

## **GMCA Scrutiny Committee**

Date: 29 January 2025

Subject: Addressing Digital Inequity in Greater Manchester

Report of: Councillor Nick Peel, Portfolio Lead Leader for Digital City Region, and;  
Tom Stannard, Portfolio Lead Chief Executive for Digital City Region

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### **Purpose of Report**

This report provides members of the Committee with an overview of the progress towards delivery of the Greater Manchester Digital Inclusion Agenda for Change programme.

### **Recommendations:**

Committee Members are requested to:

- Note the progress, risks and opportunities on Greater Manchester’s Digital Inclusion Agenda for Change
- Consider how support for the Digital Inclusion agenda could be strengthened in localities.

### **Contact Officers**

Phil Swan (GMCA), Beena Puri (GMCA), Chris Pope (GMCA)

## **Equalities Impact, Carbon and Sustainability Assessment:**

**N/A**

## **Risk Management**

**See section 7**

## **Legal Considerations**

**N/A**

## **Financial Consequences – Revenue**

**See section 7**

## **Financial Consequences – Capital**

**N/A**

**Number of attachments to the report: 0**

## **Background Papers**

- Feb 2024, GMCA: [Public Switched Telephone Network \(PSTN\) Switchover Update](#)
- Sept 2023, GMCA: [Public Switched Telephone Network \(PSTN\) Switchover](#)
- Greater Manchester [Digital Inclusion Social Impact Report 2023](#).
- Greater Manchester Residents Survey (Wave 15, November 2024)

## **Tracking/ Process**

Does this report relate to a major strategic decision, as set out in the GMCA Constitution

No

## **Exemption from call in**

Are there any aspects in this report which means it should be exempt from call in by the relevant Scrutiny Committee on the grounds of urgency?

N/A

# 1. Introduction/Background

We want Greater Manchester to be a place where everyone can live good lives, grow up, get on and can thrive in a greener, fairer and more prosperous city-region. Our Greater Manchester Strategy is enabled by our Digital Blueprint, placing people and businesses at the heart of our regional ambitions with aims for more inclusive and sustainable outcomes, building on our region’s greatest assets.

Our Digital Inclusion Agenda for Change is one of the underpinning priorities of our world-leading digital ambitions, where every resident has access to the essential skills, tools and support to benefit from the digital world and technology amplifies public service innovation in-hand with ensuring digital services are accessible to all.

# 2. The state of digital exclusion

The residual impact of the pandemic plus ongoing cost-of-living pressures mean that many people are having to manage increasingly challenging social and economic factors. These factors are made worse by the growing extent of the UK’s digital and social divide. As many services go online, digital exclusion - and the need to address - it has rapidly increased. Digital exclusion is a new layer of vulnerability has been highlighted, with residents and families unable to stay connected, access vital services and education, let alone participate in the economy. Figure 1, taken from the Digital Inclusion Social Impact Report 2023, illustrates the current state of Digital Exclusion in Greater Manchester.

