

A Minimum Digital Living Standard for UK Households in 2025: Briefing Paper (June 2025)

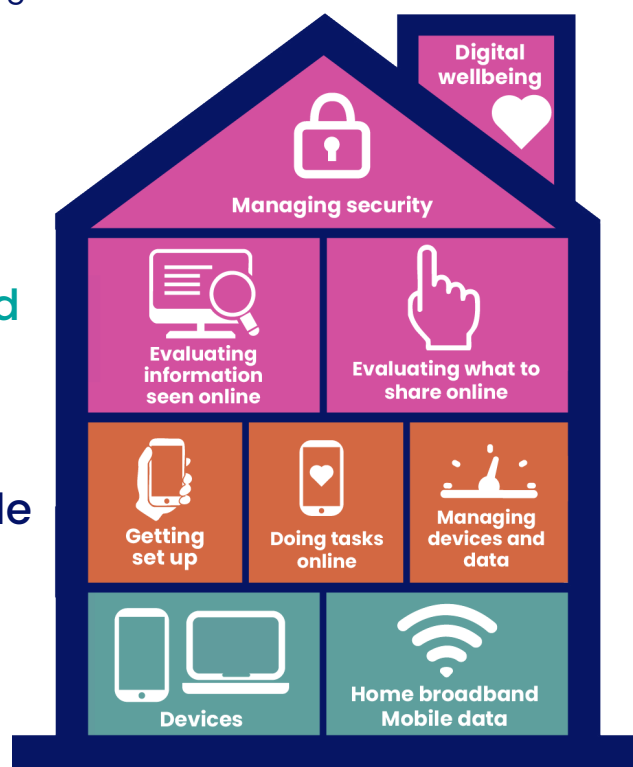
The Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS) is a benchmark, developed with members of the public, for what households need to feel digitally included.

We now have a single MDLS, developed through a series of discussion groups with working-age and pension-age households, and households with children, in urban and rural areas. Grounded in people's lives, MDLS helps us focus on the holistic nature of digital inclusion and how we can work together to achieve this.

This briefing outlines what is in the MDLS for UK Households in 2025, and how MDLS can be used to inform policy, provision, and partnership working.

What is the Minimum Digital Living Standard definition?

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



What is unique about the Minimum Digital Living Standard?

MDLS is a minimum that reflects everyday norms in a digital society. It is:

- **Bottom-up:** developed by members of the public
- **Holistic:** covering goods and services, and knowledge and skills
- **Household:** in contrast to most measures which focus on individuals
- **A starting point,** as some households may have additional needs
- **A reflection of our digital society** in the UK today.

MDLS is not only for government. Digital inclusion is a shared responsibility.

The full report is here:

[A Minimum Digital Living Standard for UK Households in 2025.](#)



The Minimum Digital Living Standard for UK Households

The table below sets out the core MDLS 'contents' common across household types. A detailed version, including additional needs, is in the full report.

Digital goods and services	
Home broadband	With sufficient reliability and speed to support all household members to access the internet at the same time OR unlimited mobile data in place of home broadband
Mobile phone and mobile data	- One entry-level smart phone per adult 5GB to 15GB per month mobile data for all household members with their own mobile phone OR unlimited mobile data in place of home broadband
Large screen device	One large screen device (laptop, tablet or PC) per household
Television and viewing	- One TV (or TV-capable large-screen device) per household - TV licence or entry-level TV subscription service per household
Functional knowledge and skills	
Getting set up (devices and connection)	- Using device functions - Connecting to the internet - Changing settings and navigating options
Doing tasks and activities online	- Internet searching - Using apps and programmes - Completing online forms - Sending and receiving emails - Making online payments
Managing and maintaining (devices and connection)	- Monitoring and maintaining device storage - Managing and monitoring mobile data
Critical knowledge and skills	
Managing security	- Using secure passwords - Evaluating connection security - Making safe payments
Evaluating information seen online	- Identifying and avoiding scams - Assessing information quality and credibility - Customising, blocking and reporting accounts and content
Evaluating what to share online	- Protecting personal information - Assessing online identities and friend requests - Considering digital footprint
Thinking about digital wellbeing	- Managing time spent online - Managing social expectations and pressures - Practicing empathy online

What are the main differences between household types?

