

Digital Inclusion Strategy

2026–2035



**Sunderland
City Council**

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Foreword

As we navigate the rapidly changing digital world, we are committed to creating a digitally inclusive city where everyone, regardless of age, ability, income, or background, has the access, skills, confidence and support they need to take part and thrive in a digital world.

Over the last three years we have been relentless in delivering our Digital Inclusion Action Plan, in collaboration with residents, community organisations and partners with a great deal of success to date.

Yet despite the achievements, our data highlights clear and continuing inequalities in digital access, skills and confidence across the city and that digital exclusion remains unevenly spread and closely linked to wider social and economic disadvantages.

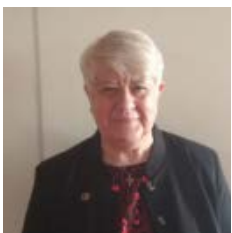
Older people, people with disabilities, lower levels of education, low incomes and people from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to experience digital exclusion. For many children growing up in poverty, a lack of devices or internet access at home makes it harder to learn, and develop digital skills that can in time, limit job opportunities and affect future incomes. Small and medium sized enterprises can also struggle, often lacking the digital skills, time or resources needed to adopt digital transformation.

Our work has shown us that digital inclusion is about more than simply providing devices or internet access. People also need the confidence, skills and ongoing support to use technology safely and effectively.

Concerns about privacy, online safety, trust in digital systems affects people of all ages and backgrounds, regardless of gender and income. This shows that digital vulnerability is not always obvious. It can emerge or change over time, which is why digital inclusion must remain flexible, responsive and open to addressing new and overlooked needs.

Digital services are not always designed with everyone in mind. By using our shared knowledge and listening to our communities, we can design digital services that are accessible, trustworthy and inclusive.

Our commitment is clear: we want everyone to be able to take part and thrive in a digital world and by working together to deliver this strategy, we will leave no one and nowhere behind, as technology continues to evolve.



Cllr Allison Smith
Portfolio Holder for Smart Cities

1. Digital inclusion: our vision

We envision a digitally inclusive city where everyone, regardless of age, ability, income, or background, has the access, skills, confidence and support they need to take part and thrive in a digital world.

As technology continues to change, we will listen, learn and adapt. By working together with our communities, partners and organisations, we will build a city that feels connected, confident and inclusive.

Sunderland will be a city where:

- Digital inclusion is fair and equitable, supporting those who face the greatest barriers
- People have access to reliable, high-quality connectivity
- Digital skills and literacy continue to grow at all ages and stages of life
- Residents feel confident, safe and informed when using digital services
- Public services are more efficient, effective and designed around people
- Digital inclusion supports economic opportunity, health and wellbeing, education and employment and a more sustainable future

Our vision is for digital progress to reduce inequality, build trust and help everyone share in the benefits of a connected city.

2. As easy as A, B, C... and beyond

Our priorities

Our engagement with employees, councillors and partners has helped us identify five clear priorities. Together, these priorities reflect what people need to access, use and benefit from digital technologies in their everyday lives.

A: Access for everyone

Affordable, reliable internet, data and devices

Everyone should be able to get online without cost or connectivity being a barrier. This includes access to good quality internet, sufficient data and appropriate digital devices.

B: Build digital skills

Essential digital skills and literacy for all ages

People of all ages need the skills and knowledge, to use digital tools in ways that support learning, work, health and everyday life.

C: Confidence to connect

Making going online feel safe, simple and enjoyable

Getting online should feel like opening a door to new possibilities and enjoyable, not a maze of passwords and worries. Confidence to connect is about helping people trust themselves and the tools they use, so they feel secure and supported every step of the way.

D: Digital services that work for people

Inclusive, accessible and community focused design

Public and community services should be easy to use, clearly designed and accessible to everyone, including those with additional needs.

E: Engagement

Collaborate and deliver a unified approach

Digital inclusion works best when we work together within the council and across city partners. A joined-up approach helps avoid duplication, build trust and make the best use of shared resources.

3. National and regional context

In February 2025, the UK Government published the Digital Inclusion Action Plan, setting out a coordinated national approach to tackling digital inclusion.

Crucially, the Plan recognises that improving digital inclusion benefits a wide range of sectors including housing, health, social care, education, employment, finance, equalities and culture.

