**Wandsworth Digital**

**Tackling Digital Exclusion in a Wired Wandsworth**

Our initial strategy

A project initiated by Katherine Low Settlement

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*“Digital exclusion effectively means exclusion from modern life. Fundamentally, if you can’t get access to current public health information you can’t follow government guidance. If you can’t get online you can’t access social security support, request a vulnerable person’s food parcel scheme or support your children to home-school, or contact your children easily if you live apart from them or they are in care.”*

APLE Collective, September 2020

1. **Summary**

Wandsworth Digital is a new partnership of 70+ local organisations working together to make Wandsworth the most digitally inclusive borough in London by 2024. It is made up of charities, community organisations, schools and colleges, independent funders, businesses and the Council.

We are working towards enabling our most excluded residents to have access to affordable devices and data; to have the skills and training to access local goods and services; and the support necessary to incorporate ‘digital’ into their everyday lives.

This is a work in progress so do join us on this journey. It will take us working together as one community, each playing to our strengths, to make Wandsworth a truly digitally inclusive borough.

**Resident Stories 1: Digital exclusion impacting on education and finances**

The Ali family have four children, aged 12, 17, 19, 21, all living at home, in Battersea. Their mother works part-time, as do the two oldest. Universal Credit makes up the shortfall. When applying for Universal Credit, she did not have the digital skills to do this but was lucky to receive assistance from Wandsworth Citizens Advice.

The two oldest are studying at university. The 17-year-old is in 6th form, and the youngest is moving into Year 7. They could only afford to buy one laptop for the children to study, (in payments and they’re still paying 2 years on) but this device has to be shared between all 4 siblings. The mother is also studying English and Maths at Katherine Low Settlement. She only has a smartphone to access all her lessons in the lockdown.

1. **Introduction**

Digital inclusion is a stark dream to young people struggling to compete against better-off school-mates; a dream to those out-of-work competing to find a job; a dream to the house-bound and isolated elderly who desperately want to stay in touch with family and friends, order shopping essentials, or check and book healthcare online.

Digital exclusion is the chasm between those who cannot afford connectivity and communication and those who can. Add to that off-putting learning barriers tech companies impose with poor user interfaces, clumsy operating systems and nerdy jargon. And now Covid-19 has highlighted the vital imperative for ubiquitous and affordable access to information, learning and sharing.

Affordability, access, understanding, confidence and competency are keywords defining digital inclusion. A great deal has already been written and said about the issues – in the literature and the media. It is a global issue, but has big and evident local effects.

In Wandsworth, digital exclusion is as much an issue as anywhere. Katherine Low Settlement and other influential partners want to play an effective role in bridging the digital divide – making the benefits of the internet, smartphones and a variety of computing devices available to everyone, especially those on low-incomes, living in deprived neighbourhoods, of whatever age, gender, ethnicity or religion. Free and easily accessible training and education plus give-away devices are key reach-out methods of achieving best outcomes and significant benefits.

In short, the purpose of the proposed project is two-fold:

1. Define qualitatively and quantitatively the scope and scale of issues in the borough, who is affected, what they require, what is being done and what still requires priority action
2. To facilitate the above, through this report, offer a strong and lasting contribution to making Wandsworth a leading, stand-out champion of Digital Inclusion

Digging beneath the surface there is lots of work already underway locally, that is contributing towards Wandsworth becoming the most digitally inclusive London borough by 2024. The real value will be setting up initiatives to achieve the above by 2024, with demonstrable, long-lasting and measurable benefits. The effort invested has to pay-off in big social and wellbeing improvements as well as financial.

The Good Things Foundation states that *‘providing everyone in the UK with the essential digital skills they need by 2028 will lead to a benefit of £15 for every £1 invested, and a net present value of £21.9billion.’*

Wandsworth is already well on the way to becoming London’s next ‘Silicon Roundabout’. It has high-tech architect firms like Foster + Partners in a cluster of similar companies by Battersea Bridge, including Britain’s foremost postgraduate design institution, the Royal College of Art. Importantly, Nine Elms and Battersea Power Station has attracted Apple and other major tech corporations.

