

# Towards a Welsh Minimum Digital Living Standard: Interim Report

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This interim report describes the progress made to date on the 'Welsh Minimum Digital Living Standard (W-MDLS) Project' since February 2022. It sets out some initial thematic findings and the next steps for the project. The final report will be published in November 2022.



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# 1 Introduction

This report covers the first phases of a project commissioned by the Welsh Government to develop a Minimum Digital Living Standard for Wales (W-MDLS). It sits alongside a UK wide project funded by the Nuffield Foundation to develop a UK Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS)<sup>1</sup>. The idea of an MDLS was developed by the Nuffield project team – (University of Liverpool, Loughborough University, Good Things Foundation and City University) just before the onset of Covid-19.

In developing the MDLS for Wales and the UK, we are examining one of the key issues that the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns brought sharply up the policy and public agenda – ***the risks and realities of digital exclusion***. The scale and significance of digital systems and media in our everyday lives has never been more apparent. As a result, the digital divide between those who have the devices and data — as well as the skills and capabilities – and those who do not has never been more apparent and consequential.

Digital inequalities encompass differences, lacks and limitations in access, skills and capabilities with regard to digital systems and media that have significant tangible consequences for citizens, households and communities. Those already most disadvantaged have the potential to continue to lose out the most. The pandemic has, on the one hand, revealed *absolute* digital exclusion where citizens fully lack the access, skills and capabilities to use digital systems and media. This is why already vulnerable individuals have found themselves significantly disadvantaged – socially disconnected, economically struggling, unable to access benefits, health services, government assistance, or make online payments. On the other hand, the pandemic has also revealed the complexity of *relative* digital exclusion, thus making visible the challenges faced by ‘limited users’, with millions with access who yet fail to fully benefit from access to digital systems and media due to a lack of skills, support, and capabilities<sup>2</sup>. The Covid-19 measures have shone a light on the digital resources and skills needed to underpin households’ ability to maintain work, education, and social interaction. Previously documented evidence showed that the opportunities and abilities to utilise digital tools to work from home and provide educational opportunities are inequitably distributed. These have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 measures that have the potential to compound current and future educational and work inequalities for households with limited digital access.

But the challenges of digital exclusion and inequalities are not new nor specific to the Covid-19 pandemic. Research evidence<sup>3</sup> and intervention experience point to a complex interplay between levels and types of social and digital inequalities. Wales faces distinct challenges in terms of digital inclusion, in particular issues of language, social deprivation, isolated rural populations, and an aging population<sup>4</sup>. In 2021-2022 the National Survey for Wales<sup>5</sup> found that household internet access decreased with increasing age, increasing deprivation, and increasing health needs, with 12% of over 65s and 29% of over 75s having no household internet access. Overall though the survey indicated a promising upward trend with 92% of households in Wales with internet access in 2021-22 compared to 73% in 2012-13. In 2021-22 the National Survey for Wales found 7% of adults living in Wales do not personally use the internet.

This figure is higher than the rest of the UK, which suggests a widening gap between those who have access, and therefore whose needs will be centred around skills and support, and those for whom access is still the foremost issue.

Despite the history of work on digital inequalities, current policy proposals continue to return to a focus on digital access (broadband). Often, such approaches define digital ‘exclusion’ predominantly in terms of material access to technologies rather than skills and support. There is therefore a substantial need for a deeper understanding of digital inclusion and for more robust measures to guide interventions. This must build on an in-depth assessment of the meaning and consequences of digital inclusion and exclusion for citizens, households, and communities in Wales.

Working with the Welsh Government, we seek to develop a W-MDLS based on the goals of the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, and the Digital Strategy for Wales (2021) that can help deliver the Status of Digital Inclusion National Indicator included by the Senedd in December 2021.

## 1.1 Broader digital literacy policy and research landscape

Such research sits within a much broader discussion of digital skills and digital literacies. Exploring this broader discussion goes beyond the scope of this project and report but international, national, and regional stakeholders are building the idea of digital literacy and digital skills into broader cultural and economic policy making. An international view can be found in the work and policy advocacy by UNESCO<sup>6</sup>. UK wide policy can be found in the recently published Digital Strategy<sup>7</sup> as well as prior DCMS work the Online Media Literacy Strategy<sup>8</sup>. Ofcom has undertaken comprehensive research and policy recommendation work on Media Literacy more broadly with annual reports going back to 2007<sup>9</sup>. Regarding the importance of digital skills, especially for economic impact there is the UK government Essential Digital Skills Framework<sup>10</sup>. The Good Things Foundation has also recently published updated figures on the economic impact of digital inclusion see work of the Good Things Foundation<sup>11</sup>. For a discussion of UK citizens digital and data literacy see the prior Me and My Big Data project led by University of Liverpool<sup>12</sup>.

## 2 Approach

### 2.1 The argument for an MDLS

As noted above, this W-MDLS project sits alongside a UK wide project aiming to build a UK MDLS for households with children. The project builds on a track record of research around the impacts of digital inequalities by the University of Liverpool and Good Things Foundation. The majority of research on digital inequalities has focused on two issues:

1. Inequalities in terms of material access to digital devices (e.g. laptop, tablet, or smartphone), an internet connection or information sources. This issue of *absolute* access to resources has remained a key focus of policy, but it has long been noted that inequalities are more complex than just access.

2. Divides and differences in skill levels and uses. Recent research has identified that digital divides in skills correspond with relative differences in citizens' socio-economic position.

While much policy work remains stuck at these first and second 'levels', recent work has focused on differences in 'tangible' outcomes and considers the correspondence of digital inequalities to other aspects or 'fields' of inequality. This position argues that digital inequalities need to be understood in relation to individuals' available social, cultural and economic capital and the embedding of the digital within their everyday 'lifeworld'. These studies are predominantly based on surveys and are effectively 'top-down' in their assessment of what counts as digital exclusion. Meanwhile, qualitative case studies have explored the importance of understanding digital inequalities regarding their domestic integration, the value of digital to lower socio-economic status communities or in relation to levels of social and cultural capital.

