



# Leicester and Leicestershire Area Digital Poverty Analysis Update 2024



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## Executive Summary

Digital poverty challenges were highlighted during the Covid pandemic, and a Digital Poverty Call for Evidence was requested by the Leicester and Leicestershire Enterprise Partnership (LLEP) Skills Advisory Panel in 2021 to collate granular data on digital poverty. In 2024 the LLEP was keen to assess if anything has changed around Digital Poverty, namely, if some of the challenges have been addressed, any new trends have emerged or if there are different barriers today.

## Findings

The 2024 research offered some evidence that things were improving locally linked to digital inclusion, but there are still some key ongoing challenges:

- A few projects (WEA, STAR, Education-Business Links) indicated that challenges such as access, skills and connectivity have improved a little.
- There remain some issues with digital poverty impacting all age groups, but the problems identified impact different age groups in different ways.
- The most disadvantaged are still at greatest risk of digital poverty.
- There are various programmes that can support some of these challenges, but the information is not uniformly known, readily available, or have limited time scales – there may also be other programmes not mentioned in this report that can also support.
- Businesses increasingly needing at least basic digital skills across a wide range of roles and continuing to report skills gaps. There appears to be low awareness of upskilling options and a lack of confidence in accessing these, even when known.



## Recommendations

Suggested activity for the area includes:

- To instigate key actions to drive greater awareness of area support, through more in-depth mapping and communication of area support, at nil or low cost, through city, county, Leicester & Leicestershire Business and Skills Partnership (L&LBSP) networks, VCS, education, district and partner networks including DWP and National Careers service.
- To coordinate work across the city, county, and districts to map out digital skills offers for employers and promote across business networks. Potentially the 2021 digital inclusion network could be reconvened to steer area activity.
- The table on pages 20-21 shows a range of suggestions to address area digital poverty, some costed, some free. Facilitated by L&LBSP, skills and digital support leads in the area could rank these in area of importance as part of digital inclusion work and agree to take forward key activities (depending on funding/resource).
- There is potential to communicate and work across the area with skills providers

to better embed basic digital skills if they are not already doing so. Sector based work academies, Skills Bootcamps and apprenticeships also offer upskilling options.

- Any area information collated needs to be clear, concise, jargon free, well communicated and updated regularly. For businesses and individuals, there needs to be better communication around the availability and ease of access of free or low-cost training options and the benefits of undertaking such courses.
- A continuation of the recycling of digital equipment scheme would be beneficial for the area as a win-win re digital and green activity but may depend on funding.
- There is potential to consider further digital poverty insights via the Careers Hub and Education-Business Links partnerships, local authorities, education and skills sector, districts, DWP, voluntary and community sector and Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP).
- Any activity should feed into the new area Business Board, under skills activity.
- There is scope to connect and align to national digital poverty activity - in June 2024 the Digital Poverty Alliance released their national delivery plan, [NDP-Overview-2024.pdf \(digitalpovertyalliance.org\)](#)

## Introduction

Digital exclusion affects many citizens and can be defined as the inability to access or utilise digital technologies effectively. It is predominantly caused by a lack of digital skills and/or an inability to access digital technology (for example, being unable to utilise basic online services around health or banking), or afford a laptop or broadband, or live in a rural area with poor broadband).

The Digital Poverty Alliance defines digital poverty as *the inability to interact with the online world fully, when, where, and how an individual needs to*. Groups commonly identified as being at risk include:

- Older people
- People who live in rural areas or socially isolated
- People on low incomes (unemployed and living in social housing)
- People with low levels of education or poor health/medical conditions/disability
- People who lack the skills to access key digital services such as benefits or work related.

Multiple risk factors can be present in the same individual or household and demographic data by geography can help identify where these risks may be higher. Those excluded are often the most vulnerable individuals in society, who could see the greatest benefit from the implementation of digital options, such as health support, access to jobs and education, and these individuals tend to be the most marginalised with lack of education or employment, disability, or age identified as risk factors.



## Previous LLEP area digital poverty research, 2021

The 2021 Digital Poverty Call for Evidence was requested by the LLEP Skills Advisory Panel to collate more granular data on digital poverty across Leicester and Leicestershire, and ensure that any funds available, such as the repurposed Growing Places Fund, were targeted appropriately. The March 2021 call received 31 detailed responses and other supplementary evidence was gathered from partners such as local authorities, public health, colleges, and voluntary groups. Key challenges highlighted were around skills, connectivity and devices.



On the back of this, an area Digital Skills Partnership was created, with one focus being on inclusion, and seven area digital poverty schemes were funded to support local people, resulting in circa 1229 disadvantaged people being supported and some providers having legacy digital equipment to use with clients going forwards. See more on this:

<https://llep.org.uk/app/uploads/2022/10/LLEP-Digital-Skills-Partnership-report-2021-22.pdf>

## 2024 approach

In 2024 the LLEP was keen to assess if anything has changed around Digital Poverty, namely, if some of the challenges have been addressed, any new trends have emerged or if there are different barriers. As such, the Leicester and Leicestershire Enterprise Partnership issued a 2024 Digital Poverty Call for evidence, which ran between February-March 2024. The LLEP received 35 responses from a range of stakeholders such as businesses, community groups, councils, skills providers, colleges and schools.

## Evidence, 2024

### LLEP call for evidence, March 2024

The LLEP call for evidence resulted in 35 responses, along with an additional 5 interviews and an activity session with education-business skills leads. The call included a specifically written survey but also asked partners to submit any evidence collected from their own service.

The survey conducted by the LLEP included information from a range of partners which reflected the experience of a variety of service users. The responses represent issues highlighted by partners working in local authorities, voluntary sector, schools, colleges, specialist services for vulnerable people as well as other local stakeholders.

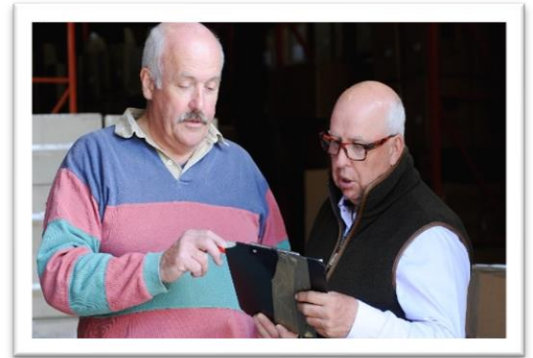
Challenges highlighted in the 2021 research indicated several practical issues, many of which were exacerbated by life under lockdown, such as barriers to socialising, lack of awareness of tools that may help, difficulty in accessing services, many of which moved online. The 2024 feedback saw less of a focus on some of these practical elements, but still identified some key ongoing challenges.

## Digital issues across groups, 2024, feedback from survey

### Adults

The adult group could broadly be divided into two groups: working age adults and older residents. Issues are not exclusive to each group, merely more or less prevalent. The main issues identified with adults were:

- Confidence
- Basic or no digital skills
- Access to the right devices
- Affordability



Digital exclusion for adults, especially older people, remains an issue, with some having barriers to services which are now nearly all on-line.

