

**Digital Divide**

**Aims & Objectives**

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1. **Introduction**

The West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) has identified a policy need to develop digital skills training at a regional level and align the training to resident needs and the regional economy.

1. **Regional Context**

Digital Exclusion is a key issue impacting on the day to day lives of our residents. It limits the ways in which our residents can access key services, the ways in which they can support their children, and prevents many from maximising their potential in work. Research shows that just over half (56%) of adults in the region do not have the essential digital skills needed for work and amongst UK regions, the West Midlands has [the highest proportion](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/employer-skills-survey-2019) of employers who say they find applicants with digital skills difficult to find (38%). Furthermore, it is estimated that our region has 92,000 more adults that are unable to complete foundational digital tasks compared to the national average and 46% of the regions population are non / limited users of the internet.

The WMCA’s ambitions for tackling Digital Exclusion are set out in our Digital Roadmap [West Midlands Digital Roadmap (wmca.org.uk)](https://www.wmca.org.uk/media/4468/west-midlands-digital-roadmap.pdf), with its focus on the key pillars of accessibility, connectivity and skills. We know there are / have been lots of good practice across the region (Adult Community Learning, Building Better Opportunities), but far too often projects are offered in isolation, without connecting opportunities for our residents or restricted by short-term funding. As a result, there is no coherent offer for our residents that supports their journey from first contact with a digital device, through to accredited learning and ultimately the opportunity to gain employment utilising those digital skills. The scale of the challenge is reflected in the below table from the roadmap:

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| **Scale of the Challenge: Securing access for everyone to digital opportunities, particularly those in poverty** |
| **Indicator** | **National Avg.** | **West Mids Avg.** | **Gap to Nat Avg.** | **Linked Roadmap Outcome** |
| **% of adults that are lapsed internet users and internet non-users** | 7.8% | 8.1% | An additional 6,897 (+0.3pp) people to meet the nat avg. | * Everyone has access to an affordable device and connection, and feels confident to access the internet and basic services.
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| **% of adults that are Digitally Excluded (based on ability to complete foundational tasks).** | 4% | 8% | An additional 91,966 (+4pp) people to meet the nat avg.  | * The supply of digital skills meets demand.
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| **% of adults with Work Essential Digital Skills** | 78% | 66% | An additional 275,897 (+12pp) people to meet the nat avg. |
| **Digital jobs as a % of total employment**  | 5.1% | 3.7% | An additional 566 (+1.4pp) digital jobs to meet the nat avg. | * The supply of digital skills meets demand.
* Everyone can access digital jobs, particularly young people and those at risk of redundancy.
 |
| **% of employers that need more digital skills**  | 38% | 40% | An additional 5,169 (+2pp) businesses finding the digital skills to meet the nat avg.  | * The supply of digital skills meets demand.
* Everyone can access digital jobs, particularly young people and those at risk of redundancy.
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*NB:* ***GREEN*** *means that the region is performing better than the national average;* ***AMBER*** *means that performance is within 1 percentage point of the national average and* ***RED*** *means the region is underperforming against the national average.*

WMCA has worked closely with the Good Things Foundation (GTF) over the last three years to address the challenges that digital exclusion poses to our residents. We commissioned GTF through the Community Renewal Fund to deliver the Digital Pathway project, engaging over 2000 residents, creating important voluntary sector networks, and accessing residents who were both employed and unemployed to help them develop their digital skills The project was successful in enabling our residents to access free resources (data /devices) via the National Data Bank.

We sought to tackle accessibility and connectivity through a £4m fund for the Connect Services Project, enabling over 17,000 digital devices to be issued to digitally excluded residents. Delivered by our Local Authority partners, the scheme has helped to build capacity across the region, placing digital devices in key community venues to support residents to access devices.

Based on the learning from the Connected Services project and Digital Pathway, in partnership with The Good Things Foundation we set ourselves the challenge of how could we build on these networks, and provide a curriculum for digital training that was not only relevant to the needs of our residents (accessing NHS services / children’s homework) but could also provide the key building blocks that, with the right support, would help someone to progress through accredited training.