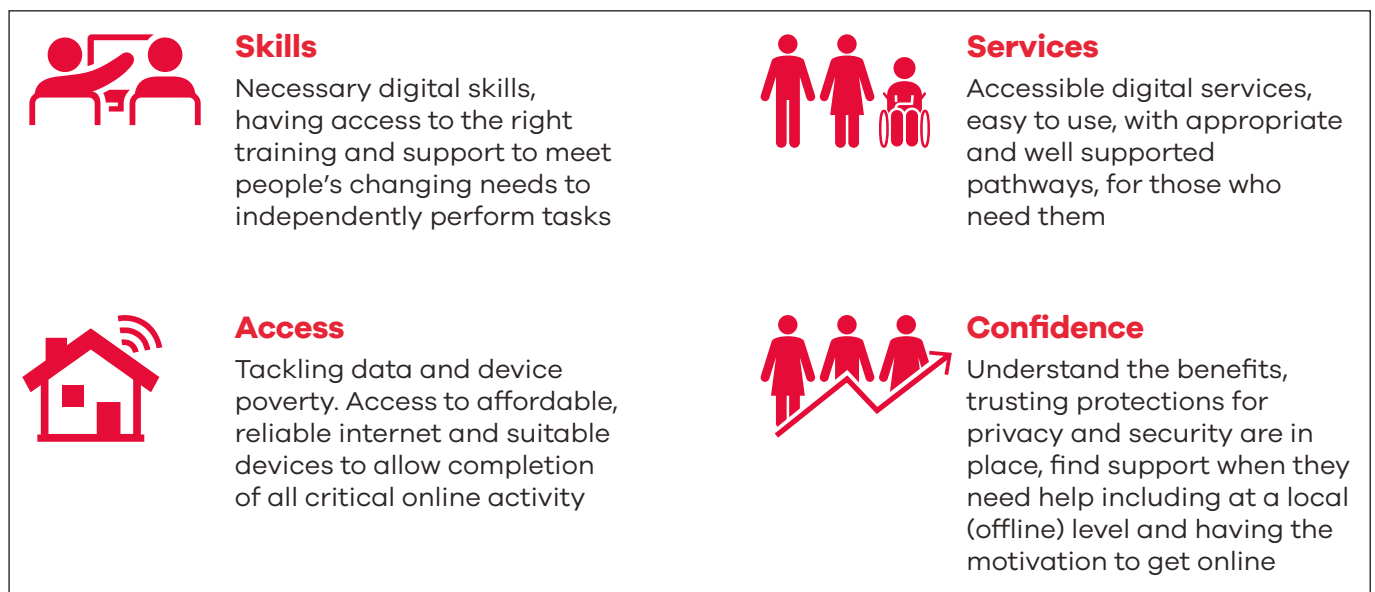


Figure 1: Summary of the government definition for digital inclusion and the four priorities

As part of the plan’s development, the government issued a call for evidence. Sunderland responded in April 2025, sharing its approach to embedding digital inclusion across services and communities.

In July 2025, the government announced the formation of a Digital Inclusion Action Committee to oversee delivery of the plan. Sunderland’s Chief Executive was appointed as a representative on this national committee, ensuring the city’s voice continues to shape the UK’s digital inclusion agenda.

In recognition of the challenges the North East face, a regional Minimum Digital Living Standards Task Group, was established, marking a significant step forward in regional collaboration and strategic alignment.

Sunderland leads this Task Group and together each local authority ensures that digital inclusion is not treated in isolation, but as a core component of wider regional development, creating a more connected economy, improving life pathways and making sure essential services are easy and simple to access.

4. Sunderland's response to digital inclusion

Over the last three years we have been relentless in delivering our Digital Inclusion Action Plan, in collaboration with residents, community organisations and partners with a great deal of success to date.