The MDLS, W-MDLS, and Welsh Government policy noted above intend to move the research and policy debate forwards by taking a new citizen and society focused approach to understanding digital inclusion, exclusion, and inequalities. We are doing this by building on the Minimum Income Standard (MIS) methodology developed by University of Loughborough to develop our MDLS. This method allows us to draw directly on the lived experience of citizens. In other words, this robust methodology allows us to understand:

1. Digital exclusion as the product of multiple factors that limit citizens' digital capabilities.
2. Digital inequalities as complex, relative to time and social context, and deeply linked to intersectional aspects of social inequality.
3. Which digital inclusion policies and interventions best address the factors and contexts that limit citizens' digital capabilities.

## 2.2 Building the MDLS on the MIS methodology

The project applies the consensus-based Minimum Income Standard (MIS) methodology to issues of digital inclusion. The MIS methodology utilises participatory deliberative methods to develop a social minimum based on and rooted in public consensus. The MDLS and W-MDLS will therefore be citizen-centred, rather than top-down, definitions of what counts as digital inclusion or exclusion.

MIS is founded on the assertion that the definition and description of what constitutes a minimum living standard should be rooted in the lived experience of individuals in a given society. The approach identifies a minimum socially acceptable standard of living – a 'minimum' as a threshold under which no one should fall, and 'socially acceptable' in that the threshold is defined by society. It asks what goods and services people consider to be indispensable for human development, many of which include subjective elements such as citizen participation or connections with others in society. Thus, MIS refers to what a standard of living should be, recognising that while it is possible to survive on basic items, or necessities, a dignified standard of living is preferable.

Following MIS, our approach to establishing the MDLS focuses on the public definition of what is needed 'digitally' to participate in UK society. Just as MIS determines a

'participation income' needed to achieve a minimum living standard, so the MDLS will establish a 'digital participation threshold' below which individuals do not have all they need to take part in UK everyday activities.

The key features of the methodology are:

1. Iterative stages of deliberative groups comprising members of the public from a range of defined household types. At each stage, groups are intentionally freshly recruited to test and broaden public consensus.
2. Developing a shared definition with the public that is used as the basis for discussion. This is done to ensure that there is shared understanding when members of the public are discussing and devising the minimum 'standard'.
3. Development of comprehensive lists of goods, services, skills and capabilities that are required for individuals and households to reach the standard.
4. Collecting rich qualitative data by facilitating discussions to produce negotiated consensus and rationales explaining the inclusion or exclusion of goods, services and skills.

## 2.3 Capabilities: Outcomes for individuals and communities

The MDLS approach builds on the work of Townsend<sup>13</sup> and is based on relative and consensually derived measures rather than assuming essentialist or universal needs. However, we see value in Nussbaum and Sen's capability approach<sup>14</sup>, which entails the acceptance of two core normative claims. First, freedom to achieve well-being is of primary moral importance. Second, that freedom to achieve well-being is to be understood in terms of people's capabilities – that is, their real opportunities to do and be what they have reason to value. MDLS then encapsulates three central components that support and define digital capabilities (see Figure 1 in the Appendix):

1. Knowledge and skills that enable decisions on what goods and services to access and how to utilise these.
2. The material ability to afford or access digital goods and services at an appropriate level.
3. Digital infrastructure and environment that dictates the type of goods and services that can be supported in any given location and by provider capacities.

MDLS is therefore made up of a basket of "digital goods, services and skills" that facilitate an individual's digital capabilities to live a life they value and are effectively able to lead.

## 2.4 Current MDLS definition

The initial verbal definition of an MDLS from the UK Nuffield Project is:

*'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's about being able to communicate, connect and engage with opportunities safely and with confidence.'*

This definition was used as a starting point in the discussion with Welsh stakeholders (see section 3.4 below).

## 3 Building a W-MDLS

### 3.1 Key Research Questions for a Welsh MDLS

What then is the minimum basket of digital goods, services, and skills a Welsh citizen needs in order to gain an adequate quality of life, including social participation? What are the social, economic, and cultural consequences of not having this minimum basket? How do these needs, capabilities and consequences vary across demographics, locations and life stages for citizens and households? We will examine these issues in-depth through interlinked activities:

- A review of new academic and policy literature relevant to the Welsh digital inclusion context.
  - **Completed**
- Conduct qualitative in-depth interviews with stakeholder organisations exploring how needs vary in terms of a W-MDLS, and the factors that can impact on the ability to reach a W-MDLS.
  - **Ongoing, due for completion August 2022**
- Once again, we will use the proven and innovative Minimum Income Standards (MIS) methodology to undertake a participatory assessment of Welsh perceptions of digital citizenship and digital needs. We will build on the UK-wide MDLS to develop a Welsh Minimum Digital Living Standard (W-MDLS) focused on the needs of Welsh citizens.
  - **To be completed in Autumn 2022**
- We will build on the surveys, statistical and geographical evaluations of the UK-wide MDLS to explore the correspondence of the UK/Welsh MDLS with other social, economic, cultural, and digital metrics.
  - **Dependent on follow on funding for completion early 2023**
- Conduct qualitative in-depth interviews with Welsh citizens who do not meet the W-MDLS, exploring experiences and consequences of unmet digital needs and the factors that can impact on the ability to reach a W-MDLS.
  - **Dependent on follow on funding for completion early 2023**

### 3.2 Key activities so far

In February 2022 the team met with members of the Digital Inclusion Alliance Wales (DIAW), a network of organisations that meet quarterly to discuss digital inclusion in Wales (See Appendix 1). In March, the team also undertook a literature review to scope the current literature within the field. From May-June 2022 the team organised and conducted in-depth online interviews with key stakeholders from across the Welsh digital landscape working to address issues of digital exclusion in Wales. This included policy makers (e.g. Ofcom), service providers (e.g. BT), regional organisations (e.g. DIAW) and local groups or charities (see section 8: Appendix 2). This is in line with the Research Activities Plan outlined in the Inception Report for the Welsh Government produced by the project team in March 2022. Interviews lasted approximately 1 hour. Interviews began by taking participants through the ethics of the project and gaining

consent. These semi-structured interviews followed a three-part structure with questions to elicit information on three issues:

1. Definition of a Welsh Minimum Digital Living Standard and its components.
2. Policy implementation of the Welsh Digital Minimum Living Standard.
3. Practical implementation of a Welsh Minimum Digital Living Standard as part of digital inclusion interventions. (See Appendix 3 for full interview guidance document).