Over the last 12 months, GTF have consulted widely with key stakeholders from across the Voluntary Sector, Adult Community Learning, Local Authority and Colleges aiming to capture best practice. The aim was to harness these practices, identify what does and does not work, and create a relevant tool and resources to help partners support our residents with a consistent approach.

The culmination of these activities was the creation of the Digital Blueprint which was launched in October 2023, a link is provided below:

<https://www.wmca.org.uk/media/ujed23yb/digitalblueprint_guide_v0-3.pdf>

The Digital Blueprint provides the basis for this funding opportunity with a particular focus on how we can engage, stabilise our residents to support them with the first steps on their digital journey, with the intention of them progressing to accredited learning.

Our ambition is that the Blueprint work will not just underpin an organisations’ offer but will inspire the connection between organisations to develop a seamless digital journey directly responding to the digital exclusion challenges that our residents face.

1. **Aim**

The intention of this grant funding opportunity is to develop a routeway from first contact to a device, to accredited learning and ultimately good employment, reducing Digital Exclusion levels, through funding the Community organisations to provide the below connection.



 The WMCA is seeking to finance a minimum of two Community Organisations in each of the 7 constituent Local Authority areas (Birmingham, Coventry, Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, Walsall, and Wolverhampton) to provide first engagement and initial support, progressing residents into further skills development with Adult and Community Education Providers and/or Further Education Colleges as shown below.

The WMCA are seeking proposals that cover the four key elements outlined below:

* **Engagement:** Each application will demonstrate an understanding of the needs and challenges that those residents who are digitally excluded across the identified Local Authority / Ward(s) of focus. WMCA would consider a place-based approach / focus on key digitally excluded cohort across a Local Authority area. The application will further demonstrate an ability to engage with those residents’ addressing barriers to participation, including mental health. Applicants must outline the target areas with the highest levels of digital exclusion within the specific Local Authority.
* **Stabilisation:** The applicant will be able to draw upon experience of supporting residents to stabilise, through primarily a one-to-one support model.
* **Learning:** Each application should reflect an evidenced ability to support residents to engage with Digital Devices and access essential online services in line with the Digital Blueprint.
* **Progression:** The applicant will be able to demonstrate an ability to connect learners with alternative provision, supporting them to manage the transition between different support organisations, with focus on referral to Adult & Community Education providers.
1. **Scope**

WMCA is seeking to award grants to community organisations, with the intention to fund a minimum of two organisations per WMCA constituent Local Authority. The delivery within each Local Authority will engage with 400 residents across a 20-month period, 40% in year 1 (Dec 24 – Jul 25) and 60% in year 2 (Aug 25 – Jul 26). WMCA intends to support in total 2800 residents across the first phase of the Digital Divide project.

WMCA is seeking to award up to £2million in grant funding over the initial 20-month period (first phase), awarded to a minimum of 14 applicants, with a maximum value to each applicant of £142,857 per grant. An application may be inclusive of a wider delivery partnership within the constituent Local Authority. The minimum value that WMCA requires an organisation to deliver would be £80,000 across the initial period.

**Funding**

Delivery expectations are outlined in the specification below:

Target Group**:**

Digitally excluded residents residing in identified Local Authority. This can include those residents who have no fixed abode.

WMCA would expect a place-based approach to delivery with expectations that activity is focused on localities determined as ranking between 1-3 on the Indices of Deprivation or priority areas identified within Local Authority Employment and Skills / Digital Skills strategies (where relevant).

Content:

* Delivery based on engagement, stabilisation, introduction to Digital skills with progression to Adult Community Learning / Adult Education Budget accredited training.
* Each organisation awarded grant funding will engage and support up to 200 residents across an initial 20-month period.
* Engagement with residents is primarily focused on outreach activities and aligned partnership working not dependent on Jobcentreplus referrals.
* Support is offered on a one-to-one basis by dedicated key worker, with each resident having an Individual Learning Plan (ILP)
* Attendance should be voluntary based on resident need; however, learners should be engaged on a weekly basis for the duration of the support.
* Support should be aligned with the ILP, with a focus on progression to tackle digital exclusion in line with the guidance provided in the WMCA Digital Blueprint
* 60% of learners (120 per grant award) should progress onto accredited learning via Adult Community Learning or Adult Education Budget provider.