**Barriers for over 50s** most mentioned in LLEP 2024 research, 25 responses.

- Lack of confidence in using tech, fear of the unknown
- Lack of skills or training to start or stay updated
- Affordability, lack of equipment
- Language barriers
- Unwilling to join digital age

*Adult skills lead feedback "One challenge can be retaining the information if the learners don't have the equipment to practice at home. A lot of learners who attend lower-level courses are slightly older. We do a lot of repetition exercises, but a lot want the courses to be longer so that they can spend more time practicing what they have learnt."*

**Barriers for job seekers** most mentioned in LLEP 2024 research, 25 responses.

- Lack of confidence and skills in using digital to apply for roles (most now online)
- Confidence in having or learning job related digital skills, fear of the unknown
- Affordability re devices or upskilling courses
- Access to internet or computers
- Handling UC online

*Adult support feedback "Long, online application forms can be quite overwhelming, especially for job seekers who do not have any experience of completing them. You have to not only be reasonably ok at digital to do well, but also quite savvy at how to convey what the employer is looking for – it can be a real barrier."*

**Barriers for ESOL group**, most commonly mentioned in LLEP 2024 research, 22 responses.

- Language barriers (mentioned by nearly every reply), specifically the double issue of

- trying to learn IT skills but also not being fully conversant in the language
- Relevant resources and websites always in English, although increasing tech options available (change language of text)
  - Lack of access to tech

**Barriers for SEND group** most mentioned in LLEP 2024 research, 15 responses.

- Accessibility of information (though does depend on the disability of the individual)
- Lack of appropriate support re learning
- Affordability and access

**Barriers for parents**, most mentioned in LLEP 2024 research, 22 replies.

- Lack of time to learn basic skills
- Affordability of laptops for children, and access to internet
- Lack of confidence re online forms, QR codes and forums linked to schools
- Confidence and skills in using tech to help their children
- Lack of knowledge re internet security - protecting yourself and children online

**Barriers for those in work** most mentioned in LLEP 2024 research, 18 responses.

- Lack of digital skills
- Keeping up with changing tech across all levels of roles, i.e., from basic Teams in an office role to cloud engineering expertise
- Lack of time to learn new skills
- Connectivity and access
- Employers not having the time to support training needs, if it is on offer, often just done online, which does not suit every learning style

Employee: *"We have regular IT upgrades and there is an assumption that we all understand everything re using Teams, email, cloud storage etc. I find the different systems confusing and cannot keep up. Other people seem to be able to juggle across the various systems easily, it knocks your confidence."*

## **Young People**

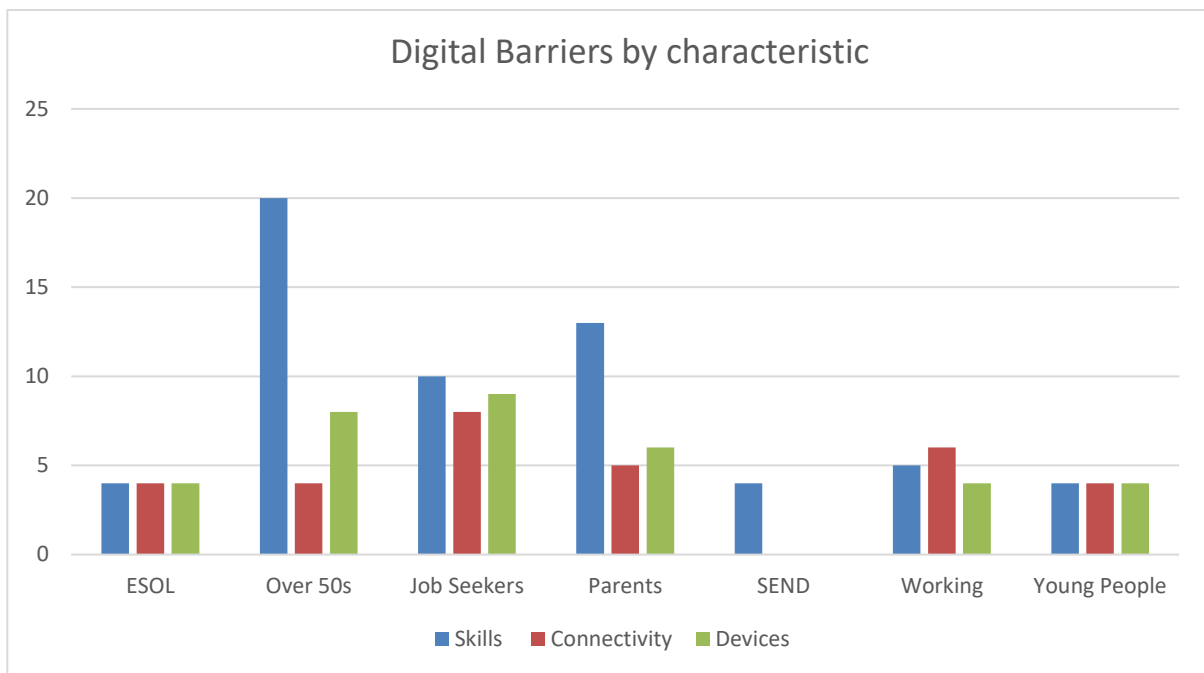
In 2021, digital poverty for young people came into focus during school closures when teaching was forced on-line. Since 2021 some elements of digital education have become embedded – homework online or school assemblies via Teams, for example.

**Barriers for young people** most mentioned in LLEP 2024 research, 18 responses.

- Often confident re phones and tech, but can lack work related digital skills,
- Can lack skills to create CV, apply for roles and wider 'Office' packages,
- Connectivity and access,
- Spend too much time on tech like games – can affect wellbeing and work readiness,
- Some are more confident communicating online than in person.

Youth support lead feedback: "Young people find it difficult to access space at home to do focused work; they can use devices and are familiar with office packages, but struggle with broadband and access issues at home, relying more on their mobile phones to access information. They do not have ready access to desktop or printing facilities."

## LLEP 2024 research, Digital Barriers by group and challenges



This graph shows the key issues for different groups around digital inclusion across skills, connectivity and devices. It clearly shows that skills are the main challenge for the over 50s, whereas connectivity seem as less of an issue.

### Other area evidence

#### Leicester Adult Education

Leicester Adult Education (LEA) support approx. 3000 city\* resident learners each year and circa 700 county residents, including 800 people with entry or basic digital skills. They are also working across community locations with Leicester City Public Health on a **'Let's Get Digital' programme**, to support people to use the internet safely, access GP services online and use a wider range of online services to benefit their health and wellbeing; so far over 300 people have been supported, most of whom are 50+ or have additional learning needs. One positive aspect of this is that the funding allows group sizes to be small, so individuals get good support and develop their confidence to use the internet independently. This engagement had led to **excellent progression opportunities as 80%** of those completing a 'Let's Get Digital' programme progressed onto further computer courses.



To further support digital skills locally, **digital e-safety** is embedded into all adult courses. LEA has also recently been working with the city housing team, as its services go online, to help tenants use the service. Some of the digital trends seen through the service since 2021 include:

### Digital

- More people have access to mobiles, but issues such as access to laptops, and Wi-Fi connectivity remain. The organisation offers a well-used chrome book loan service.
- Confidence is also an issue for adults, especially those aged 50 and above.
- Learners with ESOL struggle with some of the technical terms used in basic digital skills. IT continues to be a challenge to recruit qualified 'digital' teachers.

### Careers advice

- Increasing numbers of job seekers asking for help with EXCEL, PowerPoint or word, as these feature in job descriptions or interviews.
- More people wanting better digital skills to help them to find office or administration roles that can offer flexibility or home working.

See more on Leicester Adult Education on: <https://leicesteradulthood.ac.uk/>

(\*The total number of digital skills learners above is based on all learners and not just city residents and only includes those who have attended digital skills courses rather than learners on other courses with low level skills who benefit from the cross curriculum embedded digital skills)



### Working Education Alliance - WEA

The charity WEA is the UK 's largest voluntary sector provider of adult education, delivering in Leicester for over 100 years. In 2021 WEA were awarded a grant from the LLEP to deliver a **digital poverty project** locally, focussing on areas of the city with higher levels of deprivation but also working in the county. New ways to engage learners were trialled, and 99 learners were supported. Legacy learning is shared, including having a tailored approach, building confidence and partnerships, in the full project report:



WEA LLEP PROJECT  
2024.pdf

### Other WEA feedback regarding wider digital courses

In 2022-23 WEA enrolled 528 learners and in the current academic year (2023-2024) have enrolled around 370 learners to date.