The interviews were then transcribed and thematically analysed using NVivo, as this was the preferred platform for qualitative analysis. Part of the interview included giving stakeholders our current working definition of the MDLS and asking their opinion on its effectiveness.

### 3.3 Key findings so far from literature

Alongside the current reports on digital inclusion by the Welsh Government, there is a small amount of academic literature specifically focused on digital exclusion in Wales. The available work covers several topics. First, there is some work on digital exclusion and marginalised groups in Wales. For example, Tsatsou et al<sup>15</sup> explored the role of ICTs in supporting minority communities in Wales. The paper argues that ICTs and the Internet are perceived by these communities as being key to promoting community connectivity in contemporary society and that Welsh minority communities are at risk of both social and digital exclusion, though Higgs and Berry<sup>16</sup> note that extensive evidence on the use and roll of ICTs in marginalised Welsh communities is lacking. Several papers address issues of digital media use and health. Gann<sup>17</sup> notes a strong link between digital exclusion and ill health in Wales. He notes that those who are least likely to be online (including older people and people with disabilities) are exactly those who experience the greatest burden of ill health. In this health context Gann argues that Wales has challenges in terms of digital inclusion, including social deprivation, an ageing population and poor broadband connectivity in remote rural areas. Wu et al<sup>18</sup> examined the role of ICT in supporting sensory impaired citizens in Wales. They concluded that sustained training and support are crucial in helping sensory impaired Welsh citizens to understand the full range of interactive services available on digital platforms. Similarly, Davies et al<sup>19</sup> report on a survey of 1,252 Welsh citizens (16+) found inequalities in accessing the internet at home, particularly in relation to health services. This remains evident in Wales, with lower access in older populations, more deprived populations, and those in poorer health. Overall, though, engaging with digital technology to support and monitor health in Wales is a common activity. A higher proportion of those with low mental wellbeing used digital technology to find emotional support online. This national survey highlighted that 34% of the Welsh population have used technology to self-diagnose, 16% to manage a long-term condition and 9% to manage medications.

As we expected, issues of rural-urban differences are raised in the field work. We explored UK and international literature on rural digital exclusion. Salemink et al<sup>20</sup> point out the paradox that globally rural areas are in need of greater digital connection to compensate for remoteness but are in fact the worst served. Philip et al<sup>21</sup> and Townsend et al<sup>22</sup> both argue for the closing of the urban-rural divide, especially through novel

technologies to address the most remote communities. Though Malecki<sup>23</sup> points out that access alone is not enough and that there needs to be a linked development of local human capital – skills and expertise. Norris<sup>24</sup> examined the urban-rural digital divide in the UK pointing to a greater gap in Wales than in other areas of the UK. Though, as noted below, recent Ofcom data and interview responses by Ofcom and BT indicate that this gap is lessening. Much of the international work in this area focuses on the benefits in key areas such as farming in global south and health care as noted in the Welsh context above – especially in relation to mobile phone use. Roberts et al<sup>25</sup>, Ashmore<sup>26</sup>, and Young<sup>27</sup> also argue that increasing rural digital inclusion can support community resilience in relation to economic and social participation. Finally, there is a small amount of literature on “smart villages” – akin to smart cities – arguing for greater digital connectivity to allow for remote working and limit depopulation of rural communities where citizens move out to seek better work opportunities<sup>28</sup>.

### 3.4 Key findings so far from stakeholder interviews

Stakeholders have welcomed the idea of a W-MDLS and have provided insights into both potential benefits of such a standard, and potential challenges regarding its implementation. They have indicated that the current MDLS definition is sound (see section 2.4 above), but there are key areas that stakeholders raised as important to consider as it is taken forward. The following key messages have emerged from our thematic analysis of the stakeholder interviews.

#### 3.4.1 General overall observations

For local Welsh organisations, three issues came up repeatedly as significantly important for a W-MDLS:

1. Rural (Remote) access – lack of good broadband and/or mobile access for some communities.
2. Welsh language – especially access to many services and systems not available in Welsh.
3. The role of the Welsh Government, local government, and Wales based organisations in addressing issues of digital exclusion.

We would note that national organisations such as BT and Ofcom did not see the first of these issues as specifically ‘Welsh’. They pointed to similar issues and levels of exclusion due to lack of broadband in other areas of the UK, such as Scotland, the Lake District and the West Country. They pointed out similar technical solutions including further roll out of broadband, ‘Shared Mobile Provision’, and satellite. Where they saw a potential ‘Welsh’ (or at least devolved nations’) role in this issue it was focused on the balance of public/private involvement in reaching those communities where these additional technical solutions are needed. In terms of a W-MDLS the question might be what role the Welsh Government, or local government, or even housing providers have in supporting these connections. This could be through subsidising costs (e.g., satellite access) or through other services offers (e.g. social housing). There was a question of level of Welsh national/local government involvement tied to the speed at which solutions for these more remote locations might be delivered. Much of this was

couched in terms of the Minimum Service Guarantee (currently 10MB). Our ongoing current UK MDLS work indicates that this level of service may well be considerably below what UK citizens – including Welsh participants – consider adequate to meet the MDLS definition above (section 2.4). More broadly, BT pointed out that key digitally excluded groups – customer segments – are similar across the UK: those with poor or no broadband access, low digital skills, older non-users, people lacking digital confidence. The relative numbers of these groups vary by region or community.