City



82% Connectivity

raised full fibre coverage from 25% to 82% of households, enabling faster internet



25 Ward Dashboards

research summary of digital inclusion provision, challenges and opportunity



153,000+ Wi-Fi Logins

people accessing free community Wi-Fi



21,000m² Free Wi-Fi

installed in community buildings



6,800+ Homes

benefiting from technologies to help keep vulnerable people safe



£1m+ Funding

secured to fund VCSE deliver digital inclusion initiatives



Online Hub

national and local information, digital support, training, e-safety advice, volunteering and funding in one place



480

Digital Inclusion Network members



177

VCS groups received digital support and advice

Workforce



Digital Touch Down Zones

created across depots and council buildings for offline employees



900 Employees

supported with licences, devices and connectivity



Tech Mates on Tour

launched Tech Mates, pairing digital volunteers with colleagues to build digital confidence



Digitally Ready Toolkit

Introduced defining essential digital skills for managers and employees



Induction

embedded digital competence levels in induction, ensuring the right support from day one



Elected Members

established a Tech Mates scheme to support elected members using digital tools

Residents



37 Digital Hubs

delivering digital inclusion services at the heart of communities



88 Sensors

installed to monitor mould and damp and footfall in our Digital Hubs keeping our communities safe



182 Tech Mate Volunteers

delivering 500 hours per month, to support people to go online, equating to over £200,000 in in-kind funding



