

A Minimum Digital Living Standard for Households with Children: Summary

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This is a summary of findings from the first stage of a UK-wide proof-of-concept project funded by the Nuffield foundation and Nominet to develop a Minimum Digital Living Standard – starting with households with children. This interim report covers the development of a Minimum Digital Living Standard and what members of the public think is needed to meet the standard for urban households with children.

A final report, including findings from a nationally representative sample survey using the standard, will be published later in 2023.

Alongside this project, the Welsh Government has commissioned the project team and partners in Wales to help develop a Minimum Digital Living Standard for Wales.



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A Minimum Digital Standard of Living

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

The Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS) for households with children was successfully developed through deliberative groups with members of the public.

Equipment, infrastructure, services, and skills – including digital safety – are interdependent elements in the standard. Households with children need access to all of them in combination for digital inclusion, opportunities, and choice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Establish the Minimum Digital Living Standard as part of a vision for digital inclusion, reflecting what members of the public say is needed ‘digitally’ to participate in society today.

- In Wales, Welsh Government has already taken steps towards this.

UK Government to work with the regulator (Ofcom) and telecommunications sector to ensure that the broadband and mobile data infrastructure is in place so the MDLS can be achieved.

The MDLS to be used by government at all levels – in Westminster, devolved administrations, combined authorities, and local authorities – in order to:

- Identify policy and practical actions to help meet the MDLS for every household
- Catalyse coordinated, cross-sector and collaborative action on digital inclusion.

Organisations across public, private, voluntary and community sectors to consider how they can use the MDLS to assess their own approach, services, and products – including their role in addressing all three components of the standard (goods, services, and skills).

Funding is allocated to develop the MDLS for other household types, and understand the experiences of households below MDLS, and/or where additional or different ways of meeting the MDLS may be required (for example, related to disability, housing circumstances, rurality).

Background

Across the country, 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. With the current cost-of-living crisis placing more pressure on household budgets those on the lowest incomes are at even greater risk of being digitally excluded.

The Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS) aims to move research and policy debate forwards through a citizen-centred and household-focused approach to defining what counts as digital inclusion or exclusion. This makes it distinct from – and complementary to – approaches used by Ofcom, Lloyds Banking Group, Nominet, and Internet Matters.

The MDLS approach applies the Minimum Income Standard (MIS) methodology to issues of digital inclusion – using deliberative methods with members of the public to develop a standard based on and rooted in public consensus. Following MIS, the MDLS sets a benchmark for digital inclusion, defined with members of the public, as a minimum below which households do not have all they need to take part in everyday activities.

As a proof-of-concept study, this project has initially focussed on the needs of households with children through a series of deliberative groups with parents and young people to establish what they think households need to meet this threshold. This includes devices and internet connection as well as skills and knowledge.

[Table 1 \(page 7\)](#) summarises the MDLS contents for households with children.



The MDLS research process

The MDLS project was designed as a proof-of-concept study.

It aimed to establish the feasibility of adapting the well-established Minimum Income Standard (MIS) method to find

- A meaningful definition of a minimum acceptable digital living standard
- What the public identified as digital needs and how and why they could and should be met.

This initial research focused on households with children living in urban areas, with the intention being to use this as a benchmark to explore different and additional needs of other households.

The MDLS research comprised 17 deliberative groups (13 groups with adults, and four groups with young people) held between February and October 2022. The process involved four stages, with discussions from one stage feeding into the next through a funnelling process. Each group, lasting up to three hours, was conducted in person with between seven and nine participants. At each stage, people were newly recruited by a specialist recruitment organisation.



Stage 1: Agreeing the MDLS definition

The Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS) definition was developed through deliberative groups involving people from a range of household types (including working age adults with or without children, pensioners, and young people). This reflected that the MDLS definition needs to be relevant beyond this initial study on the needs of households with children.

People taking part were clear about the importance of being included in this digital world, and the implications of exclusion.

“Nowadays if you want to get anything done, you’ve got to be able to get onto the internet. And for me, things like that, I found it really, really difficult even to make an appointment, going to bank, trying to sort things out, it was always, go on the website, help, how, where?”

(Pensioners Orientation Group, Leicester)

“Everything has technology now, it doesn’t matter where you go, what you do, what job, there’s always some element of it. And if you don’t know how to use it you can be looked upon differently and not get the same opportunities as other people, so that’s why it’s important”

(Parents Orientation Group, Edinburgh)

Key themes which emerged from the orientation stage, and shaped the definition, were:

- The **prevalence** of digital technology across all aspects of life, with young people highlighting its importance in school life as well as socially.
- The **inevitability** of needing to participate in a digital world, linked to observations of a decrease in non-digital alternatives. Groups discussed how the pandemic had accelerated the need to be online and accentuated the difficulties of being left behind.
- The **pace of change**. Some found digitalisation overwhelming – ‘I feel like I’m drowning’. This had implications for risks of being excluded, the cost of having to upgrade technology, the need to update their knowledge and, for some, the challenges of having to learn new things.

