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The Minimum Digital Living Standard

March 2024

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.

Headlines: MDLS for households with children

Digital access is essential for family life

Families made clear how this impacts on feeling included, opportunities, and everyday tasks.

Poverty is a barrier to meeting the MDLS

Main predictors of being below MDLS are low socio-economic status, living in a deprived area, being a single parent household, a household with more than 2 children, a household led by someone with disability and/or with non-white ethnicity.

4 in 10 households with children are below the MDLS (45%)

6 in 10 households with children likely meet MDLS for both 'functional' and 'critical' skills (62%); 24% meet this for children only; 9% for parents only; 5% fall short on all

8 in 10 households with children likely meet MDLS for digital goods and services (81%); 6% lack good broadband; 4% lack enough large screen devices; 3% fall short on all.

Digital safety is a big issue for parents and young people

Families saw this as a shared responsibility with schools, state and tech companies.

1 in 4 households with children (27%) have parents missing the critical skills for understanding and managing digital risk.

3.7 million households with children do not meet the Minimum Digital Living Standard.

This is 4 in 10 households with children in the UK today.

The Minimum Digital Living Standard

What is the Minimum Digital Living Standard?

Bottom-up: what members of the public say is ‘enough’ to feel included

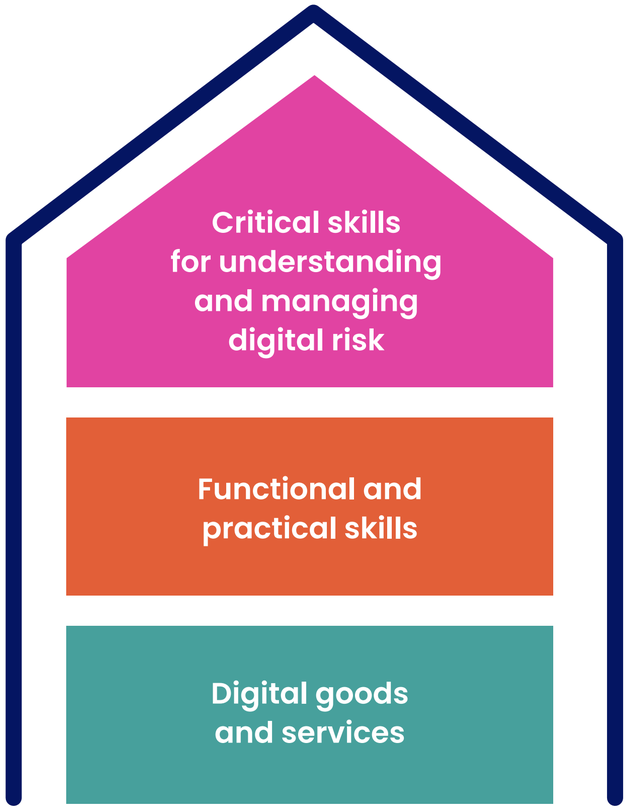
Benchmark: below this level, it may be harder to take part in society

Holistic: functional skills and critical skills and digital goods and services; a household needs all, in combination, to meet the MDLS

Starting point: extra or different ways to meet MDLS may be needed in some households (e.g. disability related)

Evidence-based: established using the Minimum Income Standard methodology; also a survey of over 1,500 households, focus groups with professionals from relevant organisations, and interviews with families

Proof-of-concept: tests the approach with ‘households with children’