1,000+ Devices Donated

by residents, which were refurbished and gifted to other residents



49 Databanks

distributing over 1,500 free SIM cards to low income households



200 Smartphones

provided to survivors of domestic abuse and people in temporary accommodation



641 Digital Devices

available for public use in the community



30,000 Residents

engaged through the annual social tariff broadband campaign



5,700+ People

with improved digital confidence and skills



367 Digital Events

supported or delivered



5,800+ People

attended digital events

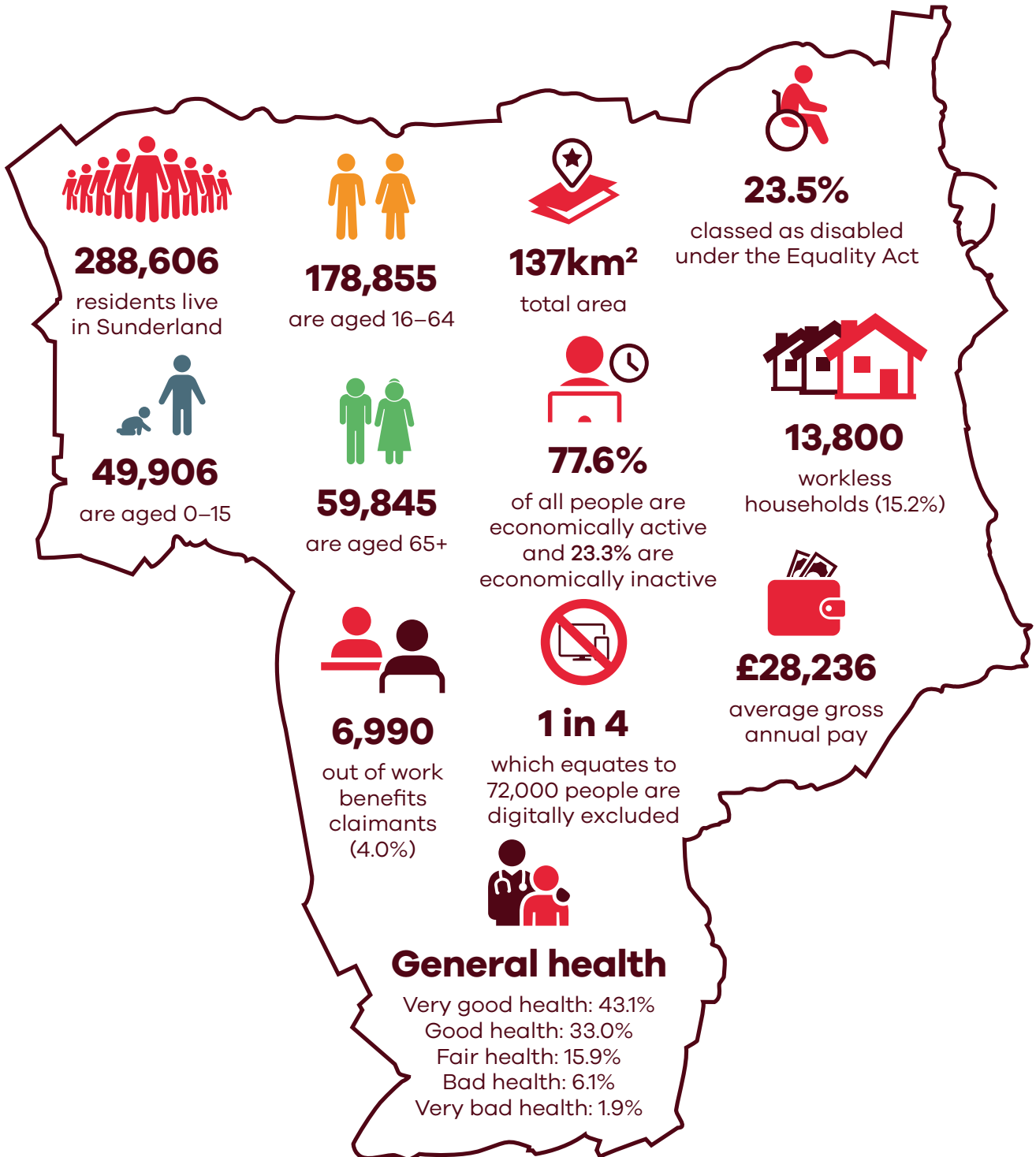


19,000+ Unique Users

accessed Recite Me accessibility tools to use our digital services

Why this matters

Our data highlights clear and continuing inequalities in digital access, skills and confidence across the city. While progress has been made, these findings show that digital exclusion remains unevenly spread and closely linked to wider social and economic disadvantages.



The data and machine learning algorithms points to gaps relating to affordability, digital infrastructure, digital skills and the way systems and services are designed. This evidence helps us understand where barriers to digital participation are most likely to be experienced and where targeted action can make the greatest difference.

Based on this insight, alongside learning from delivery and engagement with communities and partners the following groups are more likely to be affected by digital exclusion:

- Care-experienced children and young people
- Children and young people
- Low-income households
- People with limited or no formal qualifications
- People ageing well
- People experiencing homelessness or living in temporary accommodation
- People in recovery from substance use
- People who speak English as an additional language
- People living with long-term health conditions and carers
- People with mental, learning, sensory or physical disabilities
- Survivors of domestic abuse
- People experiencing social isolation

As our work has grown, so too has the range of voices contributing to it. Engagement with additional groups and communities has strengthened our approach, ensuring the strategy reflects real experiences and emerging needs. Together, this learning has informed a set of clear priorities, outputs and deliverables that build on what we have already achieved.

5. Digital inclusion: our priorities and actions

A: Access for everyone

Affordable, reliable internet, data and devices

Everyone should be able to get online without cost being a barrier. This includes access to good quality internet, sufficient data and appropriate digital devices.



Resident donating unwanted devices for the Donate Digital Campaign



Couple from Pallion receiving a laptop to help their children with homework

What we know

In Sunderland many residents, struggle to stay online. Broadband costs are unaffordable for some households, forcing reliance on pay-as-you-go mobile data, which is often costlier and less reliable.

Families with older children face added pressure as each child needs their own device and data plan for school and to stay in touch with classmates and friends. Financial exclusion, poor credit history, fuel poverty and the inability to afford devices deepen the divide, leaving many cut off from essential services.

Social tariffs exist but offer limited relief and are poorly promoted. Despite well-meaning initiatives, affordability remains the biggest barrier, made worse by inconsistent pricing and hidden costs. People also need devices that work properly, and can run modern apps and websites they rely on. For many, digital access is not a luxury, it's a lifeline.

Why it matters

Digital inclusion underpins wellbeing, opportunity and equity.

- **Health:** it enables access to Technology Enabled Care including online forums
- **Poverty:** it helps households find financial aid, manage bills and claim benefits online
- **Education:** it ensures pupils and students can learn, submit homework and attend online classes
- **Employment:** it opens doors to job searches, applications, interviews and remote work

What we will do

- Continue to stimulate the market for investment into full fibre broadband for residents and organisations
- Provide free public Wi-Fi in publicly accessed council buildings and appropriate outdoor facilities
- Commit that low-income households in priority wards, are aware of discounted broadband packages through annual campaigns
- Set up a Device Bank, which can manage donations, refurbish and rehome devices to low-income households city wide and continue to deliver and promote the city's network of Databanks
- Work with educational providers to provide reliable internet access and digital devices to pupils and adult learners for use at home
- Support people to access high-speed internet and suitable digital devices for job applications, remote interviews or virtual appointments and to manage health conditions
- Endeavour to provide the opportunity for all digitally excluded households to access a free or subsidised digital device
- Increase awareness of Technology Enabled Care, including Assistive Technologies to support independent living, improving the quality of life for residents
- Provide assistance on how to access lifelong learning opportunities