This does raise an interesting question regarding a W-MDLS – to what extent is the key value of the W-MDLS to be found in key differences to the UK MDLS or in the Welsh devolved administration's response to this? In particular the ability to mobilise local resources, regulation, legislation and stakeholders to address digital exclusion and ensure all Welsh citizens can meet the W-MDLS. Our interviews to date with stakeholders indicate that it will be a mix of W-MDLS specificities and the devolved nation response to the W-MDLS.

### 3.4.2 A WMDLS standard could change the ways in which organisations work

*"I think bringing a minimum digital living standard in is going to change the whole focus"*

Leader of a charity that provides support for people with disabilities

Stakeholders spoke of how a W-MDLS standard could affect their practice. They suggested that it could help them to:

- enhance and develop their digital offers
- put more resources into supporting the digital lives of their clients
- consolidate a concrete long-term commitment to improving digital equality
- break down barriers of organisations
- encourage them to take more risks and work more collaboratively to achieve such a standard

As organisations that would be key in policy and implementation, the W-MDLS could help them encourage digitally excluded clients to engage with support offered and take up more digital opportunities. They noted that the use of a W-MDLS to increase digital inclusion would have the long-term benefit of being able to move more services to digital. This would help to reduce costs for most organisations.

It will be important to communicate the WMDLS clearly and get people interested/excited:

*"The problem doesn't start with digital education and knowledge and confidence, it sort of starts a bit more broadly than that, like the sense of excitement about digital, right? ... It's something to be really excited about not scared and intimidated by, it's a form, it can be a force for good, it can really change the world, we really need to embrace it."*

Head of a South Wales broadband provider

The communities and individuals that would be reached by a W-MDLS are extremely diverse. There are many and varied reasons that people can be digitally excluded,

including by choice. Stakeholders pointed out that the fear of risk or surveillance, lack of digital confidence and/or skills, or simply a lack of interest in or knowledge about the digital provision available can all be barriers to access. The clear communication of a W-MDLS, with the backing of Welsh Government, could be used to help to communicate the importance of digital connection in everyone's lives, as well as to raise awareness of and excitement about the kinds of opportunities and benefits that people are missing out on.

### 3.4.3 Affordability is an important aspect of accessibility

*"In terms of that cost and affordability side, it's not just broadband at the moment, it's electricity, if you'd have can't pay your electricity bill, then you can't access the internet"*

Policy lead at a social housing provider

Given the current cost-of-living crisis it was to be expected that the issue of affordability would be foregrounded. That said, and as noted in the introduction, both Covid-19 and the cost-of-living crisis have brought into the light and potentially exacerbated existing issues that underpin digital inequalities.

Stakeholders we interviewed very often work with communities and individuals who are often not able to easily obtain either connected devices or the fast broadband connections necessary to use devices to their full potential, as well as struggling financially in other areas. When basic needs for food and power are not being met, internet connection becomes seen as a luxury that can be sacrificed and many stakeholders spoke of the need for a social tariff or subsidy.

For some, a focus on skills development is less important than this basic material provision, as without reliable access to broadband and connected devices, people are unable to apply any skills they have learnt in the real world. Someone might attend courses in a library, for example, but then not have access to a computer at home to use or practice those skills.

Some respondents raised concerns that Wales "lagged" behind in relation to digital inclusion for a range of reasons but especially levels of deprivation in some Welsh communities. Therefore they felt that affordability is especially relevant to Wales, as Wales is economically behind other parts of the UK with many areas of deprivation and high numbers of children living in poverty. This is not just an issue for the public, however, as stakeholders themselves can struggle with funding to provide the best levels of support, and the W-MDLS needs to take into account the affordability of implementation for providers as well as their clients. As for its implementation, this was seen as a major challenge in terms of infrastructure and stakeholders felt it would need to be clear who would be responsible for funding and delivery of infrastructure and training. At the same time, they also felt that the W-MDLS could act as a tool for ensuring Welsh parity with the rest of the UK in terms of funding and focus on digital equality.

### 3.4.4 Rurality

*"There are very isolated communities and homes, within Wales, big farming communities, coastal communities. And I think they do present some challenges around internet connectivity. And that's something that needs to be at the forefront of thinking around any digital offering."*

CEO of a Housing Association

Access to broadband in particular was raised as a challenge in rural areas of Wales and a W-MDLS should take this into consideration. One representative of a provider building internet connectivity in marginalised areas talked passionately about how the very existence of the network in these areas enables people from all kinds of backgrounds to have better connectivity, and that this was important as it would be there for future generations with the capacity to grow, preventing these communities from being left behind. Another stakeholder felt that while in an ideal world we would want everyone on the 'gold standard' of full fibre, the reality is that this will not reach some rural locations, advocating, rather, for innovative uses of alternative technologies such as fixed wireless access and the communication of what is available to those in the final few percent without full fibre coverage.

### 3.4.5 Welsh Language

*"From our point of view, it has to be bilingual, it has to be through the medium of English and Welsh, and those both languages given equal prominence".*

SMT for an organisation providing support, advice and funding opportunities to civil society organisations

Stakeholders were clear that the Welsh language must be something that is considered in the design of the W-MDLS onwards, rather than something added on or simply translated from an English version. It was felt by stakeholders that, in many digital services and many systems Welsh citizens needed to use, English is often given the priority which disadvantages those for whom Welsh is their first language, or who prefer to communicate in Welsh. More specific examples given by stakeholders of those in danger of exclusion included people with learning disabilities who have grown up in Welsh-speaking homes, and older people with dementia for whom language skills in English are lost before those in Welsh. There remains a question for the Welsh Government and stakeholders about the extent to which they can address this issue.