For pre-entry level individuals, WEA do note an **improvement on the basic digital skills across learners**; many people have adapted to basic digital skills during and post lockdown. This varies from people being more confident in being able to use websites, having an email address, downloading apps or using word. However, although generally people are using mobiles or tech more confidently (since 2021), there is still a significant issue for some individuals – for example they are not using tech to compare consumer prices or shopping around for better energy costs. In addition, as digital skills continue to change (the increasing use of AI for example, in job hunting) the most disadvantaged cannot always tap into these skills.

The **biggest challenge WEA see across communities is kit** – if people learn new skills, they need to be able to embed these. Hence any area projects or programmes (if any were funded) to address digital poverty should include the legacy of equipment.

**Digital buddies** are a good option, but in trying to encourage people to volunteer to be a buddy there can be confusion in what 'digital buddy' means; for example, people may think you need to be a cyber security expert, whereas the role is more about enthusing confidence and reassurance to an individual as they learn basic new skills.

One challenge is that **skills development programmes are often short-term**; capacity needs to be built so that good offers can continue long-term once funding ends. Continuing professional development is another challenge across skills providers in digital.

**Supporting Tenants and Residents - STAR**

STAR provides housing related support to some of the most vulnerable and excluded Leicester City Council tenants. The service provides one to one practical support and advice to enable people to resettle after a period of homelessness or prevent homelessness for those who are already tenants. The STAR service takes a holistic approach to support and is working towards a trauma informed approach to service delivery. The figure 740 equals the number of tenants who answered the digital access question.

**STAR Digital Access data from referral forms 1/4/23-1/4/24**

| Question  | Answer | Amount (740) | Percentage 2023-2024 | 2020-2021 answers (988 people) |
|---|--------|--------------|----------------------|--------------------------------|
| Does the tenant have access to a PC, laptop tablet or smart phone | N      | 241          | 33%                  | 48.18%                         |
|   | Y      | 499          | 67%                  | 51.82%                         |
| Does the tenant have an email address?                            | N      | 279          | 38%                  | 47.77%                         |
|   | Y      | 461          | 62%                  | 52.23%                         |
| Does the tenant have access to Data or Wi-Fi?                     | N      | 307          | 42%                  | Unknown                        |
|   | Y      | 433          | 58%                  |                                |
| Has the tenant ever accessed online services?                     | N      | 427          | 58%                  | 70.04%                         |
|   | Y      | 313          | 42%                  | 29.96%                         |

The data shows there has been an **increase in tenants with access to equipment**. However, it still shows that of the most excluded tenants, nearly 60% has never used online services, 42% does not have access to data of wi-fi, and nearly 40% does not have an email, which is crucial to set up any service online. This creates a dependence on support services to assist with crucial services which now are online. It means when the service ends or is no longer available this group maybe further excluded from essential services without appropriate support.

## Children (2024)

### Leicester Childrens Health and Wellbeing Survey (2021/2022)

The Leicester Childrens Health and Wellbeing survey was conducted in 2021/2022. The School Health Education Unit (SHEU) were commissioned by Leicester City Council to undertake a school-based survey of Leicester school pupils aged 10 to 15. Children from 26 primaries, 9 secondary schools and 2 special schools completed the survey, resulting in 3,000 responses. The survey found that:

- **About four out of five (82%) children access the internet via a mobile phone**, half (53%) with a tablet computer, and 70% with a laptop computer. Some children's (15%) access to the internet is via a mobile phone only. 1.1% could not get online at home at all.
- **Older children aged 14 to 15 are significantly more likely to spend five or more hours looking at a screen.** Children from more deprived areas are also likely to spend more hours looking at a screen. Half of children with a poor wellbeing score spend five or more hours looking at a screen.
- Most of the children recall being told **how to stay safe while online**. This is important given that seven out of ten children have a social media account.

See: <https://www.active-together.org/researchandvidence/leicester-childrens-health-and-wellbeing-survey-20212022>

## Education-Business Links round table, April 2024

Approximately 18 people who work to support area Education- Business Links across Leicester and Leicestershire took part in a discussion session on digital inclusion in April 2024. Areas identified as issues were:



### Teaching staff

- Some **lack confidence** in areas of digital and also in the transition to using new systems like Teams
  - The appetite for Ed-Tech and having the digital skills to utilise this.
  - Many schools shifted to digital during Covid but are now returning to traditional methods.
  - **Lack of expert computing staff**- and sometimes resources – may deter interest in the sector and progression.
- But **generally, most people's basic digital skills are better than pre-covid**, as the lockdowns caused people to utilise Teams and new skills.
  - Teachers talk of **online fatigue** -too much dependency on technology.
  - Generative AI is a worry, it makes it much easier to create coursework without the necessary research skills.

### Students

- Most young people do have a mobile phone –seen as a priority- so connectivity appears less of an issue since 2020– but noted that **disadvantaged/lower income students have less**

**access** to home laptops/PCs and paying for data. However, students may struggle to do school homework on their phones – it is more expensive to produce and print documents. Increasingly homework is done online, and IT skills are replacing handwriting skills.

- **Safeguarding issues** re:
  - Gaming and gambling for young people.
  - Mental health issues from social media/always being 'online.'
  - Young people may be savvier on using tech than parents/guardians.
  - Accessing online content that is inappropriate or of an adult nature.
- TikTok can be both positive- bite sized learning updates – but also negative- **endless scrolling, attention to detail poor**. There are also challenges re phones and status in some peer groups-'you are what you have' – so the phone can be seen as a priority investment.
- Even at **Universities, not everyone has access to personal laptops** – many offer a scheme where students can borrow a laptop for use in the University library via a self-service laptop loan service.

## Disengaged students

It was also noted in the workshop and LLEP Call for Evidence 2024 that:

*" Some young people are disengaged from school, so don't necessarily get to be in lessons where they are taught about digital skills, or don't have good relationships with the teachers to be interested in it. Any paid-for support is a barrier as a lot of people cannot afford to pay entry costs. "*

## Parents

- **Mix of ability**; some parents are good with IT and able to support students more, others less so.
- **Easier and quicker to communicate key messages** across IT to parents, but some schools sometimes have to support **parents** around information via information via IT – and not sure if some of the parents always understand; **but generally, their digital skills have had to improve** somewhat to accommodate schools' communication.
- There is a **gap** between parents who use IT as part of their work (so more confident), and those in roles that use little IT.

## Young people in the workplace

- Young people with less IT equipment access may struggle to **prepare for the world of work, most job recruitment is now online**, and it will be harder to apply for jobs or create CVs.
- Also noted that one positive is that **lots of useful information** at hand online re applying for jobs, interview skills et al if young people do some research.
- Some anecdotal evidence re **young people being unconfident or unwilling to answer telephone calls**, and or correctly take messages, but happy to liaise via texting/messaging with customers.
- **Access to wi-fi** is a challenge, especially in rural areas, but area libraries and community centres can help re online access, though PCs are often busy.