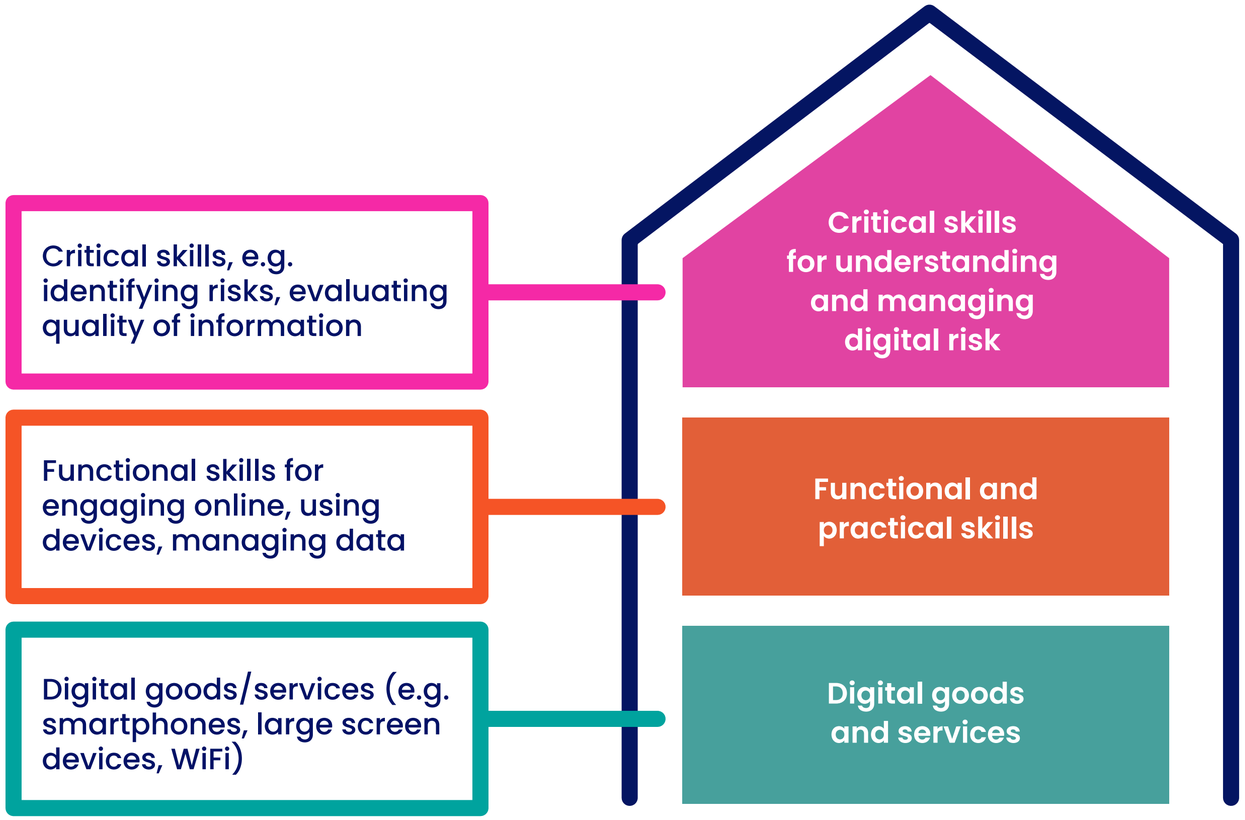
What is ‘enough’ for households with children?

Parents and young people defined what is ‘enough’ for a household with children to feel digitally included.

They thought about:

- What devices (entry level) and internet services a household needs to take part in society
- What skills they need for practical tasks and digital safety
- How needs change with family size and school stages

These are the MDLS ‘contents’.



Digital goods and services

Digital goods and services	
Home Broadband	• With sufficient reliability and speed to support all family members to access the internet at the same time
Mobile phone and data	• 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.
Large screen device	• A laptop, tablet or PC per household – parent(s) and first child share one device. • An additional device for every further school age child.
Headphones	• A set of headphones for school age children
Television and TV subscription	• A smart TV, entry-level 32" screen • An entry-level TV subscription service (e.g. Netflix, Disney+) in addition to a TV licence
Access to online gaming	• An adequate large screen device and access (via an entry-level subscription or other means) for school age children to be able to participate in online gaming with their peers

"I've tried a couple of broadbands, especially ones for people on Benefit. So cheaper broadband... Fantastic financially, but useless for internet, because it's like the lowest speed"

Parent

"Most of the time I go places that there's barely any internet anywhere, or if there is internet, you have to sign into a password"

Young person

For digital goods and services:

81% of households fully meet MDLS

15% of households partly meet MDLS

4% of households fall far below MDLS

Functional and practical skills

Functional skills

Using digital devices, programmes and the internet	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	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	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

1 **Pre-school** 2 **Early primary school** 3 **Late primary school**
4 **Early secondary school** 5 **Late secondary school**

> "You've got to be on their [school] mailing list for their emails... He's missed out on a lot because, obviously, I don't use those sort of things very well"
>
> **Parent**

> "So, it's down to you as a parent then isn't it, to update the thing and I haven't got no clue. I should educate myself on it. But where would I go, I don't know"
>
> **Parent**

17% of households have parents missing the functional skills

18% of households have secondary school children missing the functional skills

32% of households have primary school children missing the functional skills

Critical skills for understanding and managing digital risk

Critical skills	
Managing security	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	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	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

1 Pre-school **2 Early primary school** **3 Late primary school**
4 Early secondary school **5 Late secondary school**

"Your family might not necessarily know the way that groomers and stalkers work these days... School might have more of an idea on that because they are getting information from like the police and people who know more information"

Young person

"I think the children should also learn those sorts of things separately at school as well, because it's actually about their personal safety"

Parent

27% of households have parents missing the critical skills

31% of households have secondary school children missing the critical skills

49% of households have primary school children missing the critical skills

MDLS ‘contents’

MDLS is a starting point for thinking about family needs, barriers, and how needs can be met.