Services developed and used by Welsh and UK government and by Welsh stakeholders can and may be required to be provided or built in the Welsh language. This does not hold for many other digital systems services and for content are produced and hosted outside Wales and the UK. This could range across all areas from financial services, health advice, and education materials to entertainments media and apps. In these cases, there is no legal nor commercial requirement to provide a Welsh version. As a result, access to digital content and services for Welsh speakers may be limited as compared to other groups and UK regions. The question for the implementation of a W-MDLS might be the extent to which intervention by the Welsh government or stakeholders can effectively mitigate this innate inequity in digital systems and services.

### 3.4.6 Welsh Ownership

*"The narrative that comes out is that English action is UK action when that isn't always the case".*

Manager for a charity representing people with learning disabilities

It was felt by stakeholders that a W-MDLS could be more successfully introduced if it were perceived as 'owned' by the Welsh people, within a digital 'vision for Wales'. Stakeholders stressed the importance of listening to wider civil society in order for people to feel that they have had a say in shaping these standards, which is why we will be interviewing digitally excluded people in the next phase of the project. Implementation of the W-MDLS will require commitment and ownership from Welsh government in order to drive it forward.

### 3.4.7 Diversity of communities and individuals

*"People could ask someone, have they got a piece of technology? Or do they use tech? Yeah, everyone's interpretation of what technology is, is different as well. So, you know, I could go to my grandmother, do you use technology, she goes no, but in reality, she's got a smartphone in her pocket that's got more power in it than the Space mission flight".*

Community Support Worker with an organisation providing support to older people

Stakeholders we spoke to work with groups who are more likely to be digitally excluded, including older adults, people with disabilities, people in social housing, and people on low incomes. They stressed the importance of reflecting the specific needs, circumstances and preferences of the groups they worked with. It was not always clear the extent to which these circumstances reflected something that was specific to Wales or rather to these groups and communities in general. Several voiced concerns about the difficulty of reaching those who are most digitally excluded. All stakeholders stressed that within communities there is great variation in the level of individuals' digital access and skills. Stakeholders pointed out that some individuals were digitally excluded by choice, or that the understanding of what was meant by being digitally excluded may vary from person-to-person and this will be key in the communication and implementation of a W-MDLS. These issues should be considered in relation to wider Welsh government equality strategies, and implementation would need to be in line with wider Welsh legislation.

### 3.4.8 Training and Skills

*"There is no core digital standards for training for staff... I think it should be a mandatory requirement that you go for that course. Right, because it's going to drive change, and it's going to drive people to realise the potential".*

Leader of a charity that provides support for people with disabilities

While access to broadband and devices are important, without the requisite skills access to the internet will not bring people the benefits it potentially affords. Stakeholders are aware of the importance of digital skills for both their clients and their

staff. Training for support staff was considered equally important, with stakeholders indicating a lack of consistency in the digital skills and confidence of the workforce, and the opportunities for training available to them. While Digital Skills Wales offers digital inclusion training, and providers are making offers of training for their own staff, there are currently no core standards or mandatory skills level for those in the public sector. Some stakeholders were concerned about the level of support staff would be able to give to clients if they themselves were digitally excluded, under-skilled, or underconfident.

*“Without the training, they just don't know about these things”.*

Community Support Worker with an organisation providing support to older people

In terms of clients, stakeholders were aware that many people lack the skills and/or confidence to engage fully with the digital offer available. Sometimes a person will be highly skilled when using a particular device (e.g., a smartphone) but not able to utilise other devices (e.g. a laptop), or be skilled in one area and not others. This means that they may be able to pursue some opportunities online but not be able to fully take advantage of digital services, which may rely, for example, on the use of health or government sites. One stakeholder pointed out that the pandemic has brought groups and individuals online who were not engaging with it before. Stakeholders talked about how training can help people feel more secure as they understand how to stay safe online, making them more likely to engage. On a positive note, stakeholders identified many organisations and groups working collaboratively already to offer opportunities to upskill for both clients and support staff.

## 4 The Next Steps

For the final steps of the Delphi framework, the team will take these initial findings, and produce a short survey for all key stakeholders (See Appendix Two). This will both refine and confirm that we have captured the key issues for stakeholders. This will be complete by close of August. This work will inform the additional MDLS group interviews with households and children to be conducted in Wales to produce a W-MDLS definition that is as robust as possible. This field work will be complete in October and the final report complete by November 2022. Should Phase 2 of the project be funded, these results will then be taken forward in the next stages of the project where the team will utilise the W-MDLS to explore national, community and personal impacts of meeting, or not meeting the standard. Phase 2 will involve undertaking in-depth interviews with Welsh citizens representing specific groups, or who sit at the intersection of key demographics, and undertaking seminar workshops with representatives of and practitioners supporting key groups.

## 5 Conclusions

### 5.1 W-MDLS Definition

Stakeholders valued the idea of a W-MDLS. They valued its potential as a tool for enhancing their work, and for improving the lives of those affected by digital inequalities. The W-MDLS definition should make specific reference to affordability as part of accessibility, as well as to Welsh language to ensure that this is not an afterthought. The W-MDLS should be a collectively decided standard with as much involvement and interest from wider civil society as possible, including those who are digitally excluded.

### 5.2 Policy Implementation

Implementation of a W-MDLS will need financial and political commitment from both Welsh government and organisations, especially where powers are not devolved. There should be a commitment to ensuring the standard is communicated clearly where it is needed most and that strategies to help people meet it are effective, as well as more generally raising awareness about the importance of the digital in enhancing the lives of citizens. While affordability is implicit in the standard in ‘accessibility’, funding will be particularly important in implementation of this standard, as affordability has emerged as a key concern in this respect.

### 5.3 Practical implementation

Rurality and the difficulty of reaching those who are digitally excluded will be challenging in terms of the implementation of a W-MDLS. The diversity of communities and individuals in Wales should be accounted for. It is important that the W-MDLS application takes into account what barriers are likely to exist for particular groups but also allows for more nuanced understandings of individual circumstances in its application, taking the individual as the focus of this standard.

