

West Sussex Digital Inclusion, Access, and Safety Strategic Framework

2024 – 2027



Foreword

In an ever-increasing digital world, we recognise the importance of and commit to tackling the inequalities in West Sussex relating to digital inclusion. Digital skills and access are a key enabler to improve the quality of life for residents in West Sussex by supporting possibilities to access education opportunities, information, financial and health care services, improve employability and keep connected with friends and loved ones.

Our strategic framework involves working in collaboration with a range of partners across the county with the aim of tackling the digital divide. Digital safety is considered a vital priority which will be embedded throughout any digital service and support work undertaken.

We will work to best support and empower those who want to be more digitally enabled, whilst providing access to services for those who are unable or choose not to be connected.

There is a detailed action plan which underpins the long-term ambitions and commitments set out in this strategic framework. This framework contributes to the county councils Digital Strategy and overarching priorities as set out in our Council Plan.

Cllr Duncan Crow, Cabinet Member for Community Support Fire and Rescue, West Sussex County Council



Introduction

“Digital” permeates everything. How we communicate, work, learn, travel and entertain ourselves today is a world away from 20 years ago. The COVID-19 pandemic has made everyone aware of the importance of digital skills and highlighted the digital divide for many. Digital skills are classed by the government as ‘essential’ to live in our society, yet it is estimated over 138,000 adults in West Sussex don’t have all the essential digital skills for life and over 43,000 are estimated to be completely offline.

The residents more at risk of digital exclusion are those who are most vulnerable in society, including people who are; older, disabled, unemployed, living on low income, living alone and those with low educational attainment. With the current rises in the cost of living, these are the same groups that will acutely feel the severity of rising bills and food prices. Digital skills and access are an enabler to support a huge range of positive outcomes including keeping connected with loved ones to reduce social isolation and feelings of loneliness, improving employability, access to services, information and improving health and wellbeing. It is important that we improve digital skills and confidence to ensure that communities are resilient to future technological changes so that people aren’t further excluded as technology advances.

The problem of digital exclusion is too great for any single organisation to solve alone. As such, we have set up a West Sussex Digital Inclusion, Access and Safety Partnership to enable us to work collaboratively with local organisations. The membership includes the County Council, voluntary sector organisations, District and Borough Councils, health services and businesses.

We have developed this strategic framework and the underpinning action plan with engagement from a range of stakeholders including residents, public services, voluntary and community groups. The scope of the framework includes residents who are digitally excluded and recognises the importance of digital safety as part of any local delivery. This work aims to embed digital inclusion into communities and organisations to make the work sustainable and have long lasting impact. We will support anyone who is digitally excluded to access the benefits of the internet. This framework also recognises there will be residents who will never be able to use a digital service or will need assistance to do so.



Supporting our corporate plan priorities

Our Digital Inclusion Access and Safety Strategic Framework supports the priorities outlined in our [Council Plan \(2021-2025\)](#):

1. Keeping people safe from vulnerable situations: ensuring that our residents know how to stay safe online is a key element of this strategy.
2. A sustainable and prosperous economy: improvements to our digital infrastructure and residents' digital skill levels will enable more efficient ways of working, helping businesses to grow and support our economy.
3. Helping people and communities to fulfil their potential: being digitally included enables improvements to education, access to better work, improves health and wellbeing, living independently as well as reducing health inequalities.
4. Making best use of resources: making digital inclusion a part of our culture, will allow us to work more effectively and efficiently. We will increase the number of our staff who can support residents to engage with us through digital channels. This will both empower our residents and provide staff with more capacity to support those residents who are not able or willing to use digital services.

The underpinning theme in our Council plan is protecting our environment. Encouraging organisations and residents to recycle old digital devices to be refurbished and provided to residents who are digitally excluded, will support our climate change commitments.