The full report shares the views and experiences of members of the public – their reasons for deciding what households need to ‘connect, communicate and engage with opportunities safely and with confidence’.

Views coalesced around core MDLS needs, while also noting variations, such as:

- **Households with children have the most needs overall**, both for skills, and for devices and connectivity (which are also shaped by household size).
- **Pension-age groups felt smartphones were essential** for out and about; working-age groups saw it as the go-to device in and out of the home.
- **Pension-age groups added an option of a landline** in areas with poor mobile coverage, particularly with a risk of power cuts. Concern and confusion emerged about the switchover of phone lines to digital.
- **Ability to change settings** (e.g. font size) was most salient in pension-age groups but also identified as important for all groups.
- **Ability to use parental controls** was a need in households with children.
- **Access to online gaming** was important for children’s social inclusion and friendships. Extra kit may not be needed but it can put more demand on devices and connection, and requires skills like evaluating friend requests.
- **Young people identified four stages** of digital use over time which shape their needs for skills: accessing devices; using online multiplayer games; getting a first mobile phone; and later use as children go through school, do homework online, socialise online, and travel independently.

What shapes a household’s ability to meet the MDLS?

Households will vary widely in their ability to meet MDLS needs, depending on financial circumstances, local infrastructure, and access to support. Other circumstances (such as disability or health conditions, housing situation) will also influence both households’ needs, and their ability to meet needs.

Over 4 in 10 (45%) households with children were below the MDLS in a face-to-face UK survey of 1,582 households with children published last year (MDLS 2024). This correlated with factors closely linked to child poverty, such as having a low income; being a lone parent and/or larger household; living in a deprived area.

How ‘future proof’ is the MDLS?

MDLS reflects everyday life and society today. Given the pace of technological change, MDLS would benefit from being updated regularly to stay relevant and reflect technological shifts which impact everyday lives and services.

What did MDLS groups say about...

Affordability?

Across MDLS groups, people expressed concerns about affordability, value for money, and costs. Meeting the MDLS is not a one-time expense but an ongoing financial commitment – for example, the need for household devices to be in working order, secure, and compatible with software used in online services. Households with children face increased costs as children age and require their own phones and data plans.

Infrastructure?

Issues with broadband provision and mobile data connections were key themes in the rural MDLS groups, and in some urban MDLS groups. This had implications for ability to meet MDLS, the balance between mobile and broadband provision (relying more on one if the other was inadequate), and costs. Rural groups also talked about limited choice and paying more for workarounds (like satellite).

Safety?

Digital safety and well-being of households were significant themes for all ages. Experiences varied (e.g. use of online banking, public WiFi) but it was agreed that everyone needs to be aware of device and internet security, and the use of information to spread false information or assist scams. Rapid changes, such as the expansion of AI, meant this was an ongoing process.

Confidence?

MDLS groups frequently raised confidence as an issue in relation to skills. They felt a certain degree of self-confidence in one's ability to carry out tasks online and recover from mistakes (a 'trial and error' approach) was needed. Groups also discussed the challenges of keeping up with technology, and constant change as a source of fear or pressure.

Learning skills?

MDLS groups felt the main ways to gain skills and confidence were: independent learning, getting help from friends and family, through work or school. They felt that while couples can support each other, each individual needs their own skills, especially for security and to protect yourself online 'in the moment'. Trusted organisations (such as councils, libraries, community organisations) were seen as important sources of support. Groups discussed inconsistency in quality, availability, and funding of formal support, and more limited support for working-age adults compared to other groups.

Opportunities for policy makers and service providers

Digital inclusion is a shared responsibility. MDLS enables policy makers, service providers, and wider stakeholders to have a shared understanding of what households need to feel digitally included. This can be used to guide digital inclusion policies, provision, and partnership working. Building on how the MDLS has already been used, we set out some suggestions below.