Some external evidence also backs up the discussion linked to digital poverty impacting young people in education or entering the workforce. **The Prince's Trust** reported that many disadvantaged young people are not achieving positive outcomes online, when it comes to education and employment. Disadvantaged young people are using ICTs more to engage in employment related activities, yet **they were less likely than their peers to succeed**, even partially, through this medium (46% compared to 65% of their employed peers). [Slipping Through the Net | Our research | About us \(princes-trust.org.uk\)](#)

## SMB College

SMB college, with campuses in Brooksby, Melton and Coalville provided the following information:

In 2024, SMB college supports circa 2205 students, including apprentices and HE. When questioned at enrolment: **Do you have access to a computer, laptop or tablet with broadband connection?**

1741 students said **YES** (1469 16-18 years) (272 19+)

398 students said **No** (350 16-18 years) (48 19+)

66 students neglected to answer question (52 16-18 years) (10 19+)

Showing that circa 18% do not have access, a considerable chunk of students.

Approximately 347 students are utilising discretionary, vulnerable, or residential bursaries, or have access to free college meals, or advanced learner loans.

There are 4 FE colleges and several sixth forms in the LLEP area, and this is only a sample from one institution.

## Refurb IT



Reaching People charity coordinated a Refurb IT project to **connect old or unused devices with people in the community who need it**. Refurb IT tackled digital exclusion, through a green, circular economy. The project, funded by the LLEP, runs until Dec 2024, and encouraged individuals, organisations, and businesses to donate their unwanted laptops, tablets and smartphones, to be then refurbished to be used by those who need it most through local charities and partners who support digitally excluded individuals

and communities. Over 150 devices were donated and over 70 have been distributed to individuals. There is scope to make this self-sustainable but issues regarding the capacity to manage and storage.



## East Midlands and national evidence from external sources

Although lockdowns speeded up the need and adoption of online access, there is still a **significant minority that are digitally excluded**, and they are often among our oldest and poorest citizens. According to research by the **Good Things Foundation, Digital Nation UK, 2024**<sup>1</sup>, 37% of over 65's lack basic digital skills, along with 24% of people who are not working and 48% of those who have no qualifications. In addition:

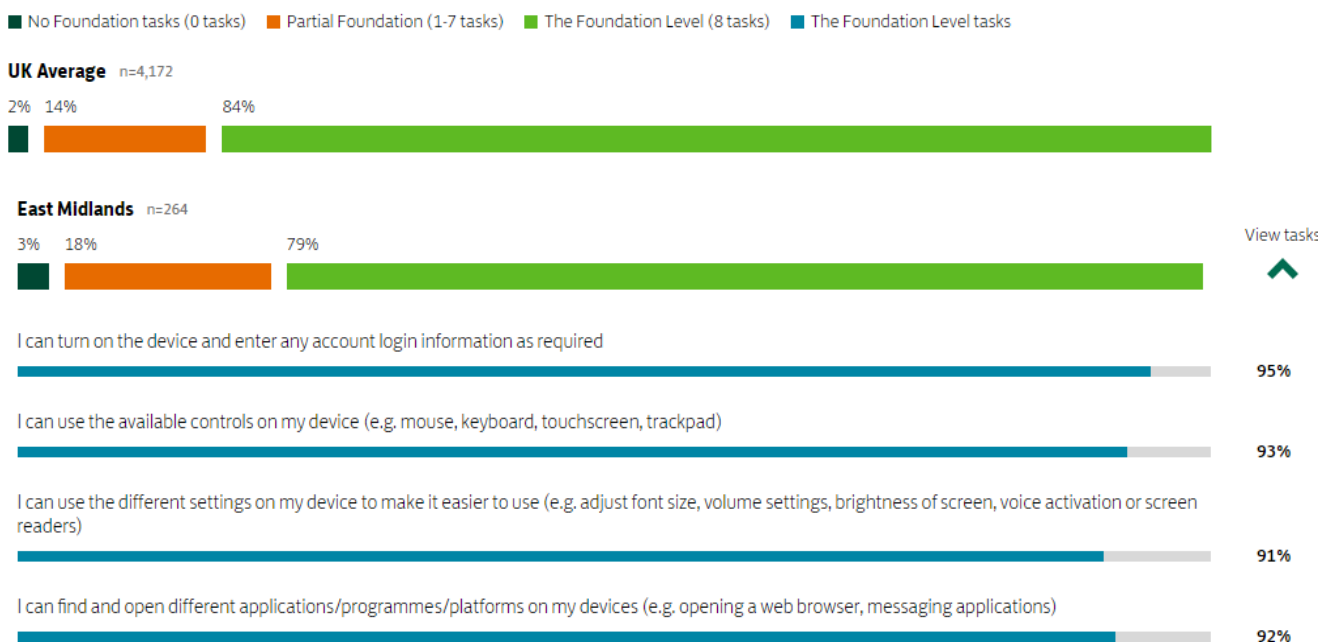
- 7.5m working age adults lack basic digital skills for work
- 33% of those offline say that it is difficult to interact with NHS services
- 92% of UK businesses say that there is a digital skills gap

### Essential Digital Skills (EDS) survey

The **Essential Digital Skills (EDS) survey**<sup>2</sup>, conducted by IPSOS MORI on behalf of Lloyds Bank, is the UK's benchmark for digital skills, measuring fundamental tasks needed to access the online world and the essential digital skills needed for life and work. The fifth annual EDS was published on November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2023. The in-depth survey compares responses across a range of typical digital skills with data from 2022 and 2023, some outline detail is below but also worth assessing the full survey.

### Foundation Level Digital Skills, 2023

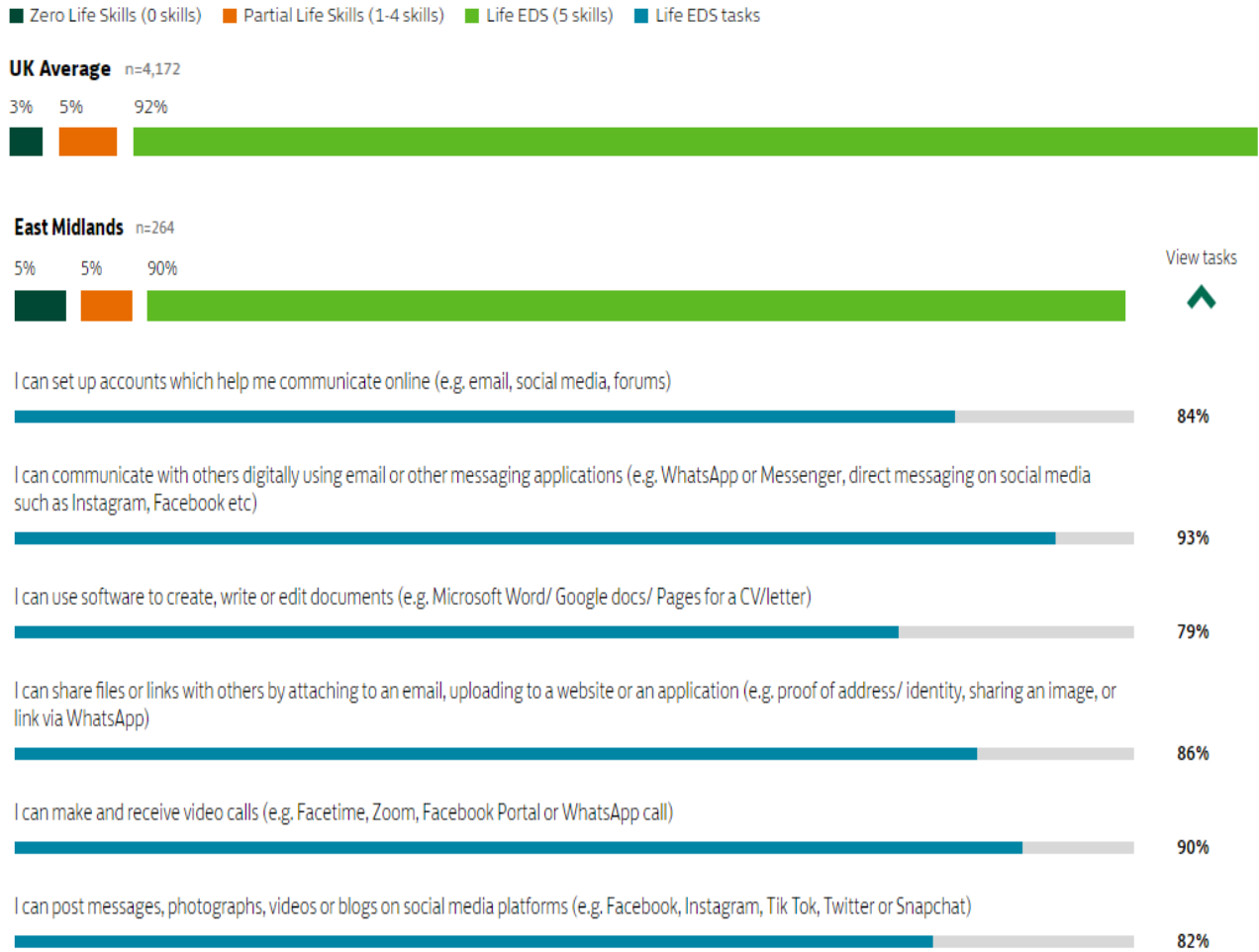
The below data shows the proportion of **East Midlands** residents who achieved the Foundation Level, in 2023. Foundation level covers areas such as turning on devices, securing and changing passwords and five other areas. When compared to UK average data the East Midlands achieves a slightly lower level. When comparing 2022 data (3% no foundation level, 15% partial and 82 % full foundation level, table not shown) to 2023 data the East Midlands does not show a particular improvement, it shows a slight decline in skills levels.