This is the definition which emerged and was validated in subsequent stages:

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

Stages 2 to 4: Developing the MDLS contents

Through a further three stages, groups of parents with dependent age children and young people identified the goods, services, and skills which a household with children would need to achieve a minimum set of needs. The MDLS contents are summarised in Table 1 below.

Digital goods, services, and skills

Groups considered the types of goods, services, and skills required to enable households with children to reach an acceptable standard, and how these requirements would change with the age of the child or number of children in the household. Discussions covered different digital devices, connectivity (mobile data and broadband), and other services (such as subscriptions). Parents and young people emphasised:

- The increasing move of services online, including health, banking, and school. Parents and young people noted that contact with schools was becoming significantly more digitised.
- That now, more than ever, parents and children needed to use digital technologies to participate in everyday life and society.

"You could have whatever laptop you want but making sure the internet quality is good...has got to be key...to be able to hold conversations on the internet is key."

Parents Task Group, Bristol

Practical and functional skills for everyday tasks and activities

Groups identified a list of skills that would be necessary for using the devices included in the standard. Their discussions centred around:

- The types of tasks and activities a household would engage in so that different family members could access the digital world and perform tasks online that had real-world implications for their everyday lives - from the perspective of households with children.
- Tasks related to (1) using digital devices, programmes, and the internet, (2) engagement online, and (3) managing and maintaining digital devices and data usage.

"We're in a digital society, aren't we? We are talking about minimum standards...everyone has got to have that, you know, from logging your gas and electricity bill online now all the way to getting your prescription, it is just life. So everyone has got to understand it "

Parents Final Group, Liverpool

Skills for understanding and managing digital risks

Groups considered what households would need to be able to understand and manage digital risks and engage in the digital world safely and confidently. Their discussions covered:

- General wariness of things going wrong online or being scammed.
- Potential digital risks and harms for children and young people.
- Skills related to: (1) managing security, (2) interacting with others and (3) sharing and receiving information.

"The game console is good...because it will keep you connected with friends, but my opinion is it will need some sort of like parental restriction or something because, like on lots of games nowadays there is adults talking to children who aren't supposed to be talking to children in the ways they are"

Young People Task Group, Leicestershire

Table 1: MDLS: Urban Households with Children

Groups with parents and young people felt that households with children require the range of goods, services, and skills outlined below to meet MDLS - to enable them to carry out the tasks and activities households need, and to feel confident, safe and included in the digital world. Digital needs are interrelated so reaching MDLS involves a combination of these elements.

The goods, services and skills listed in the table present what groups felt was needed for reaching MDLS. However, MDLS is not intended to be prescriptive, it does not set out how these needs should be met, nor what should be provided by any organisation or government body. Rather, establishing what people need to reach MDLS, informs potentially wide-ranging efforts to support families to feel confident, safe, and included in the digital world.

DIGITAL GOODS AND SERVICES

Home Broadband	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With sufficient reliability and speed to support all family members to access the internet at the same time
Mobile Phone and Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An entry-level smart phone per parent and secondary school age child + 5GB data per month each An extra 3GB of data per month if they have a child of pre-school or primary school age.
Laptop/Tablet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An entry level laptop per household – parent(s) and first child share one device. An additional device for every further school age child.
Headphones	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A set of headphones for school age children
Television and TV Subscription	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A smart TV, entry-level 32" screen An entry-level TV subscription service (e.g. Netflix, Disney+) in addition to a TV licence
Smart Speaker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An entry-level smart speaker
Gaming Console and Subscription	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A gaming console and an entry-level online gaming subscription

PRACTICAL AND FUNCTIONAL SKILLS

Using digital devices, programmes and the internet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using device functions Using apps and programmes Downloading apps and programmes Saving and recovering documents Connecting devices to the internet/hotspots Changing settings
Engagement online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using Zoom/Teams/Google classrooms Performing browser searches Using school apps (homework, school-home communication) Creating an email account and sending emails Online bookings and forms (e.g., appointments) Cashless/online payments
Managing and monitoring digital devices and data usage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creating and sorting files and folders Turning off devices properly Deleting old files to manage device storage Monitoring and managing phone data usage

UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING DIGITAL RISK

Managing security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using secure passwords Knowing about and avoiding in-app purchases Using phone safety features out and about (e.g., 'triple tap' or 'SOS') Monitoring banking activity online Removing bank card details to avoid accidental purchases Knowing how to apply parental controls
Interacting with others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluating what details to share online Identifying risks (e.g., scams, unsafe links, catfishers, groomers) Evaluating friend requests Managing social pressures and time online
Sharing and receiving information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluating quality of information (e.g., identifying mis/disinformation or unrealistic images) Knowing how to avoid and report inappropriate/offensive content Understanding digital footprint

Skills

The skills outlined above are needed by parents, and symbols indicate the age/stage by which children need to begin developing these skills, according to parents and young people.

1 Pre-school

2 Early primary school

3 Late primary school

4 Early secondary school

5 Late secondary school

Barriers to reaching the MDLS

Groups identified several common barriers that households could face to obtaining the necessary digital goods, services, and skills to reach the Minimum Digital Living Standard.