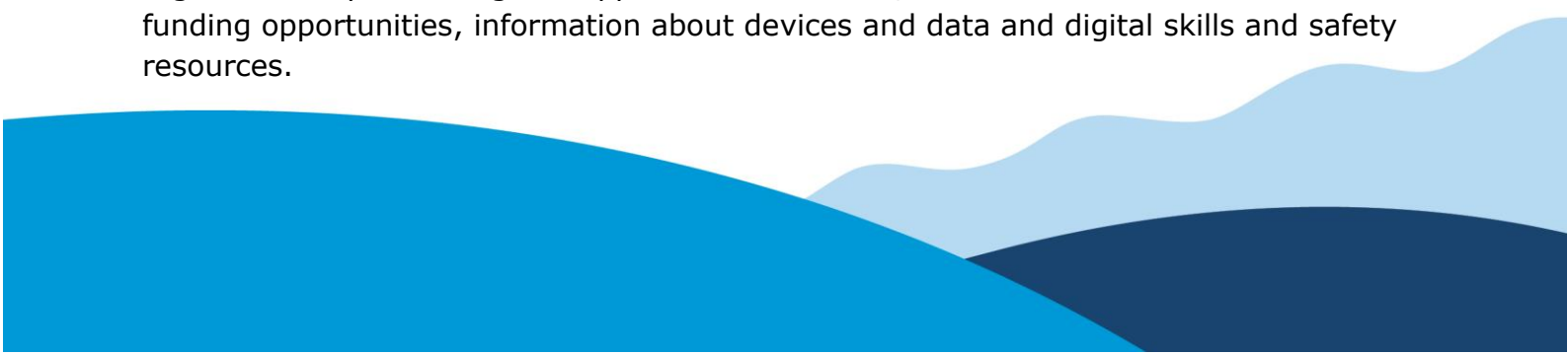
Supporting residents to have digital skills, digital access and to be safe online will also contribute to achieving many other strategic aims as part of policy and strategies for West Sussex County Council and other local organisations. These are listed in references and research.

What we are already doing

Currently, all [West Sussex libraries](#) provide free access to Wi-Fi and PCs (across all 36 libraries) with trained staff and volunteer support to help people get online and access digital services and resources. Over 1200 people a year access our Digital Volunteer support sessions and library staff answer over 24,000 digital enquiries annually.

The West Sussex Digital Inclusion, Access and Safety Partnership has been established to facilitate collaborative working, share best practice and support West Sussex residents.

A dedicated [webpage](#) resource has been created and is hosted on the West Sussex County Council website. The webpages host information about which local organisations provide digital support to their clients, customers or residents. Local funding opportunities, information about devices and data and digital skills and safety resources.



Our Digital Safety team deliver a range of training and resources for professionals and residents. The [Safer West Sussex Partnership](#) (SWSP) supports a Fraud Prevention Working Group and operates a coordinated approach to reducing crime and online related harm.

The West Sussex [Digital Safety Volunteers](#) offer a range of online safety information and take part in a number of awareness raising activities. This includes sharing information via communication channels, delivering talks and attending local events.