The government aims to make fast-fibre broadband available throughout the UK, mostly by 2025 and certainly by the start of the next decade. This is not only to enhance the population’s welfare but also boost business productivity and hence gross national product (GNP) and in turn the nation’s wealth and prosperity.

Will the present digitally excluded in Wandsworth be able to access those benefits?

**Resident Stories 2: A family struggling with their education**

Samira is a single mother of 3 children, aged 12, 10 and 8. The family live on a low income, in a flat in Battersea. Prior to the Covid-19 crisis Samira worked part-time, but she lost her job the week after lockdown. Her eldest has severe developmental and physical disabilities and he is often in and out of hospital. Her youngest has ADHD and struggles with his behaviour at school.

The family have two mobile phones which they share. They do not have a laptop. Samira is a refugee and unable to read or write in English herself. She struggles to help her children with their school work. The family does not have WiFi. They rely on the phone’s internet data, which is expensive and can be temperamental. As a result, the children's education has been severely affected during this lockdown, as they hardly ever do their school work.

1. **Vision**

Our vision is for Wandsworth to be the most digitally inclusive borough in London by 2024.

We will achieve this vision by working together as one community, each playing to our strengths, combining our expertise and resources, to make Wandsworth a truly digitally inclusive borough.

1. **Focus**

Wandsworth Digital will focus its efforts on enabling digitally excluded residents to access:

1. **Affordable devices** (hardware/software applications) **and data services** (sim-only, broadband, community fibre).

This could include: collaborating on donating/refurbishing devices with local businesses and schools, bulk buying devices, lending through libraries; bulk buying data sim-only/dongles; installing community fibre across Wandsworth etc.

Examples:

* Local residents and business can donate laptops to Power to Connect who can refurbish and distribute to 6,000 local school children on Free School Meals.
* Community Fibre or other ISP to increase their super-fast, affordable broadband offer to all Wandsworth residents (reflecting government incentives).
* Funding pots are identified to purchase devices and data at scale.
1. High-quality and relevant tech **skills and training**, that will advance their knowledge and use of digital devices so that they can access services, education, work and more.

This could include: providing a range of ‘basic to advanced’ training courses; making the training relevant and useful for residents tailored to different age or special interest groups (‘carrots’ = emphasise the rewards of digital with beneficial incentives).

Examples:

* Social housing tenants learn the skills necessary to pay their rent online (and/or other council services). This will reduce rent arrears and all their associated costs.
* An elderly resident can book and attend a GP consultation online, freeing up GP, dial-a-ride and social services time and resources.
* A resident can learn how to access Universal Credit benefits online (and maybe the foodbank online or Discretionary Payments or the Free School Meal app) to support themselves and their family.
* A resident can learn how to apply for jobs online. Once in employment (possibly working in the digital economy), they are contributing to the local/national economy in terms of productivity and taxes.
1. **Support for digitally excluded residents** to develop the confidence and motivation to incorporate ‘digital’ benefits into their everyday lives.

This could include: providing support to the elderly, young people, people with disabilities and more, to use ‘digital’ to improve their quality of life in accessing education, health services, employment, goods/services online and more. Establishing a ‘digital buddy’ programme; and digital work placements. Linking Social Prescribing and Talking Points.

Examples:

* Providing specialist ‘digital/AI’ support to older people with dementia.
* Supporting young people to learn how to use laptops and their applications (not just social media, which they’re good at).
1. **Key components of strategy**
2. **Desk research, interviews and surveys**

To map out what exists, rather than wasting time reinventing the wheel and of course, identify issues and gaps that require solutions.

1. **Partnership / links**

Results cannot be achieved working alone, this has to be a collaborative project involving private, public and third sector players – Wandsworth Borough Council being key. Not forgetting to work or associate with academic institutions and ‘think tanks’, both local and national, especially those engaged in similar interests.

1. **Funding / sponsorship**

To increase the value and effect of work, add scale and capability where required; look for objective partnerships with tech companies or those with relevant interests, noting that as the project develops it may require paid staff.