You constantly upgrade them. And you are paying a lot of money all the time, because the faster you want it, you have to pay more money for it. So, all these things are included as well, like you can't afford to pay every time. And if your phone is old and your computer gets slower, you are stuck, sometimes you can't finish everything what you are doing.

(Pensioners Orientation Group, Leicester)

Barriers to goods and services included:

- Costs and resources – access to resources restricted by household-level incomes (becoming even more relevant in the context of the current cost of living crisis)
- Physical infrastructure – access to broadband and mobile data connectivity as dependent on the coverage, availability, reliability, and speed of those services – with implications for affordability, and knowledge needed to manage data usage
- Wider infrastructure – for example, proximity to community centres or library services.

Barriers to acquiring skills (for practical tasks and for safety and confidence) included:

- Feeling 'out of touch' – for example, parents feeling unaware of digital issues on particular apps because they are not 'part of their world'.
- Feeling overwhelmed and unable to keep up, including (for both adults and young people) concerns around potential digital risks and harms. Parents especially were concerned about digital safety for children and how to manage this.
- Time pressures among parents which make it difficult to make the time to learn.
- Uncertainty about where to go to get reliable information – also linked to trustworthiness of sources of information.

So they have Instagram or Snapchat but you have no control, you feel like you open a Pandora's box and anything could happen. But you also want to find a balance where your child feels like they can be amongst their friends and not be picked on.

Parents Orientation Group, Edinburgh

Conclusions

The Minimum Digital Living Standard is a successful approach to understanding digital needs

This proof-of-concept research established that members of the public could:

- Agree on a definition of the MDLS and a set of minimum needs.
- Agree on the types of goods, services, and skills that would meet those minimum needs.
- Identify not only what parents and children of different ages would need to reach the minimum needs (highlighting how needs could change over time), but also how those individual needs combine at a household level.

The MDLS is a holistic package of goods, services, and skills

The MDLS research identifies a list of goods comprising a minimum benchmark for digital inclusion. However, reaching MDLS also requires reliable services and a set of skills for each member of a household, depending on their age.

- Equipment, infrastructure, services, and skills are interdependent elements in the standard.
- Households with children need access to all of them in combination for digital inclusion, opportunities, and choice.
- Additional and/or different ways of meeting the MDLS may be required for some households related, for example, to disability, ethnicity, housing circumstances, or rurality.

Digital safety was identified as a key component of the MDLS for households with children.

Parents and young people identified digital safety as a collective responsibility. They felt:

- Family members could take an active role in informing themselves of digital risks.
- Schools were crucial in providing up to date information on digital risks.
- Service providers and device manufacturers should be more responsible for providing information about the importance of security features and using them.
- Social media companies should ensure greater safety of their platforms, and both social media and traditional media could do more around advice and awareness.
- Greater regulation was needed, while recognising the challenge this presents.

Further work is needed to develop the MDLS and use it to shape policy and practical action

Further funding is required to develop the MDLS for other household types, building on this proof of concept study, and to understand where additional or different ways of meeting the MDLS may be required. Alongside this, as a citizen-led definition of digital inclusion, the MDLS can be used to:

- Set a vision for digital inclusion strategies.
- Identify policy and practical actions to help meet the MDLS for every household.
- Inform and measure progress at a household level. (The next step for the MDLS project is to undertake a UK-wide sample survey with measures informed by the MDLS).

For further information

This summary covers findings from an interim research report produced as part of a UK-wide project funded by the Nuffield Foundation (under grant number FR000022935) and Nominet to develop a UK Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS).

A separate report covers the recommendations and research findings from a project commissioned by the Welsh Government to develop a Minimum Digital Living Standard for Wales, undertaken by the MDLS project team with Cwmpas, Swansea University, and Digital Inclusion Alliance Wales.

MDLS project team

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About the project

The idea of the MDLS was developed by an interdisciplinary team combining social, geographic, and economic researchers (University of Liverpool, Loughborough University, Good Things Foundation and City University). It is rooted in a household-based, citizen-led assessment of digital needs and uses a range of interlinked methods. It uses the proven and innovative Minimum Income Standard (MIS) methodology to develop (through a series of deliberative groups with members of the public) a definition of MDLS which sets out what the standard should encompass, and establish a 'minimum basket of digital goods, services, and skills' that households with dependent age children need to meet this. There is potential to extend the methodology to include other household types in the future.

Next steps

- A UK-wide survey and statistical and geographic evaluations to explore how the MDLS is linked to other social, economic, cultural and digital metrics and to assess regional variations.
- Consultations with stakeholders to explore relevance with regard to key dimensions of lived experience and intersectionality, such as disability, ethnicity, rurality, poverty and housing circumstances.
- Ongoing engagement with stakeholders from across sectors to explore using MDLS as a tool to inform policy development and practical actions.
- A full final report will be produced at the end of the project, expected in Autumn 2023.

Further Information

The project has been funded by the Nuffield Foundation, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation.

Visit www.nuffieldfoundation.org

For more information and publications from the project, please visit:
[MDLS Project: www.mdls.org.uk](http://www.mdls.org.uk)