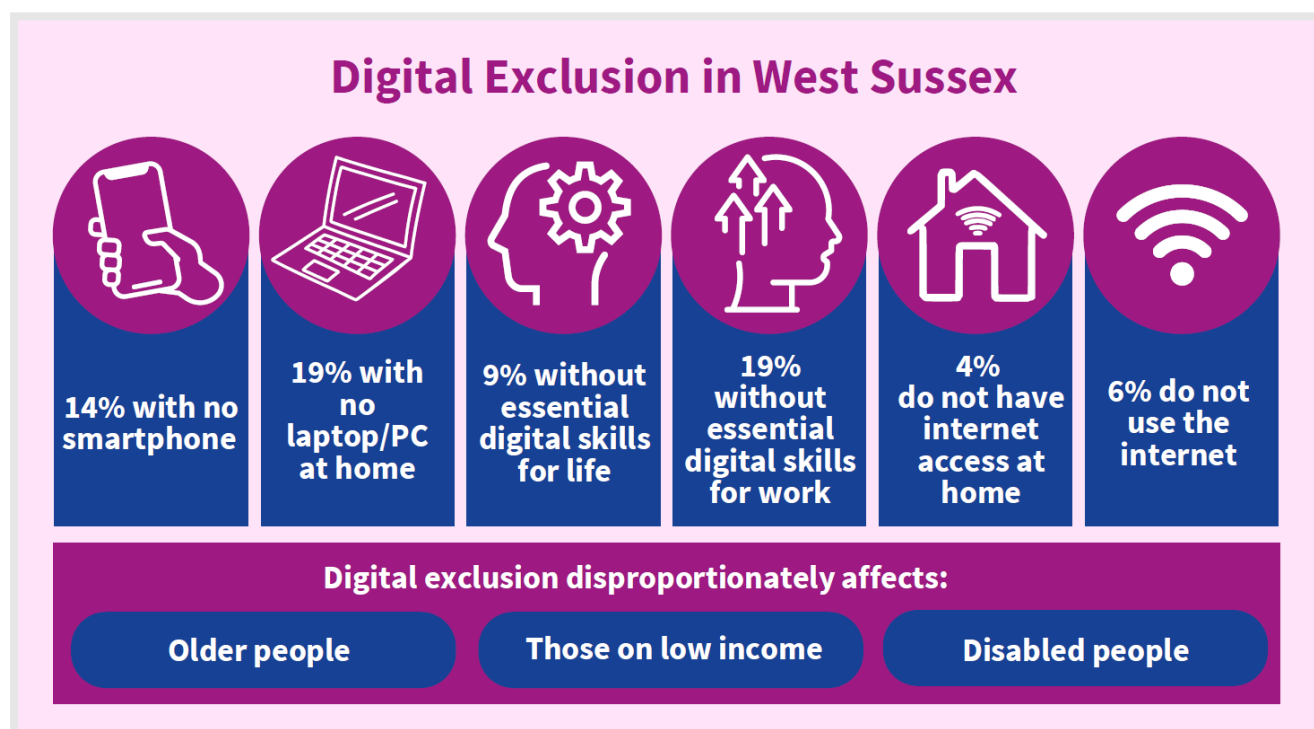
The West Sussex **Digital Strategy** outlines our long-term vision, and key themes, of how we make the most of digital opportunities and ways of working. The Digital Strategy will bring together existing plans, policies, strategies and digital focused projects taking place around the county council to ensure we work towards the same goal of making things digitally safer and more convenient for our residents, and our partners.

Our [Digital Infrastructure Strategy](#) (2023-2030) outlines the ambition to ensure that we have the digital infrastructure needed to support our economy to thrive, to improve our quality of life and to protect our natural environment. We will continue to build on our solid foundations to further enable innovation, efficient use of resources, productivity gains, connected spaces, people and things. This includes enabling future-ready infrastructure that will support our diverse economy and stimulate growth and innovation; enabling the creation of connected places, unlocking value for communities, businesses, public services and the environment; and to improve access to connectivity in hard-to-reach areas, reducing the digital divide and unlocking the potential of our rural economy.

Our [Life You Want to Lead Adult Social Care Strategy](#) (2022–2025) aims to work with partners to promote digital inclusion and explore opportunities to enable people, carers and the social care workforce to understand the benefits of assisted technology.