### 5.4 W-MDLS vs MDLS

In our discussion with Welsh stakeholders, it is clear that key regional issues such as the Welsh language, poor connectivity speeds in rural/remote areas, specific community groups and local Welsh resources (e.g., community and charity providers) are all key issues to be taken into account. Our further consultative MDLS groups, to be undertaken in autumn 2022 by Loughborough University, will explore the extent to which these add to or change the MDLS requirements identified in the broader UK work.

We would also note a number of respondents commented that Wales “lagged behind” on some aspect of digital inclusion compared to rest of UK. We already noted above the comments regarding relative poverty and affordability. Other comparisons were made around:

- Broadband or fibre roll out
- Changes to flexibility of planning regulations to aid digital roll out

- Number of providers in the market for certain regions due to commercial viability
- Use of digital in voluntary sector

We believe these comments reflect important regional and Welsh perceptions. However a better understanding of the actual difference with other UK regions and practices is needed to tease out any specific Welsh needs or policy. This point was made by the national organisations interviewed (e.g., BT). Also the broader digital inclusion literature, and national UK statistics point to these being factors that are common in other areas of the UK and internationally. For example, issues around English as a 2<sup>nd</sup> language and digital access are found in migrant urban communities in Wales and the wider UK. Similarly, issues of rural/remote access are pertinent in Scotland and the West Country, for example. This is not to deny the importance of these issues, far from it. Though, without pre-empting our overall findings, it may be the case that the specificities and value of a Welsh-MDLS may lie as much in how policy, practice, and technology can be deployed to address these locally in the Welsh context and to ensure as many Welsh citizens as possible meet this standard.

## 6 Welsh Government Digital Resources

- [National Survey for Wales: Headline results, April 2019 to March 2020 \(gov.wales\)](https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2018-12/080313sb102008en.pdf)
- <https://www.ogi.wales/>
- Digital strategy for Wales How we will use digital, data and technology to improve the lives of people in Wales. Available at <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/pdf-versions/2022/3/4/1646322827/digital-strategy-wales.pdf>
- <https://gov.wales/well-being-of-future-generations-wales>
- <https://digitalanddata.blog.gov.wales/2021/01/07/digital-strategy-for-wales-mission-4-digital-inclusion/>
- <https://www.digitalcommunities.gov.wales/blog/digital-strategy-for-wales-mission-5-digital-connectivity/>
- <https://digitalpublicservices.gov.wales/toolbox/digital-service-standards/>
- <https://gov.wales/digital-inclusion-progress-report-towards-digitally-confident-wales-html>
- <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2018-12/080313sb102008en.pdf>
- Welsh Government, 2022. Digital Communities Wales. Available at <https://www.digitalcommunities.gov.wales/> [Accessed 18 March 2022]

## 7 Appendix One: DIAW Network Meeting

### 7.1 Network Meeting 17 February 2022

The Digital Inclusion Alliance Wales (DIAW) is a network of organisations which meet quarterly to discuss digital inclusion in Wales. The focus of each meeting is taken from the five priorities in our 'Agenda for Digital Inclusion: From Inclusion to Resilience':

1. Embedding digital inclusion across all sectors
2. Mainstreaming digital inclusion in health and social care
3. Addressing data poverty as a key issue
4. Prioritising digital skills in the post-Covid economy
5. Setting a new minimum digital living standard and adopting co-production approaches

This briefing will give a concise summary of issues raised by DIAW Network members during the meeting on 17 February 2022 where Priority 5: Setting a new minimum digital living standard (MDLS) for Wales and adopting co-production approaches was discussed.

This meeting was attended by MS Jane Hutt, Minister for Social Justice, Nigel Moss, Welsh Government Head of Financial and Digital Inclusion, and Professor Simeon Yates of Liverpool University.

1. Breakout room discussions were framed around three set questions:
2. What would you or your organisation expect to see covered in a Minimum Digital Living Standard for Wales?
3. How might a Minimum Digital Living Standard be useful to you and the communities you work with?
4. More broadly, how can DIAW members support co-production approaches in digital inclusion policy and programmes?

For ease of reference, this briefing will be set out with those three questions as headings.

#### 7.1.1 What would you or your organisation expect to see covered in a Minimum Digital Living Standard for Wales?

- There was a consensus from DIAW members that an MDLS must include measures of connectivity, skills and confidence, access to devices, accessibility and affordability. An MDLS for Wales should ensure that everyone in Wales has a reliable and affordable connection in their home, access to a device, and the support to gain the skills to use the internet in the way that they want to, if they wish to do so.
- This standard will require geographical mapping of all measures: connectivity, skills, access to devices, accessibility and affordability. There is a need to get a complete national picture to understand the situation.
- There is a concern that we are already missing people in current digital inclusion initiatives and that the only people we reach are those who have reached out themselves to services or support organisations and made themselves known. It is hoped that an MDLS and the data gathering exercises that will follow it will help organisations to identify individuals who may have been “under the radar” previously.
- Nearly all breakout rooms discussed the fact that affordable and reliable connectivity remains a persistent problem in many areas of Wales and would need to be addressed first and foremost.