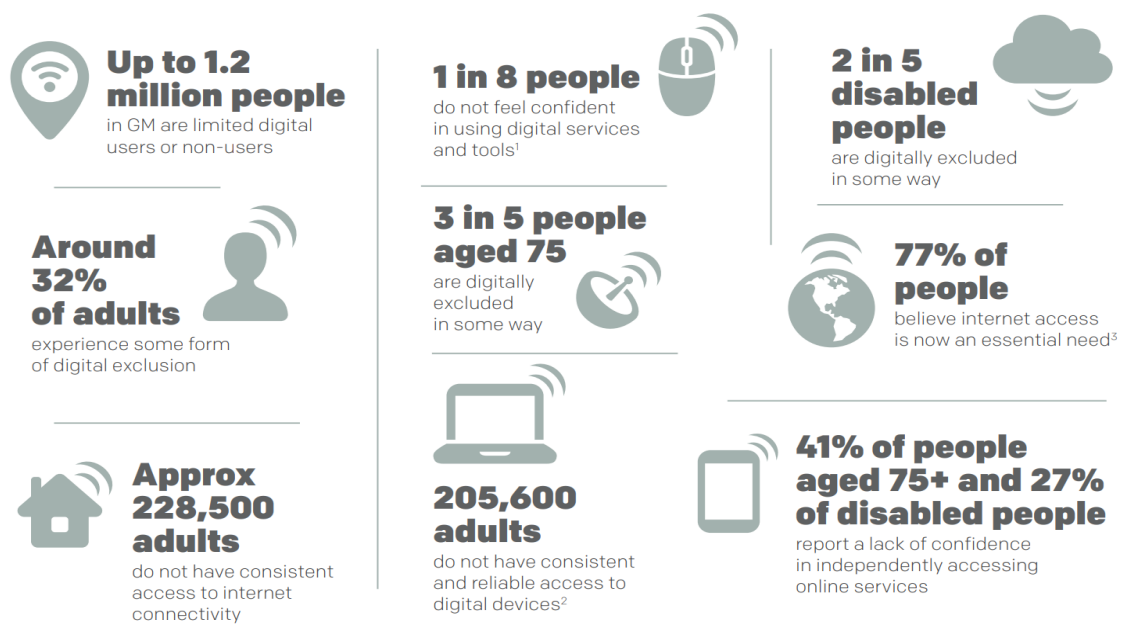


Figure 1. The State of Digital Exclusion in Greater Manchester

The Greater Manchester Resident [Survey](#) (November 2024) highlighted:

- Since May 2024, over a third (36%) of respondents have said that their household experiences some form of digital exclusion.
- Whereas the proportion of respondents experiencing any form of digital exclusion overall has remained stable, there have been increases in digital exclusion reported by 16–24-year-olds, those 75+ and disabled respondents. Our renewed understanding of digital exclusion amongst these groups is now as follows:
  - **73% of those aged 75+ now say they have experienced one or more aspect of digital exclusion**, compared to 70% in surveys 10-12
  - **59% of disabled respondents report experiencing at least one form of digital exclusion**, compared to 56% in surveys 10-12
  - **32% of 16–24-year-olds now say they have experienced one or more aspect of digital exclusion**, higher than the 27% reported in surveys 10-12.
- A slightly reduced proportion of GM residents have been cutting back on home broadband and/or mobile plans as a response to ongoing increases in the cost of living – when comparing surveys in the last six months to those conducted at earlier points in the cost-of-living crisis. **In the most recent survey 11% of respondents said they were cutting back on broadband/mobile plans** (broadly like the proportions in fieldwork in May, July and August 2024). This compares to 16-17% of respondents in earlier surveys.

### 3. The fiscal and social opportunity

Using data from the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR)<sup>1</sup> we estimate the total cost of not improving basic digital skills over the next ten years in Greater Manchester to be approximately £700M. This includes:

- Cost offset by approximately £139M with efficiency savings, increased tax revenue, and NHS savings

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<sup>1</sup> [Cebr \(2022\), The economic impact of digital inclusion in the UK, via Good Things Foundation](#)

- Time savings equating to approximately £195M, for individuals from use of digital services, plus £175M saved through online shopping
- £177M benefit to businesses through filling basic digital skills vacancies, increased earnings, use of technology adoption and environmental benefits

Impacts are not only financial. Research in France suggests that using refurbished rather than new smartphones can save up to 90% of CO2 emissions from smartphone production - preventing 77.6kg of carbon emissions per device, while producing only 7.61kg of CO2 emissions end-to-end<sup>2</sup>.

There are also personal social benefits from increasing digital connectivity and inclusion. More than three-quarters (78%) of respondents to Ofcom's Media Use and Attitudes Report<sup>3</sup> use the internet to support their wellbeing, while 77% say the internet helps them tackle loneliness and stay connected with family and friends.

According to the Good Things Foundation, improving digital inclusion can unlock £13.7 billion to the UK's economy.