The County Context

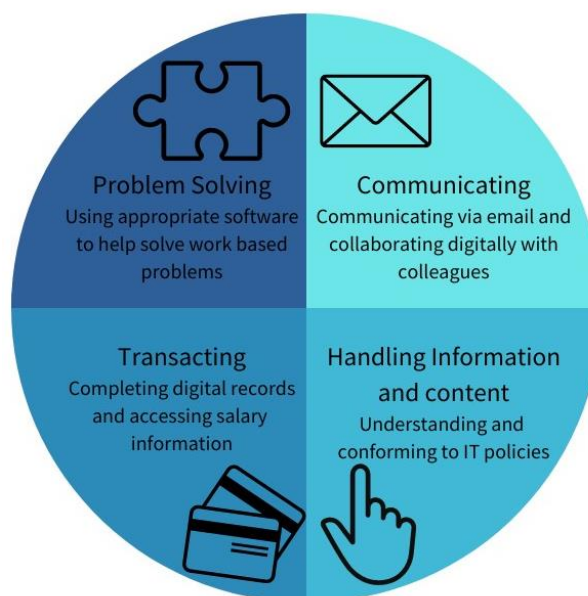


Digital skills are of ever-increasing importance in our society. Yet recent research shows **that an estimated 13% of adults (94,500 people) in West Sussex** either don't use the internet or need support to do so. A total of 6% (43,600) of adults are estimated not to be online. The findings from research with residents show higher figures than suggested in national statistics. Many more of our residents, around 65,400 (9%) of adults in West Sussex, lack the full Essential Digital Skills for Life. These skills are needed to safely benefit from and participate in the digital world that we live in today.

Essential Digital Skills for Life



Essential Digital Skills for Work



Digital exclusion disproportionately affects the most vulnerable in West Sussex. Older or disabled people and those on low incomes are much more likely to not use the internet.

Older adults

West Sussex residents aged 75+ are much more likely to not use the internet than younger people. At a national level, the issue of digital exclusion in later life has become starkly apparent. It is of course true, that the internet is being used more by older people over time and that the pandemic has acted as a catalyst in this respect. However, it needs to be considered that this is more about existing older online users broadening their range of online activities than those who are entirely new to digital devices getting engaged and utilising them. Research suggests a lack of digital skills and confidence is a big barrier stopping many of today's over-75-year-olds going online, alongside the associated costs.

Disability

People with a long-term physical or mental health condition, or disability, are less likely to be frequent internet users. Local research for West Sussex mirrors national statistics. It is recognised that some of the key barriers for those with a disability to use the internet include website and device accessibility, financial constraints and access to venues for support with learning. There are also a number of barriers in relation to motivation and skills which include lack of confidence, fear of breaking the device or being scammed, low literacy skills and reliance on 'proxy users'.

Low income

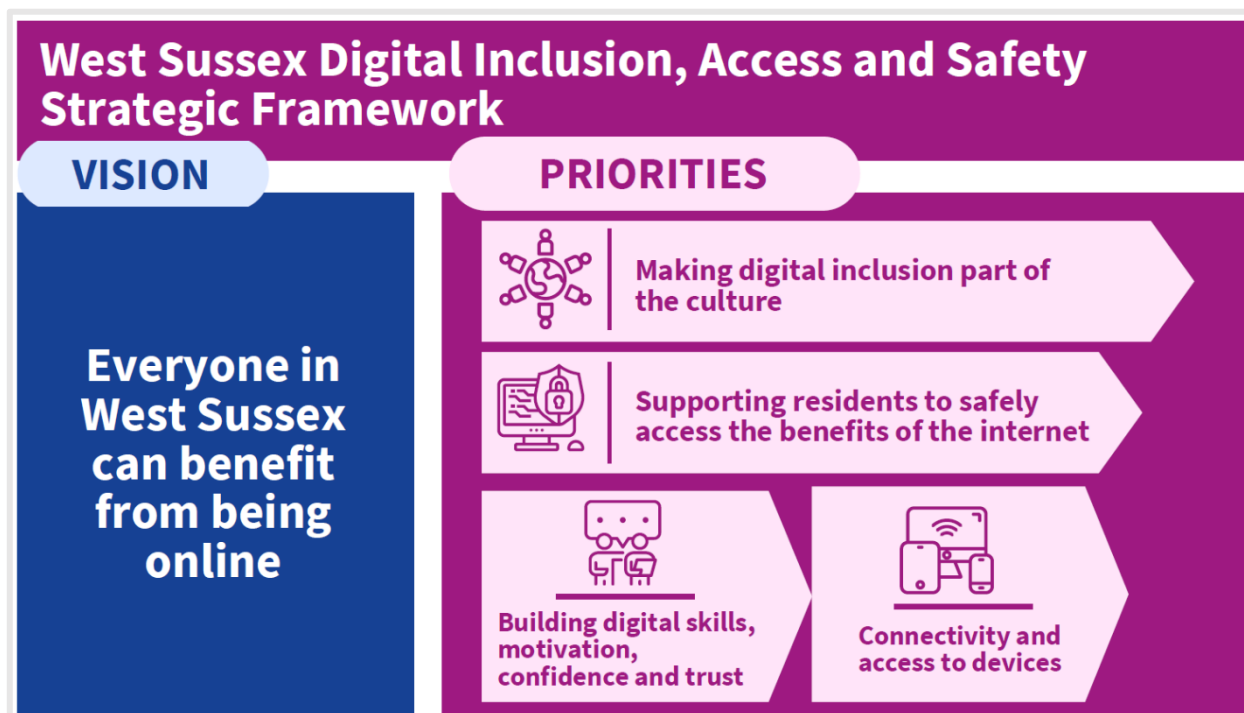
Residents in West Sussex with lower incomes are more likely to not use the internet. Nationally, those with lower incomes have less skills in the Essential Digital Skills groups, compared to those on higher incomes.