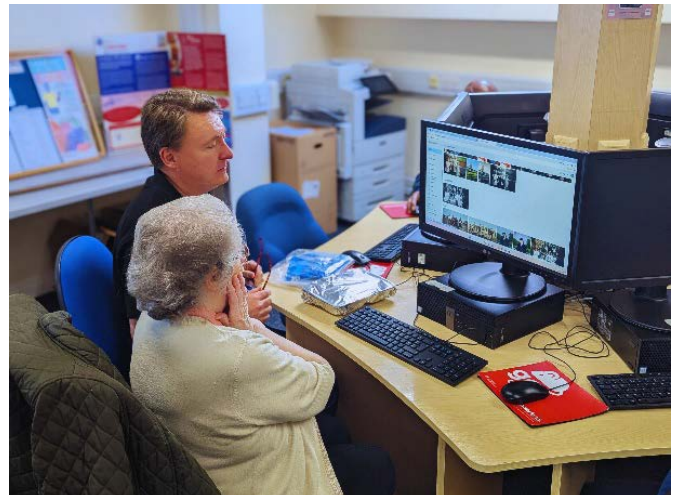
B: Build digital skills

Essential digital skills and literacy for all ages

People of all ages need the skills and knowledge, to use digital tools in ways that support learning, work, health, finances and everyday life. This priority focuses on education and employment opportunities.



Youth Almighty leading a digital session in Silksworth



Pallion Action Group helping build digital skills through a one to one session

What we know

Digital skills remain a major barrier to inclusion. While the Lloyds Consumer Digital Index (2023) shows that 33% of North East residents fall below basic digital literacy standards, more recent national study, Digital Nation (2025), continues to highlight significant gaps in essential digital skills with 21m adults not being able to complete essential digital tasks for work, such as, word processing, handling files and sending emails.

Why it matters

Many learning providers in the city are competing for the same money and the same learners. This means some areas have too much support, while others don't have enough. We need to work together more, not compete, so people can find the right learning at the right level, from first-step digital support to advanced qualifications. By collaborating, we can make sure learning is available to everyone, wherever they start.

- **Health:** it empowers people to manage conditions and attend virtual appointments, access test results, order prescriptions and access trusted information
- **Poverty:** for those facing financial hardship, digital skills become a lifeline, enabling access to essential services such as student finance, debt advice, free school meals and support platforms like Lightning Reach
- **Education:** flourishes as learners of all ages connect with resources like Sunderland's online library and community courses, enhancing lifelong learning

- **Employment:** prospects grow, from basic IT competence to technical expertise that meet the demands of a modern workforce

What we will do

Co-ordinate a digital skills pathways, from pre entry courses to advanced technical qualifications, to provide a talent pipeline into future employment opportunities.

Provide accessible and inclusive digital literacy and media literacy skills training to empower individuals.

Increase the number of residents achieving a necessary digital skills certification year-on-year by:

- Delivering digital training to residents with chronic conditions, enabling them to access online health services and manage appointments through the NHS app and Links for Life Directory and Connect to Work
- Providing basic digital skills and Maths and English training to low-income households and people not working to help them access online support services, such as, housing, finance, to avoid fraudulent schemes
- Training young people and parents/carers to use online educational platforms and digital libraries such as BorrowBox, while teaching them how to evaluate reliable learning resources
- Enrolling people looking for work onto programmes, built of the principles of the essential digital skills framework (2025) published by Future Dot Now, to improve their employability, including guidance on spotting fake job ads

C: Confidence to connect

Make going online feel safe, simple and enjoyable

Getting online should feel fun and like opening a door to new possibilities, not a maze of passwords and worries. Confidence to connect is about helping people trust themselves and the tools they use, so they feel secure and supported every step of the way.



Washington Tech Mates completing their Induction



Roker Life Art Group seeking inspiration for their next project

What we know

For many, the digital world feels unfamiliar and even a little scary. Concerns about scams, privacy and misinformation can lead to hesitation or complete avoidance. When confidence is low, people often rely on others, like family members, to complete basic tasks on their behalf like booking appointment, ordering a blue badge, or paying bills. This reliance reduces independence and deepens exclusion.