- Quotes: *If we don't light up the unconnected areas in Wales very quickly, the divide is going to be insurmountable. We can provide devices, data, skills support - but we can't make broadband reach a house that it doesn't.*
- There is a need to focus on the individual in creating this national standard. There will be many and diverse needs amongst citizens in Wales for their digitally connected life so what is a minimum to some, may not be true for others. Individual needs and community needs will be very different across Wales, so local knowledge will be key in implementing this appropriately.
  - Quote: *The problem this standard is trying to solve will be different in every area – rural to urban, areas of deprivation, changing demographics – it must take into account things such as infrastructure and how that articulates with all the other issues such as deprivation.*
- It will be necessary to have targeted, ongoing support for those who are digitally excluded, and for those who support people to be digitally included. Investment from Welsh Government for this will remain essential in the medium term. The burden of bringing individuals up to a minimum standard cannot be placed on already over-stretched, often volunteer-led support organisations without providing additional resources to them. As a greater proportion of citizens get online, those that remain excluded will require the most help.
  - Quote: *It can't just be put onto support organisations that they have a legal requirement to get the people they support to an MDLS - it takes resources and support for those organisations - they could be the ones who support the individual, but they should be supported to do so.*
- This minimum standard will need to be revisited often – technology and the digital world and what citizens require from it changes rapidly and this standard will need to be adaptable to this changing landscape.
- An MDLS for Wales must consider Welsh language standards and this includes Welsh content and Welsh language accessibility tools. There needs to be parity of access to the internet for people whose first language is Welsh, so their experience of the internet is not less than those whose first language is English. An MDLS should include a standard for people being able to participate in the way that they want and in the language that they want. Welsh language needs to be designed in from the beginning, not just translated afterwards.
- In designing and delivering digital public services organisations should be aware of inclusion, including data poverty issues, and services should be designed to minimise the impacts. Zero rating of webpages (meaning that there are no data charges for people to access those services) is part of the answer, but so is designing sites that don't require significant amounts of data use to access.
- There were many questions around what criteria will be used for what it means to be digitally connected. If we limit it to essential services, i.e. "I have the skills, device and connectivity to have a video call with my GP"; then people may miss out on the many wellbeing and financial benefits of being online. What level of connectivity will be considered the minimum? What skills framework will we use to decide whether someone is digitally included? Who will make those decisions? How can we use this standard to measure digital confidence, not just digital inclusion?

- Quote: *the status of 'digitally included' needs to have a basket of indicators underneath it. So, what are those indicators? We need research, evidence, data sources, lived experience and once we know that we can look at policy interventions to address that.*

### 7.1.2 How might a Minimum Digital Living Standard be useful to you and the communities you work with?

- This standard will only be useful if it is legislated for or there is a strong mandatory steer being given to organisations that they must demonstrate how they are meeting and exceeding the standard using standardised measures.
  - Quote: *It needs to have teeth.*
- There is already an indicator around connectivity in the [Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation](#) and broadband providers are obligated to provide a minimum of 10Mbps, but this isn't perceived to have had an effect on affordable connectivity in reality in large areas of Wales. There needs to be accountability and responsibility for this standard.
- This standard should be built into areas such as commissioning, funding streams, and reporting requirements. Having a baseline with clear guidelines and standards which everyone in Wales must work to will be very beneficial to ensuring that every individual is getting the support that they need and that organisations supporting those people are working to the same standard across Wales and getting the support that they need to do so.
- The mapping and data gathering exercises that are going to take place in order to make this standard effective should be open for organisations to access and utilise to help them to understand the situation individuals in their communities are facing. This data is going to be extremely useful for many organisations in the Network to understand the true nature of the problem in their area and to strategically target resources. We know that digital exclusion is a determinant of health ("the digital inverse care law") and so knowing who is below the MDLS will be important for health and social care providers too.
  - Quotes: *'Mrs Jones has this, this and this so all good' - but what's really important is where that information goes - what does that matter - where do we report these things to? There needs to be a national gathering of data, a place where this information is collated and is visible to us so that we can see that we're feeding into the national picture*
  - *We need that information to be collected, and we need to be able to use it to join up the dots. If we have someone come into social services for whatever reason, if we could know where there are digitally, that would help us to tailor the services they need to assist them much better*
- This standard must not become just a tick box exercise – it needs to start with an individual's needs, not just a blanket form that we tick off once someone has been connected. In order for this to be useful to organisations, it should work as a means to an end, not the end result.
  - Quote: *this can't be a tick box exercise; it needs to measure meaningful engagement with digital - legal requirements like a standard can be a*

*perverse incentive as they only focus on the output and not on meaningful outcomes for people*

### 7.1.3 More broadly, how can DIAW members support co-production approaches in digital inclusion policy and programmes?

- As outlined in Professor Yates' presentation, this work needs to be informed by the lived experience of a variety of people who are experiencing digital exclusion in different ways. For example, the questions on the survey for the MDLS need to be created with people who would fill out the survey. Language can be one of the biggest barriers. The diverse range of members of the DIAW Network will be very beneficial to the co-production approaches outlined for this piece of work. We have reach into a huge variety of communities across Wales and this should be utilised.
- If the Network members want better data, better policies, and better targeted programmes of support, then there is an onus on us to participate and engage with the creation of these policies and programmes. Having these Network meetings and discussing these issues and sharing our knowledge and experience with each other is how we can support co-production of digital inclusion policy and programmes – as long as someone is listening.
- It is not just about how we can support co-production approaches in policy and programmes, but also about how we support each other in the Network, how we share our collective knowledge and experience in order to create better programmes and services.
- The DIAW Network members valued the opportunity to explore this topic and to share their thinking with the Minister and Welsh Government officials and are keen to continue to collaborate with Welsh Government in making the Minimum Digital Living Standard for Wales a reality.

## 8 Appendix 2: Target organisations for Delphi consultation

Digital Inclusion Alliance Wales - Steering Group
Organisation
Innovate Trust
Dŵr Cymru
DVLA
Monmouthshire County Council
Perago
Older People's Commissioner's Office
Swansea University
Digital Communities Wales
Centre for Digital Public Services

<b>Wales Council for Voluntary Action</b>
<b>BT Group</b>
<b>Good Things Foundation</b>
<b>Disability Wales</b>
<b>Cardiff Capital Region</b>