All elements are needed – in combination – for a household with children to feel digitally included.

Digital goods and services

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Functional skills

Using digital devices, programmes and the internet	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	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	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

Critical skills

Managing security	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	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	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 below are needed by parents, and colours 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

Needs and barriers for different households

Digital access is essential for all families

- Affordability emerged as a big barrier for some
- Families shouldn't need to go without other essentials to meet the MDLS

Impacts of not having digital access may be worse for some

Families facing challenges like living on a low income may need services which rely on online access, like:

- Universal Credit, with risk of sanctions if they miss appointments
- Reporting as homeless or registering for social housing

Some families may have extra or different needs, like:

- More mobile data to keep safe and in touch – especially if there's a health condition or disability
- More accessible online services – thinking about disability, neurodivergence, and language barriers

"Realistically, I choose paying for the internet over feeding myself because the need is so massive for my children"

Parent

"So online, you know, I can be myself without anyone knowing me"

Young person on the autism spectrum

Mapping the MDLS

Mapping MDLS for households with children

- Using MDLS, we did a doorstep survey of 1,582 households with children
- One person per household answered questions, giving data on 4,616 individuals
- We got data on devices, internet access, skills, household makeup, children's ages, plus more data on the respondent
- Postcode data let us match MDLS data to other local data
- We mapped how likely households with children are in an area to meet or be below MDLS
- MDLS maps are public so policy makers and practitioners can use them to target support for families
- NOTE: These maps tell us about digital living standards of households with children only, not all households

Rural / urban differences

- MDLS survey data found no strong link between being in a rural area or below average broadband speed
- This might differ for other household types
- Interviews with families suggests some pay more than they can afford to get the broadband quality they need
- Slow, unreliable speed and higher costs in rural areas were strong themes in the MDLS for Wales research

Policy priorities for families below the MDLS

1. Recognise digital access is essential for families

2. Make digital inclusion a cross-cutting government priority for families

3. Find ways to enable more families to afford suitable connectivity

- Ofcom, industry and government to find ways to make essential online public and health services free of data charges
- Review social tariffs' suitability for households with children - looking at products, price, and promotion
- Signpost to emergency support, such as the National Databank

4. Refresh and resource the role of schools in digital inclusion

- Work with teachers, parents and children to review curricula for digital skills
- Work with partners so all children have home access to devices for learning

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The Minimum Digital Living Standard

Policy priorities for families below the MDLS

MDLS can be used to review government policies and plans (central, devolved, local government). Priorities identified by professionals in relevant organisations included:

- Review social security benefits to cover digital access costs
- Recognise extra digital access costs for families with special educational needs and disability and support families to meet these
- Mitigate risks for families below MDLS in roll-out of Government Digital Services (such as One Government Login and digital ID verification)
- Mitigate risks for families below MDLS in expanding online NHS and care services (such as NHS App, NHS Wales App, NHS Scotland App)
- Embed digital access into public standards, such as the Decent Homes Standard
- Support families in temporary accommodation and families seeking asylum to access and afford broadband or sufficient mobile data
- Work with the National Digital Inclusion Network to target provision (including free mobile data, devices, support) in areas with high levels of families below MDLS

12.5% of households with children are below MDLS across a mix of digital goods and services, practical skills, and critical skills

Priorities for digital safety for families

Digital safety is a key part of a Minimum Digital Living Standard.

Adults and young people worried about digital risks and harms.

Parents and young people felt digital safety is a shared responsibility. They felt:

- Family members should inform themselves of digital risks
- Schools should provide up-to-date information on digital risks
- Service providers and manufacturers should give better information on security features and using them
- Social media companies should make platforms safer, especially for children
- Social and traditional media companies should do more on advice and awareness
- Greater regulation is needed, recognising the challenge this presents

The Online Safety Act (2023) makes Ofcom the regulator for online safety.

Ofcom also regulates the telecoms industry with a role to protect consumer interests.

