strategy will support our customers to choose the digital option first, but to not exclude those who do not wish to use these methods
- **Live Well for Longer Plan** – our Digital Inclusion strategy will support the council to achieve it's aims of helping its residents live longer, healthier, happier lives

Fundamentally, this will mean improving savings from greater use of digital methods whilst improving service quality. As stated by the Cabinet Office and Government Digital Service's Digital Efficiency Report, "the bulk of the savings is driven by the fact that digital transactions are estimated to be 20 times cheaper than by phone, 30 times cheaper than by post and as much as 50 times cheaper than by face-to-face meetings".¹¹

These savings mean that this money can be utilized across other areas of need to continue towards the corporate aim of being:

'an open and enabling organisation which empowers and cares about people, and facilitates a thriving and sustainable place'

NHS Organisations

The commitment that every patient has the right to be offered digital-first primary care is a core part of the NHS Long Term Plan and the rate of implementation for this was fast-tracked through the COVID-19 pandemic with online consultations doubling in March 2020¹². The NHS is set to continue its digital journey with many benefits seen for both patients and the healthcare system.

According to The Good Things Foundation¹³, residents who have basic digital skills can take advantage of the NHS website, E-prescriptions and online bookings systems which will lead to a reduction in the number of avoidable GP visits, as well as lower costs from providing offline booking services. They estimated the cost savings to the NHS to total £141 million by 2028.

For us in Cheshire East, this digital usage means that more patients can be supported with more efficient service provision for our communities. Therefore, the more we can support our residents who want to get online, the more they are able to use the online healthcare systems and services, and the healthier our Cheshire East community will become.



¹¹Government Digital Service (2012) "Digital Efficiency Report": <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/digital-efficiency-report/digital-efficiency-report>

¹²<https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/insights/digital-participation-lessons-learned/>

¹³<https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/insights/economic-impact-digital-inclusion/>

08 Whole Community Benefits

Reducing Inequalities

Improving digital inclusion has the power to tackle health inequalities¹⁴. Often the benefits of reducing health inequalities are proposed at the individual level through longer life expectancy and improved quality of life¹⁵. Whilst these benefits are important on a number of 'fair and just' levels, there is also a "growing body of research that suggests reducing the social and economic inequalities that lie behind the uneven distribution of disease will bring a wide range of [societal] benefits"¹⁶.

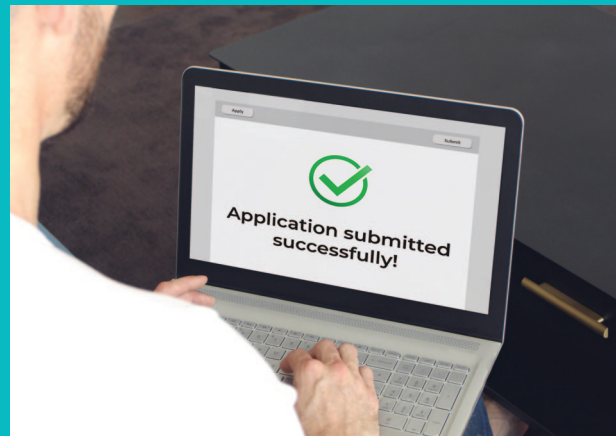
This has been supported by the Marmot review¹⁵ which estimated there to be substantial economic losses as a result of health inequalities in the realm of £50-60 billion per year in the UK through productivity losses, lost taxes and higher welfare payments.

Improving levels of digital inclusion will support Cheshire East to tackle health inequalities, creating a fairer society and reduce the economic impact on the system.

Businesses in Cheshire East

The challenge to attract and recruit employees remains an issue for businesses across the UK, including Cheshire East. Many roles today are digitally advertised through online job boards and many application processes tend to be online through digital submission of a CV. Online recruitment methods prevent those who are digitally excluded from applying and may reduce the potential number of applicants. By improving digital inclusion, there would be an increase in use of digital recruitment methods through an increased candidate pool.

In addition to this, the UKCES 2015 skills survey¹⁷ found that 14% of companies have staff that are not fully proficient and, where the workforce is digitally included, they are more able to access information to support their health and wellbeing, thus this may support lower sickness absence levels, improving organisational productivity and resilience. Therefore, there is a strong case to improve digital inclusion for the benefit of businesses in Cheshire East.



Carbon Neutrality

There is an environmental case for supporting those who wish to be digitally included. For example, providing digital support for residents using our NHS can reduce the number of unnecessary journeys to appointments, reducing not only petrol cost for patients but also the environmental impact of these journeys. Additionally, using digital methods of communication instead of postal methods can also contribute to reducing carbon footprints by being more environmentally friendly¹⁸.

¹⁴<https://digital.nhs.uk/news/2020/national-project-shows-digital-inclusion-is-key-to-tackling-health-inequalities>

¹⁵www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/fair-society-healthy-lives-full-report.pdf

¹⁶www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1731601/

¹⁷www.gov.uk/government/publications/ukces-employer-skills-survey-2015-uk-report

¹⁸www.gov.uk/government/publications/energy-white-paper-powering-our-net-zero-future/energy-white-paper-powering-our-net-zero-future-accessible-html-version

09 Working Together to Achieve Change

The digital world is fast moving and the gap between the included and excluded is widening at pace. As one of our Cheshire East residents said, “as each day goes by, I’m feeling more cut-off”.