Opportunities for any organisation

Organisations can use MDLS to support partnership working based on a shared understanding of what households need to be digitally included; and to consider which households (using their services or in their area) may fall below the MDLS, and what they can do to support them.

Opportunities for the UK Government

MDLS research can inform future actions following the launch of the 'Digital Inclusion Action Plan: First Steps', such as:

- ✓ *'Opening up opportunities through skills'*: Department for Education can use MDLS to refresh the Essential Digital Skills framework to reflect public views.
- ✓ *'Tackling data and device poverty'*: Department for Science, Innovation, and Technology (DSIT) and Department for Work and Pensions can use MDLS to inform action to reduce affordability barriers.
- ✓ *'Breaking down barriers to digital services'*: Government Digital Services and others can use MDLS to inform user research and design of online services.
- ✓ *'Building confidence and supporting local delivery'*: DSIT can promote holistic, household approaches, and champion funding for local trusted support.

Opportunities for governments in the devolved nations

- ✓ Welsh Government has used Welsh MDLS to inform digital inclusion policy, and social housing pilots. It can also promote use of Welsh MDLS in future funding for local approaches to digital inclusion.
- ✓ Scottish Government can use the Scottish MDLS research and 2024 UK survey findings to raise awareness of the links with child poverty.
- ✓ Northern Ireland Executive can use MDLS to inform future strategies.

Opportunities for regional and local government

- ✓ Local and combined authorities can use MDLS to catalyse engagement with relevant policy and delivery teams, such as skills and jobs, tackling poverty, reducing health inequalities, and reforming services.
- ✓ Local authorities can use MDLS to inform use of budgets (adult skills funds, crisis support) so households below MDLS can build skills and stay connected.

Opportunities for the regulator and the telecoms industry

- ✓ Ofcom and the telecoms industry can use MDLS to improve approaches to 'adequate', 'affordable', and 'accessible' internet access (e.g. social tariffs).
- ✓ Ofcom can use the MDLS to inform its ongoing work on online safety and digital media literacy, including critical thinking skills.

Opportunities for organisations delivering services

- ✓ Any statutory, voluntary, or commercial service provider can use MDLS to assess and reduce digital barriers, and identify how these intersect with their duties around equality, fairness, and customer vulnerability.

Behind the MDLS: methodology at a glance

The MDLS definition and contents have been developed using the well-established Minimum Income Standard methodology developed by Loughborough University.

Additional research to establish the MDLS UK Households 2025 involved:

- 3 groups for working-age households without children
- 3 groups for pension-age households without children
- 2 groups with parents of dependent age children and 1 group with young people
- 3 groups with participants living in rural areas (working-age and pension-age households without children, and parents of dependent age children).

This built on and benefited from prior research which included:

- Groups across household types and ages to develop the definition (orientation)
- Separate groups with parents and young people to establish what households with children need to meet the definition (task, checkback, final)
- Additional focus groups with members of the public and interviews with families in Wales and Scotland
- Interviews and engagement with stakeholders in Wales, Scotland, and UK-wide
- A face-to-face survey of 1,582 households with children across the UK.



For more information and support to use MDLS

The full report provides detailed information about the research method, findings, and recommendations for policy makers and service providers outlined in this briefing paper. 'A Minimum Digital Living Standard for UK Households in 2025: Full report' by Katherine Hill, Chloe Blackwell, Eleanor Balchin, Emma Stone and Simeon Yates (2025) (ISBN: 978-1-7385736-2-2) is available here: <http://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/policy-and-research/research-and-evidence/research-2025-MDLS-full-report>

All MDLS research, including 2024 survey findings and research reports funded by the Welsh and Scottish Governments, and a short animation video explaining the MDLS and the methodology behind it, are available here: www.mdls.org.uk

To request a presentation, or a conversation, about MDLS, you can email: emma.stone@goodthingsfoundation.org and simeon.yates@liverpool.ac.uk

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