Ofcom should draw on the MDLS framework and findings, using it to:

- Close the gaps in critical skills, working with policy makers in education, lifelong learning, and tech platforms
- Shape Ofcom's future data collection from children and households, and from regulated companies

27% of households have parents missing the critical skills for understanding and managing digital risks

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The Minimum Digital Living Standard

Using MDLS – what's happening already

MDLS is already being used by a mix of organisations to:

- Learn what families need to feel digitally included
- Identify barriers faced by specific groups
- Consider where to target support
- Inform data collection in other surveys
- Support digital inclusion collaboration
- Consider how to design better online services
- Advocate for support for digitally excluded families

There is a lot of interest in MDLS for other household types:

- Single and couple older households
- Single and couple working-age households

Welsh Government funded the MDLS for Wales research, and is using MDLS to inform the next National Survey for Wales

London Borough of Camden has set up a working group to explore and use MDLS to inform their work with families and their staff.

Scottish Government is exploring development of the MDLS for Scotland, linked to priorities on child poverty

Service designers and user researchers are interested in MDLS to inform how they make online services more inclusive

Ideas for using MDLS and mapbooks

Inform strategies and interventions

- [ ] Use the MDLS definition to shape a shared vision and goals
- [ ] Use the mapbooks to identify priority areas and target groups
- [ ] Use the findings to consider interventions for families, and who needs to be involved
- [ ] Use the contents to inform evaluation frameworks for interventions

Partnership development

- [ ] Use MDLS to catalyse cross-sector action on digital inclusion
- [ ] Use MDLS as a framework and evidence base in bids for collective action or research

Policy development and standard setting

- [ ] Review policies which impact on children and families in light of the MDLS evidence
- [ ] Use MDLS to consider if and how public or commercial standards should be updated

Improve provision to families

- [ ] Recognise that some or many of your customers or clients may be below the MDLS
- [ ] Assess how to improve your services to families below MDLS (online and in person)
- [ ] Consider what families need to use any online services you provide; how much mobile data or broadband would they need to use your services? Hardware or software? Level of skills and understanding?
- [ ] Signpost to digital inclusion support, if you can't provide this yourself

Public sector procurement

- [ ] Draw on MDLS as part of your approach to Social Value (buyers and suppliers)

Behind the MDLS: evidence

MDLS definition and contents were developed using the Minimum Income Standard methodology.
17 focus groups with members of the public - freshly recruited at each stage. Nominet funded focus groups with young people.
Decisions from each group fed into the next stage to reach a final consensus.

Pilot survey with 300 households with children.

A UK-wide in-person survey of 1,582 households, with a sample representative of the whole UK. Data collected on 4,616 children and adults.

Statistical analysis to explore and visualise links between survey data and other social, economic, cultural, digital, and local area metrics.

Stakeholder sessions with public, voluntary and private sectors to look at MDLS with regard to disability, ethnicity, rurality, poverty, housing.

MDLS-Wales: extra focus groups with members of the public, interviews with eight families, and stakeholder engagement in Wales.

Behind the MDLS: partners and funders

MDLS Project Team:

Prof. Simeon Yates, Prof. Alex Singleton, Dr Gianfranco Polizzi, Dr Jeanette D'Arcy, Rebecca Harris (University of Liverpool)

Dr Chloe Blackwell, Prof. Abigail Davis, Katherine Hill, Prof. Matt Padley (Loughborough University)

Dr Emma Stone (Good Things Foundation)

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Paul Sheppard (Critical Research)

MDLS Wales partners:

Jocelle Lovell (Cwmpas)

Prof. Hamish Laing (University of Swansea)

Funding partners:

The Nuffield Foundation (MDLS UK project)

Nominet (focus groups with young people)

Welsh Government (MDLS Wales research)

The MDLS UK 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**

The Minimum Digital Living Standard

"If you want people to survive in this world, you need food, you need water, and that's your human rights. Now having connectivity that is usable, affordable, should be on there somewhere, because actually you can't survive in this world, the day and age that we're living in, without them"

Parent

Where to get more information and support

Find out more on the MDLS website:

www.mdls.org.uk

For MDLS reports and maps:

www.mdls.org.uk/publications or **scan the QR code**

- The Minimum Digital Living Standard for Households with Children: Final report with executive summary
- Measuring the Minimum Digital Living Standard for Households with Children: Survey Report
- Mapping the Minimum Digital Living Standard for Households with Children: Mapbooks
- Defining the Minimum Digital Living Standard: Interim report - findings from deliberative groups
- Developing the Minimum Digital Living Standard for Wales - reports funded by Welsh Government (available in English and Welsh languages)

Ask the MDLS team to present at an event or for support on using the MDLS:

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If your organisation supports people who face digital barriers:

You can join the National Digital Inclusion Network run by Good Things Foundation. Ask about free resources including the National Databank, National Device Bank, and Learn My Way:

Visit: www.goodthingsfoundation.org/network/join

Email: hello@goodthingsfoundation.org