Current frameworks often assume people are already online, overlooking the realities of social and economic exclusion. They separate skills from real-life problem-solving, leaving gaps in practical application. People need digital soft skills that foster creativity, confidence and social connection, yet these are rarely prioritised.

Why it matters

Confidence builds choice. It means knowing you can do things safely and having the reassurance that support is available when needed.

- **Health:** trusted local support to help people use digital health tools without worrying about scams
- **Poverty:** strengthens community networks that make online spaces feel approachable and safe
- **Education:** offers a lifeline to those who feel digitally doubtful, opening doors to learning, volunteering, civic participation and registering to vote without fear

- **Employment:** provides practical help with CV writing, online job applications, universal credit journals and interview preparation, so people feel ready to take the next step

What we will do

Build digital confidence and promote online safety. Through our Network of Digital Health Hubs (DHHs) and partners, individuals will receive practical guidance to navigate the digital world safely and confidently.

- Continuously recruit and retain Tech Mates (digital volunteers) to support residents by sharing tips and stories, turning digital confidence into a social experience
- Work with Barclays Digital Wings, and partners to run digital challenges by gamifying activities, like 'spot the scam' or 'password power up' to make safety skills engaging
- Deliver a range of Techy Tea Parties and Confidence Clubs, as friendly drop ins where people learn by doing, e.g signing up for garden waste, booking appointments, problem solving
- Provide access to media literacy modules to help recognise misinformation, understand how artificial intelligence influences decisions and how to share information responsibly
- Work with the Regional Economic Crime Co-ordination Centre to host community workshops on scams and frauds
- Continuously review, update and share the digital toolkit, with partners, to promote access to AI, free software, learning platforms and resources

D: Digital services that work for people

Inclusive, accessible and community focused design

Public and community services should be easy to use, clearly designed and accessible to everyone, including those with additional needs.



Volunteers assisting residents with online council services



Setting up a digital hub in Washington to improve access to online services

What we know

Digital exclusion isn't a single issue, it's a web of challenges that affects people in different ways. For some, every click online carries a cost, with limited or no mobile data putting essential services out of reach. Others face barriers rooted in confidence, skills, or accessibility: older adults often feel unsure how digital tools fit into their lives, while people with disabilities encounter poorly designed online services that fail to meet their needs.

Language and cultural barriers add another layer of complexity. Low-income households, single parents and carers often lack the time, resources, or devices to engage online, leading to missed opportunities.

Young people, including those with cared-for experience, are frequently overlooked despite facing serious health inequalities. Even small organisations, vital to local communities, struggle to embrace digital tools, limiting their sustainability and growth.

These overlapping issues show that digital exclusion is not just technical, it's deeply social, demanding priority in the way we work and respond.

Why it matters

Digital inclusion is about more than technology, it's about dignity, opportunity and connection. When services are co-designed with accessibility at their core, they become powerful tools for care and empowerment.

- **Health:** inclusive platforms and smart systems, such as voice-activated assistance, help people with disabilities or language barriers manage their wellbeing

- **Poverty:** simplifies services, breaking down barriers for individuals facing literacy or cognitive challenges, ensuring no one is left behind
- **Education:** accessible tools create inclusive learning environments, supporting students and lifelong learners with special educational needs to thrive
- **Employment:** opens doors for people with disabilities, enabling full participation in the workforce and meaningful careers

Together, these efforts build a community where everyone can engage, contribute and succeed.

What we will do

Provide the tools, materials and the guidance to ensure that digital services are designed with accessibility in mind, meeting the needs of people with disabilities and diverse user groups

- Ensure that services are designed with accessibility in mind and share best practice to ensure consistent customer journeys online
- Embed accessible ways of working into daily practice, from delivering presentations to hosting virtual meetings, making the most out of existing digital accessibility tools
- Refresh and co-design key online services, platforms or content pieces in collaboration with residents and representatives from underserved communities to deliver an inclusive approach to services
- Work with website owners to minimise their use of large images, videos and animation to ensure content is accessible for residents with low-speed connections and basic devices

E: Engagement

Collaborate and deliver a unified approach

Digital inclusion works best when we work together within the council and across city partners. A joined-up approach helps avoid duplication, build trust and make the best use of shared resources.



Cross generational fun – learning how to take the perfect selfie!