Maximum amount of funding available per award of up to £142,857, a total of £285,714 per LA constituent area. The maximum award would be comprised of £124,286 claimable costs (i.e., Staffing) and a further £18,571 for referrals starting on accredited training (£150 per start on accredited learning) via Adult Community Learning or other Adult Education Funded opportunities.

Expected minimum number of learner beneficiaries: 2800 residents, 200 per award.

Locations: WMCA constituent Local Authority areas

1. **Mandatory Requirements**

For a proposal to be successful, Applicants will need to be able to fulfil the mandatory requirements as listed below.

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| REQUIREMENTS\* | 1. Proposals should be developed taking full account of the programme aim and scope.
2. Proposals should detail how residents could be expected to be engaged, offering a service suitable to the needs of the targeted cohort.
3. Proposals should include detailed information on locations in line with specification requirements for face-to-face delivery.
4. Proposals should include details on expected duration of programme, to support and ensure balance of engagement and delivery.
5. Proposals should include outputs and outcomes (as set out in section 6 below).
6. Proposals should include a breakdown of costs up to the maximum value of £124,286 by month of delivery across the full 20 months.
7. Proposals should include information on the safeguarding of vulnerable adults.
8. Successful applicants will be required to submit data on learners through the Individualised Learner Record (ILR) on a monthly basis.
9. Applicants must be confident in their submissions and ensure that they have the capacity, capability, and strategies in place to deliver the offer from the date grant funding is made available.
10. The Applicant must comply with the Skills Programme Funding Rules, Skills Programme Provider Payments & Performance Management Framework and the Skills Programme Supply Chain funding rules [published by the WMCA.](https://www.wmca.org.uk/documents/productivity-skills/skills-programme-documents/)
11. Prior to commencing delivery of the service, successful applicants must hold the appropriate approvals and authorities to deliver the service.
12. WMCA will only fund those residents who reside in the West Midlands Combined Authority area.
13. Successful providers must have robust processes and controls in place to ensure the eligibility of the learner, comply with audit requirements, monitor progress, and manage risks. Further information on data, evidence and reporting requirements can be found in the Skills Programmes Funding Rules and Skills Supply Chain Rules.
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*\** The WMCA may need to re-prioritise activity to maximise the impact of this funding commitment

1. **Measuring Success and Reporting**

Successful Applicants will be required to submit data on learners through the Individualised Learner Record (ILR). Additional non-regulated learning aims will be added to the ILR to support this. Compliance with this reporting is mandatory for participation in delivery of WMCA Skills Programmes.

Organisations will be required to submit monthly eligible cost returns to WMCA.

**Indicative Outcomes:**

Successful Applicants will be required to submit to WMCA six case studies per award on a bi-monthly basis, focusing on the learner’s journey:

* Intent: The reason for resident engagement, outlining how the individual was Digitally excluded
* Support: How the resident was supported and key interventions
* Impact: the benefits of the support to the resident and any associated outcomes
* 60% of all residents that engage would be expected to engage with and use the NHS app
* 60% of all residents that engage would be expected to commence Adult Community Learning or Adult Education Budget accredited learning.
* 20% of residents would be expected to commence employment.

**Indicative Outputs:**

* Expected Number of residents engaged with the service addressing barriers to participation.
* Expected Number of residents stabilised through primarily a one-to-one support model.
* Expected Number of residents enrolled in learning to support residents to engage with Digital Devices and access essential online services in line with the Digital Blueprint.
* Expected Number of learners referred to and enrolled onto Adult Community Learning or Adult Education Budget accredited learning.
* Expected Number of residents commencing employment

To evidence these outcomes and outputs, and to understand what is most effective in delivering these for different groups of learners, WMCA will require collection of outcomes and outputs data. WMCA will also be commissioning an external evaluation, which successful applicants will be expected to engage with.