## 4. Mapping risk of digital exclusion in Greater Manchester

Inspired by Salford City Council's work, the development of the Digital Exclusion Risk Index (DERI) was undertaken by GMCA to cover the city region plus the wider UK in response to discussions with local authorities around the country who faced the same challenges and has proved beneficial for areas across the UK to understand their own areas of need. As shown in Figure 2, the diagram brings together information relating to deprivation, demographics, and broadband availability. This information has been used in work to focus support to get online. It is openly available at: [Digital Exclusion Risk Index \(DERI\) - Greater Manchester Combined Authority](#)

Since availability of superfast (>30MBS) broadband in Greater Manchester now exceeds 99% of the city region, and similar 4G coverage, the main factors impacting access are increasingly affordability (including of devices), skills and motivation.

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<sup>2</sup> [Richard, C \(2022\), The environmental impact of refurbished tech, Backmarket via ADEME](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Ofcom \(2023\), Adults' Media Use and Attitudes Report](#)

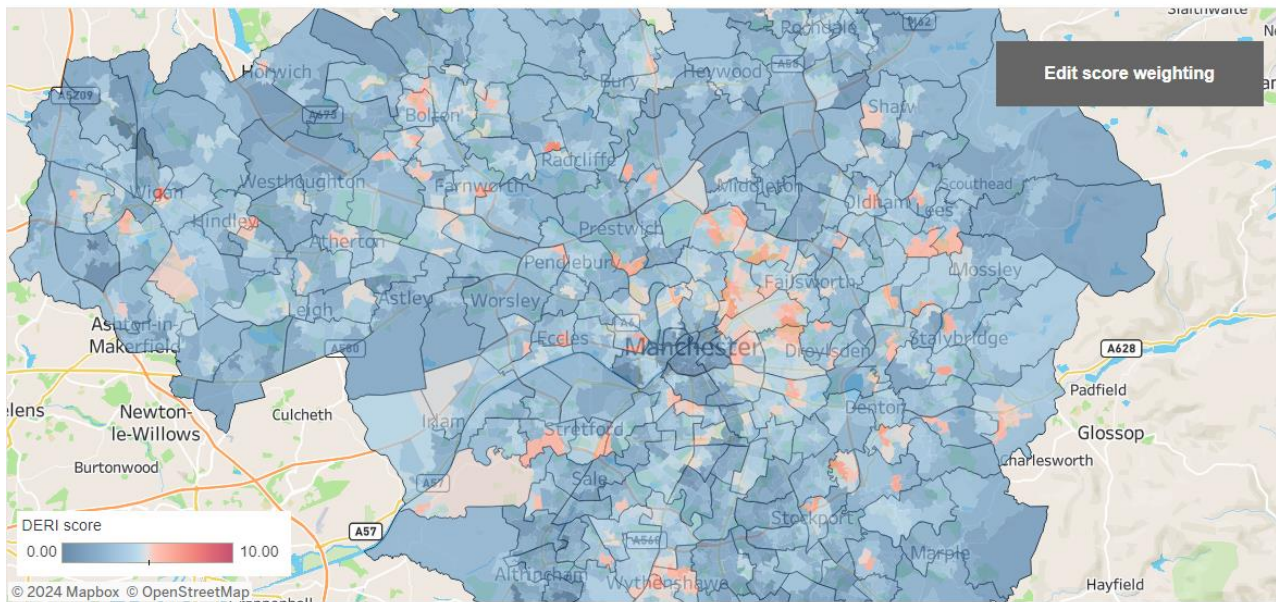


Figure 2. Information available in the Digital Exclusion Risk Index.

## 5. Improving digital equity in Greater Manchester

Efforts to improve digital equity and catalyse positive regional impact requires a bold and multifaceted approach, with the flexibility to adapt and create the conditions for continuous improvement. Greater Manchester's regional ambition is ecosystem-led, focused on tackling barriers and improving system leadership and ownership, underpinned by building capacity, galvanising resources, sharing learning and best practice and improving access to digitally enabled public services and resident support.

Our approach is centred around localising digital inclusion so it speaks to and engages local residents; in a way which maximises efficiency and value for money, delivering core functions at a regional rather than borough level.