Working together to build a digitally inclusive Sunderland

What we know

Despite growing awareness of digital inclusion, it is still too often treated as a stepping stone to other outcomes, like employment or education, rather than a vital goal in its own right.

Funding for digital projects is often short-term and depends too much on voluntary capacity, which isn't a long-term solution. Services don't always work together and digital inclusion is sometimes forgotten in strategic plans.

We need better standards, like the Minimum Digital Living Standard (2025), to understand what people really need. Without a clear, joined-up plan based on evidence, digital inclusion could be left behind instead of helping improve the systems we all rely on. Digital inclusion isn't a quick fix, it's an ongoing process that needs teamwork, smart solutions and a promise that no one and nowhere is left behind.

Why it matters

When different services work together on digital projects, the whole city becomes more connected and fair.

- **Health:** coordinated digital health efforts reduce disparities and improve access to support, helping close gaps in health outcomes
- **Poverty:** data-driven strategies ensure that interventions reach the people who need them most, while simplifying the process of accessing benefits, advice and support

- **Education:** joined-up efforts across schools, libraries and community spaces ensure that vital information is shared widely and effectively
- **Employment:** digital tools help track the impact of career and job schemes, allowing programmes to evolve in response to the city’s changing labour market needs

What we will do

We will deliver a unified approach by aligning efforts across departments and partner organisations, using data to measure progress and drive continuous improvement.

- Establish a City Digital Inclusion Board bringing together partners to co-ordinate the delivery of the strategy. Ensuring services are joined-up, targeted and effective for different communities across our city
- Publish an annual Digital Inclusion Impact Report
- Host a biennial celebration event, showcasing achievements, highlighting challenges and future priorities
- Build on the existing digital inclusion scoreboards and at-risk maps to deliver a pledge that every resident in Sunderland, Washington and Houghton-le-Spring will be within 15 minutes of a Digital Hub
- Funnel resources into the network of Digital Health Hubs to help make them sustainable, and to support wider strategies such as the Child Poverty, Pride in Place, Neighbourhood Health, and Stronger Communities

6. Governance and impact

To ensure the Digital Inclusion Strategy remains effective, responsive and impactful, a robust framework for monitoring, evaluation and continuous improvement will be established to feed into the Sunderland City Plan 2025–35, strengthening Sunderland as a digitally inclusive city, providing access to wide ranging opportunities.

Linked city strategies

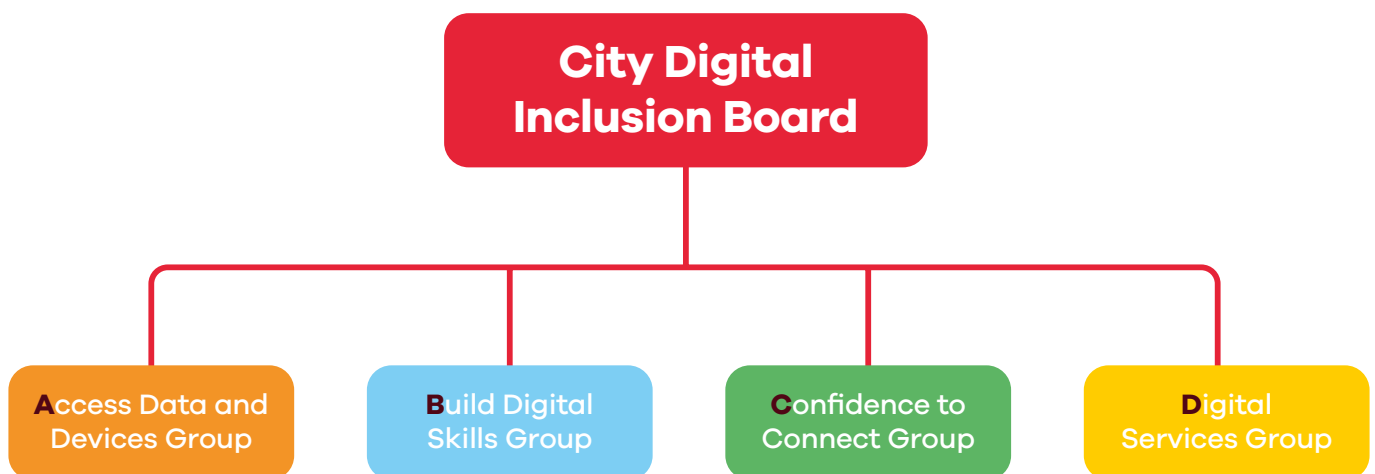
- Sunderland City Council’s Low Carbon Strategy
- Sunderland City Plan (2025–2035), outlines the Sunderland Partnership’s vision and ambition for the city
- Together for Children Business Plan 2025–2028
- South Tyne and Wear Waste Management Partnership (STWWMP)
- Sunderland children and families thriving: Child Poverty Strategy 2025–2035
- Sunderland Financial Wellbeing Strategy 2023–2027
- Forthcoming Skills, Progression and Employability Strategy
- Sunderland Healthy City Plan (2020–2035, 2nd edition July 2025) and 10 Year NHS Plan
- Sunderland City Council’s Workplace Health Strategy 2024–2027
- Sunderland City Council’s Adult Services Care Strategy
- Sunderland City Council’s Culture House Sunderland and Libraries Values
- Sunderland No More: Our Strategy to End Domestic Abuse and Violence against Women and Girls
- Sunderland City Council’s Homelessness Reduction and Sleeping Rough Strategy 2023–2028
- Sunderland City Council’s Digital Strategy
- Sunderland City Council’s Cyber and Information Security Strategy
- Sunderland City Council’s Stronger Communities: Sunderland’s Framework