1. **Funding and Rates**

Whilst the funding source for this provision is the Adult Education Budget, LARS funding rates are not applicable. Applicants will need to outline their expected costs as part of their application.

Any reference given to estimated amounts of funding may be revised at the sole discretion of WMCA to reflect an increase or a decrease in the funding allocated for these services. WMCA do not guarantee any minimum or maximum amount to be awarded during the term of this contract.

1. **Mobilisation and Contract Duration**

The start date is anticipated to be 1st December 2024 with an initial expiry date of 31st July 2026, followed by 2 x 12-month options to extend at WMCA’s discretion up to a potential final expiry date of 31st July 2028 (where WMCA exercises its option to extend). Agreements will be subject to performance monitoring and manged in line with the Performance Management Framework.

Successful community partners must be able to demonstrate that they are able to commence full delivery by December 2024 and complete Year 1 by 31st July 2025. This will need to be evidenced within the responses forming your Business Case and will be evaluated and scored.

1. **Payment Schedules**

This activity will be funded from the WMCA skills allocation and managed in line with the WMCA Skills Programmes Funding Rules. Following evaluation of applicant responses, successful applicants will receive a grant funding agreement from the WMCA confirming details of reporting, payment and claim schedules and conditions.

Applicants will be paid on an 87/13 ratio. 87% of funding per learner will be paid in equal instalments based on identified costs as laid out in the Business Case.

Mobilisation payments will equate to two months eligible costs upfront and will be subject to receipt of signed agreements with delivery commencing no later than December 2024.

Subsequent payments will be paid monthly in arrears following successful submissions of eligible costs underpinned by performance as demonstrated through data submitted via ILR.

13% of the total funding will be paid on evidence of 60% of residents commencing adult community learning / alternative AEB provision, a maximum of £150 will be paid per resident enrolled onto Adult Community Learning or Adult Education Budget accredited learning.

1. **Variations**

Following award of grants, WMCA may either make additional awards or reduce the grant funding during the term of the grant agreement to reflect the provision of services and to cover the need to reconcile figures/outputs or milestones in relation to service delivery. The circumstances in which WMCA may consider variations are as follows:

* + - Review – following review of the services in accordance with the grant agreement where it seems likely that the Applicant is about to under/over perform the required Services.  To enable the WMCA to meet their funding obligations there may be the need to decrease/increase an Applicant’s targets to ensure that the overall funding targets for the Programme are met.  Costs will be amended accordingly.
		- Reconciliation – following reconciliation of the Services in accordance with the agreement, there may be a requirement to decrease or increase the targets set for the Applicant which will automatically decrease or increase the Maximum Grant Value.
		- Growth – the demand for Services and/or the funding attributable to a certain service may increase, as a result of (including but not limited to) underspends within the Programme being re-allocated, additional funding becoming available from the funding stream or any other event which results in the need for Applicants to supply more services of the same or similar nature to the Services being provided under the grant agreement.  The targets and values will be amended accordingly.
1. **Supply Chain and Partnerships**

For delivery against these requirements, the Applicant must demonstrate that they can deliver all aspects of the funding opportunity that they wish to deliver. Applicants may use associate coaches, mentors, and subject matter experts to support the delivery, and these should be captured in the supply chain declaration.

[Skills Programme Supply Chain Funding Rules](https://www.wmca.org.uk/documents/productivity-skills/skills-programme-documents/)

Only one organisation within the same Group of Companies may bid for this opportunity. If a bidder wishes to use other organisations within the same Group of Companies, they may do so by declaring that organisation as a sub-contractor. Please note that all sub-contractors are subject to the approval of the West Midlands Combined Authority.

1. **Response**

The WMCA require a response to all the questions detailed in the application form for Digital Divide Grants. The questions & associated guidance can be found in the Digital Divide Application and includes the assessment process. Applicants will also find details of how the applications will be evaluated including eligibility and award criteria.

If your proposal has been developed in collaboration with other partners, please include this in your response.

Deadlines for completed applications is 1st November 2024 at 5pm. Responses submitted after the deadline will not be accepted. Completed applications must be submitted to Skills.Programmes@wmca.org.uk