<b>Digital Inclusion Alliance Wales - Network</b>
<b>Organisation</b>
<b>AbilityNet</b>
<b>Active Wales</b>
<b>Age Connects Torfaen</b>
<b>Age Cymru Gwynedd a Mon</b>
<b>Antur Cymru Enterprise - Antur Teifi</b>
<b>ateb group</b>
<b>BCS, The Chartered Institute for IT</b>
<b>Blaenau Gwent Council</b>
<b>Blaenau Gwent Libraries/Aneurin Leisure Trust</b>
<b>Caerphilly County Borough Council</b>
<b>Cardiff and Vale Recovery and Wellbeing College</b>
<b>Cardiff County Borough Council</b>
<b>Care &amp; Repair Cymru</b>
<b>Carmarthenshire County Council</b>
<b>Citizens Advice Cymru</b>
<b>Citizens Online</b>
<b>ClwydAlyn Housing Ltd</b>
<b>Community Housing Cymru</b>
<b>Community Lives Consortium</b>
<b>Competition and Markets Authority</b>
<b>Computer Recyclers UK</b>
<b>Computeraid</b>
<b>ConnectED Cymru</b>
<b>Cyngor Ysgolion Sul ac Addysg Gristnogol Cymru</b>
<b>Cynon Taf Community Housing Group</b>
<b>Digital Health and Care Wales</b>
<b>Digital Poverty Alliance</b>
<b>Disability Sport Wales</b>
<b>DPIA</b>
<b>EYST Wales</b>
<b>Flintshire County Council</b>
<b>Good Things Foundation</b>

<b>Hafod</b>
<b>Health Education &amp; Improvements Wales</b>
<b>Iberian and Latin American Association in Wales (ILA)</b>
<b>Internet4Everyone Ltd</b>
<b>Learning and Work Institute</b>
<b>Learning Disability Wales</b>
<b>Leonard Cheshire Cymru</b>
<b>Macular Society</b>
<b>miFuture</b>
<b>Mirus</b>
<b>Monmouthshire County Council</b>
<b>Newport City Council</b>
<b>Newydd Housing Association</b>
<b>NPT Adult Community Learning</b>
<b>NPT CVS</b>
<b>Oxford Internet Institute</b>
<b>PAVS</b>
<b>Pobl Group</b>
<b>Powys County Council</b>
<b>ProMo Cymru</b>
<b>Public Health Wales</b>
<b>Race Council Cymru</b>
<b>Royal National Institute of the Blind (RNIB)</b>
<b>RWG Mobile</b>
<b>SCL - Society of Chief Librarians Wales</b>
<b>Serco</b>
<b>Social Care Wales</b>
<b>Swansea Council</b>
<b>Swansea Music Art Digital</b>
<b>Swansea University</b>
<b>The Big Issue</b>
<b>the DigiCoach</b>
<b>Unite Wales</b>
<b>University of Wales Trinity St David</b>
<b>Velindre University NHS Trust</b>
<b>Wales Cooperative Centre</b>
<b>WCVA</b>
<b>YMCA Swansea</b>
<b>Youth Cymru</b>

#### Internet Service Providers

**BT**

**Ogi**

<b>Other organisations</b>
<b>Ofcom</b>
<b>Newport City Council</b>
<b>Swansea Council For Voluntary Services (SCVS)</b>
<b>The CAE</b>
<b>Race Council Cymru (RCC)</b>
<b>African Community Centre (ACC)</b>
<b>Iberian &amp; Latin American Association in Wales (ILA)</b>
<b>South Riverside Community Development Centre</b>

## 9 Appendix Three: WMDLS Interview Guide for Stakeholders

### 9.1 CONTEXT AND THE DIGITAL

- Can you tell me about your organisation and what it does?
- What does your organisation do to tackle digital inequalities and what types of vulnerable and marginalised groups do you work with?
- What services do you provide the people you work with? How are digital technologies incorporated into the work of your organisation? Which of the services that you provide rely on the use of digital technologies?
- Could you give me some examples of how you've used these technologies in practice? How useful did you find these technologies in terms of the work that you had to do?
- How has the shift in increased use of digital technologies impacted on your work?
- How confident are you and your colleagues in your ability to access and use digital technologies in the context of tackling digital inequalities?
- Would you say that you, and your colleagues, have received adequate training, if any, to use the digital technologies required to fulfil your job? If yes, did you find it useful? What was less useful? Why and what are training gaps?

### 9.2 DEFINITION OF A WELSH MDLS

We are developing a definition of a Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS). As part of our national MDLS project – and based on discussions with members of the public – we have come up with a definition of a MDLS that reflects the opinions of different households. The

definition reads: “A minimum digital living standard of living includes, but is more than having accessible internet, adequate equipment and appropriate training and support. It is about being able to communicate, connect and engage with opportunities safely and with confidence”.

- As we are exploring what that means particularly in Wales, in your opinion and from your experience what would a Welsh MDLS need to include?
- Do you think a Welsh MDLS would need to look different to an English, Scottish, or Northern Irish MDLS? In what ways and why?
- What do you think about the definition that we have come up with? In what ways, if any, does it relate to the people you help / work with?
- To what extent does it apply to the Welsh context? If so, in what ways? Why / why not? Do you think there are any particular aspects of digital inclusion specifically in

### 9.3 POLICY AND PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION OF A WELSH MDLS

- What kind of policymakers does your organisation work with and what kind of work do you do with them?
- Do you think it would be beneficial to implement a Welsh MDLS and why?
- Considering our definition of a national MDLS, what do you think needs to be done from a policy perspective in order to implement it across the UK and, more specifically, in Wales?
- What challenges do you anticipate in terms of implementing this definition, or a revised definition for Wales, through working closely with policymakers? Are there any specific challenges to implementing a Welsh MDLS as opposed to the broader national context? And how would you go about addressing those challenges?
- If a definition of a Welsh MDLS were to be recognised and implemented from a policy perspective, in what ways, if any, would you incorporate it into your practice? In what ways, if any, would you alter, expand and build on your current practices (e.g., lobbying, raising awareness and providing resources, digital literacy training) with a view to tackling digital inequalities?
- What challenges do you anticipate in terms of adapting your current practices?

## 10 Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The MDSL project is funded by The Nuffield Foundation under grant number FR000022935. The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare, and Justice. It also funds student programmes that provide opportunities for young people to develop skills in quantitative and scientific methods. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics and the Ada Lovelace Institute. The Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation.

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