City Digital Inclusion Board

To make Sunderland a city where everyone can thrive in a digital world, collaboration is key. The City Digital Inclusion Board will be the driving force behind this vision, bringing together people, ideas and resources to unlock opportunities for all. By providing strong leadership and strategic direction, the Board will turn ambition into action, ensuring progress on our A, B and C priorities. Creating a united effort that transforms digital inclusion from a goal into a reality for every resident.

Thematic Groups

Four workstreams will lead impactful projects that turn priorities into action. Ensuring that linked strategies are connected to real-life delivery. By focusing on clear deliverables, they will help drive progress and keep momentum strong.



Measuring impact

An annual Digital Inclusion Impact Report will be published to evaluate the outcomes and longer-term effects of the strategy. This report will include both quantitative data (i.e. improved digital skills) and qualitative insights (i.e. case studies).

Community feedback will be central to shaping and refining the strategy. Regular engagement with residents, Tech Mate volunteers and frontline staff will provide insights into what is working and where improvements are needed. This feedback will be gathered through surveys, focus groups and digital platforms.

Findings will inform annual reviews and be used to adjust delivery models, reallocate resources and update priorities. A flexible governance structure will support this adaptive approach, ensuring the strategy evolves in line with local needs and technological change.

7. Glossary

Access

Being able to get online using the internet, data and a device.

Affordable Connectivity/Social Tariff

A cheaper broadband deal for people on low incomes or certain benefits.

Assistive Technology

Tools that help people live safely and independently, such as fall detectors, smart sensors or voice-activated devices.

Basic Device

A simple laptop, tablet or smartphone used for everyday online tasks.

Connectivity

How people get onto the internet, for example broadband, Wi-Fi or mobile data.

Co-design

Working with residents to design or improve a service together.

Data Poverty

When someone does not have enough mobile data or Wi-Fi at home to use the internet properly.

Device Bank

A place where donated devices are collected, fixed and passed on to people who need them.

Digital Exclusion

When someone cannot get online because they do not have the access, skills, confidence or equipment they need.

Digital Health Hub (DHH)

A community place where people can get help to go online, use devices or access health services.

Digital Inclusion

Making sure everyone can go online by having the right access, skills and support

Digital Literacy

Being able to understand and use digital tools and devices safely and confidently.

Essential Digital Skills

Everyday skills like sending emails, filling in forms, staying safe online and using apps.

Media Literacy

Understanding what you see online, knowing what is true, what might be fake and how to spot and report scams.

Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS)

A national guide that sets out the basic digital access and skills every household needs to take part in daily digital life.

Tech Mate

A trained digital volunteer who helps people learn digital skills in a friendly, one-to-one way.

Techy Tea Party

A relaxed drop-in session where people can learn simple digital skills over a cuppa,

Temporary Accommodation

Short-term housing for people who are homeless or fleeing unsafe situations.

VCSE Sector

Voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations that work to support local people.

Wi-Fi

A wireless internet connection that lets people use the internet on their devices.