<sup>1</sup> Good Things Foundation research, 2024 <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/insights/building-a-digital-nation/>

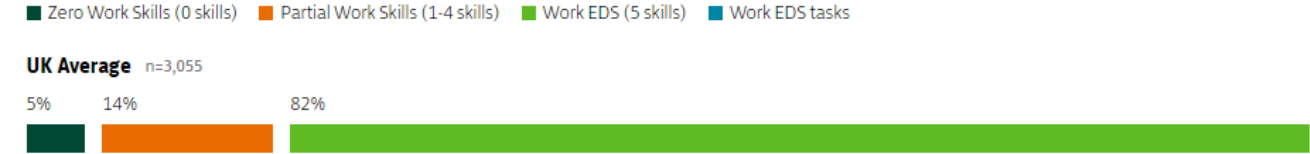
<sup>2</sup> <https://www.lloydsbank.com/banking-with-us/whats-happening/consumer-digital-index/essential-digital-skills.html>

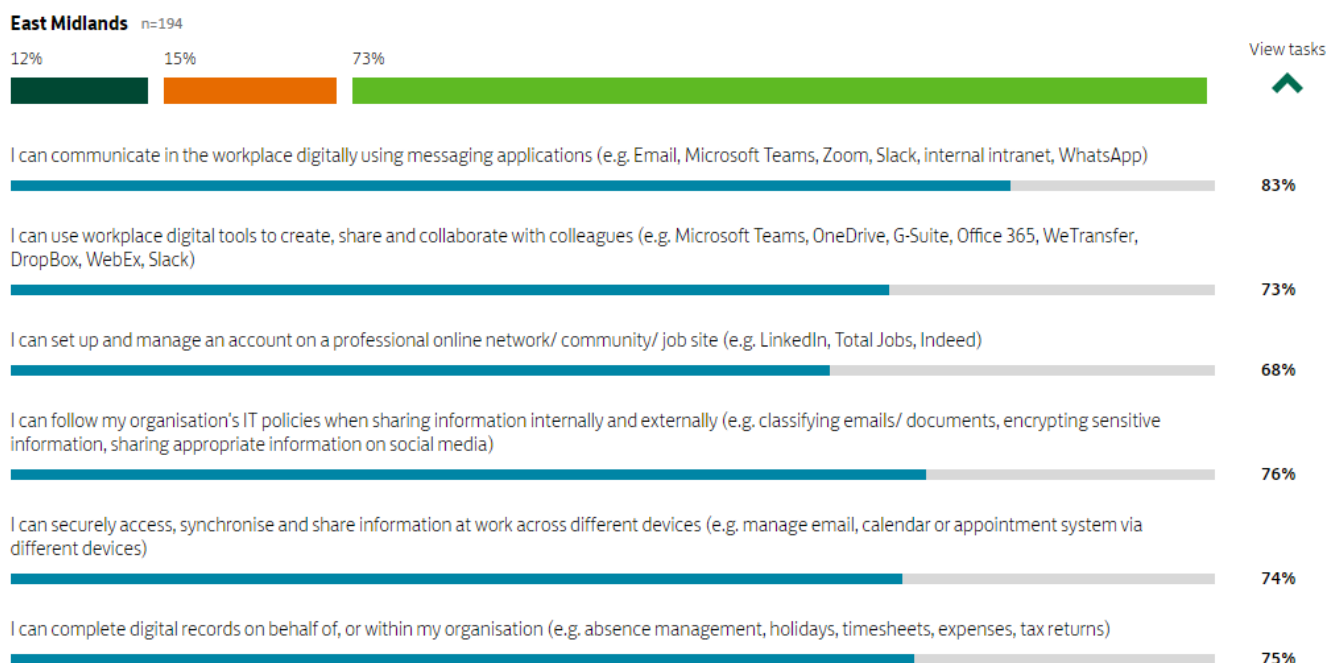
**Life Essential Digital Skills, 2023** The below data shows **East Midlands** residents' achievements regarding essential digital skills for life, in areas such as communicating digitally or using a search engine, in 2023. When compared to UK average data the East Midlands achieves a slightly lower level of ability. When comparing 2022 data (5% no foundation level, 5% partial and 91 % full foundation level, table not shown) to 2023 data the East Midlands shows a very slight decline in skills levels.



**Work Essential Digital Skills, 2023**

The below data shows the proportion of **East Midlands** residents who achieved the tasks for essential work digital skills in 2023. Aspects include communicating digitally in the workplace, following IT policies and completing digital records. When compared to UK average data the East Midlands achieves lower levels of ability. When comparing 2022 data (5% no foundation level, 16% partial and 79 % full foundation level, table not shown) to 2023 data the East Midlands shows a decline in skills levels.





## Rural communities

The landscape of digital inclusion across the UK's rural communities has been researched by the University of Liverpool and its partners, including Loughborough University. The findings, presented in the "**A Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS) for Households with Children**" report, (March 2024) reveal a nuanced picture of digital inclusion that both challenges preconceptions and highlights specific barriers faced by rural households.

### Understanding MDLS in Rural Contexts

**MDLS** represents a benchmark for digital inclusion, encompassing not only access to the internet and devices but also the essential skills and confidence required to navigate the digital world safely. While the broader findings suggest that 45% of households with children across the UK do not meet the MDLS, the situation in rural areas deserves a closer look.

For **rural communities, the challenge of digital inclusion is multifaceted**. The MDLS findings initially suggest that living in rural areas doesn't necessarily correlate with poorer broadband speed or digital exclusion. However, this surface-level observation belies the nuanced reality that rural residents face, including **higher costs for broadband services that meet their needs and limited choice in service providers**. These issues compound other barriers identified by the research, such as socio-economic status, disability, and ethnicity, making the pursuit of digital inclusivity challenging.

### Barriers Beyond Connectivity

The digital divide in rural communities extends beyond mere access to services. The reports highlight several factors that compound the challenge of digital inclusion:

- **Affordability:** The cost of digital services and devices remains a hurdle for many rural households, with some forced to choose between digital connectivity and other essentials.
- **Quality of Service:** Even when available, rural internet services often suffer from reliability issues, hindering effective online engagement for education, work, and social connectivity.