Cost of living pressures may be pushing more people into digital exclusion. Reports show that the rising cost of living is impacting people's ability to go online. This will include affordability of devices themselves as well as accessing the internet via broadband or data.

Digital exclusion may in turn exacerbate cost of living pressures, as items bought online can be cheaper than in shops. In an increasingly online world, digital exclusion inhibits people's ability to apply for jobs, access training opportunities and engage with many public services.



Our Vision and Priorities



Our vision is that everyone in West Sussex can benefit from being online and is able to access and experience safely the wide-ranging opportunities that being online gives them. Everyone in West Sussex should be able to fully participate in our digital society.

To achieve this, we will focus on four priorities and state our ambitions and commitments.

1. Making digital inclusion part of the culture

Long-term ambitions:

- Embed digital inclusion, access, and safety into daily working practices of the County Council.
- Establish strategic oversight and a governance framework for delivery of digital inclusion in the County.
- All residents have the support they require to access online council services.
- Residents who lack digital skills or do not have access to the internet are at the heart of any customer facing digital transformation projects.
- Residents are asked at first point of contact with the County Council if they have a digital device, and if they are confident to use it.
- Champion this work across West Sussex with influential organisations.

We Commit to:

- Incorporating digital inclusion into future directorate strategies.
- Including digital inclusion, access and safety when designing our digital services.

- Raising awareness of digital inclusion work across the County, through the West Sussex Digital Skills, Access and Safety Partnership.
- Coordinating digital inclusion initiatives with partners, aligning funding opportunities and establishing principles for partnership working.
- Encouraging partners to ask residents about their digital skills and access to help us target support.
- Exploring opportunities to support and fund digital inclusion, access and safety work from organisations, charitable trusts and leverage social value from relevant contracts.

2. Supporting residents to safely access the benefits of the internet.

Long-term ambitions:


- All residents are aware of how to stay safe online.
- Organisations are supported to embed online safety practice and guidance as part of any digital inclusion delivery.
- Online safety is considered as part of any digital transformation or service delivery work.

We Commit to:

- Raising awareness of online safety to residents.
- Delivering online safety training to organisations and residents.
- Developing and delivering online safety support, resources and engagement activity with residents and professionals.
- Further developing and delivering the Digital Ambassador initiative across the county.
- Working with partners to deliver digital safety best practice.

3. Building digital skills, confidence, motivation, and trust.

Long-term ambitions:

- All residents have access to person centred digital support across the county.
 - Any digital support recognises that residents require repeated opportunities to access support from trusted sources.
 - Residents who are older, disabled or living on low incomes are more likely to be digitally excluded and have the support they need.
 - Digital becomes part of the conversation that we have with residents to help build their motivation to participate in digital society safely.
 - Local organisations have access to the Digital Inclusion Access and Safety Partnership for help and support with delivering digital support.
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We Commit to:


- Raising awareness of digital support in West Sussex to County Council staff, partners and residents.
- Training more Digital Champions across the County – including our customer facing staff.
- Ensuring our staff know how to triage residents and direct to them to the right source of help for digital skills support.
- Ensuring that online safety training & awareness is embedded in all work.
- Raising awareness to staff and partners of the barriers to digital inclusion.
- Working with local partners to ensure that any provision is of a high standard to make sure that residents receive the best quality digital support.
- Working with local organisations who support residents who are older, disabled or living on low incomes to engage and empower their clients to access the internet safely.
- Capturing good practice and innovation from our partners to share as best practice and as inspiration for future development.
- Creating a common approach to assess digital exclusion to include level of skills, confidence and access to devices.

