

Towards a Welsh Minimum Digital Living Standard: Summary

Simeon Yates, Katherine Hill, Chloe Blackwell,
Emma Stone, Gianfranco Polizzi, Rebecca Harris,
Jeanette D'Arcy, Abigail Davis, Matt Padley, Dan
Roberts, Jocelle Lovell and Hamish Laing
February 2023

This summary covers a project commissioned by the Welsh Government to develop a Minimum Digital Living Standard for Wales (W-MDLS). The project report provides full details of findings summarised here. This builds on a UK wide project funded by the Nuffield Foundation and Nominet to develop a UK Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS).



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government



Loughborough
University



UNIVERSITY OF
LIVERPOOL

ewmpas



Good Things
Foundation



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

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 deliberative work with Welsh and UK households developed a basket of goods, services, and skills needed by households with children to meet this definition as a proof-of-concept.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Welsh Government to consider how a Minimum Digital Living Standard can be used to ensure no household in Wales is below the threshold, as part of a vision for digital inclusion in Wales.
- Welsh Government to work with Central Government, the regulator and telecommunications sector to ensure that the broadband and mobile data infrastructure is in place so that the standard can be achieved where policy and regulatory levers lie outside devolved powers.
- Welsh Government to use the Minimum Digital Living Standard for Wales research to inform and measure progress towards the Status of Digital Inclusion National Indicator.
- Welsh Government and local governments across Wales to use the standard to catalyse coordinated, collaborative action across sectors and identify tangible policy and practical actions to help meet this for every household in Wales.
- Welsh Government to play its full role in promoting parity of the Welsh language in the design and delivery of digital systems, services, training, and support in Wales.
- Organisations based in Wales - across public, private, voluntary and community sectors - can use the Minimum Digital Living Standard for Wales to assess their own approach, support collaboration, and direct resources into digital inclusion.
- Welsh Government to commission further work (building on the proof of concept) to understand the implications of the Minimum Digital Living Standard on a wider range of households and communities, and to convene stakeholders to identify opportunities for collaborative working to achieve the standard.

Background

Digital inequalities encompass differences, lacks and limitations in access, skills and capabilities that have significant tangible consequences for citizens, households, and communities. In Wales, 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. Wales faces distinct challenges in terms of digital inclusion, in particular issues of language, social deprivation, isolated rural populations, and an ageing population. This project aims to move research and policy debate on digital inclusion forwards by building a shared understanding alongside more robust measures to guide interventions – measures which reflect the meaning and consequences of digital inclusion and exclusion for citizens, households, and communities in Wales.

The Minimum Digital Living Standard is a citizen-centred definition of what counts as digital inclusion or exclusion. The 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 ‘digital participation threshold’, 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, the MDLS has initially focussed on the needs of households with children through a series of focus groups with parents and young people to establish what they think families need to meet this threshold. This includes devices, internet connection as well as skills.

The Welsh Government commissioned the MDLS project team to help develop a Minimum Digital Living Standard for Wales. The project comprised a series of research activities: engagement with members of the Digital Inclusion Alliance Wales; a literature review; online interviews and a survey with stakeholders from across the Welsh digital landscape. The team also held deliberative focus groups with members of the public in Wales to test and explore the relevance of the MDLS definition to Wales, and the contents of the MDLS for urban households with children – including its relevance in rural areas.



Key Insights from the Research

1

Members of the public felt the definition of a Minimum Digital Living Standard and the contents of the MDLS for urban households with children were appropriate and reflected needs in Wales. Discussion centred around barriers to meet those needs.

2

Stakeholders in Wales (across public, private, voluntary and community sectors) welcomed the ideas of a national benchmark for digital inclusion for Wales. They felt this could:

- Support coordination across Wales, encouraging the Welsh Government and others to take more risks and work more collaboratively to achieve such a standard
- Enhance and develop their digital offers as organisations based or working in Wales, directing more resources into supporting the digital lives of people they support
- Consolidate a long-term commitment to improving digital equality in Wales, driving prioritisation of digital inclusion higher up the agenda for policy and investment.

3

Most stakeholders supported the MDLS definition for Wales. Stakeholders identified key areas to consider in taking forward a Minimum Digital Living Standard for Wales:

- Affordability barriers, particularly in the context of the current cost of living crisis
- Infrastructure barriers - broadband and mobile data infrastructure, but also wider infrastructure especially (but not limited to) rural areas in Wales
- Parity of the Welsh language in digital systems, services, training, and support
- Ability of providers and organisations to help households achieve the standard
- Importance of recognising, identifying, and addressing equalities, diversity, and inclusion
- Identifying roles for the Welsh Government, local government, and others, including to influence central Government, regulators, and UK companies on behalf of Wales.