In the city region, this is led through three groups:

- The **Digital Inclusion Taskforce**, a 250 strong, cross-sector member group that meets bi-monthly and works collaboratively to showcase best practice, build partnerships, identify need and target action to address the interrelated barriers to digital inclusion and ensure no one is left behind.
- A **Digital Inclusion Action Network** which was set up and is sponsored by the GM Mayor to lead targeted action with a specific focus on supporting under-25s, over-75s and disabled people. It meets monthly.

- The **Digital inclusion Local Authority Leads Group**, a regional working group, joining up activity, learning and resource across the ten boroughs to remove barriers and ensure a locally-led, long-term sustainable focus which is embedded in services and communities. This has been supported through activity funded through the Adult Education Budget and Retained Business Rates.

Together these groups have convened and instigated a broad range of actions at local, regional and national levels. Summaries of recent locally led impacts can be found in the Digital Inclusion Impact Report 2023. At a regional level, progress includes:

### **MISSION ONE: Tackling Digital Poverty**

- **Greater Manchester Databank** - working with Good Things Foundation and the telecoms industry to provide free 20GB SIM data cards to eligible residents in need. As of December 2024, the latest data shows that 53,290 data SIMs have been distributed by GM Databanks across 10 boroughs. There are now 291 community centres that are Online Centres and Databanks in GM, against a target of 75 set in 2023, which include GM libraries, community organisations, food banks, etc.
- **Device Lending Libraries in Local Authorities** Most GM Local Authorities have established device lending library schemes for residents and families to borrow devices so they may access services, look for jobs, or continue their learning and education.
- **Digital inclusion pilot for social housing residents** - five of the UK's largest internet service providers collaborated with five GM housing organisations in 2023 in a study tackle digital exclusion through increased uptake of social tariffs. This study was published by University of Liverpool in late 2023 and highlighted even though awareness of social tariffs needed to be raised, they were still unaffordable for many people in social housing. 495 residents took up connectivity offers during the pilot; 136 residents gained digital skills support provided by ISP volunteers; and two community centres were given free connectivity.
- **GM social housing wayleave** – Following the successful pilot, referred to above, several telecoms and housing organisations collaborated to streamline broadband installation in Greater Manchester's social housing through a common, standardised wayleave agreement. Previously, varying wayleave agreements and lengthy approval processes caused delays and increased costs, discouraging telecoms investment in the sector.
- In summer 2024, Greater Manchester's 20 largest housing organisations agreed the Greater Manchester standardised wayleave agreement, launched at Connected



Britain in September. This innovative approach is now being explored by telecommunication providers and regions across the UK, paving the way for broader adoption and improved digital connectivity.

## **MISSION TWO: Targeted support for priority groups**

- **Go GM Care Leavers project** - 1,087 care leavers have been supported since the project's inception, generating 1753 offers of personalised assistance. This includes the distribution of 796 free data SIMs, gifting of 551 devices, engagement with 173 individuals through the Learn My Way programme, 155 care leavers participating in the Salford Foundation Money Matters initiative and involvement of 77 care leavers in Digital Skills Bootcamps led by IN4.0/Skills City. Currently, over 25% of care leavers aged 18-25 in Greater Manchester have engaged with at least one aspect of this initiative.
- **Doing digital in later life** – in conjunction with the GM Aging Hub, Citizens Advice and Age UK, new resources and guidance were published in 2023 designed for anyone to support someone they know to do digital in later life.
- **Get Online Greater Manchester** – a guide to digital support for disabled people booklet and BSL video. The guide brings together digital support for people with disabilities into one place, including assistive technology, connectivity and digital skills training.

## **MISSION THREE: Building digital skills, confidence and capabilities for all with trusted faces in trusted places**

- **Get Online GM Digital Skills and Support Finder map**: this map, based on the DERI tool with input from GM Local Authority DI Leads, highlights digital skills activities, databanks, and online centres in community spaces across each local borough. Empowering residents, sectors, and services, it connects people to essential digital skills activity and support. This tool is being used by GM Job Centres to signpost job seekers to improve their digital skills and complete applications confidently.