- **Digital Skills:** The gap in necessary digital skills and confidence to use technology effectively is pronounced in rural areas, where opportunities for digital literacy training may be scarce.

The report advocates for policies that recognise the unique challenges faced by rural communities and propose several strategies:

- **Enhanced Affordability:** Develop and promote social tariffs tailored to the needs of rural families, ensuring high-quality broadband access at a reasonable cost.

- **Infrastructure Investment:** Prioritise upgrades to digital infrastructure in rural areas to improve service reliability and speed, closing the quality gap with urban centres.

- **Skills Development:** Expand digital literacy programs in rural areas, leveraging schools, libraries, and community centres to build residents' confidence and capabilities online.

### **Shared Responsibility for Digital Safety**

The issue of **digital safety emerges as a key concern**, especially for families with children. The collective effort of government bodies, educators, service providers, and families is essential in creating a safer online environment. The recent **Online Safety Act** is a step forward, but there are specific needs across rural communities.

The Rural Services Network advocates for the well-being of rural communities, highlighted within their '**Winning the Rural Vote**' campaign, particularly in the chapter on 'Rural Digital Connectivity'.

## **Issues for Business**

### **LLEP call for evidence, 2024.**

The call for evidence also considered the impact on business. However, most responders were **not employed in private business** but were providing responses based mainly on opinion or anecdotal information. The strongest overall themes related to the disruption to business with additional skills and costs being required to meet the transition.

### **Key feedback from the survey and interviews included:**

- Time availability to support digital skills impacting on productivity and performance.
- Mature staff much slower at picking up on technology systems and processes.
- Lack of confidence in some employees using new technology, from areas such as digital communication through to advanced technical processes.
- Employers expect new employees to have the skills that they need; have not got time or expertise to train.
- Cost of new equipment.

Employer quote: *"I am in that age group which did not fully engage with the social media networks and still do not, although I would now like to more involved, have a Facebook page, website, etc. to support the business."*

## Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP)

The area LSIP research included insights with employers on digital skills. The Leicester and Leicestershire Collective Intelligence Skills Observatory (CISO) contains links to the business survey and a series of skills supply and demand dashboards, which collectively underpin the LSIP.

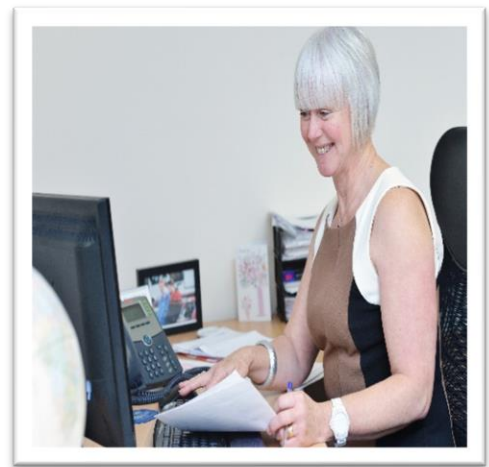
Data from the LSIP business skills survey included elements on digital skills, including asking the general question: **how confident on a scale of 1-10 are you that you have the digital skills you need for your business to succeed?** In the most recent survey (March 24), this showed a small drop from the past year, recording 5.2 against a score of 5.6 in February 2023. [Leicester and Leicestershire | Scorecard Dashboard \(insight-unlocked.co.uk\)](https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/insight-unlocked.co.uk)

## Lightcast job vacancy analysis

One key trend in the world of work is the increasingly need for basic digital skills across a wide range of job roles. According to 2023 research by the [Behavioral Insights Team](#), over 80% of all advertised vacancies in the UK require at least one digital skill.

Lightcast uses data analytics to scrape online job postings information. The most common digital skills, where mentioned across Leicester and Leicestershire job adverts over the last 12 months to May 2024 are:

**Microsoft Excel, Microsoft Office, Microsoft Outlook, and Microsoft PowerPoint.**



One issue with vacancy data is that employers looking for digital skills might convey needs in several different ways, using different descriptions or may just assume that applicants already have basic digital skills. In addition, looking at the top 20 most advertised roles across the area, **80% include the use of some sort of digital skills**, whether it is using tech to aid HGV driving, keeping records in administration, or using scanners in retail.

## Other

CV Genuis research<sup>3</sup> in December 2023 showed that the career platform found 58% of people working in the UK claimed to have had **no digital skills training**, and 28% are under-qualified for their job. One in five people said they actively avoided applying for a new role because they do not have the digital skills needed, and a quarter either did not ask for, or did not get, a promotion for the same reason.

## The Federation of Small Businesses (FSB)

The FSB released a report which talks about **digital adoption amongst small businesses**. Part of this activity includes the need to upskill staff to utilise new technology. In the report, regarding barriers to innovation, one issue cited for 22% of respondents is: lack of suitably skilled staff. See the full report: <https://www.fsb.org.uk/resource-report/the-tech-tonic.html>

The clear implication is that **any prospective employees will need at least a basic level of digital**

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.computerweekly.com/news/366561732/Almost-60-of-UK-workers-have-had-no-digital-skills-training>



**skills.** There may also be a requirement for employees to have adequate connectivity and knowledge to work independently. This provides information about how digital poverty could have an impact on job seekers and the pool of labour available to local businesses.

### Qualitative evidence

The call for evidence collected many examples of how issues identified translated to practical problems for LLEP residents.

| <b>Issue identified</b>                    | <b>Real life example</b>  |
|--|---|
| <p><b>Digital Skills and Knowledge</b></p> | <p><i>“We work with the elderly; many have never used a computer before, and do not fully understand the internet or email. They find so many companies do everything online and presume that everyone has access and the knowledge to do this. For example, to renew a Blue Badge by phone rather than online you must make an appointment with up to 4 weeks’ notice. Companies such as insurance will give discounts for online applications which is unfair for those who cannot access the internet.”</i></p> <p><i>“Knowledge of how to use a computer, we found that youths know how to operate a mobile phone but not a computer.”</i></p> <p>Many respondents conveyed: <i>“ It is a lack of knowledge primarily with lack of equipment secondary – but both impact each other.”</i></p> <p>Hence, access to services can be restricted/disadvantaged.</p> |
| <p><b>Affordability / connectivity</b></p> | <p>Several respondents also highlighted that those with additional barriers such as poverty, mental health, drug, or alcohol challenges are harder to support and face the most digital disadvantage.</p> <p><i>“Those in poverty will often struggle to paying for device or broadband; they are also at further disadvantage as they are less likely to access online discounts for services.”</i></p>  |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Language barriers</b>                | <p><i>"Language is a big barrier too, especially in the City, with many different languages spoken – it can be an additional barrier to learn digital skills."</i></p> <p><i>"Language for some can be an issue, much support relies on English."</i></p>  |
| <b>Awareness of support and courses</b> | <p><i>"It's hard to keep updated on the full range of area options to support our clients with digital skills."</i></p> <p><i>"We find it hard to source IT skills at level 2 and above, and a lack of courses including Microsoft Office packages which are need of customers. Courses seen a few years ago."</i></p> |