Towards a Minimum Digital Living Standard for Wales

The Minimum Digital Living Standard is a citizen-centred definition of what counts as digital inclusion or exclusion. The methodology for developing the MDLS comprised focus groups with members of the public in the UK, including Wales. The Welsh Government funded the MDLS team to hold additional focus groups with parents and young people in Wales to test and explore the relevance of the MDLS definition, and the contents of the MDLS for urban households with children in Wales. People taking part in these groups lived in rural as well as urban areas across Wales.

The groups confirmed that both the MDLS definition and the MDLS contents ([summarised in the table on page 6](#)) were appropriate for Wales. Discussion centred around the important factors influencing people's abilities in Wales to meet the threshold, specifically:

- Home broadband speed, connection quality and reliability, with implications for affordability
- Patchy mobile data coverage, particularly in rural areas but also in urban areas - and therefore the skills and knowledge required to manage mobile data usage
- Wider infrastructure - for example, proximity to library services for printing in rural areas
- Adults' and young people's concerns around potential digital risks and harms, with parents especially concerned about digital safety for children and how to manage this.



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 families 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"> 1 Using device functions 2 Using apps and programmes 3 Downloading apps and programmes 3 Saving and recovering documents 3 Connecting devices to the internet/hotspots 4 Changing settings
Engagement online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 Using Zoom/Teams/Google classrooms 3 Performing browser searches 4 Using school apps (homework, school-home communication) 5 Creating an email account and sending emails 5 Online bookings and forms (e.g., appointments) 5 Cashless/online payments
Managing and monitoring digital devices and data usage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 Creating and sorting files and folders 2 Turning off devices properly 3 Deleting old files to manage device storage 4 Monitoring and managing phone data usage

UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING DIGITAL RISK

Managing security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 Using secure passwords 3 Knowing about and avoiding in-app purchases 4 Using phone safety features out and about (e.g., 'triple tap' or 'SOS') 5 Monitoring banking activity online 5 Removing bank card details to avoid accidental purchases Knowing how to apply parental controls
Interacting with others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 Evaluating what details to share online 2 Identifying risks (e.g., scams, unsafe links, catfishers, groomers) 3 Evaluating friend requests 3 Managing social pressures and time online
Sharing and receiving information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 Evaluating quality of information (e.g., identifying mis/disinformation or unrealistic images) 3 Knowing how to avoid and report inappropriate/offensive content 4 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

Value of a Minimum Digital Living Standard for Wales

Stakeholders supported the idea of setting a national benchmark for Wales.

“I think bringing a minimum digital living standard in is going to change the whole focus” *(charity leader)*

Most stakeholders agreed with the definition and identified areas to consider in taking forward a Minimum Digital Living Standard for Wales.

Stakeholder identified key areas to consider in taking forward a Minimum Digital Living Standard for Wales.

- **Affordability** - reflecting the current cost of living crisis, and concern about levels of deprivation in some parts of Wales. Some stakeholders reflected that even discounted ‘social tariffs’ for broadband can be more than some households can afford currently.

“In terms of that cost and affordability side, it's not just broadband at the moment, it's electricity, if can't pay your electricity bill, then you can't access the internet” *(social housing provider)*

- **Rurality** - a recurring theme, albeit some felt it was not distinctive to Wales. There was some concern that Wales was lagging the rest of the UK in broadband and mobile data infrastructure, with recognition that extra investment would be needed to meet the standard across all areas. Rurality also emerged regarding wider infrastructure such as library services and community support.

- **Parity of the Welsh language** - came through strongly from some stakeholders, with expectations around the design and delivery of digital systems, services, and training. This can be challenging where these are commissioned, produced, and hosted outside Wales and outside the UK.
- **Equalities and diversity** - for those working with groups who are more likely to be digitally excluded (such as older adults, disabled people, people experiencing homelessness), the importance of reflecting their specific needs, circumstances and choices was a key message, including the choice to not use digital. Important links need to be made between the standard and wider equity, diversity and inclusion commitments and legislation.

Stakeholders felt that a Minimum Digital Living Standard for Wales could encourage the Welsh Government, companies, and other organisations to take more risks, work more collaboratively and coordinate efforts to achieve such a standard for Wales. Stakeholders felt it could enhance and develop their own digital offers and help to prioritise digital inclusion in public policy and investment.

Next steps

A decision on a second phase of the Welsh MDLS project is due by March 2023. If agreed, this will explore – with citizens, stakeholder, and citizen representative groups – what will be required to move towards achieving the Minimum Digital Living Standard for Wales. It will include issues around delivery as well as people’s perspectives on what support they might need to overcome barriers to reaching MDLS. This phase will generate recommendations about how to implement the MDLS for Wales.

For Further Information

This summary covers a project commissioned by the Welsh Government to develop a Minimum Digital Living Standard for Wales. This builds on a UK wide project funded by the Nuffield Foundation (under grant number FR000022935) and Nominet to develop a UK Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS). The idea of an MDLS was developed by the MDLS project team (University of Liverpool, Loughborough University, Good Things Foundation and City University). The next phase of the MDLS project is a nationally representative survey and consultative events.