4. Connectivity and access to devices

Long-term ambitions:

- All residents have access to a suitable device for safe access to the internet.
- Residents have equal access to broadband throughout the county as part of the Digital Infrastructure Strategy (2023-2030).

We Commit to:

- Exploring the scale of device and data needs across West Sussex.
 - Working with the Digital Inclusion, Access and Safety Partnership to pilot sustainable solutions to access to devices.
 - Enabling the availability of low cost and free-to-use devices in public settings, with access to a range of devices and operating systems.
 - Raising awareness of affordable and free options to access the internet, including social tariffs for broadband and free Wi-Fi in public locations.
 - Encouraging recycling of digital devices to ensure access to low cost-devices.
 - On behalf of resident's access free data from providers.
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The Framework

This framework entails the overarching strategic focus and will have an associated detailed action plan, from which the Digital Inclusion, Access and Safety Partnership will deliver to.

Making digital inclusion part of the culture <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Establish strategic oversight and a governance framework for delivery of digital inclusion in the County.• Make digital part of the conversation. Embed digital inclusion within all County Council work streams, public and community services.• Raise awareness of the barriers to digital inclusion.• Continue to learn from and implement best practice on digital inclusion and staying safe online.• Seek opportunities to support and fund digital inclusion, access and safety work from organisations, charitable trusts and leverage social value from relevant contracts.	
Supporting residents to safely access the benefits of the internet <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Raise awareness among residents of the risks and how to stay safe online.• Provide training and share best practice to organisations to enable them to incorporate safety guidance and practices in the digital support they provide.	
Digital skills, motivation, confidence & trust <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Train and support more digital champions.• Ensure that online safety training & awareness is embedded in all work and promote best practice. Facilitate a joined-up approach. Signpost to provision and resources.• Raise awareness of digital inclusion support for residents, the benefits of technology and how to stay safe online.• Create a common approach to assess digital exclusion e.g., Level of skills, confidence, and access to devices for residents.	Connectivity and access to devices <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explore the scale of device and data needs and pilot sustainable solutions.• Enable availability of low cost and free-to-use devices in public settings, with access to a range of devices and operating systems.• Promote social tariffs and availability of free Wi-Fi to residents.• Access free data from providers and the National Data Bank.

References and Resources

The Digital Inclusion, Access and Safety strategic framework is aligned with the priorities in our [Council Plan 2021-25](#).

Improving digital inclusion, access and safety for our residents will also support several other strategies, including:

[Start Well, Live Well, Age Well: West Sussex Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2019-2024](#)

[The life you want to lead – Adult Social Care Strategy 2022-2025](#)

[Joint Carers Strategy 2021-26](#)

[West Sussex Education and Learning Strategy 2023-2025](#)

[Economy Reset Plan 2020-24](#)

[Social Value Framework](#)

[Channel Strategy and Vision for the future](#)

[IT Strategy 2016-2020](#)

[West Sussex OpenDigital - Digital Infrastructure Strategy 2023-2030: Connectivity for people, places and things](#)

[Climate change strategy 2020-2030](#)

References:

[Department of Education, 2019: Essential Digital Skills Framework](#)

[Digital Poverty Alliance Evidence Review 2022](#)

[Lloyds Consumer Digital Index 2020](#)

[ONS Internet Users 2020](#)

[Lloyds Consumer Digital Index 2019](#)

[thinkBroadband](#)

[Citizens Online Phone Poll of 302 adults in West Sussex, 2023.](#)

[ONS Internet users, UK: 2020](#)

[Institute of Development Studies & Citizens Online 2022: Digital Poverty in the UK.](#)