Three additional new initiatives are currently underway:

### **5.1. Digital Champion Volunteer Network**

Launched in October 2024, this 'train the trainer' program, a collaboration funded by telecoms organisation Cellnex, and delivered by social enterprise, Starting Point, empowers community volunteers with the confidence and skills to teach and advance



digital inclusion across Greater Manchester. Volunteers will gain the skills to help those at risk of digital exclusion—under-25s, over-75s, and disabled individuals—develop essential digital skills.

The initiative aims to boost digital confidence, improve access to online services, and enhance social connectivity for vulnerable residents. By fostering a network of skilled and confident volunteers, the program seeks to build a more empowered, connected, and inclusive community, scaling its impact region-wide.

## **5.2. Strengthening Communities Digital Inclusion Fund**

This is a dedicated financial resource, backed through Retained Business Rates agreed by GMCA, established to support community-led initiatives aimed at reducing digital exclusion within 1km/ 15 minutes walking distance for residents in underserved areas of support.

This fund seeks to empower local boroughs to develop and implement projects that enhance face to face digital skills activity and access to technology, with a particular focus on support being available for residents in areas of high risk of digital exclusion that remain underserved with digital inclusion face to face activity and support.

Applications have been received from every local authority in GM and £70k grants have been issued to most boroughs. It will be formally announced at the end of January.

## **5.3. Technology Refurbishment Schemes in Local Boroughs**

Most Local Authority boroughs have a technology refurbishment partner as a sustainable method to combat digital poverty through device redistribution, reducing e-waste and environmental impact.

## **6. Addressing concerns over PSTN switchover**

The switch-off of the Public Switched Telephony Network (PSTN) continues to be a significant concern for Greater Manchester. As reported to the GMCA in both September 2023 and April 2024, the primary issues revolve around vulnerable people who heavily rely on landline services being cut-off. There are concerns over how the transition may disrupt access to essential services for some, less digitally savvy people, and that telecare users are left without working devices.

We have made considerable representation to Government and industry on this subject, including a co-signed letter in March 2024 from several Mayoral Combined Authorities and led by GMCA to the Secretaries of State for Health & Social Care; Science, Innovation & Technology; and Housing, Communities & Local Government. Following Government

intervention, BT has delayed its rollout by 13 months until January 2027, however concerns remain about resident communications and engagement, consistency of working practices, and a common definition of vulnerability.

These were emphasised at a further GM roundtable event in November 2024 where key stakeholders were gathered to take stock of progress and discuss the ongoing risks and concerns. Industry and Government engagement continues.

## **7. Opportunities and Risks**

The new Government's commitment to writing a national digital inclusion strategy, the first since 2014, offers a tremendous opportunity and GMCA is actively collaborating with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) to ensure that Greater Manchester's needs and strengths are well-represented in this strategy.

Similarly, digital inclusion has been embedded in the emerging model for "LiveWell" in Greater Manchester, a key theme in our priority planned and of government engagement.

The strength of community working on digital inclusion in GM is very strong, powered by local resource but too often in a fixed-term manner. Financial pressures on individual organisations make it challenging to prioritise digital inclusion. Despite these constraints, industry support continues to be strong and welcome although securing this support through meaningful collaborations takes time, energy and has its limitations. Procurement that emphasises social value remains an important means of ensuring sustained support.

The ongoing digital inclusion efforts in Greater Manchester present many opportunities and challenges, however this topic is undoubtedly an ongoing issue that requires continuous focus. The continued commitment of local councils to improve access to services and focus resource on actively coordinating local networks to strengthen capability and resilience are key to overcoming these challenges. Advancing digital equity in the region is a considerable driver for improved health and wellbeing outcomes, better jobs and economic empowerment, and a request will be being made for continued funding support in 2025/6 for a multi-year programme commitment and continued commitment to ensure the development of local economic plans prioritise digital equity. Whilst Prime Minister Kier Starmer announces a [blueprint](#) to turbocharge AI, improve productivity and cost savings by digitising health services and processes, it is important to do this in hand with recognition on the responsibility to those who are not online and provide alternative non-digital ways for people to interact with them. Whilst there is a push to digitisation, we have a responsibility to ensure that individuals can feel these benefits too.