1. **Donations**

Campaigns to attract give-aways and pass-along devices, pay for refurbishment and distribution, or attract internet service providers (ISPs) willing to donate free access, such as Community Fibre and others installing fast-fibre broadband and services.

1. **Communications**

To promulgate the project, make contact with mutual interests, create a network of active collaborators, increase awareness of ‘brand’ and participants, and use the media and websites as free publishers.

1. **Education and training**

Easily accessible, free means to find out, learn, borrow or loan – web-based and actual, like CommuniTech’s Tea & Tech sessions, originally in libraries, currently online.

1. **Measurement**

Set up analysis and reporting of online activity, metrics and KPIs e.g. number of local residents with all 5 basic digital skills.

**Next Steps**

Wandsworth Digital needs to establish an ‘overall steering group’ and ‘sub-working groups’ to take forward each of the above components.

1. **Project planning framework and checklist**

We expect that Wandsworth Digital’s 3-year strategy and plan will incorporate the following:

1. **General aims and outcomes**

Project to be:

* Positive and constructive
* Deliver real, practical value to facilitate inclusion
* Contribute a long-lasting legacy of action and benefits
* To ensure achievement of goals and benefits, be clear about target audience, what they want and what’s doable
* Avoid bias and as far as possible be neutral on age, gender, ethnicity, etc - Bespoke approaches for different groups to ensure engagement
* Make Wandsworth an outstanding model comparable to other initiatives, like Leeds, Harrogate, Thurrock, Greenwich and more
* Form mutual links and collaborative relationships to further knowledge and relationships of value
* Become a recognised and respected contributor to the topic area, not just locally
* Strive to collaborate and share to deliver greater collective value
1. **Project approach and planning**
* Appoint team and delegate responsibilities
* Agree timescales including milestones and deliverables
* Stage one is map out what exists and what’s been done, locally and nationally
* Don’t reinvent the wheel and waste time, build on other work – joining the dots not
* Rapidly define scope and scale of topic field
* Identify one topic that is manageable, achievable and delivers real value – look for ‘low-hanging fruit’, especially if a deliverable by December 2020 is part of aim
* Do we want it to be a standalone project or part of an ongoing continuum or partnership?
* Clarify resources and possible funding/ sponsorship
1. **Methodology**
* What are we trying to find out?
* First define the problem dimensions
* Do that through desk research and interviews
* Carry out surveys where appropriate
* Attend online conferences and seminars, etc
1. **Models of best practice**
* Who stands out as running initiatives that work and deliver results?
* What can be learned or bettered? For example, from Leeds
* Other examples nationally, globally
1. **Analysis of findings**
* Correlate and identify trends and issues
* Categorise and classify
* Single out potential option
1. **Recommendations**
* Propose ideas for immediate action or further study
* Do that collaboratively
1. **Resources**
* Find people who can actively contribute to the project itself including the overall steering group
* Identify and use local, plus wider London and national sources of information, centres of excellence (Leeds), special interest groups (SIGs), government sources, etc
* Funding – how much will the project cost?
* Sponsorship – donations/ support from private, public and third sectors
1. **Communications**
* Important to actively publicise the project
* Through media, websites and other appropriate channels
* Get project noticed, attract interest and enquiries
* Form links and useful connections
* Add to body of knowledge
1. **Timescales**

Questions we need to answer:

* What can we do between now and Christmas?
	+ Identify quick wins / low-hanging fruit
	+ Heightened by Covid, what issues are local residents facing this winter? What devices, skills and resources will they need to get through it?
* How do we phase/schedule the above work programme into achievable ‘chunks’ of activity, over the next 3 years?
1. **Wandsworth Digital Partnership**

Wandsworth Digital is currently an informal group of 70+ passionate people, from a variety of community organisations, schools, business and the Council. They meet monthly.

The partnership has agreed it needs to bring more people and organisations into the discussion and subsequent work ahead of us. These will include key decision makers, influencers, funders, celebrities etc.

It will take the whole community to make Wandsworth the most digitally inclusive borough by 2024.

If you’d like to join Wandsworth Digital then please contact Aaron Barbour on aaron@klsettlement.org.uk and 020 7223 2845.