### Ideas of how the main themes could be implemented:

The table below shares some of the ideas from partners about how digital poverty could be addressed in practice across Leicester and Leicestershire; many of the suggestions were highlighted in the 2021 LLEP research. These ideas are not intended to be proposals but may provide some inspiration for future work:

| <b>Ideas to address digital poverty</b>  | <b>Who will be supported</b>   |
|--|--|
| <p><b>Building in targeted short courses</b> to existing provision such as how to download apps to a phone or tablet and how to create an account on them. A lot of people need help with understanding the basics.</p> <p>Maximising awareness of existing provision that can support this.</p> | <p>Older citizens</p> <p>Ethnic minority groups</p>                                  |
| <p><b>A Library/application of videos for different tasks</b> (accessing emails e.g.) for different devices and platforms would be helpful, in one place so they are not confused with others on YouTube, and in clear language with easy-to-follow steps.</p>                                   | <p>Anyone needing an easy read offer of 'how to' guides linked to basic digital.</p> |
| <p><b>A mapping/collation of what help is already available</b> and area campaign to raise awareness/increase take-up. This will also help to identify key area gaps.</p>  | <p>Help across area to increase access to offers across all groups.</p>              |

| Ideas to address digital poverty   | Who will be supported   |
|--|---|
| <p><b>More one to one support via buddying schemes or skill providers</b> to connect low-skilled users with more digital savvy helpers –this could include remote support and accommodate different languages. Could include home visits or mobile service.<br/>Review existing buddying schemes and learn from good practice.</p> | <p>Help anyone who is digitally excluded across all age and social groups.</p>  |
| <p><b>Basic free training offered at job centres</b>, whilst claimants are there, with more integrated services.<br/>Funding for projects to assist with this, and support re free sim cards with data</p>   | <p>Help job seekers and claimants improve their skills, confidence, access, and work readiness.<br/>Help those on low incomes to access services.</p>                               |
| <p><b>Internet access for all</b> had several suggestions such as: internet access via equipment in libraries, community centres, and other public buildings but also hot spots and 5G connectivity for users own devices.</p>   | <p>Disadvantaged groups would benefit the most including job seekers and those trying to access digital services.<br/><br/>Young people able to access school and college work.</p> |
| <p><b>Integrate digital skills into ESOL courses</b> - some providers are already starting to do this and potential to better align area services.</p>   | <p>Overcomes language barriers involved in accessing online services.</p>   |
| <p><b>Apprenticeship and T Level bootcamps for disadvantaged young people</b></p>  | <p>Business volunteers helping with digital applications or virtual recruitment practices.</p>  |
| <p><b>An equipment loan system</b> to provide equipment for jobseekers, workers, or students (some services do offer this such as colleges, and adult education centres), this could also be tied to training courses.</p>   | <p>Those trying to upskill, find work or stay in work.<br/>Families where children cannot participate fully in education due to lack of equipment.</p>                              |
| <p><b>Continued recycling and refurbishment of IT equipment</b> in a co-ordinated way, via a recycling hub or commercial innovation will increase the supply of affordable devices, such as an extension of the Refurb IT scheme.</p>  | <p>Digital access benefit to economically disadvantaged groups. Also, of benefit to the environment and potential to generate income.</p>   |

| Ideas to address digital poverty  | Who will be supported   |
|---|---|
| <p><b>Lack of public transport</b> affects all areas of life for isolated people in the villages, so potentially funding to volunteer driver schemes or greater awareness re transport options.</p> | <p>Help anyone who is rurally and digitally excluded across all age and social groups</p> |

Although there were lots of positive suggestions to address digital issues, there were also some suggestion that back up offline offers should always be available too.

Support officer: *"Councils and DWP need to allow wider options to complete forms or access information, and support people who can't access digital forms and don't have the skills, or fund provision/charities that pick up the pieces and do the work."*

### Less reliance on digital services

Although the survey was strongly targeted at increasing digital literacy and access, a small number of respondents indicated that not all people wanted to embrace the growing digital age, with some issues such as loss of choice, and exclusion for the most disadvantaged. It is also noted across feedback that some people appear to be constantly online, which is not necessarily ideal for communication skills, community and mental health.

## Summary of findings

Challenges highlighted in the 2021 LLEP research indicated several area issues, such as a lack of basic digital skills, a lack of awareness of tools that may help, access to equipment, connectivity, and difficulty in accessing services, many of which moved online. The 2024 feedback saw less of a focus on some of these practical elements, with some evidence that things were improving locally around these areas, but there are still some key ongoing challenges.

- A few projects (WEA, STAR, Education-Business Links) indicated that challenges such as access, skills and connectivity have improved a little.
- There remain some issues with digital poverty impacting all age groups, but the problems identified impact different age groups in different ways.
- The most disadvantaged are still at greatest risk of digital poverty.
- There are various programmes that can support some of these challenges, but the information is not uniformly known, readily available, or have limited time scales – there may also be other programmes not mentioned in this report that can also support.
- Businesses increasingly needing at least basic digital skills across a wide range of roles and continuing to report skills gaps. There appears to be low awareness of upskilling options and a lack of confidence in accessing these, even when known.

## Recommendations to address area issues

- Instigate key actions to drive greater awareness of area support, through more in-depth mapping and communication of area support, at nil or low cost, through city, county, Leicester & Leicestershire Business and Skills Partnership (L&LBSP) networks, VCS, education, district and partner networks including DWP and National Careers service.
- Coordinate work across the city, county, and districts to map out digital skills offers for employers and promote across business networks. Potentially the 2021 digital inclusion network could be reconvened to steer area activity.
- The table on pages 20-22 shows a range of suggestions to address area digital poverty, some costed, some free. Facilitated by L&LBSP, skills and digital support leads in the area could rank these in area of importance as part of digital inclusion work and agree to take forward key activities (depending on funding/resource).
- There is potential to communicate and work across the area with skills providers to better embed basic digital skills if they are not already doing so. Sector based work academies, Skills Bootcamps and apprenticeships also offer upskilling options.
- Any area information collated needs to be clear, concise, jargon free, well communicated and updated regularly. For businesses and individuals, there needs to be better communication around the availability and ease of access of free or low-cost training options and the benefits of undertaking such courses.



- A continuation of the recycling of digital equipment scheme would be beneficial for the area as a win-win re digital and green activity but may depend on funding.
- There is potential to consider further digital poverty insights via the Careers Hub and Education-Business Links partnerships, local authorities, education and skills sector, districts, DWP, voluntary and community groups, and LSIP.
- Any activity should feed into the new area Business Board, under skills activity.
- There is scope to connect and align to national digital poverty activity - in June 2024 the Digital Poverty Alliance released their national delivery plan, [NDP-Overview-2024.pdf \(digitalpovertyalliance.org\)](#)

## Area projects and programmes already in place

Several projects addressing digital poverty are already operating in Leicester and Leicestershire. The following were highlighted in the Digital Poverty call for evidence. This is not intended to be a fully comprehensive list of activity in the area.

### **Go Learn! Leicestershire**

Offer a range of digital skills courses, designed for absolute beginners and upwards, through to the advanced ICDL Level 3 certification. Courses include IT skills for everyday life, with a range of introductory courses to help basic skills and gaining confidence. Circa 600 Leicestershire residents each year undertake digital courses up to Level 2.

<https://golearnleicestershire.ac.uk/courses/digital-skills/>

### **Let's Get Digital-Leicester Adult Education**

Leicester Adult Education (LEA) offer a range of entry level and upwards digital courses to help adults to improve their digital skills. They also work across communities with Leicester City Public Health on a 'Let's Get Digital' programme to help residents access GP services online and other digital access support.

See: <https://leicesteradulthood.ac.uk/courses/>

### **Multiply, city and county**

The Multiply offer is available across Leicester and Leicestershire, with a range of workshops and courses across communities to help individual to understand maths in everyday life, but it includes aspects of digital skills support. In the county, 37 Leicestershire residents have been supported through Multiply specifically with their digital skills and 796 learners were supported overall by the project in its second year. The Multiply project ends on 31 March 2025.