The level of change that is needed is community-wide and will only be achieved by us all pulling together and working closely, in partnership.

10 Our Five Initial Priorities

Several recommendations have been made by resident, NHS, Council and VCFSE voices during the engagement phase of this strategy.

These include a buddy scheme for those learning to use the internet and improving broadband infrastructure across the area (Appendix A).

Many of these suggestions are already taking place, yet not always in a joined-up approach for maximum impact for our residents.

This means that:

- Similar projects are taking place in similar areas but these project groups are not working together. Therefore:
 - (a) resource may not be maximised, leading to a reduced return on investment
 - (b) there may be a risk of ‘double-doing’ with two or more projects working on the same thing for the same area
- Areas may ultimately be missed where there is not an ‘aerial view’ of activity across the area, thus potentially disadvantaging certain areas with little digital inclusion activity



Based on these recommendations, we have established five initial priorities to focus on within the Partnership.

Priority 1: Establish a Cheshire East Digital Inclusion Partnership network

We will establish a Cheshire East Digital Inclusion Partnership Network. We have already seen benefits from the Digital Inclusion Task group comprised of members across our NHS organisations, Cheshire East Council and VCFSE organisations. We will expand this to strengthen our partnership approach across Cheshire East.

In expanding this group to create a broader network, we will ensure more work is joined-up across the area, leading to more focused and impactful outcomes for our residents.

Priority 2: Open up the opportunity for resident involvement as part of the Cheshire East Digital Inclusion Partnership network

Equally as important are the voices of our residents. This strategy has highlighted many of our residents have lived experience of digital exclusion and are key to ensuring the success of inclusion activity. Our residents help us understand where the gaps are in support provision around digital inclusion and help us co-produce initiatives to actively tackle digital exclusion. As such, we will ensure that the Cheshire East Digital Inclusion Partnership includes resident voices.

Priority 3: Cheshire East Digital Inclusion Partnership will set the strategic direction for digital inclusion activity across Cheshire East, agreeing key areas of focus that are aligned to our residents' lived experiences

Through the engagement that informed this strategy, it is clear there are specific priorities born from the lived experience of residents. Given the substantial negative impact digital exclusion has for residents as outlined in this strategy, we will ensure this directly informs the strategic direction for activity driven by the Cheshire East Digital Inclusion Partnership.

We will ensure that our Cheshire East Digital Inclusion Partnership group consider:

- How we can effectively communicate with residents who do not wish to use digital tools
- How can we ensure that policies and processes are not 'digital-by-default'
- How we can ensure areas across Cheshire East have better connectivity and are aware of initiatives that are being undertaken to achieve this
- How we can ensure residents have access to the digital tools they need and are able to affordably access the internet
- How we can ensure our online services are easy to find digitally
- How we can create a 'One Cheshire East' offering to develop our residents' digital skills
- How we can help our residents build their confidence in using digital tools
- How we can ensure our residents feel safe online

Priority 4: Complete a mapping exercise of existing available assets and resources to understand what we have, how to maximise their impact and where the gaps are

There are many existing assets and resources providing digital provision across Cheshire East, some that are well known to a few and some that are going under the radar.

We will map out places, spaces and digital provision across Cheshire East to understand where digital inclusion activity is taking place, identify gaps and how to maximise their impact.

This will allow us to:

- Understand what we already do to tackle this issue
- Enhance the impact of these activities by joining-up work
- Identify which areas in Cheshire East may be disadvantaged where very little activity is going on
- Ensure a fair spread of activity across the area, in line with our vision that no resident is digitally left behind.

[Asset definition – asset can be a service such as digital community group or skills courses or a physical resource such as a digitally enabled community centre]

Priority 5: Develop a managed programme of activity in accordance with the above four priorities

The Digital Inclusion Strategy will be achieved through a managed programme of activity in our delivery plan in accordance with priorities 1 - 4 above, and in line with the following principles:

- Activity is behavioural and evidence informed meaning that it is backed by research and engages residents effectively through positive behaviour change principles
- Momentum is maintained through active management of the programme plan
- Every area of the partnership is kept informed of progress of activity and outcomes
- Members of the partnership take ownership over agreed strategic actions, ensuring they come to fruition and do not fizzle out over time
- Working groups are established to achieve time-bound goals and support working at pace

Dedicated project management support will be required to drive the programme and co-ordinate the partnership.

11 Final note

The approach and priorities set out above will create the foundations for us to truly gain traction and confront the issue of digital exclusion. Only with this joined up approach can we explore how we remove the barriers to digital inclusion that our residents told us they experience.

Together, we are stronger.

This strategy is iterative to ensure it remains flexible to the ever-changing digital world. Once established, CEDIP will propose and evaluate detailed recommendations for action that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound.

An initial draft delivery plan is enclosed in support of this strategy and may change as the CEDIP group take ownership and as new digital inclusion actions are proposed.

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