### **Reaching People**

Reaching People manage several projects aimed at the economically inactive, unemployed and job seekers. Two of their digital support offers include:

#### **>>> Moneywise Living**

Moneywise Living delivers concentrated 121 support for those who are financially and digitally excluded to become more resilient and better able to deal with life challenges, in particular the rising energy costs and general of cost of living. Addressing these vital and basic needs will help people to progress. The project will help 415 city residents and closes for referrals in March 2025. See <https://www.reachingpeople.co.uk/our-projects/moneywise-living/>

#### **>>> Health+**

Health +, funded by the NHS Better Care Fund, is focused on improving access to primary care for patients in Leicester aged 18+. Trained volunteers from Reaching People deliver group sessions about the NHS App, GP online services and accessing NHS health information to patients, community groups and to surgery staff, to improve patient access to digital primary care services, aid digital skills and to help people to find health information online. Since July 2023, the project trained over 183 patients, 161 community

members and 76 health professionals. Recipients are often ethnically diverse groups, mainly female, and include groups such as carers, people with a disability and those with health conditions. <https://www.reachingpeople.co.uk/our-projects/health-project/>

### **WEA**

WEA offer a range of ESFA funded entry level and upward digital skills programmes at their venues and are also working very closely with DWP in both Leicester and Leicestershire to help users to improve their skills. They can deliver at DWP venues, in community centres, and also in housing associations. WEA have had considerable success supporting asylum seekers and refugees to increase digital skills. See: <https://www.wea.org.uk/>

### **DWP**

Can signpost to appropriate digital skills support as needed. Working closely with WEA on this too, can be delivered at DWP or other venues.

### **Restart Scheme**

Participants may be able to access a Participant Support Fund which can be used to cover interim cost towards internet connectivity. Entry level participants can be offered tablets to support with job search and access to onsite digital learning hubs; participants are offered entry level IT courses via the Jobs 22 Skills Trainers or referred to local IT related courses.

### **Area Colleges**

Leicester College: for students enrolled on any Leicester College courses are eligible if they meet the income requirements set out by the government can have the loan of a laptop and/or a MiFi dongle. They offer a wide range of ICT courses starting with Community Learning Provision non-regulated Introduction to Computing. The college has a Computing Department who offer qualification courses from Entry Level to Degree Level.

Other colleges in the area are SMB, Loughborough and North Warwickshire and South Leicestershire who also offer a range of digital skills options for all ages.

### **Digital Leicestershire**

Leicestershire County Council is working with partners from the public, private and voluntary sectors to help people get online and use digital services.

<https://digital-leicestershire.org.uk/help-to-get-online/>

### **District and Borough Councils**

A variety of help and/or signposting is available via district and borough councils.

Charnwood Borough Council, for example, supports residents who need help in accessing online services.



### **Free internet access in community**

For example, the Mario Tinenti Centre and the Altogether Place in Loughborough as well as libraries and community group settings across the county. In the city, many organisations such as the Highfields Centre and Bangladesh Youth and Cultural Shomiti offer Wi-Fi access and computer suite access with entry level and wider packages to aid digital skills and employability that can be accessed by young people and adults.

### **Optima UK**

Through their training business they train disadvantaged and disaffected individuals both unemployed, and in the workplace, and provide equipment where necessary and basic and intermediate digital skills.

Through their recruitment business they support individuals with digital skills in their job search and can help workforce and individuals with online financial access support. <https://optima-uk.com/>

### **Age Concern**

Provide a service to elderly people to access online services which otherwise they would be unable to do so for example insurance quotes, uploading information to council housing portals, blue badge applications and renewals, accessing information. Find that even the GP's are now asking people to book appointments or order prescriptions online. <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/services/>

### **Housing charity Falcon Support**

This organisation helps the homeless and those in need across Leicestershire. They have also been given 50 sim cards to offer to service users, they have free internet, texts, and calls. Anyone in the community and their hostels can access these sim cards. <https://www.falconsupportservices.org.uk/>

### **Voluntary Action South Leicestershire**

Provide support to people over the age of 60 who live alone or who are carers in Harborough District. They can visit at home and offer a monthly session at Market Harborough and at Lutterworth libraries.

### **Support in North West Leicestershire**

Support re laptops from Tech4Youth, the Digital Poverty Alliance and Barratts, helping young people get online, to aid homework, coursework, CV preparation and digital life skills. See: <https://digitalpovertyalliance.org/tech4youth/>

## Real Purpose, Loughborough

Secured a grant to give laptops to individuals with mental health issues who are looking for employment, to assist them in the job searching process and get them digitally enabled. <https://www.realpurpose.uk/>

## National and corporate schemes

- A variety of national and corporate schemes including the National Careers Service: <https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/careers-advice/build-foundation-digital-skills-to-help-your-career/>
- Initiatives to support **young people and adults to improve their digital skills** include **T levels, Higher Technical Qualifications, apprenticeships, and Skills Bootcamps.**
- The [Statutory digital entitlement](#) provides free study for adults with low digital skills, while eligible adults are [able to access fully-funded level 3 digital courses](#)
- Department for Education: <https://www.skillsforcareers.education.gov.uk/pages/adults>
- The Digital College: <https://www.thedigitalcollege.co.uk/>
- Barclays: <https://digital.wings.uk.barclays/>

## Support directly from schools, colleges and universities

This varies and can include the loan and distribution of equipment as well as facilitating free data SIM cards from mobile phone providers.

## Useful links for further reading:

Digital Poverty Alliance: [Home - Digital Poverty Alliance](#)

Good Things Foundation: [Digital divide - Good Things Foundation](#)

Office for National Statistics: [Exploring the UK's digital divide - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

Government Digital Strategy:

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

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/digital-development-strategy-2024-to-2030/digital-development-strategy-2024-to-2030>

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## Appendix A – Digital Poverty survey questions

|   |
|---|
| Name - Name   |
| Email address - Email   |
| Organisation name (if applicable) - Organisation  |
| Does your organisation contribute to digital skills development, device access and / or improving connectivity?   |
| If yes, explanation of how organisation helps re skills, connectivity and/or devices  |
| What are the primary barriers faced by your client group in accessing digital skills support?<br>Expansion re other barriers (i.e., secondary barriers) re: adults, young people, job seekers, ESOL group, over 50s, parents, SEND, those in work   |
| Matrix question grid: asking if things are better or worse today for client groups when compared to covid/2021 questionnaire for groups: adults, young people, job seekers, ESOL group, over 50s, parents, SEND, those in work around the following:<br>Access to devices<br>Skills<br>Connectivity |
| Linked to your area oof expertise, what would help to close the digital poverty divide?   |
| Do you have any other comments about barriers that deter people from being able to improve their digital skills?  |
| Details of digital support programmes or services you refer clients to, when needed (outside of your organisation): - Programme and provider  |
| Project / programme 1 - Project name 1  |
| Project / programme 1 - Provider 1  |
| Project / programme 1 - Audience 1  |
| Project / programme 1 - Duration 1  |
| Project / programme 1 - Objectives 1  |
| Project / programme 1 - support 1   |
| Project / programme 1 - area 1  |
| [Option to add details on up to 5 projects)   |
| Please share any data or supporting evidence you may have on digital poverty in Leicester, Leicestershire, or a local district area. - digital poverty data upload  |





To receive news and information about Business Gateway programmes and activities go to: <https://bizgateway.org.uk/>

If you require further information on anything within this publication, email: [anna.cyhan@lep.org.uk](mailto:anna.cyhan@lep.org.uk)

The Business Gateway Growth Hub is part of the new Leicester and Leicestershire Business and Skills Partnership, working with Leicester City Council and Leicestershire County Council to enhance area business, skills and economic growth.

